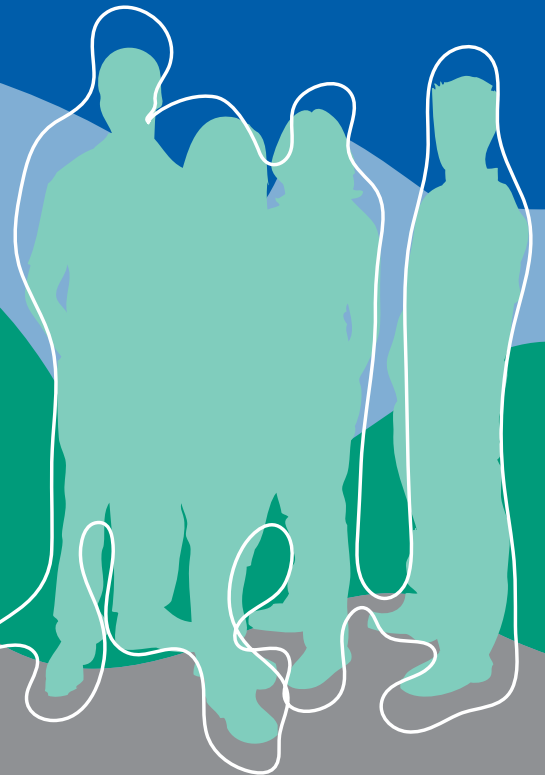


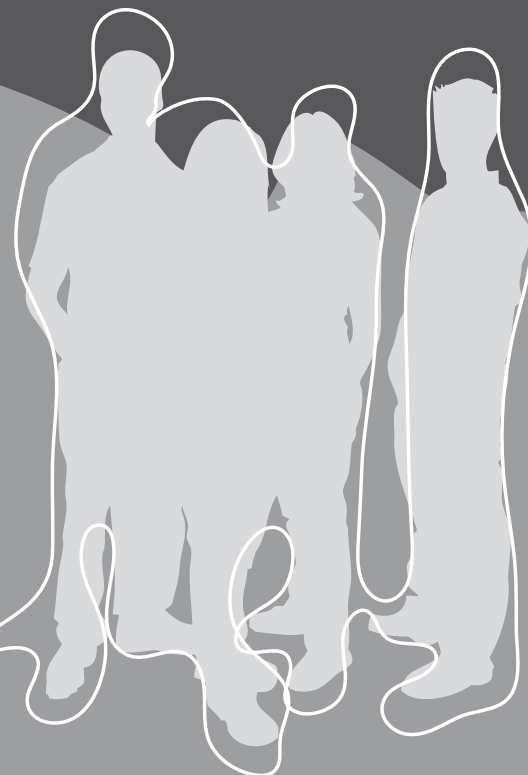
HOW YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN CIVIC ACTIVITIES USING INTERNET AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES



Jackie Ohlin
Allison Heller
Susan Byrne
Nicky Keevy

**Report to the National Youth Affairs
Research Scheme (NYARS)**

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The National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) was established in 1985 as a cooperative funding arrangement between federal, state and territory governments to facilitate nationally based research into current social, political and economic factors affecting young people. NYARS operates under the auspices of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).

NYARS reports published since the early 2003 are available free of charge on the website of the Australian Government's department responsible for youth affairs. At the time this report was published, the website address was www.deewr.gov.au/Youth/Programs/NYARS/Pages/Home.aspx

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AIM AND CONTEXT

Urbis was commissioned by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) under the auspices of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), to conduct research into how young people participate in civic and political activities through the use of online and mobile technologies. In recent years there has been concern that young people are apathetic to government decision making and social issues. Many governments, both nationally and internationally, are recognising the need to engage and inform young people through information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The aim of this research project was to determine whether young people are engaging in civic and political activities; which types of activities they are engaging in; how online and mobile technologies play a role in this engagement; and what government can do to use these technologies to communicate and interact with young people more effectively.

METHODOLOGY

The research consisted of four components: a review of national and international literature detailing the current state of youth civic and political engagement using online and mobile technologies; consultation with governments, youth sector organisations and ICT providers; focus groups with young people in metropolitan and regional areas throughout Australia; preparation of a final report summarising key findings and implications of the consultation.

KEY FINDINGS

The literature presents young people's engagement in civic and political activities as a somewhat contentious issue. While many studies indicate a decline in participation in conventional forms of representative democracy, emerging research claims there has not been a decline in participation, but rather a *shift* in the ways in which young people engage. This pertains to an increased integration of online channels (as opposed to offline 'real-world' channels) for participation, and further, a move from organisational, institutional and political allegiance to alliances with issues and causes.

This research conducted with young people tends to support the literature regarding non-conventional participation and the movement away from institutionalised engagement. Young people *are* interested in engaging—however, on different terms. Young people are far more motivated by 'politics of choice', such as humanitarian causes, political issues, and campaigns. They prefer to participate in arenas and on issues where they feel they can make a contribution. Furthermore, they are discussing these issues in more informal networks, among like-minded individuals, and using media with which they feel more comfortable, in particular ICTs.

TECHNOLOGICAL PLATFORMS AVAILABLE FOR USE

Currently a range of ICTs are available to young people offering varying levels of technological sophistication.

- *Basic interactivity*: this refers to a basic informational webpage, which provides a one-way information channel and no capability to exchange information. Many local government websites follow this model.

- *Moderate interactivity*: information is available to young people, and websites offer the opportunity to email organisations or departments; content can be downloaded; links are available to related sites; and the site incorporates linkages between other organisational web pages. Such sites tend to be found in the sphere of local, or in some cases, state government, and youth organisations.
- *Sophisticated interactivity*: these sites are very interactive, offering a seamless two-way exchange of information and the capability for young people to download and upload content to websites through blogs, discussion forums and media content. Predominantly used by non-government sites, some government websites, particularly state and federal, have also harnessed this technology, and are using Web 2.0 with success.

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE USE INTERNET AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES

Young people are engaged in civic and political activity to varying degrees. Generally, the spectrum encompasses non-engagers, non-committal engagers, moderate engagers and committed engagers. Further, the degree to which these young people use and harness internet and mobile technologies for civic and political activity varies greatly. In using internet and mobile technologies young people are almost always integrating these activities with the offline world. There is significant overlap between new and traditional methods, and young people make the transition between the two spheres seamlessly and with purpose.

Internet and mobile technologies are used as:

- an information source
- an organisational tool
- a space for exchanging ideas and posting information
- a means to 'spread the word'
- a channel for focused and opportunistic networking (through social networking sites).

Currently, mobile phones do not feature prominently in young people's engagement. However, with the development of technology and increase in uptake from young people of 'smart phones', the mobile phone is likely to play a more central role in the future.

BARRIERS TO AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

Young people experience many barriers to civic and political participation. Significant barriers to young people's engagement include being time poor; age; distance from the urban metropolis; perceived exclusivity of groups; feeling overwhelmed; being unaware of opportunities or pathways to participation; experiencing disadvantage (diverse cultures, economic status); perceived apathy and adult-centric branding of civic engagement and the resulting 'uncool' images associated with civic activity.

Technology can address some of these barriers through its ability to:

- provide information at fingertips
- remove geographical boundaries
- provide access to a cyber community
- reach broad audiences
- re-brand civic engagement as 'cool'
- keep issues 'top of mind' for young people
- create a youth-focused, culturally relevant space
- lend legitimacy to emotional connections elicited through media.

There are still barriers to accessing technology for the use of civic and political activity, such as lack of or poor quality of internet connectivity; disadvantaged background (culture, economic status); computer literacy and limitations placed on the types of websites accessible through school systems (proxies).

Governments at all levels are keenly aware of these issues and are attempting to address them through various localised initiatives, which have achieved some successes. Internet connectivity and mobile coverage in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia is a significant challenge to the successful uptake of civic activity via online and mobile technologies.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Generally, young people tend to view governments as power-laden institutions in which limited or cautioned trust is placed. Young people feel a sense of disillusionment with their political leaders.

At a local level however, young people were more able to place government in a more positive role. Civic activity is more closely associated with local governments than state or federal. It is at the local level that young people feel they are likely to effect change, to some extent due to the perception that local MPs are more accessible. Governments and members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in particular however, are not necessarily 'top of mind' for young people as facilitators of the civic experience.

Overall, there is great variation in the manner in which young people currently engage with government. Young people may be members of youth advisory councils or local government initiatives, occasionally visit government websites, or not have had any involvement at all with government or political processes (such as voting).

In considering the above, governments' engagement of young people could be conceived in terms of three separate audiences:

1. *Government-engaged young people*: young people who engage with governments through youth councils, youth committees and youth advisory groups, and who may have established relationships with government at all levels.
2. *Non-government engaged young people*: those who participate in civic activities and who are not necessarily associated with governments but rather non-government organisations.
3. *Non-engaged young people*: young people who are not engaged with governments or other social groups in any significant way.

As governments have clearly already established a relationship with the first group, it is the latter two groups that present key challenges. As a means to engage with these groups, governments may need to utilise the sources these young people seek to use, such as existing issues-based ICTs and social networking sites.

In doing so, Web 2.0 will increasingly play a role in the methods used to engage with young people and may likely result in content exchange between both parties. The capability for ICTs to use Web 2.0 is considered to be very important to young people and indeed, an expectation. While governments are making the transition into Web 2.0 technology there are inherent risks and challenges. However, there are ways in which perceived risks can be managed. There are several examples of governments adopting Web 2.0 technology for engagement with young people on a large scale at the federal level: the Australian Youth Forum and the Prime Minister's blog. Some examples at the state level are youthcentral and the Your Spin community consultation campaign.

THE SPACE FOR ENGAGEMENT

The meaning of space is extremely subjective, and in association with governments there can often be implicit undertones of power differentials, with young people often feeling disenfranchised. Therefore, when considering an online forum where young people can feel truly empowered to enter into genuine dialogue with institutions such as governments, a neutral space away from government may be the most appropriate platform for exchange. Further to this, engaging young people may require a shift away from governments' own territories into that of young people's.

This was generally supported by young people, government youth sector employees, and issues-based ICTs. Some ICT providers are keen to work with government to provide a space for engagement on their own ICT application. These providers view government initiatives to engage with young people in a youth-owned space as a meaningful step towards deconstructing traditional dichotomies such as adult/child and powerful/powerless.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research has led to the following recommendations for approaches to future online engagement strategies.

1. Use personal connections with young people as the starting point for engagement.
2. Use a combination of offline and online techniques to more effectively engage with young people.
3. Recognise the growing role of the 'smart' mobile phone in increasing access to online platforms.
4. Ensure the branding of government products is attractive and accessible to young people.
5. Recognise that the most effective point of engagement may be young people's space.
6. Utilise existing ICTs to reach out to young people by ensuring these are well-designed, accessible interfaces.
7. More effectively harness opportunities to reach out to young people in schools through technology.
8. Take a risk management, rather than risk averse, approach to Web 2.0 and the opportunities it offers for engagement with young people.

9. Engage young people effectively and appropriately in the development of online tools and spaces.
10. Utilise ICTs in a flexible manner to enable an inclusionary, rather than exclusionary, approach and place a greater emphasis on supporting and providing facilities to those young people in disadvantaged locations, situations or categories.

In considering the potential of these recommendations to effect change holistically, it is important to be aware of the argument that it is not young people who are disengaged from politics, but contemporary political democracy that has become disconnected from young people. Young people's contribution to civic and political activity needs to be validated and acknowledged as being of equal worth to the contributions of adults.

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.¹

¹ Coleman, S 2005, *Remixing Citizenship: Democracy and Young People's Use of the Internet*, Carnegie Young People Initiative, UK, p. 5.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
AYCC	Australian Youth Climate Coalition
AYF	Australian Youth Forum
CIRCLE	Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
GLBT	Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender
ICTs	Information and communication technologies
IEA	Evaluation of Educational Achievement
MCEECDYA	Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (superseded by MCEECDYA)
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament

NESB	Non-English speaking background
NGOs	Non-government organisations
NOIE	National Office of the Information Economy
NUS	National Union of Students
NYARS	National Youth Affairs Research Scheme
PETA	People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
VGen	Vision Generation (associated with World Vision and Stir)
YES	Youth Electoral Study

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The following report presents findings on the ways young people participate in civic and political activities through the use of internet and mobile technologies.

The research project was commissioned by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS), under the auspices of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), formerly known as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).

1.1.1 Approach to the research

The overall objective of this research project was to gain insight into the ways in which young people, aged 12 to 25 years, engage in civic and political activities using the internet and mobile technologies, specifically:

- how young people become informed about issues that concern them
- where young people can take action on these issues
- where young people can engage with others who share their concern
- how young people may be consulted on these issues
- whether young people influence government decision making and policy development.

- For the purposes of this report, all references to young people include people aged 12 to 25 years.

1.1.2 Key research questions

The following key research questions were addressed:

- What are the preferred online and mobile technologies that young people use when participating in civic and political activities to influence government decision making and policy development?
- Are young people more likely to participate as consumers, creators or networkers when they use online and mobile technologies and what other ways do they use these technologies to actively participate in their communities (including geographic communities and communities of interest)?
- What are the expectations of young people using government websites, particularly their expectations of how governments will respond to issues they raise online?
- Does the willingness and ability of governments to use these technologies to engage young people in civic and political activity contribute to, or enhance, long-term capacities and interest of young people to continue civic/political activities into adulthood, such as enrolling to vote at 18?
- What are the barriers that prevent young people from participating in civic/political activities and government decision making using the internet and mobile technologies? Examples may include:
 - technological understanding
 - access to technical infrastructure, computers, suitable internet connection and speed, current software
 - cultural beliefs/understanding
 - negative/ambivalent attitudes to government.
- How can governments address and remove these barriers to engage particular groups of young people who may be more likely to experience them (e.g. newly arrived migrants, Indigenous young people, young people with a disability, young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, and rurally isolated young people)?

- Given the current technological opportunities in Web 2.0, what have been the barriers to governments using these technologies to engage young people in participatory democracy?
- Regarding the issue of whether e-democracy places too much emphasis on the centrality of government and whether technology is used to preserve the status quo rather than transforming it, should government websites provide direct online opportunities for young people's civic participation? Or should governments engage other organisations and young people to create, or build upon, their own online space to participate in decision making on issues that affect them?
- Details on the manner in which these questions have been addressed are further discussed in section 1.4.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Research indicates a decline in the number of young people participating in political and civic activities at local, state and national levels. Political participation can be understood as formal participation in politics, such as voting and party membership. Civic participation may be understood as action taken for the common good, including the good of the community/public life, such as matters of public interest, activism, charitable and voluntary work.

While research to date offers a number of potential reasons for this decline, which are discussed in the literature review presented in Chapter 2 of this report, governments have recognised the need to reach out and connect with young people in new and different ways.

The issue of declining levels of participation among young people may not relate to *whether* communication is conducted through mobile and internet technology channels, but rather *how* communication is conducted via these channels.

1.2.1 Technology and the individual

In recent years, there have been clear shifts in modes of communication, from face-to-face and verbal interaction to mobile and technology-based forms of communication. This is especially so for young people, also referred to as 'Generation Y'. Social networking platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, mobile phone texting, instant messaging, cyber chat rooms and blogs, are but a few of the relatively new ways in which young people connect with others, share experiences and voice their opinions.

The technological advancement of the internet has propelled it beyond its original role as a source of information for its users to a platform for exchanging information. Through what is referred to as Web 2.0, this information flows both ways, bringing with it the opportunity to share knowledge and ideas with others quickly and seamlessly, and to ultimately build 'communities' which are not limited by geographic boundaries.

In so doing, the mutual exchange of knowledge and ideas between people, where opinions are voiced and heard, has enhanced the access of individuals to information, but not necessarily to empowerment, which is a theme of particular relevance to civic participation.

1.2.2 Young people and government

There is a growing emphasis within governments, both nationally and internationally, to engage and inform young people through ICTs and, in particular, via the internet and mobile technologies. They are a key component of young people's lives and integral to the way in which they interact with the world. Therefore, connection with this generation requires an ability to 'speak their language', and to establish channels of communication familiar to young people in order to converse in a meaningful way.

The term 'eDemocracy' refers to the use of ICTs in democratic processes to provide new opportunities for governments, individuals and groups in the community to engage with one another; become informed about issues, and consult and exchange views on matters of public concern.

To effectively engage with young people, governments need to understand their role as both facilitators and participants in enabling young people to engage in civic activities via internet and mobile technologies and through the creation of user-generated media.

The degree to which young people are currently engaged or disengaged with civic activity also determines the approach taken to engaging them further, as well as of the type of platform used by governments to attract them.

These issues form the basis for this report, which have been explored through consultation with young people and with a range of organisations, including governments that are currently engaging with young people.

1.3 STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

This report is divided into four parts:

- Chapter 1 Introduction to the project aims and research questions, a brief background to the project and a description of the research methodology.
- Chapter 2 Review of relevant literature, including an overview of young people's current civic and political participation and success in using online and mobile technologies in communicating with young people.
- Chapter 3 Consultation findings on how young people are engaging with internet and mobile technologies, patterns in offline engagement, barriers to engagement, the role of governments in civic participation and how governments may more effectively engage young people.
- Chapter 4 Key findings and recommendations arising from the research intended to inform governments' future strategies with regard to engaging with young people.

1.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology consisted of:

- a review of national and international literature on current issues and trends relating to young people's engagement in civic and political activities using online and mobile technologies
- consultation with governments, youth sector agencies, ICT providers and academic experts
- focus groups with young people in metropolitan and regional areas throughout Australia
- the preparation of a final report summarising key findings and implications of the consultation.
- These steps are outlined below.

1.4.1 Literature and case study review

A review of national and international literature was undertaken to provide an overview of the decline of young people's civic and political participation and the current nature

of youth engagement, and to identify ways in which communication about civic and political activity through online and mobile technologies has been successful.

In terms of scope, focus was given to:

- Australian and international literature (primarily based on information from the US, Canada, Britain and New Zealand)
- literature from academic and peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Youth Studies*, as well as other university, conference and academic papers
- literature from 2005 onwards.
- The literature review was submitted to NYARS as the first interim report at the end of May 2009, and is presented in Chapter 2 of this report.

1.4.2 Consultations with government, youth sector agencies, ICTs and academic experts

As part of the research, consultations were held with a total of 49 stakeholders, and included:

- teleconferences with 15 government employees across all states and territories from a variety of departments and a variety of roles (such as policy and strategy advisors for youth and technology, web managers, youth planners, and youth program managers)
- three academics who have undertaken research into youth and online engagement
- in-depth interviews with 24 ICT providers and youth sector employees.

A full list of the stakeholders consulted is provided at Table 1.

The consultations were predominantly conducted by telephone, either one-on-one or as a teleconference with a small group from the listed organisations. Two consultations were held face to face.

Consultations were generally an hour in length and followed an interview discussion guide which was developed in consultation with NYARS. Four separate interview guides were used: one for government stakeholders, one for ICT providers, one for the youth sector and one for academic experts.

A copy of each of these interview guides is provided at Appendix A.

Table 1—List of organisations consulted

Sector	Organisation
Academic expert	The Whitlam Institute regarding the <i>Putting the Politics back into politics; Young people and democracy in Australia</i> report
Academic expert	The Australian National University regarding the Youth Electoral Study (YES) reports
Academic expert	The University of South Australia/The Ehrenberg-Bass Institute
Government	Policy adviser for youth
Government/ICT application	Australian Youth Forum
ICT provider	youthcentral
ICT provider/academic expert	Inspire Foundation (ActNow/Reach Out)
ICT platform	Vibewire
ICT platform	Bang the Table
ICT platform	Oxfam
ICT platform	GetUp!
Youth sector	National Union of Students
Youth sector	Vision Generation (associated with World Vision and Stir)
Youth sector	The Foundation for Young Australians
Youth sector	Twenty 10 (gay and lesbian community group)
Youth sector	Youth Affairs Council Western Australia
Youth sector	Student and Youth Participation network Victoria (Connect)
Youth sector	Christian Surfers International (faith-based organisation)
Youth sector	Campaign worker for a political party
ICT/youth sector	triple j radio 'Hack' broadcasting show
ICT platform/youth sector	<i>beyondblue</i>
ICT platform/youth sector	STIR (associated with World Vision)
ICT platform/youth sector	Invisible Children
ICT platform/youth sector	Oaktree Foundation

1.4.3 Focus groups

In total, 15 focus groups with young people were conducted. This consisted of 12 face-to-face groups and three online groups, with an average of eight participants in each. The face-to-face groups were conducted in metropolitan and regional areas of New South Wales and Victoria. The online focus groups were held between mid-July and mid-August 2009 with young people living in the remaining states of Australia. Overall 118 young people were consulted during this phase of the research.

Participation in both sets of groups was voluntary and participants were notified that their comments would not be attributed to them and their identity would remain confidential. All participants were provided with a monetary incentive as an acknowledgement of their effort in participating, ranging from \$50 to \$70, according to the age and location of the participant as well as to the method of participation (online, face to face).

Participants were recruited through a number of channels, including:

- youth organisations, councils and clubs such as the National Union of Students (NUS), City of Sydney youth workers, and the OASIS youth support network
- by uploading an advertisement on various youth-related civics websites such as STIR, ActNow (Inspire Foundation), the NSW Commission for Children and Young People and youthcentral (included at Appendix B), as well as posting information about the research and details on the groups on the Urbis company website
- by posting notices on university online student notice boards
- through a 'snowball' effect whereby participants spread the word among their friends
- through the use of professional recruiters.

Face-to-face focus groups

The 12 face-to-face focus groups were held in metropolitan and regional areas of New South Wales and Victoria and were organised according to age and level of engagement. The levels of engagement were classified as follows:

- *Engaged*—young people participating in this group needed to have been involved at the very least, in any of the following:
 - their local communities, for instance through their local council or school or university

- a charitable or cause-orientated group
- social, political, youth, global or environmental issues
- visited action websites (such as ActNow, youthcentral, Vibewire, VGen or GetUp!)
- been a member of a social, political, environmental cause (such as Greenpeace, their university union, protest groups)

Or have:

- signed a petition for a social cause
- organised a petition or event for a social cause.
- *Non-engaged*—young people participating in this group were not aware of any ICTs and had not participated in, or contributed to any social, political, youth, global or environmental causes or events, or anything otherwise that would benefit the social or political sphere.

Three groups each were held in Sydney, Armidale, Melbourne and Ballarat. The details of each group are provided at Table 2.

Table 2—Face-to-face focus group details

State	Location	Age group	Level of engagement
NSW	Sydney	12–16	Engaged
		17–20	Engaged
		21–25	Non-engaged
	Armidale	12–16	Non-engaged
		17–20	Engaged
		21–25	Engaged
VIC	Melbourne	12–16	Engaged
		17–20	Non-engaged
		21–25	Engaged
	Ballarat	12–16	Non-engaged
		17–20	Engaged
		21–25	Engaged

The groups were moderated by a member of the study team and were structured according to discussion guides developed in consultation with NYARS: one for engaged groups and one for non-engaged groups. Each group convened for approximately 90 minutes.

Copies of each of the guides can be found at Appendix A.

Real-time focus groups (online focus groups)

A further three online focus groups were held to extend the contact with young people across Australia. All efforts were made to obtain participants from a range of geographic locations, so that young people from states not previously consulted face to face would be included in the research.

All participants in the online focus groups were engaged, and groups were organised according to age. One group was held for each of the following age groups: 12–16 years, 17–20 years, and 21–25 years.

Online focus groups ran for approximately 90 minutes.

1.5 KEY CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Some challenges occurred in undertaking the research in relation to recruiting for the focus groups.

While the research project was advertised through a number of websites in which young people engaged, these did not elicit the anticipated response rate. This resulted in the need to recruit through other avenues including youth organisations, word of mouth and through the services of a professional recruitment firm.

As a result, the research incorporates the experiences of young people who engage through a variety of channels, not necessarily focused on ICTs. The ensuing discussion about how young people use internet and mobile technologies therefore reflects their engagement processes.

In addition, it is important to note the differences in perception of young people's engagement through internet and mobile technologies, which was indicated by adults involved in running youth-related ICTs and young people themselves. This is in part due to the proportion of young people consulted who did not regularly engage using ICTs.

The research findings, in relation to this issue, may be broadly representative of varying perceptions of young people's level of engagement using ICTs within the broader population.

2 REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Objectives and scope of this review

The focus of this literature review is twofold: it provides an overview of the observed decline of young people's civic and political participation and the current nature of youth engagement; and identifies ways in which communication about civic and political activity through online and mobile technologies has been successful or unsuccessful.

The review forms part of a wider study for NYARS, looking at the ways in which young people are participating in civic activities using internet and mobile technologies in Australia.

The review is focused on young people aged 12–25 years. Particular focus has been given to:

- Australian and international literature (primarily based on information from the US, Canada, Britain and New Zealand)

- literature from academic and peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Youth Studies*, as well as other university, conference and academic papers
- literature from 2005 onwards.

2.2 BACKGROUND

The 'generational slide toward democratic disengagement'

It is well documented in the literature that there is increasing apathy among young Australians towards political and civic participation. The 'generational slide toward democratic disengagement' has come to the attention of many governments of the developed world, stimulating much social research and academic commentary in the area.² This 'slide' is characterised through lower levels of party membership and a downward trend in voter registration. Research shows that few young people in Australia are mobilised to join unions and even fewer are members of political parties, with many reporting that they only vote because they have to, and would not enrol or vote if it was not compulsory.³

Election turnout remains an important marker for the health of any democracy whereby democratic systems are premised on the participation of a significant number of citizens in their processes.⁴ In addition, research shows that civic and political participation are not only important to the health of the nation state, but the wellbeing of individuals who, when disengaged from society, can suffer from social isolation, long-term unemployment, offending behaviour, homelessness, alcohol and drug use, mental illness and suicide.⁵

In Australia, it is a requirement that all eligible citizens register on the Australian Electoral Roll from the age of 17 years, and vote in federal, state and territory elections from the age of 18 years. Although non-enrolment and failure to vote are punishable by fines,⁶ Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) data reports that only 80 per cent of

² Fyfe, I 2009, 'Researching youth political participation in Australia: Arguments for an expanded focus', *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 28 no. 1.

³ Collin, P 2008, *Young People Imagining a New Democracy: Literature Review*, Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney.

⁴ O'Neill, B 2007, *Indifferent or Just Different? The Political and Civic Engagement of Young People in Canada: Chartering the Course for Youth Civic and Political Participation*, Canadian Policy Research Networks.

⁵ Burns, J, Collin P, Blanchard, M, De-Freitas, N and Lloyd, S 2008, *Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

⁶ Edwards, K 2007, 'From deficit to disenfranchisement: Reframing youth electoral participation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 10, no. 5.

eligible young people in Australia between the ages of 18 and 25 are enrolled to vote, compared with 95 per cent of the eligible voting age population as a whole. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reports that in 2005, the AEC estimated that about 400 000 of Australia's 18 to 25 year olds (19 per cent) were not registered to vote;⁷ in contrast to 4 per cent of the total population who were thought to be unregistered.

Saha et al.⁸ found from their *Youth Electoral Study* that among a sample of secondary school students surveyed, 87 per cent said that they would vote in a federal election, but only 50 per cent said that they would vote if it were not compulsory.

O'Neill⁹ reports that the influence that age has on political behaviour is two-fold: *life-cycle*, whereby the nature of responsibilities and experiences vary over an individual's lifetime due to life stage, and where political and civic engagement generally increases with age; and *generational*, whereby political attitudes and behaviour are shaped by events and circumstances at play during one's formative years. She maintains that age is positively related to the psychological elements of engagement, directly determining levels of political interest, political knowledge and political efficacy. Age is also positively related to engagement behaviour where, through either life cycle or generational effects, levels of political and civic participation are shaped by one's age, birth and cohort, as well as by socialisation factors.¹⁰

Generational differences

While there is limited literature available on the history of youth participation in Australia, Inglehart¹¹ argues that in Western democracies, more recent generations express beliefs and behaviour that are decidedly different from earlier generations because they have not experienced the hardship and failure to meet material needs that comes with times of war and economic downturn, such as the Great Depression. As a result, it was considered that recent generations focused rather on 'higher order' issues such as environmentalism and human rights.¹²

Edwards et al., in a 2006 study of young people's participation based on data from the AEC, concluded that the structure of the electoral system itself precludes young people's participation by 'marginalising young people's interest and issues, hence

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006, Australian Social Trends: Social participation of young people, Cat 4102.0.

⁸ Saha, L, Print, M and Edwards, K 2005, *Youth Electoral Study, Report 2: Youth, Political Engagement and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission.

⁹ O'Neill, B 2007, Op. Cit., p.6.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.8.

¹¹ Inglehart, 1997 cited in O'Neill, B. 2007, Op. Cit., p. 3.

¹² Ibid., p. 3.

failing to represent them adequately. Other recent studies¹³ have found the Australian political system to be lacking in young people's eyes: 'They did not feel that the present system encouraged their participation or valued it or offered adequate opportunities to contribute'. They did not strongly identify with traditional political institutions, seeing them as 'complex and not conducive to meaningful participation'. Essentially, while they *did* participate in wider civic activities, young people felt alienated and excluded from 'conventional party politics and formal political institutions' and their decision-making processes.¹⁴

A recent study undertaken for the Australian Government, the *State of Australia's Young People*¹⁵ confirmed this view, finding that the most common forms of civic engagement for 18 to 24 year olds are in fact the same as that for adults at present: signing a petition and ethical consumption.

International literature

Young people's participation in democratic processes

The situation of declining youth political and civic participation is not confined to Australia, but is shown in the literature to be a phenomenon experienced by the majority of developed nations. Currently, Australia is the only nation out of those listed below that enforces compulsory voting. Collin reports that internationally there has been increasing interest in understanding how young people participate in democracy, particularly in the context of an overall decline in participation in traditional forms of democracy.¹⁶ There is concern among these countries that recent low rates of voting by young people may reflect not only a lifecycle stage, but also continue a historical change to lower levels of voting.¹⁷

Coleman reports that in the 2005 election in Britain, only 37 per cent of eligible 18–24 year olds voted—a two point drop from 2001 and a 14 point drop from 1997—and that the number of young people who said they were concerned about

¹³ Horsley and Costley, 2008, *Young People Imagining a New Democracy: Young People's Voices—Focus Groups Report*, Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney/The Foundation for Young Australians, cited in Muir, K, University of New South Wales Social Policy Research Centre, on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Office for Youth, 2009, *State of Australia's Young People*, Australian Government, p. 86,

¹⁴ Collin, P 2008, *Young People Imagining a New Democracy: Literature Review*, Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney/The Foundation for Young Australians, cited in Muir, K., Op. Cit., p. 86.

¹⁵ Edwards, K 2007, 'From deceit to disenfranchisement: reframing youth electoral participation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 10, no. 5, pp. 539–55, cited in Muir, K., Op. Cit., p. 82.

¹⁶ Collin, P 2008, Op Cit.

¹⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2006, *Australian Social Trends: Social participation of young people*, Cat 4102.0.

who would win the next election fell from 68 per cent in 1994 to 39 per cent in 2003. Despite this, Coleman cites an ICM Research survey of 16–20 year olds conducted for the British Electoral Commission in Britain in 2005, where although 90 per cent said they would have no involvement in politics, 60 per cent said they would like to have more say in how the country is run. Coleman argues that this shows a clear connection between democratic aspiration and active participation.¹⁸

Canadian research reveals a similar trend in the rate of decline of youth participation, particularly in voting numbers. O'Neill¹⁹ reports that surveys show Canadian young people vote at a lower rate than other age groups, with estimates during the 2004 election revealing a turnout rate of 37 per cent among the youngest voters, compared with a 61 per cent overall turnout rate. She reports that young Canadians, while not indifferent to politics, display a pattern of civic and political engagement that differentiates them from other Canadians, as in addition to not voting they are also less likely to be members of political parties and interest groups and are less interested in, and know less about, politics than other Canadians.

According to the Elections New Zealand website, 78 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds were enrolled to vote as at 30 April 2009, compared with an average of 96 per cent of the rest of the population (aged 25 and over). Elections New Zealand reports that one in five people are leaving it up to their parents, grandparents and friends to decide about their future by failing to enrol to vote.²⁰

The case of young people voting in the US is quite different. The Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), reports that youth turnout during presidential elections has been slowly growing since 2000 (40 per cent) where it rose to 48 per cent in 2004, and then 52 per cent in 2008. Despite this number being higher than the other countries listed above, only half of all young people are choosing to vote in the US. In addition CIRCLE reports an educational and socioeconomic status gap where, although only 57 per cent of citizens between the ages of 18 and 29 have ever attended college, 70 per cent of young voters had gone to college. This shows that college-educated young people are much more likely to vote. People with less than a high school diploma represented only 6 per cent of young voters.²¹

¹⁸ Coleman, S 2005, *Remixing Citizenship: Democracy and Young People's Use of the Internet*, Carnegie Young People Initiative, UK.

¹⁹ O'Neill, B 2007, Op. Cit.

²⁰ Elections New Zealand website, 2008, Enrolment Statistics, accessed 14 May 2009, <http://www.elections.org.nz/ages/electorate_all.htm>.

²¹ Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), 2008, *Young Voters in the 2008 Presidential Election*, <www.civicyouth.org>.

2.3 RATIONALE FOR DECLINING PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUTH

The research presents a number of explanations for the declining rates of youth participation in political and civic affairs. Ultimately, young people's participation and engagement in civic and political life is occurring against a backdrop of social, cultural and technological change at both a local and global level.²²

Sense of disengagement from mainstream politics

Coleman²³ argues that for most young people, politics is 'a game in which they are rarely invited to be players, and in which their voices are rarely heard'. Many young people feel abandoned by the political system or 'put off' by formal politics.²⁴ 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.

Fyfe²⁵ recognises from his research that young people are less interested in the conventional forms of representative democracy than their adult counterparts have been, and far more committed to action on a range of social issues that are of specific interest to them. He reports that many of the cited actions of young people involved in recent Australian studies are outside the normal channels of conventional democracy.

Harris et al.²⁶ note that young people's lack of engagement with formal politics is also a powerful reflection of the impact of globalisation on citizenship more broadly, whereby nation states no longer primarily control matters significant to their citizens. They cite Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's²⁷ view that politicians are not perceived as effective players in a world where social and political issues are debated and determined at a global level. It is suggested that many young people—including those engaged through this research—no longer believe that politicians have the capacity to solve issues that impact on their lives (for instance global warming), and have come to feel that their interests are unable to be represented through formal political processes.²⁸

²² Harris, A, Wyn, K, and Younes, S 2007, Op. Cit.

²³ Coleman, S 2005, *Remixing Citizenship: Democracy and Young People's Use of the Internet*, Carnegie Young People Initiative, UK, p. 2.

²⁴ Ibid., and Harris, A., Wyn, K., and Younes, S. 2007, 'Young people and citizenship: An everyday perspective', *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 26, no. 3.

²⁵ Fyfe, I 2009, Op. Cit.

²⁶ Harris, A, Wyn, K, and Younes, S 2007, Op. Cit.

²⁷ Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, cited in Harris, A, Wyn, K, and Younes, S 2007, Op. Cit.

²⁸ Harris, A, 2007, Op Cit.

Despite popular political thought, a recent review conducted by Fyfe,²⁹ *Researching youth political participation in Australia: Arguments for an expanded focus*, reports that using dwindling electoral participation rates are an unjustifiable starting point for studying young people's political participation, as it narrows the field of investigation to the conventional political sphere.

Harris et al.³⁰ believe that 'adult-centric' views of youth engagement limit the current potential young people have in civic participation. Rather, Fyfe and numerous other researchers argue that the problem lies in the definition of political and civic participation, which is highlighted further in this review as the crux of understanding that young people are not disengaging, but rather engaging in different ways.³¹ Harris et al. argue that the decline in participation is linked to a breakdown in structured pathways to adulthood, the diminishing relevance of formal institutions and the disintegration of traditional civic affiliations.³² Coleman argues that it is not young people who are disengaged from politics, but contemporary political democracy that has become disconnected from young people: '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.'³³

2.3.1 Political versus civic participation

Political participation refers to the formal arena of politics such as voting and party membership, whereas civic participation refers to activities undertaken by individuals in the interest of the public good and includes actions such as volunteering, activism, institutional politics and cultural acts.³⁴ Civic participation is congruent with social participation, which *ABS Australian Social Trends* understands as 'engaging with others in the domains of life appropriate to one's life stage'.³⁵

Political participation is a contested term, particularly youth participation, which Fyfe says has entered a new era of understanding.³⁶ Fyfe's review outlines the changes that have taken place in defining political participation: from the 'separation' of the citizen

²⁹ Fyfe, I 2009, Op Cit.

³⁰ Harris, A, Wyn, K, and Younes, S 2007, Op Cit.

³¹ Fyfe, I 2009, Op Cit.

³² Harris, A, Wyn, K, and Younes, S 2007, Op Cit.

³³ Coleman, S 2005, *Remixing Citizenship: Democracy and Young People's Use of the Internet*, Carnegie Young People Initiative, UK, p. 5.

³⁴ O'Neill, B 2007, Op Cit. and Burns, J, Collin, P, Blanchard, M, De-Freitas, N and Lloyd, S 2008, *Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

³⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006, *Australian Social Trends: Social participation of young people*, Cat 4102.0.

³⁶ Fyfe, I. 2009, Op. Cit.

from the structures and processes of government, whereby participation primarily took the form of casting an electoral vote (refer to Table 3) ; to become more structurally fluid and decentralised, with open membership and focus on lifestyle issues and achieving social change through direct action and community building, alongside formal decision-making processes.³⁷

Table 3—Traditional hierarchy of political participation

Description of activity	Form of action	Level of participation
Gladiatorial	e.g. holding public and party office, soliciting political funds, becoming an active party member, contributing time in a campaign	Active participation ↓ Inactive
Transitional	e.g. attending political meetings or rallies, making a donation to a party or candidate	
Spectator	e.g. wearing a badge or displaying a sticker or poster, voting, following political issues and debates	

Source: Fyfe, 2009, 'Researching youth political participation in Australia: Arguments for an expanded focus', *Youth Studies Australia* 28:1

Norris agrees that contemporary social movements are primarily engaged with issues such as globalisation, human rights, debt relief and world trade, and potentially 'signal the emergence of a global civic society.'³⁸ Classic indicators are reported to no longer apply to young people, who now draw on a range of repertoires to express themselves politically including a range of new social movements and community organisations which occupy civil society, in addition to the traditional institutions of political parties, unions and organisations. Fyfe reports that this new form of participation reflects a broader knowledge and skills base that enables new and creative political activities within both civic and public domains.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Norris, 2002, cited in Fyfe, I 2009, Op. Cit., p. 38.

³⁹ Fyfe, I 2009, Op. Cit.

Figure 1 presents a matrix of the generational change in political participation, highlighting that young generations are driven by cause-oriented repertoires and new social movements and advocacy networks.

Approaches to researching young people's political and civic participation

Collin reports that literature from Australia as well as Canada, the UK and the US demonstrates two divergent approaches to researching the participation of young people: research on institutional forms of participation, and research on changing attitudes towards politics, democracy and citizenship, and non-institutional forms of participation.⁴⁰

Institutional forms of participation have been defined theoretically through the use of quantitative studies of participation in elections, political parties, unions or civic organisations.⁴¹ Collin notes a recent policy drive within some government and community sectors to increase the participation of young people in decision making through formalised means such as youth reference groups, advisory groups and committees. Despite this, there is little evidence on the kinds or quality of decisions that are made or informed by young people.⁴²

The second approach, or everyday forms of participation, is reported by Collin to address not only the activities and levels of engagement by young people, but their attitudes, perceptions and everyday experiences of citizenship, as a means of better understanding the ways that young people participate outside of institutional or formalised structures.⁴³ Within this realm, new forms of individualised and micro-political actions (such as workplace conditions) stimulate discussion not possible in formal institutions, taking place in arenas and on issues that make people feel they are able to make a difference.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Collin, P 2008, Op. Cit.

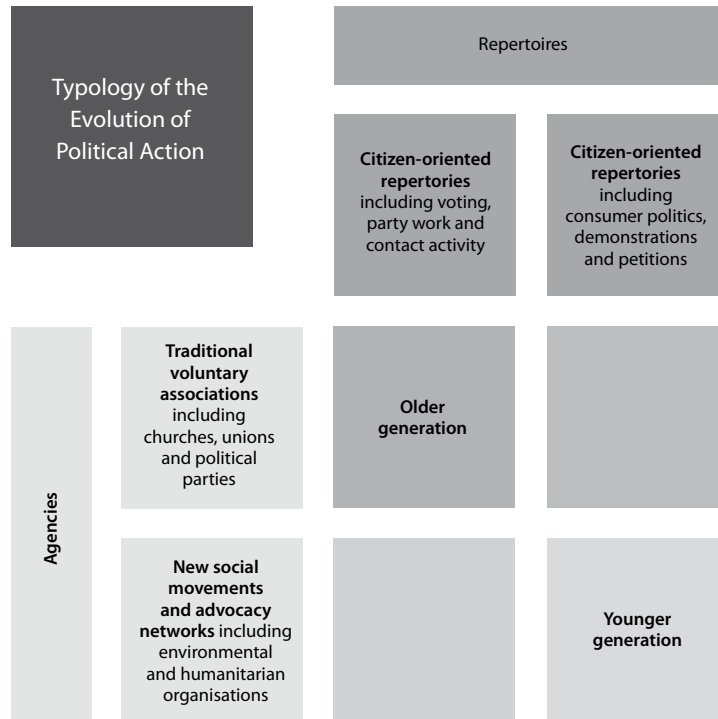
⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Tisdall and Davis, 2004, cited in Collin, P 2008, *Young People Imagining a New Democracy: Literature Review*, Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney, p. 10.

⁴³ Collin, P. 2008, Op. Cit.

⁴⁴ Pattie et al. 2004, and Bang, 2005, cited in Collin, P 2008, *Young People Imagining a New Democracy: Literature Review*, Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney, p. 11.

Figure 1—Matrix of generational change in political participation



Source: Norris 2003, cited in Collin (2008) p. 22.

2.4 ACHIEVING YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The literature suggests that in order to increase political participation among young people, focus needs to be given to civic engagement. Collin believes that it is of greater relevance to recognise youth *civic* participation, rather than focusing purely on political participation, as the nature of youth engagement in contemporary society transcends traditional political activities.⁴⁵

In Australia, citizenship is inherently tied to a right and duty to elect representatives to govern on our behalf. Young people are among those who choose not to take up this right or fulfil the obligation to vote.⁴⁶ Research shows however, that there are many political behaviours that can be included in the notion of 'active citizenship', for instance activities such as signing petitions, writing letters and even participating in forms of

⁴⁵ Collin, P 2008, Op. Cit.

⁴⁶ Edwards, K 2006, *Outside the Mortgage Belt: Homeless Youth, Voting and Citizenship*, TASA Conference 2006, University of Western Australia and Murdoch University.

public display of consent or dissent with government policies or actions.⁴⁷ Saha et al. argue that political participation is just one activity of active citizenship, and not the only activity which qualifies citizenship behaviour.⁴⁸

Generational changes in forms of political participation

Burns et al. agree that young people have increasingly retreated from traditional forms of political and community participation, and are now engaging with civic life in new ways.⁴⁹ Collin has found from her research that low levels of youth participation in traditional political activities do not necessarily indicate broad levels of apathy or disengagement, but a generational change in common forms of political participation to new repertoires and agencies reflecting 'politics of choice'.⁵⁰ Younger citizens are no longer motivated by state activities (such as voting), but causes and issues, including consumer politics, demonstrations and petitions.

This view is also supported in international literature. Canadian researcher Brenda O'Neill⁵¹ reports that the pattern of engagement among youth reveals a shift towards more individualised and private forms of activity, due in part to their increased political sophistication and cognitive mobilisation; and that the relative withdrawal from traditional forms of political engagement could be in part due to the hierarchical, long-term and relatively unsatisfying nature of such activity.

Young Canadians display a pattern of civic and political engagement that differentiates them from other Canadians, where they are less likely to vote and less likely to be members of political parties, but are not indifferent to politics, rather showing engagement in non-traditional political activities. O'Neill suggests that governments ought to focus the lens inwards to consider how institutions and processes may no longer 'speak' to the youngest citizens and may in fact discourage their participation.⁵² In line with other research findings, she suggests that young Canadians may be shifting to individualised results-oriented political action rather than withdrawing from politics altogether.⁵³

O'Neill distinguishes engagement from participation, whereby engagement includes a psychological dimension to participation; and reports that political interest,

⁴⁷ Saha, L., Print, M. and Edwards, K. 2005, *Youth Electoral Study, Report 2: Youth, Political Engagement and Voting*, Australian Electoral Commission.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Burns, J Collin, P, Blanchard, M, De-Freitas, N, and Lloyd, S 2008, *Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and youth.

⁵⁰ Collin, P 2008, Op. Cit.

⁵¹ O'Neill, B 2007, Op. Cit.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

political knowledge and political efficacy are commonly identified and investigated forms of political engagement.⁵⁴ Therefore, political engagement casts a wider net; addressing the degree to which youth engage with political systems and the wider civic community, both in a behavioural and a psychological manner.⁵⁵

Social inclusion and health benefits of promoting engagement

Blanchard et al. define civic engagement as 'individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.'⁵⁶ The involvement of young people in decision-making and civic life increases levels of civic engagement, and meaningful participation reduces isolation and social exclusion leading to increased levels of wellbeing and quality of life. It also fosters belonging and connectedness which are protective factors in the prevention of long-term mental, social and physical health problems.⁵⁷

In addition, Burns et al. argue that promoting engagement by focusing on social inclusion, connectedness and belonging can result in better educational performance, greater work productivity, improved relationships within families and safer communities.⁵⁸ They report that a strong sense of agency in regard to education, employment and health are key factors that impact on young people feeling engaged.⁵⁹ In addition, they note that social networks and structures that support diversity can provide support, influence and opportunities for engagement.⁶⁰

The dialogue around young people's participation in civic and political activities is clearly reflected in wider research around young people's sense of isolation from, not only civic and political structures, but from wider social structures and processes.

As Vromen⁶¹ states: 'The social inclusion policy agenda needs to address how it will include young people in setting the agenda, as well as implementing and evaluating new policy approaches targeting young people's marginalisation and/or voice in contemporary Australian society.'

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Blanchard M, Metcalf A, Burns J 2008, *Bridging the Digital Divide: Young people's perspectives on taking action*, conducted by the Inspire Foundation and ORYGEN Youth Health Research Centre for Inspire.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Burns, J, Collin, P.,Blanchard, M, De-Freitas, N, and Lloyd, S 2008, *Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Vromen, A, Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney, 2008 (October), *Inclusion through Voice: Youth Participation in Government and Community Decision-Making*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, p. 3.

Vromen refers to social inclusion as 'a community-building process, rather than one predicated on individualisation of both policy delivery and youth participation.'⁶² She highlights the importance of social inclusion policies being more inclusive of the diversity *among* young people.

Through her research conducted for the Brotherhood of St Laurence on behalf of the University of Sydney, Vromen makes an important distinction between two current approaches to the youth and social inclusion agenda. The first being 'the youth development approach,'⁶³ which encourages young people's participation as a tool for enhancing the effectiveness of other programs aimed at individuals, including employment and drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs.

The second approach is one which recognises the potential of 'active citizenship' to achieve broader social change through encouraging young people's participation. This approach, in contrast to the former, 'does not focus solely on change in individual young people, but argues that through participation and community development, or social capital type processes, young people are able to change policy-making organisations and society.'⁶⁴

The latter perspective highlights the critical importance of young people's engagement in civic and political activities in effecting a social inclusion agenda which reaches beyond the individual to the progressive development of our broader social structures. Aligned with this understanding is a recognition of the important role which ICTs may play in harnessing young people's engagement and level of civic and political participation. The specifics of this approach and the utilisation of ICTs are explored in Chapter 2.5.

2.4.1 The current nature of youth engagement

Following on from the above, research indicates that the backdrop of change against which young people's engagement in civic and political life is occurring, is forcing us to broaden our understanding of 'engagement' and further explore the everyday ways in which young people experience and express their place in society.⁶⁵ Rather, the focus today on youth engagement can be described as 'ordinary people's politics.'⁶⁶

⁶² Ibid., p. 3.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶⁵ Harris, A, Wyn, K and Younes, S 2007, Op Cit.

⁶⁶ Brett and Moran, 2006, cited in Harris, A, Wyn, K and Younes, S 2007, 'Young people and citizenship: An everyday perspective', *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 26, no. 3, p. 26.

Impact of perceptions of 'making a difference'

Research into the area of youth engagement has shown that young people are participating in arenas and on issues that they feel they are able to make a difference, and that these are typically everyday areas of expression.⁶⁷ Collin⁶⁸ reports that these may address local issues and be oriented towards local actors or targets, or they may be manifest in direct action thought to impact on global issues, for instance taking public transport, or starting an online discussion group on alternatives to car transport as a response to global warming. While there is no specific research on how young people want democracy to function, their research findings suggest that young people value processes and experiences that are fun, culturally relevant, flexible, efficacious and where they personally get something out of it.

Much of the current literature available has cited the four-year YES looking at the political and civic motivations of young people by Saha, Print and Edwards.⁶⁹ Their 2004 national survey of 4,855 senior secondary school students produced a number of findings on the current nature of youth engagement. Most significantly, they report that patterns of participating in types of political activism have remained fairly stable over the past 15 years.

The most common form of political activity was found to be signing petitions (55 per cent), followed by collecting signatures for petitions (21 per cent) and taking part in rallies or demonstrations (15 per cent). While female secondary school students were more likely to join protests in favour of social movements, males scored higher on political knowledge and attention to politics, and were more committed to political freedoms. In addition, females were more likely to participate in 'normative' actions such as signing petitions, collecting signatures and taking part in demonstrations, whereas males participated in 'non-normative' or more violent activities.⁷⁰

Saha et al. found a link between the experience of 'normative' (acceptable) political activities and the intention to vote, as students who feel strongly enough to openly display their views through political action were also students who felt strongly about voting; conversely, those who have participated in 'non-normative' activities such as *occupying a building*, and *damaging* and *violent protests* were less likely to say they would vote in a Federal election if they did not have to.⁷¹ In addition, students who participated in school elections either by voting or by standing for office, intended to vote in Federal elections when 18 years old.

⁶⁷ Collin, P. 2008, Op. Cit.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Saha, L, Print, M and Edwards, K 2005, Op. Cit.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Impact on adult behaviour of exposure in adolescent years through schools

Overall, the study found that a wide range of political activities that young people are exposed to in schools or during adolescent years in community organisations, can have beneficial effects on attitudes toward, and intentions to engage in adult political behaviour such as voting. They believe that secondary schools play a vital role in raising political awareness.⁷²

Edwards believes that Australian school students routinely and comprehensively discover democracy as part of their studies, yet still do not engage electorally at comparable levels with older generations.⁷³ They suggest that participation and engagement remain policy problems. Furthermore, French argues that if democracy is simply presented to children as a concept to which they must contribute at some future point (rather than a school ethos in which they are included and expected to contribute to on a daily basis) they are unlikely to embrace democratic principles in such an abstract form.⁷⁴

Another study conducted by Harris et al. involved an investigation of young people's attitudes towards and practice of civic and political engagement in Victoria, through administration of a survey in 2005-2006 of 15 to 16 year olds and 30 in-depth interviews.⁷⁵ They found that traditional sites of youth association were not meaningful to young people (for instance youth or community centres), showing that young people are not drawn to join organisations that are intended to attract them; but instead prefer to be engaged in informal activities that are not structured through organisations or by adults.

In particular, Harris et al. found that friends and family are the most important groups to young people emotionally and socially; and that young people do not feel that they have a say in their local councils, electorates or the media, but importantly that they 'don't especially want to have more of a say in these forums.'⁷⁶ They argue that:

...insisting that engagement can only be experienced through conventional, adult-centric forums for young people of this age group [15-16 years] misses an opportunity to create links between everyday and formal political spheres.⁷⁷

⁷² Saha, L, Print, M and Edwards, K 2005, Op Cit.

⁷³ Edwards, K 2007, 'From deficit to disenfranchisement: Reframing youth electoral participation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 10, no. 5.

⁷⁴ French, R 2007, *Youth Engagement and the Age of Majority*, Western Australian Electoral Commission.

⁷⁵ Harris, A, Wyn, K and Younes, S 2007, 'Young people and citizenship: An everyday perspective', *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 26, no. 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Harris et al. stress that young people *are* discussing political and social issues, but that they are discussing these in more informal networks and places where they feel comfortable, connected and where they feel they have a good chance of being heard.⁷⁸

Data from a study conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) is reported by Mellor et al. to have produced a significant finding that students need to be convinced that conventional forms of democratic engagement are worthwhile.⁷⁹ The study found that, with the exception of voting, students do not value conventional forms of political participation such as joining a union or political party or running for public office. In addition, 89 per cent believe in the importance of participating in activities to benefit people in the community; 75 per cent think that taking part in protecting the environment is important and 66 per cent support the promotion of human rights. Just over 50 per cent would participate in a peaceful protest against a law they believe to be unjust.⁸⁰

Social change and the rise of the individual

Another factor is the focus young people have on themselves as individuals. Social change has resulted in the increased significance of individual choice and action otherwise known as 'individualisation'.⁸¹ They argue that young people have new and significant pressures upon them to create futures for themselves without predictable pathways or safety nets, and this means their personal concerns are of primary focus. They found that of primary concern to young people is getting a good job, their studies, health, independence/freedom and money. Despite this, they do have social and political concerns, and their greatest concerns for both Australia and the world were war/terrorism and the environment (reflecting new pressures of late modernity). In light of the current global financial crisis, it would be interesting to see in future research whether young people have become increasingly interested, passionate or outspoken about government strategies to address the threats of recession, considering the importance they place in employment and income.

⁷⁸ Harris, A, Wyn, K and Younes, S 2007, Op. Cit.

⁷⁹ Mellor et al. 2002, cited in Collin, P 2008, *Young People Imagining a New Democracy: Literature Review*, Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.17.

⁸¹ Beck and Beck-Gemsheim, 2002, cited in Harris, A, Wyn, K and Younes, S 2007, 'Young people and citizenship: An everyday perspective', *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 26, no. 3, p. 22.

2.4.2 Barriers to youth engagement and political motivation

Burns et al. report from their research on *Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement*, that disengagement is often framed as an individual problem rather than a structural problem.⁸² Disengagement is treated in the literature as both an indicator and a process that puts people at risk. This is a risk for the quality of an individual's wellbeing, and in turn the collective wellbeing of society. They note that interconnected structural and individual factors such as poverty, exposure to violence, social isolation and lack of positive relationships with adults, link disengagement with long-term unemployment, offending behaviour, homelessness, alcohol and drug use, mental illness and suicide.

They conclude that being told what to do and having few options contribute to disengagement. In addition, disengagement is not necessarily a 'linear process or a definitive destination, as a person may be disengaged from school but engaged with their family or peer group.'⁸³

They propose the following 'engagement spectrum' which they used to conceptualise the range of state of youth disengagement and engagement in their research:

- *Disengaged*—feelings of alienation or disconnectedness, under-valued or unable to contribute in a meaningful way. Young people in this instance may lack knowledge and skills or face structural barriers limiting their engagement such as prejudice or limited resources and opportunities.
- *Engaged with risk*—feelings of connection and value but relationships or activities they engage with may put them at risk, for instance gang violence, drug and alcohol misuse. Because of this kind of engagement, young people may be excluded from other 'more appropriate' or socially sanctioned forms of engagement.
- *Under-engaged*—young people are concerned about issues and want to be engaged in a range of settings but face barriers to participation (political, socio-economic, cultural etc). They lack access to resources and opportunities.
- *Engaged*—young people are aware of issues, want to make a difference and are positively connected to institutions which support their engagement. They are moved to act in formal and/or informal contexts and have access to resources and are motivated to engage with others.

⁸² Burns, J, Collin, P, Blanchard, M, De-Freitas, N and Lloyd, S 2008, *Preventing Youth Disengagement and Promoting Engagement*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and youth.

⁸³ Ibid.

- *Highly engaged*—young people have a heightened understanding and involvement in issues of concern, and a strong desire and capacity to participate in conventional ways and institutions. These young people have significant experience and skills, are often turned to for advice and are seen as experts in youth experience. These young people are typically structurally privileged (through access to economic, educational and cultural resources).
- *Over-engaged*—young people undertake a high level of commitment and address focused issues of concern. Organisations often rely on these young people for their expertise and ability to ‘represent’ youth. Organisational expectations place these young people at risk of burn-out or emotional stress. Over-engaged young people are often target groups or disadvantaged groups that may not necessarily be overly enthusiastic participants but find themselves invited or engaged in consultation regularly.

Coleman maintains that even the most outwardly politically ‘disengaged’ young people have lively opinions about issues which impinge on their own lives.⁸⁴ They may not always have information required to shape lengthy arguments, but they are usually willing to explain their points of view. In addition, Melville argues that we need to ‘debunk’ the myths that young people are a homogenous group, as in reality they are as diverse socially, politically, ethnically, culturally and economically, as other groups in the wider population.⁸⁵

The literature indicates that individuals who are usually disengaged are male, from a low socioeconomic background, have low educational attainment and are of a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Those most likely to be engaged are female, from a high socioeconomic English-speaking background, with high literacy skills, from a small family and have access to ICTs. O’Neill states that families are a primary agent of political socialisation in that they impart political information and knowledge both directly and indirectly, transmit beliefs and values regarding the political system and provide role models of political engagement.⁸⁶ They believe that governments should include families as important agents in policies designed to assist youth engagement.

⁸⁴ Coleman, S 2005, *Remixing Citizenship: Democracy and Young People’s Use of the Internet*, Carnegie Young People Initiative, UK.

⁸⁵ Melville, R 2005, *Individualising social and political participation – reconstructing youth in policy making*, presented at Social Policy Research Centre Conference, UNSW, Sydney Australia.

⁸⁶ O’Neill, B 2007, Op. Cit.

Voting access and lack of information are also seen to contribute to youth disengagement. French argues in the case of enrolment and voting, that measures to ensure better catchment and ease of voting are important for lessening the difficulties associated with voting for young people.⁸⁷ She suggests strongly targeted advertising, SMS enrolment reminders, the continuation of the birthday card initiative, relocation of polling places to more modern communities, can all enhance the experience of enrolment and voting for young people.

French also adds that a solution to the inaccessible and dismissive nature of politics is for political parties and Members of Parliament to have lively and informative interactive websites, further accountability within government towards the input of young people, and to improve the potential for schools as democratic institutions which foster citizenship as well as teaching it.⁸⁸

Edwards argues that structural barriers exist for young people, who do not always have a stable address once finishing school and preparing for tertiary study or work.⁸⁹ One link to stability of address is home ownership, which the vast majority of young people are not capable of. Most young people after leaving their family home live in rental accommodation, which is often shared, and where they are frequently mobile.⁹⁰ In addition, Edwards reports that social barriers exist whereby marginalised participants (such as those with a mental illness, history of offending, and under the care of community services) are also often frequently highly mobile, and in some cases homelessness is a problem.⁹¹ She argues that the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters raises the failure of young people to enrol as an issue of concern, while in fact they have made it harder for young people to enrol, vote and remain enrolled.

⁸⁷ French, R 2007, *Youth Engagement and the Age of Majority*, Western Australian Electoral Commission.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Edwards, K 2007, 'From deficit to disenfranchisement: Reframing youth electoral participation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 10, no. 5.

⁹⁰ Casey, 2002, cited in Edwards, K 2007, 'From deficit to disenfranchisement: Reframing youth electoral participation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 10, no. 5, p. 548.

⁹¹ Edwards, K 2007, 'From deficit to disenfranchisement: Reframing youth electoral participation', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 10, no. 5.

2.5 ENGAGING YOUTH THROUGH INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

*Against the backdrop of a rampant online consumer culture on the one hand, and the public obsession over Internet harms on the other, a quite distinct development has quietly been unfolding. Scarcely audible amidst the hubbub over piracy and pornography and the clamour of the media marketplace, a low-profile civic upsurge created for and sometimes by young people has been taking root on the Net.*⁹²

2.5.1 E-democracy—the Australian context

In their paper *The Australian Public and Politics Online: Reinforcing or Reinventing Representation?* Gibson, Lusoli and Ward provide an Australian context to information communication technologies (ICTs) adoption from government.⁹³ They note that the Australian political sphere's adaption to the internet era has received mixed reviews.

While Australia has not faced the degree of crises of other developed societies such as Britain, there are issues with the vast geography of Australia, the so called 'tyranny of distance.'

The article outlines expectations that the government address issues of isolation by making democratic institutions more receptive to the use of new technologies. The federal government was seen as a strong proponent of e-government due to the establishment of the National Office of the Information Economy (NOIE) in 1997 as well as the Prime Minister's statement of commitment to ensuring all appropriate government services being online by 2001. Of importance here, was a proposed e-democracy agenda within NOIE, and the discussion about the need for online consultation and citizen engagement.

There was enthusiasm from a number of MPs who were keen to engage with Australians via ICTs. At this point, Australia was viewed as a global leader in the area of e-government and e-democracy. However, as stated by the authors, 'some of this early optimism has been questioned by subsequent research that has challenged the perception of Australia as a global leader.' They further note that: 'It has been argued that, at the federal level, the narrower issues of e-government and the electronic

⁹² Montgomery, K, Gottlieb-Robles, B and Larson, G 2004, *Youth as E-Citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation*, at: <<http://www.centreforsocialmedia.org/ecirizens/youthreport.pdf>>, p. 2.

⁹³ Gibson, R, Lusoli, W and Ward, S 2007, *The Australian Public and Politics Online: Reinforcing or Reinventing Representation?* Paper prepared for the Annual Conference of the UK Political Studies Association, University for Bath. April 12–14, 2007.

delivery of citizen services have dominated legislators' agenda⁹⁴ seemingly, to the detriment of the e-democracy perspective.⁹⁵

2.5.2 The internet and political participation

The literature shows that the internet is taking on an increasingly prominent role in political participation.

*Political participation has been transformed by the internet and new media, whereby individuals are able to come together in new communities of interest and wide, shallow networks, to blog, deliberate and campaign online, beyond geographical borders.*⁹⁶

Online communication not only takes place within a new medium, but also a new language and grammar of interaction which demands specific user capabilities.⁹⁷ Harris et al. report that the internet has the potential for young people to express and/or transcend local identities.⁹⁸

Bers and Chau argue that many of today's young people are fascinated by, and preoccupied with, new technologies. However, the question is how to leverage this interest to complement interventions aimed at fostering civic engagement and developing new interventions to capture the attention of young people who might not otherwise become involved in contributing to their communities.⁹⁹

Delli Carpini believes the internet to be a potential tool in addressing the root causes of declining civic engagement, with its 'unparalleled' platform to deliver content.¹⁰⁰

Stayner believes that the use of the internet has facilitated opportunities for self-expression, particularly individualistic expression, as opposed to collective forms of

⁹⁴ Dugdale et al. 2005 and Geiselhart 2001 cited in Gibson, R, Lusoli, W and Ward, S 2007, *The Australian Public and Politics Online: Reinforcing or Reinventing Representation?* Paper prepared for the Annual Conference of the UK Political Studies Association, University for Bath, April 12–14, 2007.

⁹⁵ Bishop 2004a cited in Gibson, R, Lusoli, W and Ward, S 2007, *The Australian Public and Politics Online: Reinforcing or Reinventing Representation?* Paper prepared for the Annual Conference of the UK Political Studies Association, University for Bath. April 12–14, 2007.

⁹⁶ Collin, P 2008, Op. Cit, p. 6.

⁹⁷ Coleman, S 2005, Op. Cit.

⁹⁸ Harris, A, Wyn, K and Younes, S 2007, Op. Cit.

⁹⁹ Bers, MU and Chau, C 2006, 'Fostering civic engagement by building a virtual city', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 11, no. 3, article 4.

¹⁰⁰ Delli Carpini.M., 2000, *Gen.Com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information environment*, *Political Communication*, pp.341-349.

expression.¹⁰¹ Individualistic forms of expression do not rely on the co-presence of others, but rely on cumulative input to make an impact, for instance signing a petition. Stayner reports that this mode of expression is quicker, requires little commitment (for instance does not involve time-consuming activity, expenditure of resources or membership of an organisation), and is convenient as people are able to express themselves at the time or place of their choosing.¹⁰²

Further to the benefits outlined above, Delli Carpini notes other advantages of the internet for civic activity, those being: increasing the speed that information can be gathered and transmitted, the ability to increase the volume of information available; information is easily accessible, there is greater flexibility in how and when information is accessed; and there is greater opportunity to interact with others in a range of contexts (one to one, one to many).¹⁰³

Vromen suggests that the provision of these alternative political outlets may make it possible for young people to create 'new and distinctive political spaces' which could offer potential for 'more personal and private politics'.¹⁰⁴

Lastly, Coleman's research found that for some activists, the movement to the internet has levelled the playing ground, giving activists a voice against larger, well-funded institutions.¹⁰⁵

2.5.3 The role of information and communication technology

The internet is a well-used avenue through which information and communication technologies (ICTs) operates. Blanchard et al. argue that the evolution of ICTs has brought about major change in young people's civic engagement and the experiences of young people more broadly.¹⁰⁶ However, they report that while the potential for the internet for promoting and facilitating civic engagement and political activism is recognised, there is polarised debate regarding the extent to which this potential is being realised, and its impact on different groups. In addition, Vromen reports

¹⁰¹ Stayner, J 2005, 'The British public and political attitude expression: the emergence of a self-expressive political culture?', *Contemporary Politics*, vol. 11, no. 1.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Delli Carpini.M., 2000, *Gen.Com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information environment*, *Political Communication*, pp.341–349.

¹⁰⁴ Vromen, A 2004, *GenerationX retrieving net-based information: political participation in practice?* Paper prepared for the Australian Electronic Governance Conference. Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne Victoria 14–15 April, 2004, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Coleman, S 2008 'Doing IT for Themselves: Management versus Autonomy in Youth E-Citizenship', *Civic Life Online: Learning: How Digital Media Can Engage*, Bennet, W, The Catherine T MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital media and learning, Cambridge, MA.

¹⁰⁶ Blanchard, M, Metcalf, A and Burns, J 2008, Op. Cit.

that discussion around implementing internet-based processes that actively include young people tends to focus on government-directed information delivery and consultation, rather than active processes of citizen ownership and collective forms of participation.¹⁰⁷

Gibson, Lusoli and Ward present widely argued views towards internet and civic and political participation, specifically from the perspective of politicians' capacity to engage with the community via ICTs.¹⁰⁸ Through their own research, they acknowledge the following arguments for and against ICTs in the realm of politics. In support of ICTs, the following benefits are acknowledged:

- Increases service efficiency and delivery—such as through the provision of information and services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, increasing public choice and accessibility to information while not being reliant on government employees to be present.
- Increases transparency and information—essentially removing the 'hostile' media thereby allowing representatives and government institutions to communicate directly with the public. The size of the internet also allows for an increase in the amount of information available to the public.
- Increases networking and linkages—being able to communicate with large numbers of people across time and geographies.
- Increases and strengthens the channels for engagement—ICTs make possible the 'modernising of old engagement methods' for example, introducing e-voting and creating new opportunities for political engagement through online consultation and discussion techniques.

The authors also acknowledge arguments against the internet's applicability to civic and political activities, those being:

- The possible threats that ICTs may pose to 'democratic health' due to the enhancement of civic passivity 'as we move toward a push-button culture of democracy.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Vromen, A 2007, Op. Cit.

¹⁰⁸ Gibson, R, Lusoli, W and Ward, S 2007, *The Australian Public and Politics Online: Reinforcing or Reinventing Representation?* Paper prepared for the Annual Conference of the UK Political Studies Association, University for Bath, April 12–14, 2007.

¹⁰⁹ Coleman, 1999 and va de Hoven, 2005 cited in Gibson, R, Lusoli, W and Ward, S 2007, *The Australian Public and Politics Online: Reinforcing or Reinventing Representation?* Paper prepared for the Annual Conference of the UK Political Studies Association, University for Bath, April 12–14, 2007, p. 10.

- The ‘technologically deterministic’ approaches do not take into account the difficulty in connecting with those who lack pre-existing political motivation. ‘Simply providing more channels or gadgets with which to connect will not necessarily motivate people to use them.’¹¹⁰
- The possibility that ICTs may make things worse than they currently are, such as increasing the social and political divides. The authors note that while some biases in accessing internet technologies are declining in Australia (such as gender and region), there are still disparities between occupational status, income and education.

Collin agrees that there is limited evidence on Australian young people’s use of ICTs (particularly the internet) and new media for participation.¹¹¹ Further work is required to fully understand the relationship between ICTs and civic engagement. However, it is apparent that ICTs’ interactive nature and capacity to facilitate interpersonal communication significantly influence social and civic life.¹¹² This sentiment is echoed by Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson who argue that regardless of whether civic websites call for ‘less than hands on’ participation, they provide fundamental first steps that set young people on the road to a future of active, informed engagement.¹¹³

2.6 CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ICTS—THEORIES AND TYPOLOGIES

There are various theories or typologies of internet usage and civic and political participation. Some outline views towards internet usage in and its impact on social capital, while others outline the types of ICT application forums and the underlying prescription of action meant of consumers. In her various works, Vromen incorporates some of these frameworks into her own research.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

¹¹¹ Collin, P 2008, Op. Cit.

¹¹² Blanchard, M, Metcalf, A and Burns, J 2008, Op. Cit.

¹¹³ Montgomery, K, Gottlieb-Robles, B and Larson, G 2004, Op. Cit., p. 18.

¹¹⁴ Vromen, A 2004, *GenerationX’ retrieving net-based information: political participation in practice?* Paper prepared for the Australian Electronic Governance Conference. Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne Victoria 14–15 April, 2004 and Vromen, A 2008, ‘Building virtual spaces: Young people, participation and the Internet’, *Australian Journal of political Science*, vol. 43.

The potential effects of internet usage on social capital are outlined below:¹¹⁵

- The internet transforms social capital: the internet provides the capacity for communication with distant communities of shared interest and thus creates new communities.
- The internet diminishes social capital: the internet chiefly entertains and draws people away from family and friends, and thus the internet leads to less community.
- The internet supplements social capital: the internet is a part of people's everyday lives and another means of communication, facilitating existing relationships and patterns of civic engagement.

In Vromen's later work, she utilises Polat's approach to online engagement, suggesting that when viewing the internet as a political space for participation, it has three primary uses, those being:¹¹⁶

- *An information source*, whereby sites provide information about political issues, existing political groups and campaigns.
- *A communication medium*, for instance:
 - conversations that are one-to-one dialogue, such as email
 - the aggregation of information where many people communicate with a single agency, such as online voting and online petitions
 - as a form of broadcast from one centre to many people, such as personal websites and blogs, and
 - group dialogue where the interaction among a large group of senders and receivers, such as in forums and online chat.

¹¹⁵ Quan-Haase and Wellman 2002 cited in Vromen, A 2004, *GenerationX retrieving net-based information: political participation in practice?* Paper prepared for the Australian Electronic Governance Conference. Centre for Public Policy, University of Melbourne Victoria 14–15 April 2004, p.5.

¹¹⁶ Polat 2005 cited in Vromen, A 2008, 'Building virtual spaces: Young people, participation and the Internet', *Australian Journal of political Science*, vol. 43, p. 81.

- *A virtual public sphere*, where internet sites are 'providing a platform for rational critical debate rather than simplistic registration of individual views through information aggregation tools, such as polls or surveys.'¹¹⁷ Vromen notes that the focus here is on 'the processes involved in opinion formation and sharing, rather than chiefly on how opinions are expressed.'¹¹⁸

Vromen analyses three Australian civic and political websites (discussed in a latter section of this review) to which she applies Dahlberg's 'more critical theoretical typology' for analysing internet-based communication and participation.¹¹⁹ For Dahlberg, sites are categorised as being either liberal, communitarian or deliberative, based on the forms of democratic process it creates.

Drawing from Dahlberg, Vromen outlines each of the following:¹²⁰

- *Liberal sites*: assist the expression of individual interests, enabling individuals' access to government information and giving them a means to communicate with institutionalised political actors. Many e-government initiatives would fall into this category due to the 'top down' consumer model theory of politics, often only providing basic electronic access to government offline services.
- *Communitarian sites*: build communities of interest and in effect, enhance communal values. Essentially, they serve to connect people with similar concerns and values. A key aspect of communitarian sites is the exchange of information through decentralised interaction. Vromen notes that other internet analysts such as Chen, Geiselhart and Gibson liken this community building to a form of 'bonding social capital found in like-minded communities.'¹²¹
- *Deliberative sites*: the internet is a vehicle for the expansion of the public sphere for rational, critical citizen discourse. Discourse is open, reflexive and respectful and aims to reach general agreement for the good of the public. A key underlying feature of Dahlberg's 'deliberative' site is that they need to be autonomous from state and corporate power.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Vromen, A 2008, 'Building virtual spaces: Young people, participation and the Internet', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 43, p. 81.

¹¹⁹ Dahlberg 2001 cited in Vromen, A 2008, Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

¹²¹ Chen, Geiselhart and Gibson 2006, cited in Vromen, A 2008, Ibid., p. 82.

¹²² Ibid.

2.6.1 The effectiveness of the internet on civic and political participation

In assessing the effectiveness of engaging young people through the internet, it is again useful to consider the work of Ariadne Vromen. Vromen outlines two views on the potential of the internet to facilitate political engagement, citing Norris' differentiation of *cyber-optimists* and *cyber-sceptics*.¹²³ Cyber-optimists see the internet as a gateway to increasing political knowledge through exposure to email and chat rooms, thus enabling individuals to become more active in politics at a community and global level; and mobilising those on the periphery of existing political systems (such as young people).

Cyber-sceptics, on the other hand, see the internet as reinforcing political agenda towards those already active and knowledgeable about political affairs, thus potentially widening the gap between those who are engaged and those who are politically indifferent. For instance, Vromen found from a telephone survey of 287 28–34 year old Australians in 2001 that there was a digital divide between young people according to access to the internet and socioeconomic status; and that the internet does reinforce existing political practices and persuasion rather than mobilise new political actors. Despite this, she reports that overall there was evidence that the internet facilitates information distribution and sharing for those involved in both activist and communitarian group-based participation.

Blanchard et al. agree that numerous empirical studies, which have sought to further assess the relationship between levels of civic engagement and internet use, have produced mixed findings. However, overall most support the hypothesis that internet use is positively associated with higher levels of civic engagement.¹²⁴

Others have argued that the internet, as well as other technological devices (mobile phones and digital television), provide new and individualised opportunities for participating in political processes. The internet has created further opportunities for self-expression through chat rooms (allowing the ability to post views and for fellow members to comment) and message boards.¹²⁵ Stayner also reports that technological

¹²³ Vromen, A 2007, 'Australian young people's participatory practices and internet use', *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 48–68.

¹²⁴ Blanchard, M, Metcalf, A and Burns, J 2008, *Bridging the Digital Divide: Young people's perspectives on taking action*, conducted by the Inspire Foundation and ORYGEN Youth Health Research Centre for Inspire.

¹²⁵ Stayner, J 2005, 'The British public and political attitude expression: the emergence of a self-expressive political culture?', *Contemporary Politics*, vol. 11, no. 1.

advances mean that individuals can easily create and maintain an online presence with limited technological know-how, through access to the internet on mobile phones and laptop computers.¹²⁶

2.6.2 The link between online engagement and offline action

Questions still remain as to whether online engagement transfers into the offline world. There is a notable lack of empirical evidence in this area, however, Raynes-Goldie and Walker's research on young people, civic activity and ICTs found that interaction online can in fact be taken into the offline world.¹²⁷ They argue that online activity can help young people to take steps towards action in their community and that the internet can help less active young people to connect with more active young people. Raynes-Goldie and Walker conclude that online civic engagement 'is a valuable precursor to engaging with young people in their physical communities.'¹²⁸

Online civic activity is viewed as providing the means for people to 'organize and mobilize.'¹²⁹ Their study found that 'young people who are interested in civic, community or activist issues are looking to the internet for information about causes important to them, connections to like-minded peers and organisations, and for ways to organize and mobilize. When these needs are met, they are able to make positive change in their lives and in their communities, demonstrating that the action or result of online engagement is occurring offline.'¹³⁰ The organisational and mobilisation argument is echoed by Delli Carpini who argues for the *potential* to affect motivation, ability, and opportunities of young people to become engaged in public life.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Raynes-Goldie, K and Walker, L 2008 'Our space: online civic engagement tools for youth' in *Civic Life Online: Learning: How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*, Bennet, W, The Catherine T MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital media and learning, Cambridge, MA.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.162.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 170.

¹³¹ Delli Carpini cited in Montgomery, K, Gottlieb-Robles, B and Larson, G, 2004, Youth as E-Citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation, at: <<http://www.centreforsocialmedia.org/ecirizens/youthreport.pdf>> and Bell, J, Vromen, A and Collin, P 2008, *Rewriting the rules for youth participation: Inclusion and diversity in government and community decision making*, Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, at: <http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/youth/programmes_funding/nyars/Rewriting_the_Rules_for_Youth_Participation.htm>.

Further to this, Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles and Larson cite the 'Online Communications' study from Pew Internet and American Life Project which found that young people often discover local religious groups, youth activities, social clubs and organisations *online* and subsequently seek association with them *offline*.¹³² They qualify this however, stating that, whether the relationships forged in online communities translate into the same kind of social capital as those forged offline, is unclear.¹³³

Bell states that differences in participation:

*...requires further interrogation, especially in terms of the relationships between offline and online participation and the ways in which the internet may figure into the broader picture of youth civic engagement and participation.*¹³⁴

Furthermore, it is noted that one important element of some technology-based networks:

*...is their effort to focus on and combine the online and offline activities of youth, relying not only on technology as a means to engage youth within the 'virtual' communities of cyberspace, but also working within, or encouraging work within, local communities as a way to build social ties and provide concrete opportunities for youth in those communities.*¹³⁵

Bell also discusses the prevalence of young people using websites to share their experiences and also accessing advice on how to deal with problems they may have in their communities, both online and offline, such as racism, drug and alcohol abuse and violence.¹³⁶

¹³² Pew Internet and American Life Project 2001 cited in Montgomery, K, Gottlieb-Robles, B and Larson, G, 2004, Youth as E-Citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation, at: <<http://www.centreforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/youthreport.pdf>>, p. 8.

¹³³ Montgomery, K, Gottlieb-Robles, B and Larson, G, 2004, Youth as E-Citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation, at: <<http://www.centreforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/youthreport.pdf>>.

¹³⁴ Bell, J, Vromen, A and Collin, P 2008, *Rewriting the rules for youth participation: Inclusion and diversity in government and community decision making*, Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, at: <http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/youth/programmes_funding/nyars/Rewriting_the_Rules_for_Youth_Participation.htm>, p. 13.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid,

2.7 CURRENT EXAMPLES OF INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

2.7.1 Information Communication Technologies in Australia

While there are many civic and political ICTs available for young people to access, it is worth identifying specific forums that have proven to be particularly successful and reputable in a local context. Vromen reviewed three leading civic and political websites in Australia, those being Vibewire, ActNow and GetUp!¹³⁷

The following overviews of these three online civic and political websites draw heavily on Vromen's primary research on each of these sites. Further to this, Vromen's overview of each website also encompasses their relevance to Dahlberg's 'theoretical typology' as previously discussed.¹³⁸ Therefore, in Vromen's exploration of these sites and the forms of democratic process each creates, she assigns them as being either liberal, communitarian or deliberative.

Vibewire

Target audience and user numbers: Established in 2001, Vibewire was created to provide a primarily internet-based youth media space. With an estimated 7500 users, it is funded by philanthropic foundations, government and corporate sponsors. Vibewire.net went live in 2002 as a 'portal for youth culture and political expression' and is targeted at young people aged 16–30 years of age.

Given that Vibewire runs vastly different projects and talks about different topics at any given time, it is difficult to define its community. The community can shift depending on the issue at hand or the project being run at any given time. Its use of creative culture is seen to be a means of attracting and establishing a broad community. Participants are not only attracted to politics, but also the different mediums through which ideas can be shared (art, music, literature).

Approach, activities and interactivity: Vibewire is youth led, user generated and is structured around three areas:

- 'Create'—written word and film.
- 'Life'—technology, travel and entertainment; theatre, film, gigs and CDs.
- 'Pulse'—political and social issues (domestic and international); global poverty, sustainability and climate change, and identity.

¹³⁷ Vromen, A. 2008, Op. Cit.

¹³⁸ Dahlberg 2001 cited in Vromen, A. 2008, Ibid.

Young people are able to post articles and take part in forums. Issues raised and discussed range from politics and public/community issues, to cultural commentary in many areas such as art, literature, film and music. Various projects have been set up on Vibewire including young journalists reporting on upcoming elections, the development of a program for young people from non-English speaking backgrounds to have their stories told, and the development of 'Square One' which aims to create an offline space for young people to come together, share ideas and interact.

A key driver of young people's participation with Vibewire is that they are creators of the media and information available on the site. Forums are often used on the Vibewire site. It hosts an annual e-Festival of ideas. Lasting for five days, it is an opportunity for young people to take part in discussions online, which are often exploring contentious issues.

One of Vromen's interviewees describes Vibewire as a space that provides an alternative political space, where young people can be invited to take part in political and civic dialogue that is beyond adult-centric notions of political and civic engagement.¹³⁹ As a forum for the exchange of views with other young people over similar issues of interest, Vromen nominates Vibewire as a communitarian site.¹⁴⁰

ActNow

Target audience and user numbers: launched in 2006, ActNow was created by the Inspire Foundation (established in 1998). It has approximately 700 members, 22 000 site visitors, and is funded by donations, philanthropic foundations, government grants, and corporate sponsors. It is led by youth advisory boards and its content is written by young people. ActNow is targeted towards young people aged 16–25 years of age.

Approach, activities and interactivity: ActNow aims to empower young people through their engagement in political and civic activities by providing information *for* young people that is written *by* young people. ActNow was originally developed as an online protest site and then a volunteer matching site (to non-government organisations). Neither was as successful as the creators would have liked. Currently, the focus of ActNow is to remove the barriers for young people wanting to have their say and who want to take part in their community. Creators are currently planning to move ActNow into the offline community.

Young people have been at the centre of the site's development and content. Compared to the other two examples, ActNow actively seeks out young people

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

to assist in structuring the site. ActNow is based on young people creating their own personal profile through which they then communicate with others. This can be through online postings, discussion boards, or personal emails. When visiting a page that relates to an issue of interest, visitors can then communicate with others who have also indicated interest in that issue by visiting that page. In order to contact others or post material on the site, young people must be members.

As well as encouraging interaction with others who visit the website, ActNow is a valuable source of information for young people who would like to know what else they can do, and who they could contact to get more involved (organisations). The page they select to visit (which highlights a particular issue), can also then take them to information about any events being held in which they show interest. ActNow encourages action, however, action can take place in various ways. Action may be a behavioural change or the adoption of a constructive behaviour, or it can involve collective action requiring organisation. Vromen also notes that the website is about raising awareness and providing advice.¹⁴¹

Of Importance, ActNow also encourages participation and action in the offline world. Vromen refers to the Inspire Foundation's annual report, which describes ActNow as creating 'both bonding and bridging social capital', as it enables people from different backgrounds to form ties. Vromen considers this the key to increasing the likelihood of young people becoming more actively involved in the wide community.¹⁴² ActNow is developing relationships with organisations for marginalised young people with the aim of involving more marginalised young people in their website.

Vromen nominates ActNow as more than a liberal site due to its aim to move young people's actions into the offline world.¹⁴³ The fact that it also encourages collective and individual action moves it beyond a 'liberal individualist outlook.' The possibility for ActNow to move into the offline world, where young people can debate issues in the public sphere, makes it potentially a communitarian or deliberative site.

GetUp!

Target audience and user numbers: Vromen describes GetUp! as 'an overtly political campaign-based' website.¹⁴⁴ Established in 2005, GetUp! has around 150 000 site users, its target audience being progressive young Australians. GetUp! exists through 100 per cent donations from Australians and the Australian union movement and acts in coalition with progressive NGOs (it does not accept funding from political parties).

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁴³ Vromen, A. 2008, Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

Approach, activities and interactivity: In contrast with the other websites, GetUp! focuses more intensely on current political and social issues at a federal level, rather than providing a platform for a broader range of issues that are not necessarily 'political' in the traditional definition. In saying this, a key objective of GetUp! is to engage with young people, thus illustrating similarities with the other websites.

A key point of difference with GetUp! is that it is not focused on creating communal spaces for forums, but is rather focused on taking action in the online and offline world. It also uses media heavily, particularly with regard to campaigns (on the internet, television, and print media). It also exercises 'direct social action' (what is also referred to as 'political stunts') to raise awareness of issues and take a stand against decisions made by government. Many GetUp! campaigns have been created with the aim of communication with government representatives. Petitions are often used. Beyond petitions however, is GetUp!'s 'sometimes disruptive, protest orientation.' While GetUp! campaigns offline, it sees itself as a predominantly online forum, offering a time-convenient means of activism.

GetUp! does not interact with members through online forums and traditionally has a top-down approach. They do however, poll members about what key issues GetUp! should pursue in the future.

Vromen classifies GetUp! as a liberal site. She notes that while other liberal top-down websites (often e-government) allow for communication with decision makers, GetUp! is 'more akin to highly organised, direct-action campaigns undertaken at the grassroots level (similar to media savvy Greenpeace stunts).'¹⁴⁵

Beyond illustrating how these Australian websites fit into theoretical typologies, Vibewire, ActNow and GetUp! also demonstrate ways in which online and offline civic action work together to encourage young people's engagement. The criticism that the internet diminishes social capital (by drawing people away from family and friends, thus leading to *reduced* community ties) may thus not be supported based on the objectives and outcomes of these three sites.

2.7.2 International ICTs for engaging young people

Reviews of ICT application forums in an international context is also important. The following offers an overview of three ICT application civic and political sites that aim to engage young people.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 98.

TakingITGlobal

Launched in 2000, TakingITGlobal offers engagement with many issues such as: arts and media; culture and identity; human rights and equity; learning and education; environment and urbanisation; work and economics; health and wellness; peace, conflict and governance; and technology and innovation.¹⁴⁶ The site encourages young people to think for themselves as citizens of both their local communities and nations, as well as citizens of the globe.¹⁴⁷

The site has evolved into a complex platform utilising the types of tools that young people are familiar using—blogs, discussion boards, podcasts and instant messaging—combined with collaborative action-planning tools, background information on a broad area of social issues, and connections to relevant organisations, groups, and their peers.¹⁴⁸

TakingITGlobal is available in 11 languages (English, French, Spanish, Russian, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Turkish, Chinese and Arabic), which is key to its capture of a global audience. TakingITGlobal has relied on volunteers for the translation into different languages.

YouthNOISE

Sponsored by Save the Children Federation, YouthNOISE 'has positioned itself as the "one stop shop for teen involvement."¹⁴⁹ The website connects young people to causes not only in their own community, but also globally. The website is extremely teen savvy, relying on the same kinds of sophisticated, cutting-edge research used by marketers to design a site that will appeal to teens, combining technological enhancements of online commercial media with socially conscious messages of the non-profit world.¹⁵⁰ It is able to do this due to its annual budget of more than USD \$1 million.

YouthNOISE is privileged in that it is funded by a number of major foundations and prominent individual donors. Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson note that the creators and managers of the site have developed a highly sophisticated media and promotion strategy designed to place it in the foreground of teen media culture by forging strategic partnerships with some of the most popular and influential players in the marketplace.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Raynes-Goldie, K and Walker, L Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁷ Bell, J, Vromen, A and Collin, P 2008, Op. Cit., p. 15.

¹⁴⁸ Raynes-Goldie, K and Walker, L 2008 Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁹ Montgomery, K, Gottlieb-Robles, B and Larson, G, 2004, Youth as E-Citizens: Engaging the Digital Generation, at: <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/1037426/Center-For-Social-Media-Youth-As-ECitizens>>, p. 54.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 55.

More than half of the content on YouthNOISE is created by young people. Visitors to the site do not have to become members, but there are incentives to obtaining membership. Young people can create their own profile on the website, which indicates the types of causes they support.

Of interest, while YouthNOISE aligns itself with business models of non-profit organisations, its privacy statement does allude to YouthNOISE's sharing of some information it obtains about its visitors with its corporate clients.¹⁵²

Rock the Vote

Established by music industry leaders, Rock the Vote's objective was to increase political participation of young people in the US. Described as a leader in organising voter registration drives, Rock the Vote devises 'get out the vote' events, and voter education events for young adults.¹⁵³

Rock the Vote now goes beyond voting, its mission now encompassing the areas of 'action', 'issues', 'programs', 'street team' and 'donate.'

Young people can go to the site to register to vote and they can now also get involved in political issues and actions. For example, they can view various issues, and then submit a letter electronically on behalf of Rock the Vote. The letter is already a template, however, young people are asked to personalise the letter in their own way, sign it and submit it.

The website urges young people to educate themselves about political issues and to take action, be it participating in volunteer activities, starting petitions, donating to a charity, lobbying, testifying, writing a bill, campaigning to vote, or even running for office. Young people are also encouraged to protest, participate in non-violent disobedience and purchase products from socially responsible companies.

Rock the Vote partners with musicians to get the voting messages across to young people. The Dixie Chicks is one example of a pop group contributing to the mission of Rock the Vote, particularly in the effort to attract young women to vote. Some artists also donate significant sums of money to Rock the Vote, for example the Dixie Chicks donating USD \$100 000.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Montgomery, K, Gottlieb-Robles, B. and Larson, G, 2004, Op. Cit. p. 22.

2.7.3 Appealing elements of ICTs

Through the review of literature, the following are identified as appealing elements of effective ICTs:

- Designed and operated *by* young people *for* young people.
- Enable young people to contribute by posting information or their own media.
- Offer multiple modes of communication (online forums, email, blogs; even communication away from the internet). Levels of connectivity need to be considered, offering basic discussion forums for young people with limited connectivity, bearing in mind that others with better connectivity will expect more 'sophisticated' platforms.¹⁵⁴
- Offer the capacity to receive feedback on how their involvement has had an impact.
- Provide serious and authentic commitment from those in power to listen to, and learn from their comments and feedback on issues.
- Affiliation with a cause as opposed to a political stance.
- Provide content in multiple languages to attract a global audience. This would also be highly relevant for sites that aim to attract young people from non English speaking backgrounds (NESB), and who are newly arrived to a country.
- Offer social networking platform types (essentially at a commercial level) such as the ability to create one's own profile.
- The presentation of information in a manner which is not overwhelming in volume.

2.8 IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS RESEARCH

As a relatively new area of activity, young people's participation in civic activities through internet and mobile technologies offers some areas for further research. Further research could be beneficial in relation to the impact of participation; interests, motivations and aspirations, as well as the transference of online engagement into the offline world.¹⁵⁵ Vromen reports that there is still much to learn about the way young people use the internet and the potential for improved relationships through political and community engagement.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Raynes-Goldie, K and Walker, L 2008, Op. Cit.

¹⁵⁵ Fyfe, I 2009, Op. Cit.

¹⁵⁶ Vromen, A 2007, Op, Cit.

3 CONSULTATION FINDINGS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the findings of consultation conducted with all participants: government employees, ICTs, the youth sector, academic experts, and young people.

It includes an overview of the current climate of engagement through online and mobile technologies. That is, how are young people currently using technology to engage. It also reviews young people's patterns of usage of technology and the role it plays in a meaningful experience. The findings include a review of both online and offline participation and gives perspectives on how these work together to form the civic experience.

Barriers to civic and political activity are explored along with the role that technology plays in addressing or *causing* some of these barriers. More specifically, the barriers to online engagement are also explored.

Finally, this chapter addresses the role of governments in facilitating young people's engagement in civic and political activities through ICTs. This discussion addresses the adoption of Web 2.0 technology and the challenges associated with its utilisation, concluding with an exploration of governments' potential to provide for, and access, online spaces targeted at young people.

3.2 CURRENT CLIMATE OF ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH INTERNET AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES

Key findings

- There is a wide scope of ICTs: basic, moderate, sophisticated (utilises Web 2.0). Government ICTs are presented on each level.
- Young people use internet and mobile technology as an information source, as a tool to organise, as a space to exchange ideas.
- Social networking is emerging as a space for raising awareness of social issues.
- There is no real consensus as to whether young people are networkers, consumers or creators of information. Currently, young people are more likely to be consumers and networkers. However, with further engagement in online technology they are likely to increasingly become creators of information for civic engagement.
- Young people like to contribute to civic activities both online and offline. Increasing the likelihood of participation is often dependent on following some very basic do's and don'ts, such as effective branding to attract youth, ease of accessibility, and quick, easy access to content.

3.2.1 What is on offer for young people?

Currently in Australia there are numerous online spaces available, which play a role in the way in which young people engage in civic and political activity. They are largely split into government and non-government spaces and provide online engagement capabilities starting from very basic, to moderate and sophisticated.

Online spaces may be classified as offering varying levels of interactivity as follows:

- *Basic interactivity*: This refers to a basic information webpage, which provides a one-way information channel and no capability to exchange information. Many local government websites currently follow this model.
- *Moderate interactivity*: Information is available to young people, and websites offer the opportunity to email organisations or departments; content can be downloaded; links are available to related sites and the site incorporates linkages between other organisational webpages. Such sites tend to be found in the sphere of local, or in some cases, state government and youth organisations.

- *Sophisticated interactivity*: these sites are very interactive, offering a seamless two-way exchange of information, and the capability for young people to download and upload content to websites through blogs, discussion forums, and media content. Sites such as STIR, Oaktree, and a limited number of government sites such as youthcentral and Your Spin are based on this Web 2.0 model.

Figure 2 illustrates the varying levels of interactivity which may be found in government and non-government sites at present

Consultation undertaken as part of this research revealed variances in the degree to which these online spaces are youth led, adult led or partnership based.

Some ICT application organisations are entirely youth led. Vibewire, Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Oaktree Foundation and Youth Disability Advocacy Service of Victoria are such examples. Young people are responsible for the strategic direction of these organisations.

Other ICT application organisations are managed by adults, where young people have significant involvement in shaping their direction, particularly with regard to designing future campaigns. The operation and direction of the organisations are, however, undertaken by either a steering committee (which for some organisations is partly led by a team of young volunteers), or an adult team. In saying this, a large portion of organisations reported that the majority of their teams are aged under 30 years.

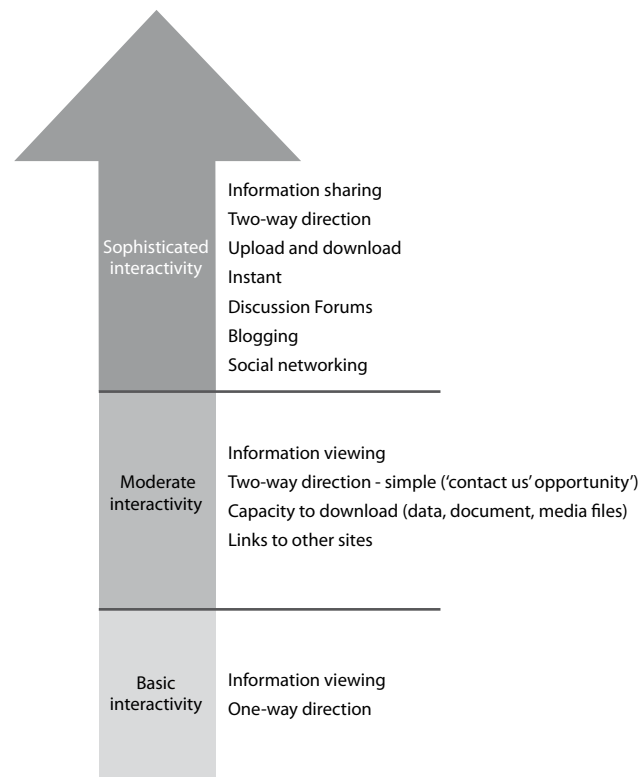
However, having an ICT application managed by adults need not result in an adult-centric approach to civic and political activity. Young people can play an integral and highly valued role in advising adults on issues of relevance and directions they believe the ICT application should take. For ICTs such as ActNow, young people can volunteer and there are internships available suggesting adult guidance and mentorship activities. There is also regular and ongoing consultation with youth ambassadors who are in touch with the current 'vibe' of young people and who bring those insights to the consultations with ActNow managers.

ActNow's philosophy to its organisation and the role young people play in its continual development echoes the sentiments of several ICT providers and youth organisations. Its website informs users: 'ActNow knows that the more you understand about an issue the more you'll feel empowered to do something about it. Use ActNow to find information on social, political, environmental, lifestyle and topical issues for a non-judgemental and factual snapshot of the bigger picture. All the content you find on ActNow is written by ActNow members who are young people just like you.'¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ http://www.actnow.com.au/Content/About_ActNow.aspx

Youth-specific government websites are not youth led and tend to have significantly less input from young people. There are some exceptions to this however, such as the Australian Youth Forum (AYF) and youthcentral, whose technological sophistication parallels that of non-government organisations. In saying this, these websites involve consultation with young people regarding ongoing development and direction, while adhering to overarching objectives of government websites.

Figure 2—Levels of interactivity of government and non-government websites



3.2.2 How young people currently engage in civic activity

Research indicates a degree of contention regarding young people’s engagement in civic activity. There is a strong perception that young people’s participation in civic and political activity is diminishing, both in Australia and internationally. Voting numbers have significantly decreased (when compared to the same demographic five or 10 years ago) and there is a widely-held perception that young people are not visible in the community engaging in civic activity.

Research also suggests that young people *are* participating in civic activity, however, they are doing so in different ways than those associated with 'traditional' modes of engagement. Moreover, they are utilising different tools to engage, some of which result in less of a physical presence in the community.

This view that young people are participating, but perhaps in different ways, is strongly supported by the youth organisations consulted as part of this study. Almost all reported that young people were raising civic and political issues through their organisations, either on their websites or by commenting on their social networking sites (e.g. Facebook and Twitter), sending emails, or through face-to-face interaction, as well as participation in events and activities in their local communities.

The Youth Disability Advocacy Service in Victoria reported that in their experience, young people are drawn in by issues that make them feel important, where their view is important and where they are fighting for something 'real'.

Vision Generation (VGen) reported that much of their youth involvement was generated through support around particular issues, noting that this was 'activism as opposed to youth participation.' GetUp! reported that young people essentially seek out ways of participating that are 'instant, with as few steps as possible,' which may explain the integration of social networking applications in online civic and political activity.

The mere existence of these organisations may be owed to young people supporting their campaigns and spreading the word among their friends and other networks, thus extending the numbers of supporters and members.

While quantitatively representative research with young people was not undertaken, qualitative research with young people supports the argument that young people *are* engaging, in both traditional and non-traditional ways. Non-traditional engagement need not equate to non-engagement. Importantly, it needs to be recognised that young people engage in civic activity:

- to different degrees
- about different issues rather than different social ethos' (i.e. alignment with causes rather than organisation alignment), and
- through different channels (offline, online and in different ways).

Categorising young people's level of engagement

As with any activity, some people are immersed more than others. This is also the case with civic and political activity, and particularly so with regard to the channels used to do so.

Examples of how young people are engaging are outlined below, and demonstrate that offline and online activity features throughout.

Some young people are heavily involved in the organisation of initiatives, either with an organisation, or individually. They are self-starters, and strong proponents of civic activity and the causes with which they are aligned. Some of these young people may have obtained temporary employment throughout a campaign, or as a volunteer, or through managing the organisation. This is often the case for organisations such as Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Oaktree, Vibewire, STIR, and VGen.

Other examples of more intense types of engagement encountered during this research are the cases of a 13 year old who has People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' (PETA) homepage as her own; sends links to friends (with graphic clips); writes letters to companies about animal testing; or a 21 year old who is concerned about depression in young people. This young person has met with the Governor-General and the CEO of *beyondblue* about possible initiatives to tackle the issue of depression in young people.

Other participants were involved in the following activities:

- youth committees such as Youth Affairs Council of various states
- belonging to issues based youth organisations such as Australian Youth Climate Coalition, STIR, VGen, Oaktree Foundation, ActNow
- anti-mining activities in a regional community
- 'Friends of the Earth cafe' (environmental activist group)
- financial aid initiatives such as knitting groups for Uganda and women for work in Africa
- school environmental committee (part of a state education initiative)
- volunteering with at-risk young people (midnight basketball)
- faith-based fund raising
- organising community events (such as a regional town autumn festival and multicultural nights)

- volunteering for disability organisations and meals on wheels, and
- chairing or belonging to an 'e-squad' (environmental squad) set up at school.

While all of these examples illustrate strong immersion in civic activity, the use of technology greatly differed between them.

As indicated earlier, there are varying degrees of civic engagement, including:

- *Non-engagers*: No indication of interest in civic or political engagement or perhaps unable to engage.
- *Non-committal engagers*: If an issue is of interest or concern to young people, they may participate fleetingly, but have no desire to seek deeper engagement with this issue. Examples of this from participants are annual events, Earth Hour, and school-driven civic events such as Clean up Australia Day, signing an online or offline petition and joining a cause through social networking sites.
- *Moderate engagers*: An issue is of interest or concern to young people enough that they want to be further informed, or seek information from others. This can include visiting websites; posting a comment; joining mailing lists; contributing to discussion boards or online forums; completing surveys; posting own media or content; 'comment on this' opportunities; online polls; participating in live chat; posting comments on their Facebook profile about particular views on issues. This activity does not necessarily transpose into any further online/offline action such as creating petitions, organising events.
- *Committed engagers*: Young people align themselves strongly with a cause or issue. They may volunteer for organisations; instigate movements, gatherings and approaches for change utilising all methods discussed above.
- Figure 3 illustrates the spectrum of young people's current level of engagement and associated technologies and online modes of engagement.

Figure 3—Classification of young people regarding levels of engagement

Non-engagers	Non-committal engagers	Moderate engagers	Committed engagers
Social networking Search engines (information seeking)	Social networking (join cause, send to friend) Search engines (information seeking) Email Mailing list (but not necessarily reading emails) Sign petitions	Social networking Join email list Occasional online poll Pasting comments (occasional) Sign online petitions Search engines (information seeking) Upload media Polls Visit issues-based website	Social networking (purposeful) Join mailing lists Sign petitions and general petitions Email to organise Blog/discussion boards/chat 'Comment on this' Polls Upload media Search engine Visit issues-based website Generating content for website

However, grouping young people with regard to 'degrees' of engagement can be problematic as it does not tell the complete story about how young people engage. The literature tells us that young people tend to engage less with an organisation or political party and align themselves more with issues or causes. They may also engage more or less intensely on a particular issue, and engagement may be intermittent.

Young people may not define their civic activity as belonging to a group and supporting its ethos, particularly in relation to political engagement. Instead, they may align themselves with issues which strongly resonate. This may have implications for the ways in which young people engage, with involvement sometimes being sporadic or without consistency. In this sense, a young person's engagement may only be for the duration of a targeted campaign. However, it does not mean that they are not interested in, or committed to, civic issues.

Young people now have more options about the channels they use to participate in civic activity. Traditional modes of face-to-face engagement with the community are still very popular with young people. However, there are a growing number of online engagement channels open to them. It is important to note that methods of engagement are not mutually exclusive and are, in many instances, most effective when used together.

3.2.3 How technology features in young people's engagement

ICTs play a role in young people's engagement in civic and political activities in a range of ways and to varied extents. These are:

- technology as an information source
- technology as an organisational tool
- technology as a space for the exchange of ideas and posting content
- technology as a means to 'spread the word,' and
- technology as a channel for focused and opportunistic networking.

Technology as an information source

Technology may be used by young people for activities such as browsing the internet to follow up on information they hear from friends (particularly platforms such as Google and Wikipedia) and for staying informed through joining mailing lists.

The majority of youth organisations and ICTs consulted see their websites and organisations as a source of information, and many try to draw young people in on this basis: to learn more about what is going on with regard to particular issues (or campaigns for which they are advocating), to join in, have their say and provide support. Many also post links to other sites to provide further information about related campaigns or issues; or post links to other organisations advocating for similar issues to encourage young people to bolster support.

Technology as an organisational tool

Young people regularly use technology as an organisational tool. Consultations with youth organisations and ICTs supported the fact that young participants organise events and campaigns, specifically through online membership and networking. This is undertaken through mass emails, often developed by the organisations themselves and forwarded to members, who in turn, forward these to friends.

Other channels for organising activities included communication via discussion forums. One such example is a 'Reach Out' youth ambassador who participates in online forums with other youth ambassadors. These online forums allow her to discuss emerging issues in her role with others. Further, given that she resides six hours from her nearest capital city, the online forum is the most effective means of maintaining communication with her peers and with the 'Reach Out' organisation.

Facebook, through facilitating the creation of 'events' for members to 'reply' to; organisations are providing messages to members to rally support. These messages may then be forwarded to members' friends and networks of young people, who may be posting blogs or links to events they have created or discovered.

Oxfam commented that young people today lead different lifestyles, where technology has become more relevant. Technology allows organisations to maintain a live connection with young people as they move through different emotional and life spaces. Oxfam believes that we need to use technology to develop a relationship with young people, while they are engaged and thus effectively using these spaces.

Technology as a space for the exchange of ideas and posting content

For some young people, technology is regularly used as a tool for the exchange of ideas and information through utilising discussion boards, polls and 'comment on this' opportunities. Content, including media content can also be uploaded to these applications.

Online forums are used regularly by young people on organisational committees as a means to discuss issues, exchange ideas and often, prepare for face-to-face meetings. These are spaces where significant groundwork can be done and ideas exchanged in preparation for an offline event. ActNow for example, recently conducted a face-to-face forum with young people to redevelop the ActNow website. In the following 10 weeks, the ideas discussed in the workshop were further developed and refined via online discussion board exchanges.

YouTube is one of the more popular sites through which young people view and sometimes post media content, often because ICTs link their interface. Flickr was discussed to a much lesser extent. When discussing the posting of media, particularly through YouTube, one respondent stated '*Seeing other people do things makes me think I can do it too.*'

Several members of one group were part of the youth advisory group for their local council. They are in the process of developing their own youth-specific website for their area. This is being created with the assistance of a council IT specialist. The website will provide information for young people in the area about initiatives and events.

Technology as a means to 'spread the word'

Technology is a popular means of 'spreading the word,' particularly through social networking sites such as Facebook whereby users may 'change their status' and send friends invites to causes/groups.

Consultations with youth organisations and ICT providers indicated that all recognise Facebook as an important means of communication among young people. Oxfam reports that whereas blogging allows deeper conversations and focus on particular areas, 'Facebook is great for making initial contact and broadening connections.'

Technology is also used in other ways to spread the word. triple j's 'Hack' radio show reports that it always re-Twitters' discussions that have taken place on air. It is believed this helps to further spread the word following the show, and enables listeners as well as the general public to voice their comments and further enable discussion on a particular issue. GetUp! also uses what it terms 'email of mouth' where it encourages members to forward regular emails to friends and networks to both bolster membership, and spread the word on particular issues.

triple j's 'Hack' radio show agreed that Facebook is by far the most effective application, because it is easy to follow and is already used by the masses. However, they were also of the opinion that while Twitter is more difficult to use, its output may be much more effective as it is considered the application is used by people who are really 'connected'. The social networking phenomenon warrants further exploration as a possible tool for 'spreading the word' and is discussed below in the context of 'focused' versus 'opportunistic' networking.

Technology as a channel for focused and opportunistic networking

Social networking emerged as a significant component of young people's online lives. Its explosion as a result of the growth of Web 2.0 and young people's subsequent immersion in this two-way information platform cannot go unexamined when considering how young people engage in civic activity online.

Fundamentally, social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo are used—as would be expected—for social networking. There are some significant differences to offline social networking, however, these being:

- the sheer expansion of an individual's network of friends
- the capability to communicate with friends instantaneously, and
- the capability to portray to the world an instantly communicable online identity.
- Each of these uses can have implications for the ways in which social networking can impact civic activity for young people.

In the context of civic activity, young people are using social networking sites to draw attention to a cause, initiative or an event. For example, (and particularly so for more

heavily engaged young people), some young people post links to particular websites that have information about a cause, initiative or event. In doing this, friends of the individual are made aware of the information, and are also aware that their friend is attending this event, interested in this cause, or is part of that initiative.

One participant discussed how she attended a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) rally because a friend posted information on her Facebook page. After attending the rally (which was held in numerous states across Australia) she noted that she had not seen such a cohort of young people at a protest rally before and attributed this to the role social networking played in transmitting information about the event. For young people who are strongly aligned with an initiative or organisation, social networking is used in a focused way to advertise an initiative. Young people involved with an initiative may, as a collective, change their Facebook profile picture to the image representing the initiative. Participants involved with organisations such as Oaktree Foundation and the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) recounted instances of doing this. This is also done on an individual basis for young people drawing attention to their own personal cause.

Some young people are now utilising Facebook as the basis of entire campaigns. An example was given by one participant at university, where Facebook was used to increase awareness of child slavery in the chocolate industry. The 'fair trade for chocolate' campaign was run entirely on Facebook where other young people were encouraged to take photographs of themselves with a fair trade 'speech bubble' such as 'I'm a fair trade chocolate eater' which would then be uploaded onto Facebook and subsequently shared with friends. This was essentially used as an online petition and 5000 young people from the university setting participated in the initiative. As stated by this participant: '[the process] is quite simple and quite effective too. You just take photos and put them online and it's there for the world to see.'

Media may also be posted on social networking sites for friends to observe. One heavily engaged participant regularly posts graphic imagery from PETA showing animal cruelty. He attempts to utilise this space to raise awareness of animal cruelty with his friends.

youth advisory councils (government and non-government) tend to use social networking sites for their own private forums. These forums are where they discuss ideas and organise events, often between their offline meetings, without having to physically meet.

However, the degree to which social networking comprises legitimate civic activity is unclear. Young people are themselves unsure. Of those who click on a link or join a cause, only a few of those consulted in this study pursued engagement

beyond initial contact. This begs the question: is posting a comment on a specific issues-based website any more legitimate than posting the same comment on a social networking site?

There are two arguments which may be considered here:

1. Social networking sites are not a legitimate form of civic activity: A simple 'click' does not require any real type of contemplation about the issue, nor commitment to the cause. Posting comments underneath an issue is a superficial form of engagement. That is, if it is considered as being 'engaging' at all. There is no investment of self, and no likely action for change to follow as a result of this 'fleeting' social awareness. The following statement from a heavily engaged participant summarises the general argument against social networking sites as an act of civic behaviour:

'There's a group on Facebook called the "Saw the group, read it once, thought it was funny, joined the group, never saw it again". Facebook can be effective, but it can just be "oh, click, click" and after a while you forget you were ever there.'

Further to this, joining a cause or a group may merely be a way of portraying an idealised 'socially aware' identity to other members of their cyber community.

2. Alternatively, social networking sites expose social issues to non-engaged masses. While there may be limited action that results from issues being posted on social networking sites, social networking sites may be considered as effective spaces for bringing issues to the masses who would otherwise have no exposure to them at all. Where young people do not appear to be engaging at all, is becoming aware of social issues the first step to becoming involved? Is posting a comment on an issue-specific website more legitimate than posting the same comment on a social networking site? It is worth considering that the comments on the social networking site may be seen by many people who would otherwise never have read or considered such a comment? Further, given peer-to-peer influence, as evidenced in literature and through the participants in this research, can this be considered a way of at least raising social awareness? As suggested by another participant: 'It can be superficial, but it can be effective in raising awareness about issues.'

As demonstrated, discussions with young people suggest both arguments to be valid. Social networking sites can be a valid channel to heighten awareness of social issues and civic initiatives. They are, in fact, used in this way by committed engagers, as exemplified above. However, the degree to which social networking sites incite further action may be insignificant, particularly for non-committed engagers or non engagers.

Consumers, networkers or creators?

It appears that young people are currently more likely to engage in civic activity as consumers first and foremost. Using the internet to seek out further information is a fundamental step in young people becoming engaged, be it online or offline. The action to follow this is networking, which includes communication with other young people via email. While young people do post content and create media, this is less common.

Research indicates that youth organisations and ICTs tended to view young people as relevant to all three categories, in that young people *consume* information to find out more, and *network* in order to *create* change. Respondents, however, varied in their views:

- VGen reported that in their experience young people 'look for a connection' regarding their thoughts and opinions on particular issues, but at the same time search the internet and their website to *consume* information about particular campaigns and find out how they can contribute. VGen also reported that this had changed the way their organisation was considering technology. Dependency on technology means that the world is becoming more individually focused and 'stuck on a computer', rather than getting out and making a change in the real world. Among some young people, it was considered that traditional organisations such as girl guides and scouts had 'gone out of fashion' and that young people now participate in an online world. However, there may be a need to create communities of online users in order to move away from this individualistic mindset and create change.
- The organisation Twenty10, felt that young people primarily were networkers, however, with a 'creator bent'. As a result, Twenty10 constantly evolves their website to keep up to date with what is currently happening, in turn keeping young people up to date with the ways in which they can make change happen.
- Oxfam felt that there was no 'one type' of user, and that one person could be consumer, networker and creator simultaneously or at various times. It reported that 'participation depends on the pathways you create and the spaces you create for young people to participate in.' In saying this, Oxfam recognises that there is no one way of being involved or making a difference, and as such, its aim is to offer broad opportunities as young people have 'different ways of growing and being active citizens.'

- STIR found that its most popular element is the 'blender forum' where young people can create and engage in discussion boards and blogs about numerous topics. In this sense, they are more likely to be creators of content. When young people send in submissions, they tend to be stories of their experiences and photo imagery.
- ActNow suggests that young people desire to be producers, not just consumers of information and includes political outcomes in that. For ActNow, however, 'producing' does not necessarily mean makers of content, but rather, *agency*.
- 'They want to be part of the process they don't just want to be service users, so they can do that online. They can create their own web page or create a button for a particular cause on their Facebook profile or to be able to upload their own content on ActNow is that they are agents in that process and that agency is what is typically missing in more traditional processes of government and politics.'
- The Youth Disability Advocacy Service for Victoria commented that the fact that young people act as all three users drives applications such as Facebook where they are consumers, networkers and creators.

3.2.4 Technological tools for engagement

Young people's use of these technological tools is on the rise and some commentators, including the Youth Affairs Council Western Australia believe that with time, ownership of the internet will fall increasingly into the hands of young people. The internet will consequently become more 'youth led and youth driven' and sites will inherently become more targeted to young people.

The following provides a summary of the primary technological tools utilised by young people to engage in civic and political and other activities, and aspects of their use of these technologies as revealed by the research.

Email

Email is an important channel for civic participation. It is used as a means of communicating ideas to others and contacting group members (large and small) to organise events, meetings, and actions.

As research participants commented:

- 'It's so convenient. Planning meetings, sending out agendas, summing up meetings, opportunities for people to easily touch base with others.'
- 'Emailing is my number one form of communication with people in my organisation.'

Email is also a key method of obtaining further information from individuals and organisations: 'I emailed so many different organisations, close to home and world-wide and it was so great to get responses and hear back from real people on how to get involved and what was happening.'

The majority of young people are on mailing lists with one or more organisations, nationally and internationally. Some nominated themselves on lists through the recommendations of friends who sent them a link. Some have sought to be on an organisation's mailing list through research on their website. Some have joined mailing lists through information provided via emails received by other organisations. Others have previously made contact with a representative of the organisation in an offline context, usually an event.

Mailing lists are seen as an effective way of keeping in touch with issues of interest. Young people lead busy lifestyles due to numerous commitments, so receiving occasional emails is a good way to maintain their interest and cognisance of issues. As one participant commented: 'I think email inspires you to maintain your involvement with the organisation or website. Everyone's busy and has their own things to do and it's sort of good to have an email come in and remind you of what's going on.'

Emails are a good way to keep young people abreast of issues. In saying this, emails are not a means of instantly contacting intended recipients. General feedback from those who use this method to communicate with young people consistently noted that they do not check their emails frequently enough to elicit an immediate response. Several government youth sector employees have experienced this and therefore, follow up each email with a text message to recipients alerting young people (youth committees) to check their inbox.

One participant who was heavily involved in the AYCC describes its approach to the use of emails, upon which it relies heavily. The AYCC recognises that young people approach emails differently and as such, it delivers contact and approaches communication between different sub groups of young people, those being 'explorers' and 'glazers'. For example, younger young people tend to 'explore' the emails. That is, read the details of the content and then take the time to explore the associated links sent within it. Older young people who tend to be professionals are more likely to 'glaze' over an email quickly. The AYCC therefore tailors its approach to emailing these groups and further, follow up emails to older young people with a phone call.

Discussion boards

For young people more heavily engaged in civic and political activity, discussion boards are used with purpose. Discussion boards are seen as more open spaces with people of

different backgrounds, ages, and geographic regions. Young people enjoy connecting with like minded individuals, but do not always want to engage with others who share the same point of view. They enjoy being exposed to new, and sometimes, opposing perspectives. As one participant observed:

I like the way discussion boards can bring people together when that wouldn't normally be possible. You could have a discussion and experience a completely different point of view with someone from the other side of the world when that's just not practical (or very possible) face to face.

Discussion boards are seen as fairly free spaces where young people can say what they like without recourse. 'People will be less restricted over the internet and that's great that you can just say whatever.'

However, all participants acknowledged the benefit of discussion boards being moderated as a means of maintaining focus on the given topic. While discussion boards are appreciated for the freedom of opinion they allow, young people prefer their conversations to maintain focus. As one young person observed of a discussion board they liked: 'I think moderation and having some sort of purpose were what made it good.'

Several ICT organisations provide discussion boards which are always moderated by young people themselves, and government youth sector employees also see the merit in this, with one commenting that: 'you have to be able to talk their language, otherwise there will be no connection.'

Online polls/'comment on this'

Online polls are a common area of internet activity for young people. They are seen as a quick and easy way of putting viewpoints across, having opinions counted. As one young person commented: 'I participate in online polls when they are relevant to me, because my opinion counts.'

The participants in this study were more likely to take polls that were on social networking sites, news sites and issues-based websites. youthcentral for example, provides opportunities for young people to take part in polls, and often, the topic allows participants to learn about other participants. Currently, youthcentral is polling young people on the reasons for using the internet. This not only informs young people, but also informs youthcentral itself so that it may better cater to the online behaviours of young people.

The opportunity to participate in socially aware polls revealed polarised views from young people.

The ease of participation and the opportunity to move on quickly sits uneasily with some who feel that such non-committal actions require little thought, effort, or meaningful engagement with the issues.

However, the general opinion is that the nature of online polls and 'comment on this' attracted the attention of people who may not otherwise put their opinion forward through channels that required more effort: 'Online polls are good for people who don't want to be active or involved in the issue...It's not so direct, you can be anonymous, do a poll in five minutes and then not have to do anything else.'

Posting media

For the participants in this research, posting media was not as common as posting general comments. Some participants have posted (graphic) animal cruelty clips; self-made documentaries, and photos of their experiences, particularly on YouTube. For those who have engaged in this activity, posting visual images (pictures or video) was considered to be a very effective means of showing the audience about an issue rather than just describing it. Given that online engagement is perceived by the majority of young people as not having the emotional impact of face-to-face engagement, uploading visual images for viewers is seen by some as an effective means of significantly enhancing the emotional impact on viewers and thus enhancing their experience of online engagement. As stated by a participant involved with Oaktree: 'Technology can help back you up...Sometimes images have more weight...Images validate and make the campaign more exciting.'

ICTs are offering opportunities for young people to post media in a structured manner. A recent initiative undertaken by the Oaktree Foundation involved encouraging members to create a 20 to 30 second short video clip to send to their local MP, which briefly introduces the individual and their opinion on a certain political issue and the changes they would like to see. Oaktree Foundation has collated these short clips into a longer video which has been shown to their supporter base and other politicians. Oaktree Foundation has also, in the past, encouraged members to change their Facebook status to signify their support for certain issues; post video material on YouTube; and provide updates on Twitter about action that has been taken. This is similar for other issues-based ICTs such as VibeWire, AYCC and STIR. The AYCC for example encourages members to post media of any offline action on the AYCC website, and also on any medium available, such as social networking sites.

Chat rooms

Participating in civic or socially aware chat rooms was rare for the participants in this study. There are challenges in organising chat rooms, particularly in generating numbers to participate, a sentiment shared by ICTs and organisations:

I think it's hard to get enough people involved and active to do chat rooms in just local groups...The purpose of the chat room is somewhat defeated if there are only two people at a time.

For some young people, chat rooms are not seen to offer much to the experience of civic or political engagement: '...not unless it's directed by a group or organisation that intends to get people motivated to act.'

While the Inspire Foundation (ActNow and Reach Out) does not host online chats on its website, it utilises another platform 'habbo' to host a monthly chatroom space called the 'Info Bus'. The topic for discussion is advertised to members and if interested they can register with the space provider 'habbo' to take part. In this sense, the Inspire foundation is outsourcing their online chat to an ICT application that can provide a more sophisticated platform. The bus is always full, with around 30 participants 'on board'.

Generally, online chat rooms are extremely labour intensive and require significant technological and financial resources to moderate the chat. Therefore, live chats are not provided from many ICT platforms.

Blogs

Blogging was not regarded as common activity online for participants in this study. Rather than create their own blog, they are more likely to read other people's. As one participant said: 'I comment if I agree with someone because I want to let the writer know that they are supported. If I disagree with someone I comment to get my questions answered.'

Appealing aspects of blogs were those such as their ability to provide the latest, up-to-date information: 'I keep an eye on the blogs that I do because they tend to be the first outlets of news relating to the topics that I'm interested in.'

Blogs also offer real life experiences for others to read: 'Blogs are awesome!! (despite the fact that some almost turn into non-fiction with much exaggeration) but they're glimpse into first hand accounts.' Or as another participant observed: 'It's interesting looking at other people's perspective - particularly when it's an informed view.'

There may be several reasons for young people's lack of engagement through blogging, including a lack of confidence or perceived lack of knowledge about areas of interest about which they would like to blog:

I'm not a huge blogger, wish I was...I guess I'm still experimenting with the input I have on the net, especially with issues. I enjoy reading and I have my opinion. But I guess the confidence, because I don't know a lot about politics, holds me back. I make comments every so often, but not regularly.

A number of the ICT providers and youth organisations consulted offer blog spots or discussion boards for young people to exchange ideas and post comments. Of those who do not offer this option, many report that they are currently updating or 'revamping' their websites with further user generated components so that people are able to blog and create discussions.

Social networking platforms

Facebook pages and other social networking platforms such as Bebo and MySpace are also used as a platform for exchanging ideas and posting comments. For instance, triple j's 'Hack' radio show reports that young people accessing its Facebook page are able to converse with others regarding current affairs and other topical issues, as well as upload photos from events on particular causes for other members to view.

Mobile phones

When asked how technology featured in young peoples civic and political participation, the use of mobile phones was not top of mind for the participants in this research. In saying this however, it was clear that the mobile phone was the primary method of communication used by young people. In discussions with government and youth sector employees and ICT providers there were some effective use of mobile phones when these were used as part of engagement strategies.

At the most basic levels, young people use texting to forward information to each other. In an example given earlier, many government employees who engage with youth councils use the mobile phone to text reminders or alerts about meetings, or emails sent.

Mobile phones are also beginning to be used effectively for other means. One government employee discussed how they used the mobile phone to relay messages to young people at a youth festival. When walking through a particular area of the festival grounds, they received a message via bluetooth about a health-related issue.

Another example was from Inspire Foundation (ActNow and Reach Out), which ran a successful campaign for students throughout the exam period. Five thousand young people who registered received fortnightly messages from Reach Out which contained tips about managing exam stress. While it was successful, Reach Out has been unable to run the initiative again due to the resources required. In saying this, Inspire Foundation believes that there is 'huge potential' in utilising the mobile phone more effectively to engage with young people, and is currently working on a partnership with another organisation to attempt a similar initiative again.

The government community consultation initiative Your Spin used mobile phones to remind young people to participate in their consultation process. Further, for those with internet access on smart phones, young people could also access the voting web portal and cast their vote on how government should spend money of young people in their area. It was suggested by the initiative's developer that with the increased uptake of the smart phone, the role it plays in civic and political activity is likely to increase. Another government employee takes this one step further, suggesting that the uptake of the smart phone is likely to make personal computers almost obsolete due to the convenience it provides for young people.

3.2.5 Guidance for engaging young people through online and mobile technologies

This study offers useful guidance in relation to the most effective forms of engagement with young people using online and mobile technologies. Foremost is the point that when engaging young people online, it is important to be aware of their preferences for the way websites accommodate them.

- Consideration of issues such as ensuring websites are accessible and easy to navigate are critical. Ideally, no more than three clicks should be required for people to access what they are looking for. In the Your Spin initiative it was found that young people disliked voting via 'sliding scales', but preferred the 'click' mechanism which required less time and effort.
- The capability to conduct a 'key word search' was deemed very important when searching for information. This decreases the time needed to navigate the site for the information they are seeking.

- If young people are required to 'sign up' to a website in order to contribute, the process needs to be quick and easy. Young people do not like having to sign up and register with an organisation in order to post a comment on a discussion board. This was a common sentiment among participants and there was a high level of frustration in having to do so. Several young participants said that this had deterred them from engaging with the issue.
- While this may be the case, it is fairly necessary for ICT providers to require registration to contribute content to the site. Inspire Foundation for example, sees this as a necessary risk minimisation strategy, to make sure it has the opportunity to know who is putting the content up and allowing content to be moderated.
- Young people's preferences for online engagement channels vary and it is important to understand audiences' preferences when seeking to engage particular target groups. This is best exemplified through the uptake of social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo. Each application tends to appeal to different groups of young people. Bebo, for example, was found to be more popular with young people from diverse backgrounds and Indigenous young people. MySpace was found to be more popular with younger young people and also young people interested in music. Facebook is known to be more popular with older young people, like young professionals. Therefore, to harness the high traffic of young people through social networking sites it is important to recognise where particular target groups gather. The Your Spin campaign is a good example of this. Prior to launching the Your Spin initiative, research was conducted to ascertain the social networking sites that its target group was more likely to frequent. Research found that, for the particular geographical areas the Your Spin campaign was applied, MySpace and Bebo were the social networking spaces with the heaviest traffic from young people.
- Young people generally expect to be able to share information with friends through social networking sites. Therefore, it may be important to provide young people with the ability to 'share this' from the original website.
- Youth branding is considered to be important. Young people are deterred by adult-centric websites. Ways in which websites can be branded for young people are through relevant and fun graphics, the language used ('use real language'), and competitions. Even within regions there can be different 'dialects' used among young people. Moderation and even basic communication with young people in these spaces is most effectively done by those who understand language, tone, and young people's specific colloquialisms.

- Peer-to-peer influence is very important. A recommendation from a friend is a key means of engaging young people in issues, causes or initiatives.
- Regarding email lists, there is potential for information ‘overload’. There is no clear indication regarding the frequency of email broadcasts as the experience of ‘overload’ is often determined by the number of mailing lists the participant has signed up to. Due to the potential of being lost among other competing issues of interest, email subject titles need to be directed and simple.

3.3 PATTERNS OF USAGE—TRANSITIONS BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE ENGAGEMENT

Key findings

- Young people regularly find out about issues or opportunities to participate in civic and political activities in the offline sphere and then go online to take the next step.
- Social networking platforms provide opportunities for young people to become aware of issues and opportunities to engage online. Their level of engagement is likely to increase due to the capacity to share information easily through these platforms.
- Young people regularly use online and mobile technologies to organise civic and political activities in the offline world.
- Young people move between online and offline participation smoothly and with purpose: they recognise that technology has its place within a larger process.

3.3.1 Online and offline routes to participation

The use of online and mobile technologies takes on different usage patterns for young people and there is fluid movement between the two. The avenues through which participation occurs (both online or offline) can be influenced by various factors such as age; location; degree of engagement; preference for (and previous exposure to) channel type; the organisation with which they are affiliated; the resources available to them, and the issue at hand (local, global, or one that requires personalised contact).

Generally, it is in the offline world that young people come into contact with issues which resonate. They may be attending an event (such as a university fair, community event) where they see an organisation or a particular issue being promoted. They may

have friends currently involved with a cause, see or hear about the issue through the media or have heard someone speak about the issue through their school or university. If interest is sparked, young people tend to go online to discover more information: 'I was inspired to join World Vision when Tim Costello spoke at our school.'

In getting online, young people become information seekers. The internet is seen as providing a wealth of information quickly, and easily. Young people can begin to build a knowledge base and find out more information about an issue. In doing so, they decide whether they would like to become further involved: 'I look to see which ones I can contribute to; which ones are viable for me to contribute to.'

In the process of searching for information, young people are then more able to identify the organisations most closely aligned with the issue and will use these as their gateway to further involvement. This may be in the form of emailing organisations for more information or perhaps joining the organisation online and contributing to the website, or joining its mailing list.

More traditional means of contact are also used to make initial contact. For some young people, picking up the phone and calling the organisation to speak with someone *personally* is preferable. This was particularly the case of older young people living in regional areas. However, for many websites, particularly globally based websites, the only contact detail available is email.

Conversely, there are occasions where it is in the online world that young people are exposed to particular issues for the first time. This is most likely to occur through peer-to-peer influence via emails or social networking. The number of young people whose initial exposure to a cause or issue will be through online channels is only likely to grow given the availability of online technology and the development of Web 2.0 for social networking. With this in mind, online avenues of communication will become increasingly important in the future as they may be the first space that exposes young people to particular issues of interest, and for some it may be the only space in which they choose to engage.

Social networking exemplifies the issue above. Young people send information/cause/group invitations to each other about potentially new issues. The continual exchange of these 'cause invitations' or postings may remain just that, and may never result in behaviours away from that particular space, or away from the online space at all. There are examples of young people pursuing further action as a result of receiving information on social networking sites (examples related more to Facebook). Such actions include exploring a linked web address for more information on an organisation and attending a fundraising event.

While awareness of a cause through social networking has resulted in offline behaviour, examples are not prolific. In saying this, the Your Spin community engagement initiative had significant success utilising social networking sites for the engagement of young people in a state government decision-making process. A web portal was set up where young people could vote on the way in which government funding was spent in their local area. The portal was connected to the social networking sites Bebo and Myspace. At the conclusion of the consultation period, Your Spin had 8000 friends, of which 2000 carried through to the web portal to vote. This is an example of an effective method of engaging young people who were otherwise not engaging in government decision-making processes. Continued communication with the 'friends' of Your Spin has immense potential as an ongoing source of community consultation with young people in the area.

The nature of the issue or organisation can impact the patterns of engagement. For example, some organisations exist as a means of providing tools for action, be it online or offline action. Many organisations encourage young people to take action (both online and offline) through the organisation of groups, events, petitions, volunteering, protests or fundraising. They provide the tools to assist young people who are inclined to take online interest into offline action. Organisations that do this include ActNow, the AYCC, GetUp! STIR, and VGen. Beyond websites, young people participate in youth affairs councils, student councils, or similar organisations, often comprising a mixture of online and offline activity. Councils meet face to face on a regular basis. However, much of the preparation for these meetings is done through internet and mobile technologies such as via emails, texting, and online discussion groups (mostly through social networking sites). There is a constant transition between the two.

This is also the case for young people who take action in the offline world. Much of the preparation is done through the assistance of internet and mobile technologies.

The degree to which online technologies are used for civic engagement can vary between age groups. For example, it was mentioned by an older participant that young people have less independence and physical autonomy at that life stage and are therefore more likely to depend on online technology to engage. They may not have transport, or be limited in the time of day or night in which they can take part in offline activities (generally after school or weekends), and may therefore be more reliant on technology to make contact with people and participate in the process of change. Older young people on the other hand may have means to travel, or friends with means to travel. They may be better able to determine the time of day or night in which they participate (i.e. more flexible schedules and a stronger sense of maturity and safety).

The nature of the cause—be it local or global—may determine the direction of action into online or offline. However, there are also numerous examples of young people participating offline, and at a local level, for a global cause. Such examples are young people affiliated with STIR, VGen, ActNow, Oaktree, Oxfam and Vibewire.

Young people move between online and offline participation smoothly and with purpose. They are keenly aware of the strengths and weaknesses of both, and utilise the most appropriate approach for the best outcome. The transition between these modes of engagement demonstrates the deconstruction of traditional dichotomies such as global and local, online and offline, and the personal and the political.

A number of youth organisations and ICT providers play an active role in encouraging offline action through online engagement and have been reasonably successful. Oxfam, for instance, sends invitations to offline events using online technologies, as it is through these online technologies that it primarily garners support for particular causes. It reports that it is currently in the process of 'building upon the idea that you can use online networks to create offline communities.'

For instance it currently runs a program called 'Close the Gap' which encourages young people to register online to participate in an offline activity such as hosting a fundraiser. Oxfam reports that there is a very close correlation between online and offline activity. However, it considers there is a need to determine a balance for the way these aspects of life can support each other.

A member of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition describes the organisation as 'very much about the online action and then using technology to show what's being done.'

The WAYAC also offers a similar approach, whereby young people are able to register for volunteer work. The Oaktree Foundation, like Oxfam, follows a principle of using online applications to encourage offline political and civic actions. It reports that 'it's important to bridge the gap between online actions' and notes that it is crucial to make the entry point into this 'action' as low as possible, i.e. make the first action step as easy as possible.

VGen reports that while online engagement is a common starting point for young people getting involved, it is essential that they also get involved offline to see first hand how they are making a difference. It reinforces their commitment to a cause rather than participating 'from a distance.' It reports that its offline events and forums held throughout the year are its main driving point, and the website acts as a support.

3.3.2 The advantages of technology for civic and political participation

When young people seek to participate in civic activity, the internet is strongly perceived by them as a good place to start. For many young people, the internet is an important first step to begin the process of participation. Online engagement was overwhelmingly seen by research participants as a means of getting information out to the world effectively and efficiently without being labour or cost intensive.

Many ICT providers and youth organisations also see online engagement as the first step to offline engagement. That is, by making young people aware of particular issues online, this assists them to *consider* ways that they can make a difference in the offline world.

Online engagement is seen as an effective way to reach a broader audience; that is, young people who are not engaged in civic activity. This is clearly seen through the way in which social networking information about issues and events is easily uploaded and easily downloaded. So the internet expands to the broadest extent for creator and consumers of content. With young people becoming increasingly savvy with technology, this is certainly an effective channel of communicating with each other utilising various levels of sophistication.

Another appealing aspect of the internet is the ability for 'non-committal engagement.' As one participant commented: 'It is not a hassle: you can come and go as you please and no one hassles you.'

This aspect of online engagement is like a double edged sword in the sense that engagement without commitment can be potentially superficial engagement: 'Things can get brushed off more easily.' Online petitions can fall into this category, as does social networking.

Conversely, the capacity of the internet to reach large numbers of young people is a definite benefit of its use. This is where the social networking sites are particularly useful and emphasise the impact of peer-to-peer influence. Social networking sites can expose young people to issues, ideas and critical thought, which they would otherwise not be exposed. The internet, in this sense, is able to make political issues personal for young people.

The abundance of information available to young people about issues of importance to them is also a key benefit of online engagement. Never before has information been so accessible and prolific where there is '...lots to see and learn.'

The benefits not only relate to the vast quantities of information, but also the range of perspectives available. When used as an information source, the internet provides information from different angles. Both the literature and our stakeholders discuss the confusing effect that information overload can have on consumers, and both discuss the challenge ahead for young people in sifting through what information is useful, useless, trustworthy and non-trustworthy. In general, young people go to their trusted sources for information, which include Wikipedia, Google and familiar websites.

The young people who participated in this research indicated that they know that all information out there is not necessarily trustworthy, and that at times it is difficult to decipher validated information. Heavily engaged young people indicated they know that there is certainly reliable evidence-based information to be found and often it is on the ICT platforms with which they engage. ActNow, for example, has fact and reference checkers to ensure that all information posted on the website is accurate. This is illustrated to visitors through the provision of references at the end of the article.

Warranting mention is the capacity of online engagements to involve shy or marginalised people, who may otherwise not attempt to engage in issues of importance to them. This may relate to engagement in taboo issues while maintaining anonymity. At their particular life stage, emerging sexualities and issues associated with sexuality are an example of the safe space that online engagement creates for young people. Twenty10 and the Youth Disability Advocacy Service in Victoria are two such ICT platforms that provide a voice to GLTB young people, or young people with disability who might otherwise feel marginalised from society. The anonymity of the internet also assisted one participant in counselling rape victims via chatrooms.

Two intensely engaged groups discussed the mobile phone and the internet's ability to release sensitive information to the world. For example, the mobile phone represented resistance and liberation of young people in Iran who have used mobile devices to stream images of war and violence to people in other countries for broadcast.

Online engagement opens up the world to young people like never before. It expands their community from being localised and centralised to being global and diverse. Young people are now exposed to social issues beyond their immediate environment and have an awareness of issues on an international scale. The young people in this research were very aware of fair trade issues in third world countries. For example, Oaktree Foundation's website is described as an entirely youth run aid and development organisation, which mobilises young people to run fundraising events for aid and development programs overseas, in addition to providing training and empowerment for young people towards political action.

The abundance of information available on the internet, coupled with the fluidity and constant flux that online engagement offers young people, is a double edged sword. How much information is too much information? Does prolific information result in overlooked information? The freedom for young people to come and go depending on their time availability or interest in a particular issue is very important to young people. However, there is a strong sentiment from some young people that the online sphere presents a space whereby people can come and go, and as such, may result in a somewhat superficial degree of engagement.

3.3.3 Gaps in online engagement and the role of the offline sphere

Engaging online is not without its difficulties and young people have indicated they are aware that online participation has its place among other approaches. In ascertaining how young people benefit from one approach and not another, a picture emerges about what engagement means for them and the intrinsic value they derive from the experience.

The perceived benefits of offline/face-to-face participation reveal the important role emotion plays in the experience. Being able to see the impact of a social or political movement, to 'see raw emotions' to 'see passion' is an extremely strong reinforcer of why these young people do what they do. As is often the case, seeing something tends to have a more powerful impact than reading about it.

In coming together as a unified group (big or small) there is a stronger sense of community, of belonging and a sense of being with like-minded individuals who share the same ethos.

A common experience among research participants was the impact that a guest speaker had had on them. Young people felt that having a person come to speak to them had a significantly stronger emotional impact and 'put a face to the cause.' People make it real. Emotion makes it memorable, meaningful and empowering. Technology, however, was felt to 'dilute the impact and the message.'

Young people also felt that involvement at this level brings significantly more credibility to the initiative. Face-to-face engagement is seen as more tangible than connecting through a cyber community. The physical presence of people involved in a cause lends significant legitimacy and is thus felt to be more convincing to others. Offline petitions were seen as being more legitimate and effective in bringing about change than online petitions.

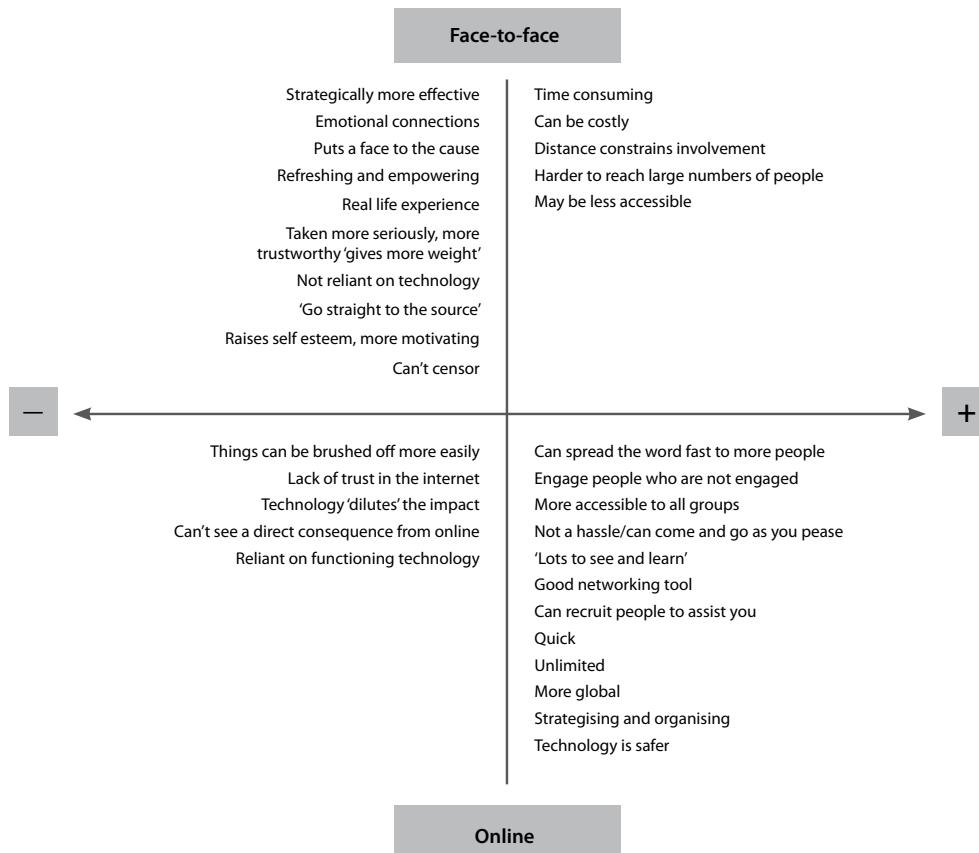
Face-to-face engagement is also considered as important in removing ambiguity and misunderstandings. Personalised engagement brings to civic participation an opportunity to relay messages clearly, with no mistaken undertones.

There are clear differences in the benefits derived from online and offline engagement. All engaged participants were keenly aware that (and those heavily aware were strong proponents of) online participation plays a specific role alongside offline approaches. As stated by one engaged group: 'Used together [online and offline], they can capture different audiences...Technology is to get it out there and face to face is about following through.'

Moreover, it is interesting that a generation supposedly seeking instant gratification, in many cases prefers more traditional, personal forms of engagement, rather than through instantaneous technology.

Figure 4 illustrates the relative advantages and disadvantages of engagement through online and offline spheres and demonstrates some of the drivers behind young people's choice to adopt online or offline approaches to civic and political participation.

Figure 4—Relative experiences of online and offline engagement channels



3.4 BARRIERS TO YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ONLINE AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES

Key findings

- Young people face many barriers to engaging in general civic activity, such as age, opportunity and awareness, and the exclusive nature of groups.
- Online and mobile technologies can assist in addressing some of these barriers.
- Online technologies are not the panacea for online civic engagement. They too present barriers for young people, such as those living in rural and remote areas of Australia and those from disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD young people.
- Web 2.0 brings with it some elements of risk that will require careful management and planning of websites.
- Young people's contribution to online (as well as offline) civic activity needs to be validated and acknowledged as being of equal worth to the contributions of adults.

3.4.1 A generation of apathy, or a generation facing real barriers

As the literature demonstrates, whether the rate of young people engaging in civic activity is decreasing or whether it is *transforming* into new ways of engaging is a contentious issue. Discussions with young people revealed some clear barriers to engagement, which are discussed below. Some of these barriers are associated with young people's engagement in the offline, as well as the online, sphere.

Time poor/busy lifestyles

Reflective of their life stage, young people lead very busy lives and as a result, feel extremely time poor. They are often juggling school, university, extra-curricular activities, paid employment, familial obligations and social life. For those engaged in civic activities this may also be seen as another commitment taking time from their day. Work and study is the centre point for many of these young people. Their life stage indicates that this is where their focus is.

Age

Age itself was a barrier to engagement, experienced in different ways. As one participant stated 'Minors are a minority group' (Armidale 12–16 non-engaged). Young people sometimes feel disempowered.

Examples were given where young people were legally too young to participate in particular activities—for example signing petitions, participating in green group activities in the bushland environment, joining St John ambulance—or were too young to donate money. One non-engaged girl spoke about her desire to join an adult knitting group whose proceeds and garments assisted women in Africa, but was told that she was too young and unable to understand the issues. As one participant observed: 'I am too young to sign petitions but have organised them to be signed by others e.g. child labour and GM foods.'

Adult attitudes to young people are also regarded by young people as a significant barrier to participation. There was a strong sentiment throughout the discussions that adults do not take young people seriously and that young people do not have a legitimate voice in an adult world. The young people who participated in this research indicated that they want to contribute to the world around them, but lose confidence when adults send the message that their views have no weight. In attempting to engage in activities, young people often come away '...feeling like you won't be listened to.'

This is certainly an issue for young people regardless of the area in which they live. However, the strongest feelings came from young people living in country or rural areas that feel that they are: 'dominated by older people who don't really respect us.' One participant commented: 'Adults don't think young people can take on the issues and think they don't understand. They think young people aren't as able. It makes us feel inferior.'

One academic expert defines this as 'citizen deficit': a deficit in people's belief that they can have an impact or that they are a valued citizen. Young people also feel that they are not aware of their rights and are therefore hesitant in questioning or resisting dominant institutions. Being unaware of the consequences of participating in protest rallies or organise petitions influences their decision to remain distanced from an issue, despite them in fact feeling strongly about the issue. In relation to the 'citizen deficit', it was stated by the academic expert that: 'Some people feel that their rights are in deficit and this has a spill-on effect as "responsibility deficit" as a citizen.'

This matter was spoken about with direct relevance to the university setting where protest rallies have been organised. Some young people felt that the non-commitment from some young people to various causes due to perceived consequences leaves those who are willing to take a stand and organise a group movement very isolated in their quest for change. As stated by one university student ‘...[they are] scared of standing up, so it turns into every man for himself’

The research suggests that young people’s contribution to civic activity needs to be validated and acknowledged as being of equal worth to the contributions of adults.

Financial constraints

As is evident with regard to many aspects of young people’s lives, the lack of money can also be a barrier, or at least a challenge, to their participation. Travelling to destinations where activities are taking place often costs money, particularly for young people living in rural or remote areas who are required to travel to urban city centres for face-to-face interaction. Comments in relation to this concern were relayed by a number of participants from rural and remote locations.

Exclusive nature of groups

The exclusive nature of some civic and community groups can also stop young people from getting involved. People within groups already engaged are sometimes perceived as being covertly protective and do not invite other people into the movement. There may be no evident pathways to join the group.

Approaching people to get involved can often be an intimidating experience, and an exclusive ‘club’ can be the wrong message to give young people wanting to get involved. One participant commented that: ‘The amnesty group on my uni campus are just a group of friends, and I went along to a meeting where no one even introduced themselves.’

This sentiment of exclusivity tended to be shared among young people living in regional areas with smaller townships and closer community groups. One participant observed that: ‘In some areas, it’s a men’s club.’

New territory without a ‘road map’

There can sometimes be difficulty for young people in ascertaining the correct pathways to get more involved in issues that resonate for them. There is an abundance of information available to young people, particularly through the internet. Regardless, while young people know that the internet is a good source of information, they may not know how to take that first step, or the right step, to get more information about

getting more involved or how to contact the right people. One participant said: 'There are so many things that I want to get involved in, but I don't know how to do it.' As such, exploring the avenue of civic activity can be a daunting experience. Ultimately, this can result in the first step never being taken or at least delayed: 'Young people do care about things, they just don't know where to go.'

Lack of awareness of opportunities

Some participants are unaware of any opportunities to get involved. This was discussed with particular regard to more community-based civic activity in regional areas: 'It's just not knowing what is out there. In a small town there's nothing there.' One engaged participant believed that 'apart from youth councils there is no way to get involved.'

One participant stated: 'You just don't hear about it. Adults don't come to school so you don't hear about it. The only way you hear about it is through church groups.'

The school was often discussed as a place where young people hear about opportunities to get involved in activities. Information is announced at school and some schools have compulsory community service. As one participant explained: 'School has got a lot to do with it. Depending on where you go to school might have a lot of input about what's needed where and what's lacking in the community.'

Many of the participants who were not engaged, or very lightly engaged, did not have a community service opportunity at school, or did not recall opportunities through their school to take part in activities of this nature. With regard to the latter, they may not have recalled opportunities because at the time they were not interested in participating.

Uncool image/adult-centric branding of civic engagement

The 'uncool' image often associated with civic participation can also be a deterrent to engaging. At this crucial life stage of identity exploration and experimentation, outward image is extremely important to young people. Fear of being judged by others can sometimes be a barrier to young people getting more involved.

Further, the way in which civic activity is framed can often be a deterrent to young people. Civic activity may need to be youth branded and more importantly, of interest to young people: 'Issues need to be related more to us.'

One participant, whose only civic engagement was through a compulsory school initiative, described the experience of working in a faith-based clothing factory where there was no interaction with other people. This civic experience was not engaging, interesting or motivating. However, when asked if he would prefer to have volunteered

at a nursing home like some of his other friends, he also said no. The options available to some young people simply do not resonate, and organisers, youth workers and other organisers may need to keep this in mind.

Impact of being from disadvantaged or culturally diverse backgrounds

There are important issues around the barriers which arise for young people from disadvantaged or culturally diverse backgrounds, including government's priority target groups, namely those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and young people engaged with statutory systems, for example through care homes and correctional facilities.

It is important to point out that there has been limited scope within this research project to give full consideration to the circumstances of young people from some of these groups, particularly those requiring ethics clearance to consult. However, there have been some clear findings in relation to these groups arising from the project, which may be explored in greater depth through further research.

Overall, it is clear that young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may lack confidence to engage with other people due to their limited use of language. One participant described her fear of interacting with others due to her difficulties with the English language on arrival from her country of origin. It was more than 12 months after arriving in Australia that she felt that she could engage in a conversation with others. Further to this, newly arrived young people may be less likely to have any knowledge of civic or political opportunities due to a lack of community networks.

Indigenous young people may distrust government institutions. One highly engaged Indigenous participant stated that due to a lack of trust in government, he will not vote or take part in any political processes and does not want to engage with 'government' as an institution as he does not feel like a recognised citizen. In saying this, he once met with the Governor-General about depression initiatives for young people. He suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are more likely to engage in civic activity away from government and within their own communities.

Young people with low socioeconomic status are also significantly less likely to engage in civic or political activities. The reviewed literature, the consultations with youth sector, and the recruitment process of this research project, illustrated the way in which civic and political participation is likely to attract young people from educated, economically sound backgrounds rather than young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Young people in these environments are significantly less likely to be presented with opportunities to engage in civic or political activity.

Apathy (perceived)

Many of the focus groups conducted with non-engaged participants found that most are in fact, engaging in some way, but to a lesser extent than others. There are, however, young people who do not engage at all.

There is the perception from some engaged participants that there are definite groups of young people who are apathetic. Participants commented that 'lots of students don't care' and 'some people just don't care about other people.'

In response to the hypothesis that young people are apathetic, there were mixed responses ranging from agreement to strong disagreement. One particular group argued that there is always a proportion of any group who don't care, but that the media emphasise that proportion.

Oxfam notes that there is a spectrum of youth engagement, ranging from 'cold' to 'hot', and that people are in fact at different stages of awareness and engagement. 'Cold' people are unaware and are not making relevant connections and 'warm' people are aware, but not actively engaged. 'Hot' people are aware and taking action.

Oxfam suggested that people—especially young people—are not making the connection between government, governance, decision makers and the decisions that affect them. They report that we need to allow people to connect on a personal level, and that the traditional methods of measuring active citizenship may be no longer relevant.

Poor role models

With respect to engaging in political activity or developing an interest in politics, the reputation of politicians was a significant deterrent to young people's interest. Politicians were perceived as actors of self interest, untrustworthy and: 'behaving like two year olds.' One political academic discussed this issue, stating that attitudes such as this towards government: '...is the result of three second grabs on the media.'

The Inspire Foundation suggests that 'The main issue is around trust and disillusionment with institutional structures. It's not that people are uninformed or don't care about social or political issues.' In this regard, young people are not disengaged, but rather, disillusioned.

Overwhelmed as an individual

As evidenced through the literature, young people often feel overwhelmed by the issues their generation currently faces. Large-scale issues such as global warming and third-world starvation seem too large and distant for them to have any type of impact. This is particularly so for non-engaged young people. There exists a strong sentiment that the problems are so large and complex that one individual person could not make a difference to make change.

Rather than become involved, or even stay abreast of the issues, some young people choose to remain distanced from the issues and not involve themselves at all. After much probing about issues that were important, or even top of mind with a non-engaged group, some participants eventually began talking about their concern about random violence on the streets. Further discussions found that this is an issue that conjures strong emotions, from males particularly. When asked if there was ever anything they would consider doing about the issue of violence on the streets, the consensus was 'what's the point?'

Participants commented on feelings of inadequacy: 'What can I do?' or 'I am just one person and the problem is massive' and 'You can feel overwhelmed.'

No feedback on participation

Taking part in a process, but not being informed about the outcome of their participation, can be a deterrent to ever becoming involved in civic activity again. When young people invest themselves in a process, cause, or initiative, it is important that they see the outcomes of their contribution.

This research finding is aligned with literature which suggests that people are less likely to engage in future initiatives if they have an unsatisfactory experience of the process.

The 'tyranny of distance'

Travelling to destinations where activities are taking place often costs money, particularly for young people living in rural or remote areas who are required to travel to urban city centres for face-to-face interaction. The Inspire Foundation hosts consultative workshops with young people and, as it endorses an inclusive approach, any young person interested in participating can do so regardless of location. One participant in a regional area discussed her desire to take part in such workshops, but also noted the significant effort required to travel to the metropolitan area to participate. In saying this, the participant was extremely grateful for the financial assistance given for travel costs by the Inspire Foundation.

VGen reported during consultations that young people in regional areas are often disadvantaged with regard to events and talks with guest speakers that they organise, as these tend to be held in metropolitan areas. It notes this as particularly significant, as being an offline action-based organisation its events and forums are their main driving point. Its website is used to support this offline action where possible rather than being the driving point.

It was generally acknowledged by government and non-government youth-related employees that face-to-face consultation (regardless of the demographic involved) tends to be in urban, metropolitan areas, often to the exclusion of people living in rural and regional areas.

Technological barriers to online engagement

Connectivity

While technology can assist young people with their civic participation, there remain barriers to engaging online. Connectivity is a significant issue, more commonly experienced among young people living in regional, rural and remote areas. There are different standards of connectivity. Some regional and rural participants did not experience any significant problems, whereas others experienced issues on a regular basis.

Young people endeavouring to participate in online forums spoke with great frustration when describing attempts. The connection was so slow that by the time their opinion was posted, the debate had already moved on to a new area of discussion. In many instances like this, they will get online to view what others are saying, but frustratingly cannot contribute anything themselves. This also pertains to uploading other media content.

The WAYAC noted that connectivity is an issue for young people who do not have regular access to the internet, such as Indigenous young people and those in regional areas. The WAYAC suggest that for online applications and social network sites to be fully effective, young people need to be able to access them regularly in order to 'keep their finger on the pulse' and receive and reply to emails, posts etc.

Those working within governments are very aware of the implications of connectivity due to geographic isolation. Concern was voiced that many young people living in regional and rural areas do not have the technological infrastructure to engage in online activities due to the poor or non-existent coverage for both broadband and mobile technologies. As a result, pockets of young people are unable to participate in online activities that involve sophisticated websites and require large downloads.

They may not be able to upload data, or participate in competitions or initiatives that encourage civic or political participation.

As one government sector employee commented: 'Regional and rural isolation can disconnect you. Distance from community coupled by a lack of technology equates to a tyranny of distance.'

Furthermore, for those who have very limited access to the internet, the limited time spent on it is not likely to be used for civic or political engagement, but rather accessing their favourite sites. In these instances, government websites are a very low priority for them.

Being from disadvantaged or culturally diverse backgrounds

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers to engaging online due to an inability to access computers readily and also as a result of having no means to pay for connectivity. As stated by one participant: 'A lot of my friends don't have computers, or can't afford internet even if they do have a computer.'

This issue is relevant in relation to the accessibility of home computers, but also in relation to other forms of technology such as mobile phones and even MP3 players. This issue has led to a concern that with the further development of technology, the division between the 'haves' and 'have nots' will be further magnified, representing a growing issue of social exclusion. As one government sector employee commented: 'The digital divide will get bigger.'

Specific groups of young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Polynesian heritage are also recognised to be at a disadvantage regarding online engagement. Some living in rural and remote communities in particular do not have computers and may not be computer or mobile literate. Although they are likely to be able to access a computer at their school, the prevalence of truancy within this cohort may mean that they are not getting access or exposure to technology in any way.

It is also important to point out that the use of technology-based tools was considered to represent a fundamental deterrent to engagement among some Indigenous young people, particularly those in remote communities who are not currently engaged with such tools and who have a preference for face-to-face forms of communication and consultation.

Some of those consulted pointed out that the engagement of currently unengaged Indigenous young people through internet and mobile technologies is an initiative which might be ranked lower on the policy priority list than addressing

more fundamental issues facing these communities, including truancy levels and comparative poor health.

These issues must be considered in light of the important distinction which may be drawn between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban, rather than rural and remote communities. The former are likely to be better connected in relation to technological tools and are more likely to utilise these tools in their day-to-day lives.

Conversely, there is a substantial body of information which suggests that young Indigenous people, including those in remote and rural communities, are both skilled in and comfortable with ICT uses and further opportunities to build upon these uses should be investigated.

With regard to newly arrived young people who experience language barriers, they may be unlikely to understand the information available to them. ICT providers and youth organisations noted that many internet sites do not have access to translated languages for those who speak a language other than English. For instance, the WA Youth Affairs Council notes that this is a hindrance and they would ideally like to have a website available to the public in a range of languages, but the costs for this are just too high. A review of ICT providers found that one international organisation TakingITGlobal was able to provide information that was translated into various languages. However, given that this was a global website with a global audience of young people, the provision of information in many accessible languages would seem appropriate. Further, the translation for this ICT application is done on a purely voluntary basis by young people from around the world as the costs associated with translation are extremely high.

Young people with a disability

Young people with disability were also acknowledged as facing barriers to engagement. Physical disability can make it difficult to use computers, see images or hear content where accessible formats are not available. In saying this, the potential for engaging online was also viewed as a way to overcome isolation from engagement in the offline world.

The Youth Disability Advocacy Service in Victoria noted that many young people with disability are not able to fully benefit from youth organisation websites and ICTs as they do not have access to necessary equipment such as voice-over software (a barrier for someone who might not have the power of movement to type) or the use of FLASH which does not assist the visually impaired. Also, many sites are not compatible to voice-activated software. The service notes that generally the more 'sexy' or savvy a website is, the less accessible it is to young people with a disability.

Proxies applied through the education system

While students in the education system have access to computers, many websites are blocked. Websites that are of interest to young people can be inaccessible, including websites that promote social awareness. One young participant spoke with frustration about her experience of doing an assignment about animal cruelty, but was unable to access related websites at school. As she was living in a regional area, she also did not have access to the internet at home. As stated by participants: 'my school blocked almost everything,' and 'we only had a few approved sites so school was a difficult resource.'

This is also the case for some university students where internet sites are protected by proxies on college campus. When asked if this can impact on generating civic and political activity, one respondent replied: 'Yes. If we can't get to the site, we can't be involved. These days, I think youth are reliant on convenience, so if it's too difficult to get to a site, they won't bother.'

Computer literacy

There are still young people who do not have the skills or confidence to use technology. Age may play a factor in this too, as some younger children may not have yet developed skills to source information (using search engines), or to use more sophisticated tools i.e. uploading media, registering membership.

An inability to engage online results in some young people missing out on significant opportunities to participate in civic and political activities. It is for this reason that many participants stress the need for multiple approaches to engagement that encompass more traditional methods. Young people facing barriers to technology were felt to be at a huge disadvantage from other young people given the role these technologies play on a daily basis in the lives of young people.

Other technological challenges including censorship concerns

There are perceived challenges to posting media online. Creating the media content can be technically challenging and requires significant time and effort to produce professionally. Further to this, when posting media on the internet was discussed in this study, the issue of censorship emerged. As one participant commented:

I took images from my trip to East Timor and posted them (on an Australian Government initiated creative arts site). I got a lot of opinions on what apparently was appropriate and not...there were images of children bleeding from being in rock fights in Dili (at the time of more people uproar over the lack of government authority). It was very confronting, but the truth...but people don't like to see the image of what happens.

There is concern among young people about elements of censorship when they want to post content on websites. This is not limited to government websites, but also encompasses non-government websites. Young people acknowledged, however, that the degree of censorship applied is not perceived as stifling to the cause, or autocratic in nature, and young people can understand the need to filter the content that is uploaded onto websites. As one participant observed: 'Well, the people who have created the site censor it to deliver their message...it's not necessarily wrong for them to censor the site so it portrays what they wish. It's their site after all.'

3.4.2 Overcoming barriers

How online engagement may help overcome barriers: the case for embracing an online approach to civic and political participation.

The utilisation of online and mobile technologies can assist in overcoming some of the barriers to engagement. Technology can deconstruct both physical and metaphysical barriers.

Providing information at their fingertips: The first place young people generally go to find out information is the internet. There is a massive depth and breadth of information available that can assist young people in taking the next step.

Removing geographical boundaries: Cyber communities can be accessible and welcoming. As websites are open to anyone, they are more welcoming. This also removes the financial burden of travel when engaging face to face.

Providing access to a cyber community of like-minded individuals: Technology also shows people that they are not the only one interested in an issue. Some participants indicated that none of their friends were interested in civic issues or activities. Rather than feeling isolated, the internet can put young people in touch with each other, where momentum begins.

Recognising that young people are increasingly allied to issues and cause rather than organisations and institutions: The shift which is found to be occurring among young people who are harnessing ICT platforms to engage on issues of concern often within a global context—such as environmental issues—must be recognised by political and other institutions in order to better target their methods and approaches.

Reaching a broad audience: Technology also makes it possible to reach a broader audience of young people who would not otherwise be reachable. Simply through accessing websites that provide information or links about how to help can be very effective for young people. Information and opportunity is at their fingertips. Web 2.0 and specifically social networking websites can play a significant role in spreading the word about issues and causes. It is civic activity and social awareness in its purist ‘pop culture’ form.

Allowing technology to re-brand civic engagement as ‘cool’: Through technology, and again, through social networking, civic activity and social awareness is becoming ‘cool’. Posting a cause, group, or highlighting an issue on a social website is also a means of telling the world that you are socially aware.

Keeping issues ‘top of mind’: Technology is also a very effective means of keeping young people abreast of issues. Young people lead very busy lifestyles, but organisations can keep up their awareness and affiliation with the issue by emailing them updated information.

Creating a youth-focused space: Technology can remove the adult-centric approach to civic engagement and create spaces where young people are welcomed. There are many ICTs that are geared especially for young people. They speak their language and are based on issues relevant to young people. The removal of an adult-centric space does not necessarily mean that it is youth led. There are many ICTs that are a result of a collaboration between adults and young people such as ActNow, youthcentral, AYF and STIR. ICTs provide a space where young people feel welcomed and appreciated.

Technology can also give young people who by law are too young to take part in civic activities the ability to engage. While they cannot sign hard copy petitions or join particular groups, they can sign an online petition, create them, and join cyber communities. Interestingly, while Facebook is by law limited to users 16 years of age and over, young people did not discuss any issues with using it.

Creating integral feedback loops: Due to the ease with which ICTs offer communication links with young people, it can be easier to feed back results of participation to young people. Many ICTs illustrate this on their main page, which indicates to new visitors immediately that what they do counts.

Increasing accessibility: For those unable to physically participate, be it due to fear (as was the case for one female participant), disability, shyness or language barriers, technology may enable young people to get involved in their own way. They can make a difference and raise their self esteem without actually 'being there.'

Lending legitimacy to a cause: As one participant noted, online spheres: 'can help back you up... sometimes posting images has more weight when you are trying to get a message out.'

The benefits of online and mobile technology as described above may therefore decrease the 'citizen deficit' experienced by young people.

The role of youth-focused organisations and governments in overcoming barriers

Youth organisations and governments reported a number of ways they are trying to address both online and offline barriers for young people trying to get involved in their organisations and causes:

- Twenty10's new website has a service directory to enable young people to seek out GLBT services near them through a postcode search.
- triple j's 'Hack' attempts to address barriers by representing the diversity of voices around the country on its radio show.
- The Youth Disability Advocacy Service for Victoria has worked to make their site design and management easy to use for visitors with disability. They report that they learnt a lot from feedback on the initial design of their site and used this to make sure their content and management system is accessible.
- Invisible Children often show DVDs in remote communities to spread the word about their campaigns and how young people can help. In addition, the screenings of documentaries are always free and in open, public spaces so that everyone can attend. They often work with community organisations to meaningfully engage with community groups and try to get them involved in initiatives (e.g. the Christian Surfers International branch in Wollongong assisted with recruiting young people for the Invisible Children 'Rescue' protest earlier this year).
- Mission Australia report that they put a lot of effort into encouraging young homeless people to have their say through media exposure and survey work, as they are one of the groups least likely to have access to the internet. In particular, they try to expose the wider public to what it is like for young homeless people who have mental illness, and try to link these young people with appropriate mental health agencies to assist.

- Oaktree Foundation is addressing lack of access to civic and political opportunities due to low education or low socio-economic status by providing face-to-face workshops.
- The Youth Disability Advocacy Service for Victoria noted that the internet is an important source of information about disability as a social construct. They try to communicate to their members and visitors to their site about alternate ways of viewing disability. Rather than seeing disability as something tragic (a perception of media portrayal) the service opens up an understanding of disability through links to other sites, such as the UK site OUCH. The service notes that the internet allows it to gather full support for disability advocacy.
- With regard to governments, policies designed to facilitate outreach to particular communities is one key aspect of government's approach to facilitating engagement among young people. For example, in relation to high levels of truancy among Indigenous young people one participant commented: 'There seems to be a movement towards combining youth development and youth participation with events in the community that might be youth-centred recreation and leisure or might be more generic community recreation.' To communicate effectively with Indigenous communities, it is clear that government needs to be aware of the appropriateness of the primary technologies they use to communicate. Faxing has been found to be particularly effective, so it could be used in conjunction with emailing.
- Young people who are newly arrived to the country also require particular consideration. The South Australian Government 'action team' has recently consulted with newly arrived young people. Subsequent to this, it has recommended the development of an online version of a 'blue book,' which provides information on medical and social services in their area. Similar initiatives have been undertaken by the SA action team regarding 'learning and earning,' 'homelessness' and 'how to engage new and emerging communities to reach their full potential'. Attaining the assistance of engaged young people from diverse backgrounds may be effective in creating support mechanisms for others from outside of Australia.

In attempting to assist young people from diverse cultural backgrounds, it was noted by one government employee that government: 'faces the challenge of engaging with Aboriginal and migrant communities due to the cultural protocols surrounding who you engage within those communities. It is very complex.' One young participant who identified with a diverse culture suggested: 'I think people from different backgrounds would be more interested in helping their communities of origin.'

- In relation to outreach more broadly, schools are considered to play an important role in encouraging young people to participate in civic and political activities in early life. If schools are able to encourage young people to be involved in initiatives and enable them to see the benefits of their engagement, this positive experience of civic participation is likely to enhance their likelihood of participating as adults.
- With regard to providing young people with a 'road map' to civic and political participation, youthcentral provides visitors with a toolkit for 'DIY democracy'. There is information on organising events, finding people to assist with a cause, public speaking and volunteering.
- Pertaining specifically to barriers to technology, the Australian Government's roll-out of improved broadband technology will go some way towards improving access to technology for people living in rural and remote townships. However, as clarified by one participant, the roll-out does not apply to people living in townships of less than 1000 people, so many parts of Australia will remain without internet access. For this reason, maintaining traditional forms of contact and communication are vital for continued inclusion. For people living in pockets of non-connectivity, engagement needs to be undertaken through traditional means of communication, such as face-to-face and community-based activities. In this context, peer-to-peer engagement is seen as just as effective in the offline as the online world.
- In relation to the lack of social networking opportunities available at schools and a lack of access to the necessary technologies, young people may be able to attend online access centres (a room with computers accessible to everyone and often attached to libraries). In Tasmania, these centres have been provided through a state-funded initiative. Furthermore, discussions with several local Queensland councils indicated that as a result of providing free internet access at libraries, more young people are using the library.
- All youth centres in the ActNow have internet access, and it has been suggested that more computers could be installed in libraries and youth centres, although it was noted that this will require significant funding. Research participants suggested a range of ways governments may address particular technological barriers, such as setting up free internet cafes and providing access in youth-friendly areas other than libraries.

- The Australian Government's policy of providing netbook computers at a discount for educational purposes was noted by one government employee as a genuine initiative to increase access to young people of low socioeconomic status. As a result of this, the participant commented: '...there will be a lot more young people coming online using these technologies, and also using WI FI technologies where they can get access without opening an internet account.'
- Other initiatives aimed at overcoming the barrier of technological availability include the Northern Territory Government's donation of computers to a township, which are set up and run by volunteers. The project has been a success, with computers frequently used.
- Several government youth officers who participated in the research and who oversee young people's councils, committees and advisory groups have taken the decision to provide space for members to come into the office and use computers.
- The provision of free education on the basics of computer and internet use for young people and their parents was suggested by government participants as an effective means of encouraging marginalised young people to engage. This is already occurring in some local council libraries. One participant reported engaging with young people in that capacity through the conduct of fun and interactive sessions about internet use and uploading content. This initiative is one example of the ways governments are attempting to close the gap of the digital divide at a grassroots level. One young participant also discussed this in a focus group:

I know my mum works at a disadvantaged school where a lot of the parents are quite young. Mum runs a program called 'out and about' and she took these people to a library and they thought it was great and they didn't know that people like 'them' could go to a place like that

- youthcentral has a strong focus on assisting young people to engage online. It provides a 'tool kit' on how to most effectively harness technology for participation in civic and political activity. There are hints on how to create a blog or website, how to use social networking sites and media based applications such as YouTube and Flickr, and the 'do's and don'ts' of online forums. This information is integrated with links to other prominent ICTs such as STIR and ActNow.

Effective approaches to overcoming barriers: the Northern Territory experience

The Northern Territory experience provides a useful example of where significant barriers to the online engagement of young people are encountered and how this is being addressed.

Around 37 per cent of young people aged 12 to 25 in the NT are Indigenous and therefore often face significant barriers to technology and engagement, especially for the 75 per cent who live in remote areas. These barriers include English as a second, third or fourth language; low levels of literacy; economic disadvantage; experience of domestic and family violence; and limited facilities in their communities. Facilities taken for granted in major towns and cities such as libraries, internet cafes, and reliable internet access at school often do not exist in remote communities. Much development needs to occur to bring remote communities in the Territory close to standards elsewhere in Australia in relation to ICT opportunities for engagement of young Indigenous Territorians.

A technology called 'one Talk' is currently being rolled out in the NT. This is a system where a script can be spoken and recorded in many different languages and incorporated into a poster that is then displayed in communities. Members of the community can then just push a button and hear what the poster is about and be able to understand the message in their own language. This is currently used in the acute health setting, but could potentially be expanded for the purposes of enhancing opportunities for civic and political engagement.

3.5 THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Key findings

- Young people are disillusioned with governments and are deterred from engaging with them.
- Young people recognise that governments have a fundamental civic role to play.
- While governments are associated with civic activity, they are not necessarily 'top of mind' as a *facilitator* of young people's civic activity.
- Civic activity is most closely aligned with local government, local MPs and MLAs. This is the level of government where young people feel they can have the most impact.
- Federal and state governments need to create a local connection to young people. It is important to illustrate the relevance of issues at the local level.

3.5.1 Perceptions of government among young people

As a means of ascertaining where governments sit in young people's understanding of civic and political activity, participants were asked what came to mind when the terms 'civic' and 'political' were mentioned. As anticipated, there are distinctions between politics and civics. However, what binds them is government.

Among young people, the term 'politics' has connotations of a lack of trust in leadership and individuals. There was scepticism from young people about the motivations of politicians and government. Politics was perceived as boring and institutionalised, and those within politics are untrustworthy. Thus far, and particularly so for younger young people (and young people who are not engaged), their experiences of politics and politicians have not been positive: 'Politicians act like a bunch of two year olds. How can they be respected?'

Older young people and engaged young people are more likely to look at the larger picture. They can see the processes that take place in politics: political parties, elections, leadership, management, and the potential impact of the governing on society.

Civic activity on the other hand, has a wide application for young people. It is about society, the community and the individual. It is about participation and engagement within the community, and sometimes, on behalf of the community. Civic activity offers the means to be part of the community, while at the same time being a citizen with capacity to contribute in their own way or to make change.

3.5.2 Where does government sit with regard to civic activity?

Despite the generally negative perceptions of politicians and the politics associated with governments, there was a strong connection between government and civic participation for the young people interviewed. Essentially, governments are the foundation upon which civic activity and all that is associated with it is based.

Governments were described by young people who participated in the research as the caretaker who: '...has a big role in creating and encouraging a culture of civic contribution.'

Some young people associated the barriers represented by perceived red tape and bureaucracy within government as giving rise to the power of individuals and collective communities to make change. As one young person commented: 'Change won't come through formal politics.'

As one participant observed: 'Government plays a large role...there is a lot pushing things in the background, behind the scenes power. Government is the driver behind change but still can't make it happen.'

Civic participation is most strongly associated with governments at the local level rather than state or federal levels. The notions of 'local' and 'community' are strongly aligned, hence the strong association. Governments are seen as being somewhat detached and out of touch with communities and there is a perceived need from young people for governments to better engage with communities. Local government is seen by young people as being better placed to be able to do this and in some instances have been witnessed as doing this, therefore firmly embedding itself with civic engagement.

There is a strong perception that leaders at the local level of government are significantly more accessible, making local government the most likely level of government where people can effect change. Further, civic activity is strongly aligned with community as is local government, again drawing the relationship closer.

There are degrees of association between civic activity and the state level of government, particularly through their upholding of laws and rules. Being civic minded means upholding those laws and rules and as state governments often create and ensure those rules are upheld, they are seen as having a strong impact on civics. Further, and particularly so for those who engage with state youth advisory councils, state governments provide a space for young people to engage in civic activity.

3.5.3 How young people currently engage with government

The large variation in the degree of civic engagement among young people is paralleled by the variation in their level of engagement with governments.

The groups of young people who engage closely with government are those on youth advisory councils at local, state or federal levels. These individuals are invited into the decision-making process of planning for young people. In general, individuals on youth advisory councils (and particularly so at the state level) were highly engaged in civic activity, not solely limited to associations with governments. They tended to be well educated and advantaged (as opposed to disadvantaged). There was an instance however, where at the local level there were youth representatives who have never otherwise been engaged. The challenge for governments is to continue to attract young people who are generally less engaged onto their councils.

Those young people who are not involved with advisory councils and related bodies indicated varying degrees of engagement with governments. Some young people are keenly aware of their local representative and have engaged with them on civic matters. This is especially so for those living in regional areas who have resided there for a long time, or who have in some way come into contact with elected representatives through their own civic engagement. This was also the case for some young people living in metropolitan areas. Some participants (particularly those 18 and older) have had dealings with their local member, often through the organisations they volunteer with, or in relation to particular issues. Those who have a degree of awareness of government representatives tended to be more highly engaged in civic activity.

Many of the young people who participated in this research have come into contact with government websites in some way or another. Usually this was for the express purpose of obtaining information and usually out of necessity, for example in relation to school or university assignments.

Feedback on their experiences of these websites varied from 'well organised,' 'trustworthy,' to 'hit and miss,' 'shocking,' and 'intimidating.' There is a general perception overall that government websites are difficult to navigate, overly complex in their structure, boring and unappealing. These sentiments were repeated by participants. However, there were also positive comments about some of the websites visited which specifically catered for young people:

- 'I find AYF actually useful whereas other government sites are pretty basic, not very user friendly and pretty old school...I suppose just comparing it to other government sites it is much more functional and there is actually something to do.'
- 'I guess the youth week website is only really useful around youth week...but it lets you know of all the events that are happening which is great.'
- 'Yeah, I go to the [youth week] website to write in a few forums and submit work into the art competitions.'
- 'The Queensland Government web page is pretty good. I always check the local shire calendars for any events to attend.'

3.6 HOW GOVERNMENTS MAY MORE EFFECTIVELY ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE

Key findings

- Governments need to employ youth-specific approaches to engage them online: make it local and relevant, youth branded, linked with other ICTs, and importantly, convenient.
- Be aware that offline approaches are also seen as equally, if not more, effective by young people.
- The utilisation of Web 2.0 technology brings with it a certain degree of 'risk' that can be managed.
- It may be more effective for governments to engage with young people in a non-government, neutral space. The key is to go to where young people already are, rather than have them come to governments.
- Relationships with existing youth-focused civic groups are a key means of engaging with young people.

3.6.1 Current issues of government engagement using mobile and online technologies

Participants were asked directly how governments could most effectively engage with young people using online and mobile technologies. It should be premised that there were mixed responses to this question. Some participants have no desire to engage with governments, whereas others were impressed, and a few, surprised, that this was on government agendas. Regardless of their reaction, young people were able to clearly articulate directions for government. Responses also demonstrate that, despite the difference among them, young people as a collective have certain preferences for online engagement. These include the following:

- There needs to be local connection and relevance: For some participants, it was difficult to grasp how they could engage with government at the federal level. A common sentiment was: 'federal is too big.' This reiterates the common perception that potential for change is more likely to occur through local politics. After further discussion with this particular group the sentiment changed slightly to 'it could work at a federal level, but it needs to be broken down to a local level.' The desire for local connection is shared by young people from both regional and metropolitan areas. It is worth adding that some government websites do this at a regional level and provide information on what's happening in various areas. The state-level website youthcentral is one such example of encouraging a sense of inclusiveness for local engagement.
- Make websites youth branded: Young people want something that is for them and in branding it for young people, it signals a genuine attempt to engage with them. Governments need to understand their language: '[it needs to be] youth telling youth.' Further, it needs to be fun and interactive to attract young people's attention: 'make it look enjoyable.' Ways of doing this can be through competitions, using fun graphics and offering young people the opportunity to contribute.
- Create links to popular, well-liked sources: These can be links to social networking sites, civic ICTs, YouTube, and other youth-related websites. As some participants noted: 'YouTube is huge! Tap into it!' Taking this further, one participant suggested that given YouTube's popularity, governments could create a YouTube government channel.
- Make participation convenient and accessible: Allow young people to engage in varying degrees. Young people often like to put their opinion forward. However, long, arduous processes to register with the ICT application can be a significant deterrent.

One government employee stated: 'Government needs to be able to get to where kids are and [have] a recognition that kids are just like adults in that they will go to websites that are entertaining and useful. We are trying to get young people to come to websites that are neither.'

The Oaktree Foundation suggests that governments need to create space for people who are experts in the area and who know how to develop effective ICTs that are targeted at young people, and be open to 'letting go of some control.' Some participants have suggested that there is a poor understanding among politicians of how online engagement with young people may be effected. They have also suggested that there are too many restrictions stifling the effective creation of ICTs online.

Governments need to create resources and platforms which are 'sexy', but then allow young people to assume control, particularly creative control. One group of young participants are creating their own youth-focused website for their council, however they have been clear that while they need the support of the council for resources and technical assistance, the website should be 'distanced' from local council branding for best effect.

The organisation Invisible Children pointed out that the political system is currently an 'older man's world,' which does not encourage young people to become interested or get involved. They suggest that 'young politicians go and visit schools' in addition to launching ICTs, as this will give online applications a 'face' of government that is approachable and interested. As they observed: 'Young people today are cynical about power. We need to change this idea and bring respect back to politicians' actions.'

Participants have suggested that one potential way of starting up a youth-focused ICT platform is to stage a competition for the best website design by a young person (i.e. get young people involved from the start).

Web 2.0: taking a risk management, rather than risk-averse approach and enabling opportunities for dialogue

The expanded capabilities of Web 2.0 for two-way engagement and the way this enables internet users to participate in content *exchange*, even in the form of conversational exchange, is considered to be very important to young people and, indeed an *expectation*. While governments are making the transition to Web 2.0 technology, there are inherent risks and challenges. Some of these risks and challenges are 'unknown factors' and will emerge as further experimentation with this interface continues. The incorporation of approaches to consultation beyond the traditional 'top down' model of government is new territory for government, not just nationally, but also worldwide. Overall, government representatives in this research certainly see the value in moving into new methods of engagement with young people. Web 2.0 appears to have more significant implications for the future engagement with young people, given this cohort's uptake and integration of the technology in their daily lives so seamlessly.

Young people are coming to expect the opportunity for the equal exchange of dialogue when engaging on civic websites and as such, expect the same when engaging with governments. Those working with young people in government are very aware of this and collectively encourage decision makers to make the transition to this technology.

However, there is a strong perception that there is resistance to embrace technology from within governments at some levels. Consultations with state government

employees revealed that a struggle exists with upper management and decision makers to utilise technology effectively to engage with young people. Fear of technology was mentioned by the majority of the government participants as the key reason for this resistance, particularly at a local government level, but with state level as well.

A strong sentiment was shared among the government employees consulted that the key challenge is to embrace a risk-management approach to Web 2.0 rather than maintain the traditional risk-averse approach applied to governance. In providing spaces where young people can contribute meaningful content, governments should look to established non-government ICTs for guidelines on risk management. Basic examples of this are membership and log on procedures and moderation of content.

It is important to point out the differences in approach and methods of engagement enacted within different tiers of government. Federal and state governments, for example, may take a more cautious view in relation to opening up online channels of engagement, on the basis of a more centralised approach to policymaking. On the other hand, individual local councils may facilitate more open engagement with young people in relation to day-to-day issues which affect them within their communities. There is a recognised diversity of approaches to online engagement among local authorities, with some being significantly more open to approaches to two-way online engagement than others. With regard to local government, the chosen approach will largely be determined by the views of particular elected representatives and management.

Across all levels of government, while there is an acknowledged need for moderation on ICT platforms, this cannot be mistaken as censorship. In governments' desire to genuinely talk with young people openly and honestly, there are likely to be occasions where the feedback from young people is not in support of government initiatives and this is where the tension lies. As demonstrated through the recently launched Kevin Rudd blog, it looks that the federal government is finding a balance in its moderation and appears to be open to displaying a wide scope of dialogue between young people and the Prime Minister, as evidenced in a posted blog by one visitor: '... K-Rudd, you need to smarten up your internet censorship plans!'

Moreover, the reception to this forum has been largely positive. The following responses were also posted on the Prime Minister's blog:

I posted what I would do if I was Prime Minister for a day! I think it's a great idea that Kate Ellis and Kevin Rudd are trying to do.

Thanks for the opportunity to have my say Mr. Rudd. I really appreciate your efforts to listen to the public.

As demonstrated through websites such as youthcentral, the AYF, the Prime Minister's youth-focused web page, and the Your Spin Initiative, there are strong indications that governments are willing to adopt Web 2.0 technology. Each of these ICTs gives young people the opportunity to contribute to the site, whether it's through discussion or content upload.

The meaning of 'space' is extremely subjective and often in associations with governments there can be implicit undertones of power differentials, with young people sometimes feeling disenfranchised. Therefore, when considering an online forum where young people feel truly empowered to enter into genuine dialogue with institutions such as governments, a neutral space away from government may be the most appropriate platform for exchanges between the two parties. Further to this, in engaging young people there may need to be a shift away from governments' own territory into that of young people's. The potential for governments to provide a space for engagement is discussed in the following section.

3.6.2 Potential for governments to provide a space for engagement

Currently, the Australian Government is putting significant effort into engaging with the Australian public through open forums. Not solely targeted at young people, other inclusive initiatives are the Australia 2020 Summit and the development of a citizen's parliament. In a youth specific context, the AYF is a relatively new initiative that is a space for exchange, as is the recently launched youth-specific space on the Prime Minister's website. Consultation thus far has taken an inclusive approach and the culture of the Australian Government demonstrates evidence of change.

Participants want to be involved in the decision-making process about issues that affect them and this sentiment was shared across all participants generally. However, many do not tend to seek out governments to be a part of the process. There are some exceptions among young people who have engaged with governments and have had a positive experience doing so. However, for the majority of young people governments are where they go to seek information and further, only when and if they need to.

While young people can articulate where they see governments in the context of civic activity, it is not 'top of mind' to source the government for their own civic and political activity, particularly with regard to open consultation. There is scepticism among the participants with one observing: 'Maybe sounded too critical, I just think at the end of the day the government for the most part want the best results for them with the least action, which I guess is reasonable.' While another participant said: 'I've seen some really good youth engagement from the government, but I feel like there's not enough criticism of whether it's tokenistic or not.'

Further, there is the perception among young people that governments do not communicate with them on the issues that matter to young people: 'Sometimes they target an audience without offering anything that that audience is actually interested in.'

There was general consensus from young people that the most effective way of removing any potential biases and censorship, is a space away from governments. This would be more appropriate and would instil more trust in the process. One young participant in the consultation suggested: 'It should be a neutral space, but government funded.'

In saying this, there are young people who would engage with governments in a government sphere and particularly at the local level. Several young people in one group noted their interest in engaging with their local MP. Some participants have already done so. The AYF was discussed by one participant as being a government space that did not seem to have its own agenda. The fact that many of the issues discussed in those forums were relevant to young people, without appearing to have any government spin was viewed as a positive.

Generally, those who engage with young people such as governments, ICTs and youth-sector workers can see the potential for governments to move away from their own space to better engage with young people. In doing so, one government participant suggested:

There is potential to have a space that has no agenda and is truly about what's on your mind and putting information on there that young people will find useful...that's where you pick up the germs of new policy

- One participant involved in the running of the youth led Oaktree Foundation suggested that governments may be well placed to engage with young people about policy through Oaktree. The possibility for governments to find a space on youth-gearred websites was also suggested by ActNow. ActNow suggests that governments could benefit from aligning themselves with reputable youth spaces that already have a dedicated and interested audience. Doing so is likely to instil significantly more trust in the process. Further, ActNow suggests that in doing this, it sends a message to young people that governments value young people enough to go to them and seek input in their space rather than expecting young people to go to government spaces. They said:

Working with respected youth brands; working with respected organisations or initiative that already have high brand awareness and trust like ActNow, is actually a better strategy for politicians. Instead of Kevin Rudd wanting to build a new youth website or stream videos or have chats with youth on his website, we would love him to do that on ActNow where there is already a community of young people who would be potentially very interested in having a discussion with him.

Outsourcing should not be seen as a means of avoiding the risks that can sometimes accompany open discussion forums. While appreciating some of the benefits of government utilising a third-party space, it was qualified with: 'Don't think that government can avoid risk by getting an agency to do it for you; the perceived risk isn't diminished by having it at arms length.'

This research found few examples of governments leaving their own spaces to engage with young people in a non-government space. An example given by an academic expert is a UK initiative 'Heads Up', initiated by the Hansard Society. A non-government organisation, Hansard Society invites MPs to online discussions with young people. The society also supports and engages the MP in communicating back to the participant about what they've done regarding the dialogue shared between young people and the MPs. This is a successful example of government reaching out to young people. However, as one academic expert consulted as part of the research stated:

There are very few examples, which demonstrates that many governments around the world are still grappling with this and in my opinion it's not really about technology and it's not really about young people. It's about models of government that are traditionally based on hierarchies that are trying to adapt to more participatory governance models.

3.6.3 Suggestions from young people for effective engagement

- Beyond technological approaches, young people consistently returned to the fundamental issues of youth engagement which are applicable in online and offline worlds. Comments included:
- 'Tell us who you are. Then talk to us.'
- 'Tell us what happened! If we aren't told, we think "why are we doing this?"'
- 'Let us know what you're doing.' This could be through an email, or more pragmatically (as email addresses will be difficult to obtain), send a newsletter about [what] local government is doing in the area.

- 'Broadcast: create a presence with young people and let them know that the opportunity is there.' Suggestions for doing this were (interestingly) all offline such as; posters, radio announcements, face to face, fliers.
- Related to the previous suggestion, but warranting further discussion: 'visit schools, and don't ignore the ones that aren't so good.'
- And again in the context of schools, one respondent discussed the need for ceding greater control to young people by encouraging more critical thinking: 'Get to the issues in school and let us question what we are reading.'
- Go to young people in their environments. It gives government credibility: 'Come to our open days at uni...Break down the hierarchy and get into grass-roots and put a face to the name.' In reference to one local government member in a regional area doing this: 'He's there and he's passionate.' One participant summarised the sentiment of his group with: 'Step away from the computer, humanise government.'

4 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

The research has provided a range of insights into current trends relating to young people's engagement in civic and political activities utilising mobile and online technologies, as well as in the wider offline sphere.

One of the key findings of the research is that it is important not to generalise. Young people in different age brackets, geographic locations and from different backgrounds have varying levels of engagement in these spheres, whether online or offline. While governments may provide a range of opportunities for young people to engage, a spectrum of engagement will remain, from non-engagers to the highly engaged.

The challenge for governments is finding a balance between offline and online engagement. The double edged sword of online engagement is that governments can be seen as detached from young people, as for many young people more genuine engagement happens in the offline world.

Within this context, this chapter summarises some of the key findings of the research and associated recommendations which may assist governments in generating interest among young people, as far as possible across the spectrum, utilising the capabilities of online and mobile technologies.

4.1.1 Recognising ‘three populations’ of young people

In considering governments’ engagement with the youth sector, young people could be conceived in terms of three separate audiences:

1. *Government-engaged young people*: Young people who engage with governments through youth councils, youth committees and youth advisory groups, and who may have established relationships with government at all levels.
2. *Non-government engaged young people*: Those who participate in civic activities that are not necessarily associated with governments but rather, non-government organisations.
3. *Non-engaged young people*: Young people who are not engaged with governments or other social groups in any significant way.

As governments have clearly already established a relationship with the first group, it is the latter two groups that present key challenges. In this context, it is important to recognise that the degree of engagement is not necessarily defined by the frequency or regularity of engagement. The nature of young people’s engagement may be occasional, while still being intense, and often dependent on the issue.

The key finding which may be deduced from this categorisation of young people is that there are different ways to effectively approach these different groups. For young people engaged in the online sphere, but not necessarily with governments, there is great potential to harness interest by utilising existing ICT platforms with dedicated and interested young people. For young people who use the online medium, but are not necessarily engaged in civic or political activity, social networking sites may present useful opportunities for engaging with young people who tend to be less engaged. The key is to go to where young people are.

4.1.2 Barriers and risks of engagement

- There are a number of barriers to young people’s engagement in the online world, ranging from technological barriers—particularly the lack of broadband access in rural and remote locations (an issue which is currently being addressed by governments in various ways)—along with issues which may affect young people from disadvantaged or non-English speaking backgrounds. These barriers must be addressed in a holistic manner to improve opportunities for young people to engage with governments.

- In relation to the perceived risks to governments of engaging with young people in the online world, particularly through the two-way interface represented by Web 2.0, these are addressed in chapter 4.1.5. In relation to this interface specifically, there is a degree of concern in some government settings about the risks of ceding greater control to young people and the potential level of moderation needed on websites to which young people may upload content. Young people consulted through the research indicated that they are comfortable with a degree of moderation of websites. In fact they expect degrees of moderation. The key for governments is to strike a balance to provide for the free flow of information and to maintain young people's interest.

4.1.3 The role of governments in civic activity

While there is clearly an inherent connection between governments and civic participation, governments may not be welcomed in all areas where civic participation is taking place.

In addition, civic participation is most strongly associated with governments at the local level rather than state or federal levels. The notions of 'local' and 'community' are strongly aligned, hence the strong association.

Governments are perceived by some young people as being somewhat detached and out of touch with communities and there is a perceived need from young people for governments to better engage with communities. Local government is seen as being better placed to do this, and in some instances have been witnessed as doing this, therefore firmly embedding itself with civic engagement.

The research indicated that perceptions about the power of individuals and collective communities to create change sometimes precludes the involvement of government, which has connotations for some young people that change does not come through formal politics.

In this context, the role of governments in the sphere of civic activity should be carefully considered, particularly with regard to areas where young people interact in this sphere.

4.1.4 Technology has its place

In general, young people are strong proponents of face-to-face contact. They prefer a personal connection. It is important for governments to make this personal connection first, in order to maximise the effectiveness of engagement through online methods.

It is important to recognise that technology has its place, that is technology can have limitations in relation to achieving civic engagement.

Government and non-government organisations that engage with young people have highlighted the fact that online and mobile technologies represent just one avenue for engaging with young people. Comments pertaining to technology: 'not being the silver bullet,' were common and alluded to a shared sentiment that technology plays a role among various approaches and should be used with more traditional approaches to communicating with young people. Engagement in the offline sphere is equally important, and in fact high levels of engagement are best achieved through both spheres; harnessing the advantages of each.

It is also important to note that the research has found that young people tend to engage in the online sphere, predominantly with regard to *global*, rather than *local* or community-based issues. This finding suggests the need for some careful reflection around whether online platforms are in fact the most appropriate platforms to harness when dealing with the latter.

4.1.5 Looking to the future: engagement through Web 2.0

When looking to the future of young people's civic and political participation and engagement with governments, Web 2.0 is a key tool. This medium represents a two-way communication channel whereby users of the internet, along with organisations, may upload content to the web and actively contribute to the issue-based ICT in a meaningful way.

Evidence suggests that, currently, young people are predominantly engaging in civic activity as information seekers. In this context, the internet is primarily used as a form of light civic engagement, as an information source, and as a tool for preparing for civic engagement, be it through research, organisational tips, or communication to others about an event or cause.

The participants in this research are less likely to be creators of online content, and those who are content creators are largely heavy engagers who do not represent the majority of young people in Australia. However, young people as creators are likely to grow as a cohort in the future as technology becomes easier to navigate. In this context, the ability to create content is becoming a growing expectation of young people who are engaging online, regardless of whether the website in question is civic related or not.

In this context, it is important for governments to note that young people are likely to notice the lack of opportunity to upload content if they visit a civic site, and this capability should consequently be considered critical when providing online spaces for engagement with young people.

In addition, the perceived risks associated with the two-way sphere of engagement represented by Web 2.0 need to be addressed by governments, particularly with regard to ceding greater power to young people over content.

Web 2.0 raises issues around the need for monitoring and moderation of content, and strategic decisions need to be made in relation to the degree to which online spheres of engagement are monitored or restricted. It is considered that a clear position on this issue may need to be arrived at by governments, in order to enable a more relaxed or confident approach to engaging with young people through Web 2.0 channels.

Ultimately, the research indicates that Web 2.0 represents a highly effective channel for governments to engage with young people, and as such, issues around how its capabilities might best be harnessed should be seriously considered.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The following sets out a series of 10 recommendations relating to the potential development of future engagement opportunities and strategies utilising both online and offline techniques. These strategies are focused on maximising the potential interest of young people and engaging with them in the most effective and appropriate manner, in light of the research findings which highlight young people's preferences.

4.2.1 Use personal connections with young people as the starting point for engagement

A key message which arose from this research was that a grassroots, personal approach is the most effective means of engaging with young people in a genuine and meaningful way and an integral element of a well-planned engagement strategy.

The primary objective in seeking to engage is to establish a personal connection and this may best be achieved initially, if this is practical and possible, through face-to-face contact and other offline avenues.

4.2.2 Utilise a combination of offline and online techniques to more effectively engage with young people

In the context of the above, technology may play a supporting role in engaging young people by enabling government to arrange opportunities for face-to-face contact with young people and vice versa, and in enhancing the impact of these meetings through spreading the word and following up on activities being undertaken in the offline sphere.

Engagement with young people is best achieved through a combination of online and offline techniques and avenues, with each being determined on the basis of key target groups and the particular aims and objectives of the engagement.

In determining appropriate approaches to engagement it is critical to note that some populations of young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with limited literacy, and those in rural or remote communities with limited broadband or computer access, may not be accessible through online technologies.

The use of mobile phone-based technologies is considered to be of secondary importance, as discussed below.

4.2.3 Recognise the growing role of the 'smart' mobile phone in increasing access to online platforms

Mobile phones are recognised by young people as the primary and fundamental form of communication. However, in relation to participation in civic and political activities specifically, the research suggests that they currently have limited applicability in this sphere, but they do play a role.

Mobile phones are currently utilised in relation to specific activities such as texting to organise group actions, and texting to remind young people about meetings, events and opportunities to participate. However, it is noted that their use has potential to grow, particularly as mobile devices are increasingly utilised to access the internet, and are significantly cheaper to purchase to access this service than are personal computers.

4.2.4 Ensure the branding of government products is attractive and accessible to young people

The research suggests that government may need to further explore the perceptions of young people with regard to its brand or image. Many young people consulted highlighted concerns around government not being relevant to them or not being interested in what young people have to say.

Further research in this area and associated strategies for improving government's image among young people offers the potential for government to engage much more effectively with young people, both online and offline. In particular, consideration needs to be given to branding with a focus on clear information and well designed websites (i.e. workable digital interfaces with minimal 'clicks' required for people to access the information they need).

4.2.5 Recognise that the most effective point of engagement may be young people's space

Government may most effectively engage with young people on their own space or sphere, whether online or offline. While some 'highly engaged' young people do have positive and strong connections with government and participate in civic and political activities, many are not engaged or are engaged in a limited way.

It is recommended that in both online and offline spheres, government seeks out popular places or online spaces through which young people currently engage in civic and political activities, and seek to become involved in these, rather than attempt to create their own spaces which might attract young people.

While government-created spaces for young people certainly have their place, utilising existing non-government spaces is considered to be a more effective approach and one which may be used in combination with the former.

4.2.6 Utilise existing ICTs to reach out to young people through ensuring these are well designed, accessible interfaces

Following from the above point, in utilising technology to engage with young people, the research suggests that government may most effectively reach young people through harnessing existing ICTs that are popular among young people, rather than introducing new government-branded ICTs.

Research suggests that the most popular forms of online platforms accessed by young people to participate in civic and political activities, particularly those who participate to a limited degree, are social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace.

In this context, it is recommended that government seeks out spaces such as these, where young people already engage and interact online and participate in these spaces. This is an approach which demonstrates government's willingness to engage with young people on their terms.

4.2.7 More effectively harness opportunities to reach out to young people through schools through technology

Schools offer an important opportunity to reach out to young people aged under 18, whether online or offline. Consultations with young people conducted through this project indicated that many young people have discovered important avenues for civic and political participation, or important causes they wish to be involved in, through their school.

In this context, standard website homepages which are provided on the websites of all state schools offer an important opportunity for government to reach out to young people. However, the degree of exploration of civic and politically focused online resources is determined by the proxies applied to school computers. Other opportunities for engagement through schools warrant further exploration.

4.2.8 Take a risk management, rather than risk-averse approach to Web 2.0 and the opportunities it offers for engagement with young people

The challenge for government of engaging through Web 2.0, given its interactive nature, is to reach a level of comfort on the necessary relinquishing of control that is associated with running, or participating in, interactive websites.

The research indicates that young people are comfortable with, and indeed expect, a degree of moderation of online engagement spaces. However, a balance must be struck between restrictions and the free flow of information. Recognition must be given to the lost opportunities that may arise through excessive control.

Strategies relating to levels of control and accessibility are a critical consideration in the government's effective engagement with young people through Web 2.0.

4.2.9 Engage young people effectively and appropriately in the development of online tools and spaces

If governments are seeking to develop new channels for engaging with young people—both online and offline—it is essential to engage young people throughout the entire development process.

A number of organisations consulted through the research, which have developed website and platforms to engage young people, have engaged young people as consultants and advisers. This is considered to be a critical element to the success of branding a site that will appeal to young people and encourage their involvement.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of services and programs dealing specifically with young people and with wider society—in the interests of maximising social inclusion—it is recommended that young people be engaged in the design of programs and services. This is particularly the case in relation to services that may be affected through technological platforms.

Engaging users in the design of service provision approaches and tools is recognised as an effective means of potentially maximising the effectiveness of such services and ensuring they run in a way that avoids alienating core users.

4.2.10 Utilise ICTs in a flexible manner to enable an inclusionary, rather than exclusionary approach

It is important to recognise that there is a spectrum of young people using a range of methods to engage. Governments need to tailor their approach to target young people according to the degree of engagement and preference for particular tools and technologies and offline channels. The research indicates that young people may be conceived of in terms of whether they are already engaging with government; whether they are engaging with civic activities but not with government; or not engaging at all.

Accessing the latter two groups may require a targeted approach utilising the most effective communications channels, namely those which these groups are already using. Existing ICTs and social networking platforms represent a potentially effective route to these groups.

In addition, the potential for offshoots of ICTs to be harnessed in dynamic approaches to engagement must be recognised. These include platforms relating to social media, mobile marketing and online collaboration; all of which may be utilised, either independently or in combination, to maximise the effectiveness of engagement and the potential to capture a wide target audience.

Addressing the social inclusion agenda

Aligned with this imperative, governments must be aware of the inclusive and exclusive nature of technology. There are many ways in which technology encourages participation. However, there are challenges for some young people in using technologies for civic and political activity.

This is particularly so for young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people with disability, and young people living in areas with poor or no connectivity.

In taking these challenges into account governments are acknowledging the diversity among young people, and accounting for inclusion accordingly. This already entails schemes from the government for access to netbook computers and the instillation of broadband throughout large regions of Australia.

In developing approaches to online engagement, governments may also like to consider the needs of young people with disability and as such, set guidelines for ICTs which provide assistive aids.

Newly arrived young people should also be considered and efforts to provide some degree of information in multiple languages may be of assistance in governments' desire to engage them in civic and political activity. However, the resources needed to do this are significant and there could be potential to partner with other ICTs as a means of sharing resources necessary for such an initiative.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDES

Teleconference discussion guide—Government

Introduction

Hello, my name is ... and I am a researcher from a company called Urbis, an independent social and market research company. The Office for Youth (NYARS) has commissioned us to conduct some research amongst Government employees working in the area of Youth with respect to how young people participate in civic activities using mobile and internet technologies.

We are exploring young people's experience (or non experience) of eDemocracy. EDemocracy involves the use of information and communication technology (ICTs) in democratic processes to provide new opportunities for governments, individuals and groups in the community to:

- engage with one another
- become informed about issues, and
- consult and exchange views on matters of public concern.

We'd like to get your views (based on your experience) on how to best engage young people in civic activities, particularly through an online approach. Engaging with young people who are very mobile is also an issue we'd like to discuss. In your experience with

young people, we'd like to explore any initiatives you know of in the past that have been successful (or unsuccessful) in engaging young people.

Before we start, I'd just like to mention a few things about our discussion;

- Everyone's view is important and I would really like to hear from all of you, so it's important that we all speak one at a time so that everyone can be heard especially as we are all calling in from different centres.
- I hope you don't mind me taping our discussion, it will help me remember what was said when we come to write up the findings.
- It goes without saying that everything you say is kept completely confidential. We shall only be using first names so as to ensure your privacy.

Before we get started, and if you feel comfortable in doing so, maybe you would like to introduce yourselves by stating your first name, the department you work in and where you are located, and finally, the capacity in which you're involved with young people. If not, a first name only is fine.

Main discussion

- How do you in your role/program currently engage with young people and what are the methods you employ to engage them?

Probe whether: Online, mail, advertising posters, mobile phones, word of mouth, via youth centres, youth groups.

For those who have moved into online engagement:

- So some of you have moved onto online technologies. How did you make that transition?
 - How did you engage with youth in this new way? What worked?
 - What didn't work and why do you think that is?
- What were some of the barriers you came across in getting young people to engage with you online? Explore (barriers within Govt vs other barriers)
- As someone who works in government in a role that requires you to engage with young people or e-government/e-engagement, what have you found to be the barriers to you/your department/program engaging with young people through online and other technologies?

Allow for all types of barriers here.

- Not technology based (organisational culture, difficulty persuading others to get involved, their own lack of knowledge and skill in this area).
- Technology based—lack of infrastructure/IT support staff.
- Let's talk in a little more depth about possible barriers to young people's participation in civic and political activities using online and mobile technologies. In your experience, what would you say are some key barriers to their participation?

If not mentioned, prompt for:

- technological understanding
- access to technical infrastructure
- computers
- suitable internet connection and speed
- current software
- cultural beliefs/understanding
- negative/ ambivalent attitudes to government, participation in government decision making
- not being aware of the opportunities in the first place.
- Let's look at these barriers a little more closely and in particular, who they are likely to affect. Are there any particular people or sub-groups who would be more likely to experience these barriers/challenges than others? Who are they and how are they affected?

If not mentioned, prompt for the barriers/challenges of the following groups.

There are some particular subgroups that haven't been mentioned yet such as:

- newly arrived
- Indigenous young people
- young people with a disability
- young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage
- rurally isolated young people.

- How do you think Government can address and remove these barriers?
- Moving away briefly from specific 'online' engagement, we would also like to talk a little about young people as a highly mobile group and as such, how we can engage with a generation constantly 'on the move'. If we think about their lifestyles: those at university, moving out of home, changing addresses, moving to new areas for work and leading very busy lifestyles. How can we have meaningful engagement with young people who are in a constant state of flux?
- What do you think are the preferred online and mobile technologies that young people use to participate in civic and political activity?

What is it that makes these channels more appealing than others?

- In your experience, are young people more likely to participate as consumers, creators or networkers when they use online and mobile technologies to participate in civic and political activities? *(if necessary, explain the differences as outlined by NYARS).*

Why do you think this is? Is this likely to change and why? How does this change the way Government is looking at using online technologies in the future?

- Have you ever had any feedback from young people who have used Government websites (may have been your own) as a means of responding to issues raised online? If so, what was their feedback? What were their expectations of Government response?
- In your experience, do you think that Governments' willingness and ability to use technology to engage with young people leads to longer term involvement / participation in civic / political activities (as adults)?
 - Can you give any examples from your own experiences?
- Do any of you have a particular vision for the future regarding how government can engage young people in civic and political activities through online and mobile technologies? What is that vision—if you'd like to share it?
- Do you think there is room to partner with the youth sector in devising ICT approaches to civic and political engagement? Do any particular groups or youth organisations come to mind?

- The last area I'd like to discuss are the methods by which Governments should provide young people with opportunities for online civic/political engagement. There is some debate about whether Government should create and manage these sites or whether they should engage other organisations/young people to create and maintain this space for them.
 - Are there conflicts of interest?
 - Do you know of any national or international examples of Governments providing and managing an online civic space? What are they? How have people reacted? Do you feel that it would have more impact if it was managed independently?
- Do any of you know of any good/creative/successful examples of online engagement with young people regarding civic and political engagement online? These could be within Australia or international.

(ascertain if examples are Govt or NGO)

What was it? What were the stand-out elements of their approach? How effective was their approach? How do you think they overcame some of the barriers you've mentioned?

Closing:

That brings this discussion to a close, but before we go, is there anything else you'd like to comment on regarding today's topic?

Thank and close.

In-depth interview with ICTs

Good morning ...

Thank you for taking part in this consultation process. My name is...and I am a researcher from a company called Urbis, an independent social and market research company. The Office for Youth (NYARS) has commissioned us to research how young people participate in civic and political activity using online and mobile technologies.

This stage of the project involves us talking with people who use Information Communication Technology (ICTs), particularly aimed at young people for civic and political activity. The interview may take 45 minutes to one hour to complete depending on your responses.

We'd like to get your views (based on your experience) on how to best engage young people in civic activities, particularly through an online approach. Engaging with young people who are very mobile is also an issue we'd like to discuss. In your experience with ICTs for young people, we'd like to explore any initiatives you know of in the past that have been successful (or unsuccessful) in engaging young people.

It is up to you whether you would like your organisations name linked to your comments. If you would prefer that your organisation remain un-identified, please let me know.

So, to begin:

- Tell me a little about your ICT application? What does it involve? What is its mission? Who is your target? How is it funded?
- What is available for young people to do on your site? How do young people interact?
 - Live chat? (Moderated / not moderated?)
 - Discussion boards?
 - Online forums?
 - Surveys?
 - Posting own media/ content?
 - Blogs?
 - 'Comment on this' opportunities?
 - Online polls?
 - Any others?

- Does your application offer membership or is it for transient visitors?
Why do you / do you not have membership?

(for those with membership) What do young people get out of becoming a member?

- Has offering membership been beneficial for your ICT application/to members?
If so, in what ways?
- Do young people raise political issues on your application? How? And in what context?
- To what degree is your ICT application youth led?
- How is it led and managed? *(explore how youth-led works).*
 - How is content decided/written?
- How do you promote the application to young people?
- In your experience, what are the preferred online and mobile technologies that young people use to participate in civic and political activities?
- What would you say are the most popular modes of communication on your ICT application?
 - Why do you think this is?
- When young people can contribute to the site, what are the most popular forms of submissions?
 - Why do you think this is?
 - How are political-specific information/views exchanged?
- To what degree is your application online action and offline action? That is, is there a deliberate prompt to take action in their offline 'real world' community? Do you have any evidence of this occurring?
- If so, how do you resource young people to do this?
- Do you partner with other organisations to produce your application?
 - Links to organisations (which ones and why those particular organisations)
 - Links to other applications (which ones and why those particular sites/applications)

- Besides your own application, are there any indications that your visitors use these technologies to participate in their communities in the offline world?
 - How? What actions do they take?
 - How do you encourage this?
- What are some of the barriers young people may face with becoming involved in civic and political activity on your application?

If not mentioned, prompt for:

- technological understanding
 - access to technical infrastructure
 - computers
 - suitable internet connection and speed
 - current software
 - cultural beliefs/ understanding
 - negative/ ambivalent attitudes to government, participation in government decision making
 - not being aware of the opportunities in the first place
 - not an objective of the application.
- Let's look at these barriers a little more closely and in particular, who they are likely to affect. Are there any particular people or sub-groups who would be more likely to experience these barriers/challenges than others? Who are they and how are they affected?

If not mentioned, prompt for the barriers/challenges of the following groups.

- There are some particular subgroups that haven't been mentioned yet such as:
 - newly arrived young people
 - Indigenous young people
 - young people with a disability
 - young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage
 - rurally isolated young people.

- Does your ICT application attempt to address some of these barriers? If so, how?
- Moving away briefly from specific 'online' engagement, we would also like to talk a little about young people as a highly mobile group and as such, how we can engage with a generation constantly 'on the move'. If we think about their lifestyles: those at university, moving out of home, changing addresses, moving to new areas for work and leading very busy lifestyles. How can we have meaningful engagement with young people who are in a constant state of flux?
- To what degree do you think that young people's engagement in civic or political ICT applications encourages their participation in political processes later on in life?
 - Why do you think this is?
- To what degree do you think your application encourages young people to develop engage in basic political activity (such as enrolling to vote/voting)?
 - How does it encourage this?
 - Do you think it has been successful in this? Why?
- I'd like to ask about any particular challenges you face in your role of managing this ICT application? Do you come across any of the following?

(Explore and discuss any issues with) Social/ethical/financial/technical infrastructure/participation numbers/projecting the right image.

For Government ICT applications

- To what degree does your ICT application allow young people to voice opinions about Government issues? Do your visitors indicate that they have visited other Government websites? If so, what are the expectations of young people using government websites (for feedback on issues they raise online)? How does your application differ to other Government websites?
- What have been the barriers to Government in utilising these technologies to engage young people in participatory democracy?

ALL

- What are some examples of ICT applications for young people that are particularly successful?
- What are the stand-out elements that make it successful?

- The last area I'd like to discuss is the methods by which Governments should provide young people with opportunities for online civic/political engagement. There is some debate about whether Government should create and manage these sites or whether they should engage other organisations / young people to create and maintain this space for them.
 - Are there conflicts of interest?
- Do you know of any national or international examples of Governments providing and managing an online civic space, or participating in an online space managed by non government agencies?

In closing: Are there any comments you'd like to add?

Discussion guide—Youth Sector

Introduction

Thank you for taking part in this consultation process. My name is ... and I am a researcher from a company called Urbis, an independent social research company. The Office for Youth (NYARS) has commissioned us to research how young people participate in civic and political activity using online and mobile technologies.

This stage of the project involves us talking with people who work within the youth sector in some way. The interview may take 45 minutes to one hour to complete depending on your responses.

We'd like to get your views (based on your experience) on how to best engage young people in civic activities, particularly through an online approach. Engaging with young people who are very mobile is also an issue we'd like to discuss. In your experience with young people, we'd like to explore any initiatives you know of in the past that have been successful (or unsuccessful) in engaging young people.

It is up to you whether you would like your organisations name linked to your comments. If you would prefer that your organisation remain un-identified, please let me know.

So, to begin:

Tell me a little about your organisation? What does it involve? What is its mission? Who is your target? How is it funded?

How do you in your role/program currently involve young people?

- To what degree is your organisation and its website (application) youth led?
- How is it led and managed? (*explore how youth-led application works*)
- What are the methods you employ to involve/engage them?

Probe whether: Online, mail, advertising posters, mobile phones, word of mouth, via youth centres, youth groups.

If organisation has website (likely)

- How is content decided/written?
- What is available for young people to do on your site? How do young people interact?

Live chat? (Moderated/not moderated?)	Online forums	Posting own media/ content	'Comment on this' opportunities	Any others?
Discussion boards?	Surveys	Blogs	Online polls	Online membership/ sign up to mailing/sms list

- In your experience, what are the preferred online and mobile technologies that young people use to participate in civic and political activities?
- Do young people raise civic and political issues through your organisations? How so?
- Do they use online and mobile technologies to do this? (how does website/phone play a role?) And in what context?

(If sophisticated ICT application)

- When young people can contribute to your organisations site, what are the most popular forms of submissions?
 - Why do you think this is?
- In your experience, are young people more likely to participate as consumers, creators or networkers when they use online and mobile technologies to participate in civic and political activities? *(if necessary, explain the differences as outlined by NYARS)*
 - Why do you think this is? Is this likely to change and why? How does this change the way your organisation is looking at using online technologies in the future?
- To what degree does your organisation encourage 'online action' and 'offline action'? Is there are relationship between the two? That is, is there a deliberate prompt to take action in their offline 'real world' community? Do you have any evidence of this occurring?
 - If so, how do you encourage and resource young people to do this?
- *Besides* your own organisation and its associated application, are there any indications that young people use these technologies to participate in their communities in the offline world?
 - How? What actions do they take?

- What are some of the barriers young people may face with becoming involved in civic and political activity via online and mobile technologies?

If not mentioned, prompt for:

- technological understanding
 - access to technical infrastructure
 - computers
 - suitable internet connection and speed
 - current software
 - cultural beliefs/understanding
 - negative/ambivalent attitudes to government, participation in government decision making
 - not being aware of the opportunities in the first place
 - not an objective of the application.
- Let's look at these barriers a little more closely and in particular, who they are likely to affect. Are there any particular people or sub-groups who would be more likely to experience these barriers/challenges than others? Who are they and how are they affected?

If not mentioned, prompt for the barriers/challenges of the following groups.

- There are some particular subgroups that haven't been mentioned yet such as:
 - newly arrived young people
 - Indigenous young people
 - young people with a disability
 - young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage
 - rurally isolated young people.
- How, if at all, does your organisation address this through its ICT application?
- Where does technology feature as a means of encouraging inclusion in civic activity?

- Moving away briefly from specific 'online' engagement, we would also like to talk a little about young people as a highly mobile group and as such, how we can engage with a generation constantly 'on the move'. If we think about their lifestyles: those at university, moving out of home, changing addresses, moving to new areas for work and leading very busy lifestyles. How can we have meaningful engagement with young people who are in a constant state of flux?
- To what degree do you think that young people's engagement in civic or political activities through online or mobile technologies encourages their participation in political processes later on in life?
 - Why do you think this is?
- To what degree do you think your organisation encourages young people to engage in basic civic and political activity (such as enrolling to vote / voting / writing letters to decision members)?
 - How does it encourage this?
- I'd like to ask about any particular challenges you face in providing an online space/ ICT application for young people. Do you come across any of the following?

(Explore and discuss any issues with) social/ethical/financial/technical infrastructure/participation numbers/projecting the right image?

- Government is exploring how it can engage with young people through online and mobile technologies. Do you think there is room to partner with the youth sector in devising ICT approaches to civic and political engagement? Do any particular groups or youth organisations come to mind?
- What about partnership with sophisticated ICT providers. Has that ever come to mind as a means of developing your ICT application/your organisations reach to more young people?

(Explore potential)

- The last area I'd like to discuss is the methods by which Government should provide young people with opportunities for online civic/political engagement. There is some debate about whether Government should create and manage these sites or whether they should engage other organisations / young people to create and maintain this space for them.
 - Are there conflicts of interest?

- Do you know of any national or international examples of Governments providing and managing an online civic space? What are they? How have people reacted? Do you feel that it would have more impact if it was managed independently?
- Do any of you know of any good/creative/successful examples of online engagement with young people regarding civic and political engagement online? These could be within Australia or international.

(ascertain if examples are Govt or NGO)

- What was it? What were the stand-out elements of their approach? How effective was their approach? How do you think they overcame some of the barriers you've mentioned?

Closing:

That brings this discussion to a close, but before we go, is there anything else you'd like to comment on regarding today's topic?

Thank and close.

Discussion guide—Academic expert

Introduction

Thank you for taking part in this consultation process. My name is ... and I am a researcher from a company called Urbis, an independent social research company. The Office for Youth (NYARS) has commissioned us to research how young people participate in civic and political activity using online and mobile technologies.

This stage of the project involves us talking with people who work within the youth sector, with ICTs and with Government. After conducting a review of literature, we felt that academics with expertise in this area would also be of relevance to the research. The interview may take 45 minutes to one hour to complete depending on your responses.

We'd like to get your views on how to best engage young people in civic activities, particularly through an online approach. Engaging with young people who are very mobile is also an issue we'd like to discuss. In your experience and through your own research with young people, we'd like to explore any initiatives you know of in the past that have been successful (or unsuccessful) in engaging young people.

It is up to you whether you would like your name or research institution linked to your comments. If you would prefer that you remain un-identified, please let me know. If this is the case, we will refer to any comments as coming from an 'academic expert'.

So, to begin:

- Can you give me a brief overview about the research you've conducted that looks at young people, civic and political engagement and mobile and internet technologies?
- Government is keen to engage young people in civic and political activity via internet and mobile technologies. What do you believe to be the barriers to its engagement with young people?

Allow for all types of barriers here

- Not technology based (organisational culture, difficulty persuading others to get involved, their own lack of knowledge and skill in this area).
- Technology based – lack of infrastructure/IT support staff.

- What about possible barriers to young people's participation in civic and political activities using online and mobile technologies. What would you say are the key barriers to their participation?

If not mentioned, prompt for:

- technological understanding
 - access to technical infrastructure
 - computers
 - suitable internet connection and speed
 - current software
 - cultural beliefs/understanding
 - negative/ambivalent attitudes to government, participation in government decision making
 - not being aware of the opportunities in the first place.
- Let's look at these barriers a little more closely and in particular, who they are likely to affect. Are there any particular people or sub-groups who would be more likely to experience these barriers/challenges than others? Who are they and how are they affected?

If not mentioned, prompt for the barriers/challenges of the following groups.

- There are some particular subgroups that haven't been mentioned yet such as:
 - newly arrived young people
 - Indigenous young people
 - young people with a disability
 - young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage
 - rurally isolated young people.
- How do you think Government can address and remove these barriers?
- Can you give me some examples of particular organisations that are effectively addressing these barriers via ICT applications?

- How are they doing this? What is their approach and what are the elements that make them successful and addressing these barriers?
- Moving away briefly from specific ‘online’ engagement, we would also like to talk a little about young people as a highly mobile group and as such, how we can engage with a generation constantly ‘on the move’. If we think about their lifestyles: those at university, moving out of home, changing addresses, moving to new areas for work and leading very busy lifestyles. How can we have meaningful engagement with young people who are in a constant state of flux?
- What do you think are the preferred online and mobile technologies that young people use to participate in civic and political activity?
 - What is it that makes these channels more appealing than others?
- Are young people more likely to participate as consumers, creators or networkers when they use online and mobile technologies to participate in civic and political activities? *(if necessary, explain the differences as outlined by NYARS)*
- Why do you think this is?
 - Do you see this changing or developing in the future? Why and how so?
- To what degree do ICTs encourage and ‘offline action’ from ‘online action’ in their community? Is there are relationship between the two? Do you have any evidence of this occurring?
 - How should an ICT resource young people to do this?
 - Is there a place for Government in this? (resourcing young people for offline action) and what would its role be here?
- Through your research, have you ever had any feedback from young people who have used Government websites as a means of responding to issues raised online? If so, what was their feedback?
- When attempting to engage with Government, what do you think are young people’s expectations of Government response?
- How (if at all) do you think that developing an online, or more mobile approach to engaging with young people will impact on Governments engagement with young people?

(Probe for positive and/or negative impacts)

- Do you think that Governments' willingness and ability to use technology to engage with young people leads to longer term involvement/participation in civic/political activities as adults?
 - What has been your finding on this?
- Do you have a particular vision for the future regarding how Government can engage young people in civic and political activities through online and mobile technologies? What is that vision—if you'd like to share it?
- Do you think there is room for Government to partner (or work with) with the youth sector, civic organisations, or established ICTs to increase young people's civic and political engagement?
 - If so, do any particular relationships/working arrangements come to mind?
- The last area I'd like to discuss is the methods by which Governments should provide young people with opportunities for online civic/political engagement. There is some debate about whether Government should create and manage these sites or whether they should engage other organisations/young people to create and maintain this space for them.
 - Are there conflicts of interest here?
- Do you know of any national or international examples of Governments providing and managing an online civic space? What are they? How have people reacted? Do you feel that it would have more impact if it was managed independently?
- Do any of you know of any good/creative/successful examples of online engagement with young people regarding civic and political engagement online? These could be within Australia or international.

(Ascertain if examples are Govt or NGO)

- What was it? What were the stand-out elements of their approach? How effective was their approach? How do you think they overcame some of the barriers you've mentioned?
- Finally, do you know of any examples nationally and internationally of government effectively participating in citizen-developed and driven online dialogue and conversations to influence decision making and policy development?

Closing:

That brings this discussion to a close, but before we go, is there anything else you'd like to comment on regarding today's topic?

Thank and close.

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Engaged

Good evening. My name is ... and I am a researcher from a company called Urbis, an independent social and market research company. We have been commissioned to find out how young people engage in civic and political activities via online and mobile technologies.

As part of our research we are talking to young people who participate in civic and political activities, in particular young people who are engaged in these activities *technologically*—this is where you come in!

I hope that when you think of civic and political activity you don't automatically think that this is going to be a boring discussion. I promise that it won't be. We'd like to talk to you about how you engage in important social issues around you. We want to know what matters to you, how you seek information

Before we start, I'd just like to mention a few things about our discussion:

- Everyone's view is important and I would really like to hear from all of you, so it's important that we all speak one at a time so that everyone can be heard.
- I hope you don't mind me taping our discussion, it will help me remember what was said when we come to write-up the findings.
- It goes without saying that everything you say is kept completely confidential. As you can see we use first names only so as to ensure your privacy. Our report will not single out any individual person's comments but report on the views of the group as a whole.
- Please turn all mobiles off.

Introduction to topic area.

So tonight I'd like to talk to you about three key things:

1. your interest (or reasons for disinterest) in civic and political activities
2. how you use technologies to find information, communicate with others, and participate in these activities; and specifically which technologies you use
3. how you think these technologies could be more effective in helping you to participate in civic and political activities.

Before we get started, maybe you would like to introduce yourselves to the group by stating your name and a little about yourself such as whether you are studying, working, or 'in between' those things right now and whether there is perhaps a social

issue that you're currently interested in right now or that is of importance to you (e.g. environment, third world issues, mental health ...) etc ... (five min)

Civic and political activity and sourcing information (10 min)

I'd like to get your thoughts on what civic and political activity means. What words come to mind when I say: 'civic and political activity?' Feel free to call them out.

Where does Government fit into your understanding of this? (local, state, federal)

Technological engagement in civic and political activities (40 min)

When you were recruited to take part in this focus group you said that you may have done at least one of the following:

- have membership with a social causes—political, environment, humanitarian
- have signed up to mailing lists for social causes—political, environment, humanitarian
- have contributed online to a social, political, environmental, humanitarian website in the last 6 months—such as through:
 - signing e-petitions
 - joining chat room
 - posting comments
- youth councils
- political parties
- student councils
- attend meetings about particular causes/or volunteers for particular causes ...

So, tell me briefly about the types of organisations/issues you're involved with

What's the nature and degree of your involvement?

- More online or offline?
- What types of technological/online activities do you use to do this? (explore live chat, discussion boards, online forums, surveys, posting own media/content, blogs, 'comment on this' opportunities, online polls, email, others)

Do any of you use internet sites for your involvement?

- What internet sites are you doing this on? (explore ICTs)
- What do you like about these sources/sites?

Consumer/creator/networkers

- Are you seeking out information (i.e. consumers)?
- Are you creating information/support for a particular issues? (i.e. creators), or
- Are you using these to network with others and (i.e. networkers)? (explore combinations or other).

Let's take a few steps back to how you became interested in your issues. I want you to try to take me through your own journey from when you first became interested to where you are today with your degree of involvement in that cause/issue.

- How did you find the particular sources that you did? (just found it browsing, friends recommendation)

Now, try to remember what it was that made you want to take the first step to getting more involved in the cause—you know, more than just reading about it. Can you remember why and how that shift occurred?

- When you realised that you did want to get more involved, how did you go about it?
- Any difficulties?

OK, back to what you're doing now ...

Thinking about the ways you use technology for your involvement in the issues important to you - Do you use mobile phones ever for this? (i.e. connecting to the internet and commenting on facebook or twitter)

Social networking ...

What about social networking sites such as facebook and myspace; does anyone here join groups or accept 'cause invitations', create events for organisations/causes you belong to?

Do you consider this to be 'engaging with a cause'? Why/how/why not?

Do you prefer using social networking sites to post comments, rather than visiting a website dedicated to the cause and posting a comment there? If so, why?

Transition

Have any of you, as a result of online involvement, gotten involved in a cause in the 'real world'?

- Tell me about how that happened? What was the process of elevating your involvement?

What are the differences in experiences between online and 'real world' community involvement? Are there things you get from one that you don't get from the other?

- What are they? (*explore (+) and (-) here*)

Barriers to engagement as well as technological engagement (15 min)

I'd like to move onto barriers to engagement for young people.

Firstly, why do you think young people can be really interested in issues, but (unlike you) don't tend to take that next step—that is, don't get more involved? (examples of friends etc who they know don't get engaged)

- What could make them more involved?

*(Example is it young people encouraging their friends to get involved?
Youth organisations targeting young people better? Young people being allowed more of a say?)*

Secondly, have you encountered any *technological* barriers to being more involved in civic/political activities i.e. has anything ever hindered your ability to get involved/ express yourself or stopped you from having your say online? (i.e. technical: access, internet speed, software).

- Do you know of others who have?

What about social or cultural barriers – are there barriers for those of an Indigenous background, those who have particular cultural or religious beliefs, those from a low socioeconomic background, or those in rural or regional areas, or those with a disability?

(Discuss)

Government space (15 min)

Have you ever visited government websites to post comments, have your say or contribute to change? What sites?

Do you think Government websites are able to offer an effective space where young people feel free and comfortable to interact with government in certain issues?

- (If yes, how? If not, why not?)

What do you think are the preferred types of communication between government and young people?

Would you ever consider going to a government website to see if it could offer information about the issue you're interested in? Why/why not? (what do young people anticipate government websites as being like? What gives that impression?)

In what situations, if any, do you think young people are generally likely to visit a government website?

Let's imagine that a young person is browsing the internet about a particular issue of interest to them. Let's say the issue is global warming. They find a website dedicated to global warming that's got lots of information available and offers some links to other websites related to that issue. One of those links is to a Government website. The link is titled: 'see what your government is doing about this issue?' or: 'Where does the government stand in this issue?' Do you think a young person would be likely to click on that link?

- Do you think that having a link like that would help people become more informed about particular policies that government has?

Closing (5 min)

Government wants young people to be more engaged in the issues surrounding them and wants to encourage them to share their opinions about what matters.

What's the one most useful thing government youth departments could do to encourage you (and others like you) to get more involved in the area that interests you?

Was there any else you wanted to add about how government should best engage with young people?

Focus Group Discussion Guide: Non-engaged

Good evening. My name is ... and I am a researcher from a company called Urbis, an independent social and market research company. We have been commissioned to find out how young people engage in civic and political activities via online and mobile technologies.

We are not only talking to young people who participate in civic and political activities, but are also talking to young people who don't really do this at all—this is where you come in! There may even be the chance that, in your own different ways, you are already doing some civic and political stuff without realising it. But we'll get to that a little later.

I hope that when you think of civic and political activity you don't automatically think that this is going to be a boring discussion. I promise that it won't be. We'd like to talk to you about how you engage in important social issues around you. We want to know what matters to you, how you seek information

Before we start, I'd just like to mention a few things about our discussion;

- Everyone's view is important and I would really like to hear from all of you, so it's important that we all speak one at a time so that everyone can be heard.
- I hope you don't mind me taping our discussion, it will help me remember what was said when we come to write-up the findings.
- It goes without saying that everything you say is kept completely confidential. As you can see we use first names only so as to ensure your privacy. Our report will not single out any individual person's comments but report on the views of the group as a whole.
- Please turn all mobiles off.

Before we get started, maybe you would like to introduce yourselves to the group by stating your name and a little about yourself such as whether you are studying, working, or 'in between' those things right now and whether there is perhaps a social issue that you're currently interested in right now or that is of importance to you (e.g. environment, third world issues, mental health...) etc...

Introduction to topic area.

So tonight I'd like to talk to you about three key things:

1. your interest (or reasons for disinterest) in civic and political activities
2. how you use technologies to find information and communicate with others

3. whether you think technologies could have an impact on your participation in civic and political activities.

Civic and political activity

I'd like to get your thoughts on what civic and political activity means. What words comes to mind when I say 'civic and political activity'? Feel free to call them out.

- Where does Government fit into your understanding of this? (local, state, federal)

Why do you think it is that some young people don't participate in these types of activities?

- (Explore deterrents to engagement—boring, belief that politics is contrived, 'I choose not to be involved', no time, not interested, 'I'm just one person, how can I make a meaningful difference? Issues of access to civic and political information/groups, access to information)
- Explore group types that may be less able to engage and why that is?

In the introduction of this group, some of you were able to nominate an issue of interest or importance to you. How do you keep yourself informed about these issues? (explore preferred source of information—internet, other media—TV/radio/print, friends, family etc)

What is it about these types of sources that appeals to you?

Sourcing information

I'd like to talk a little more about sourcing information on the internet—what types of websites would you use to get more information about issues of interest to you? What do you do when you visit those websites?

Would you ever consider going to a government website to see if it could offer information about the issue you're interested in?

- Why/why not? (what do young people anticipate government websites as being like? What gives that impression?)

In what situations, if any, do you think young people are generally likely to visit a government website?

What do you think are the preferred types of communication between government and young people?

Transition from interest to engagement

When you were recruited to take part in this focus group you said that you:

- don't have membership with any social causes—political, environment, humanitarian
- have not signed up to mailing lists for any social causes—political, environment, humanitarian
- have not contributed online to a social, political, environmental, humanitarian website in the last six months—such as through:
 - signing e-petitions
 - joining chat room (social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo excluded)
 - posting comments (social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace and Bebo excluded)
- do not belong to any offline groups that contributes to movement for social or political change
- youth councils
- political parties
- student councils.

However, many of you were able to nominate a social issue of interest and importance to you. So, for some of you, it sounds like you're *interested* in certain issues, but don't take that next step to becoming more *engaged* with those issues. Does that sound right? (explore the level of agreement with this).

Why do you think people can be really interested in issues, but don't tend to take that next step, that is don't get more involved?

- (Explore barriers to engagement (may or may not be online related at this point))

What do you think could motivate people to take that next step, that is, to become more engaged with issues, such as jumping into a chat room, signing a petition?

- How do you think that step *might* lead to greater involvement (or not)?

Social networking's role in engaging non-engaged

What about social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace. Does anyone here join groups or accept 'cause invitations'?

Do you consider this to be 'engaging with a cause'? Why/how/why not?

Have any of you sourced any further information about an issue because you joined a cause on Facebook? Have you posted Facebook or Myspace comments about a certain issue?

(If yes)

What is it about social networking sites that make you want to post comments, rather than visiting a website dedicated to the cause and posting a comment there?

(Probe: anonymity? friendship groups are safer, ease/no effort required, simple and fast, allows for opinion to be known with little dedication...)

Government space

There are some online spaces out there that young people can visit, post comments, have their say, and contribute to change. Do you think Government websites are able to offer this type of space where young people feel free to interact with government in certain issues?

(if yes, how? If not, why not?)

Let's imagine that a young person is browsing the internet about a particular issue of interest to them. Let's say the issue is global warming. They find a website dedicated to global warming that's got lots of information available and offers some links to other websites related to that issue. One of those links is to a Government website. The link is titled: 'see what your government is doing about this issue?' or 'Where does the government stand in this issue?' Do you think a link a young person would be likely to click on that link?

- Do you think that having a link like that would help people become more informed about particular policies that government has?

Closing:

Government wants young people to be more engaged in the issues surrounding them and wants to encourage them to share their opinions about what matters. How can government encourage young people to be more engaged?

Was there any else you wanted to add about how government should best engage with young people?

APPENDIX B

ONLINE RECRUITMENT INFORMATION SHEET



Do you get involved in the things that matter to you?

Are you interested in social, political, environmental or youth issues?

Are you 12 – 25 years of age?

If you said 'YES' and want to earn \$50 - \$70, read on!

We are conducting research into how young people participate in civic and political activities.

- How do you communicate with others about issues that are important to you?
 - How do you find information?
- How do you, in your own way, go about making change?

We would like to talk with young people who have an interest in the world around them and who get involved in some way to make change!

Is this you?

We are holding focus groups around Australia. Some will be 'face-to-face' focus groups and some will be online focus groups – like a chat room. The type of group you'd attend depends on where you live.

Am I eligible?

If you have done any of the following in the last 6 months, then you are perfect for the job!

- Been involved in issues that are important to you, like:
 - Social
 - Political
 - Youth
 - Global
 - Environmental
- Become a member of a social, political, environmental cause (Greenpeace, university union, protest groups)
- Visited action websites like: ACT NOW!, Youth Central, Vibewire, VGen, Get up!
 - Signed a petition for a social cause that's important to you (online included)
- Joined a chat room, posted comments or media about an issue important to you
 - Participated with an action group in your community
- Belong to a youth council or youth group of any type (say school or uni)
 - Organised a petition or event for a social cause



Details of the focus groups

Living anywhere in NT??

We'd love you to join our **online** focus group.

Online focus groups will be conducted between
Monday 10th August and Thursday 14th August at 6:30pm.

Contact us to find out the best group for you!

Groups will last for 1.5 hrs and to say thanks, we'll give you between \$50-\$70.

Interested?

All you need to do now is contact us at the details below,
and we'll give you more details. It's easy!

Call xxx on (02) xxxxxxx (work hours)

xxxxxxx (after hours until 8pm)

Or email her at xxxxx@urbis.com.au

If xxx doesn't answer, simply leave your name,
contact details and the state you live in. She'll call you back.

You can use this link to find out more about Urbis, the independent research
company conducting the research.

<http://www.urbis.com.au/index.cfm?contentid=750>

We hope to be talking with you soon!

