**Backed into a Corner: Challenging Media and Policy Representations of Youth Citizenship in the UK**

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**Abstract**

As a group, young people in the UK are represented in media and policy as vulnerable to radicalisation, exclusion or criminality, and as digitally savvy ‘partners’ and service users. These contradictions between media and policy constructions of young people highlight the problematic frames through which young citizens are imagined and represented. In tandem, mainstream UK media and policy documents identify normative institutional forms of participation as primary arenas for youth engagement. Drawing on extended original thematic analyses of media messages and policy documents about and for young people, and on expert interviews with young activists and youth policy-makers, this paper finds that (1) adults and young people who work in the fields of youth activism and policy have far more precise and critical understandings of young people’s needs, contexts and diversity as citizens than media representations or policy narratives; that (2) the nuanced perspectives of young people and of these adults is frequently lost or unheard; and that (3) a diverse repertoire of productive forms of youth active citizenship – which are critical, playful and dissenting – are discouraged, excluded, delegitimised or criminalised. By building consensus amongst powerful adults, media representations and instrumental policies regarding youth thus further widen the chasm between ‘accepted’ notions of youth active citizenship and how young people enact citizenship in their everyday lives. Rather than retreating from difficult and contentious politics to protect adult authorities, media and policy narratives should acknowledge these as key levers for the productive and critical development of active young citizens in a strong democracy.

**Keywords:** Youth citizenship, Media representation, Policy discourse, Critical citizenship

**Introduction**

A broad scholarly consensus maintains that citizen participation strengthens democratic processes, and brings ‘the people’ closer to democratic ideals (Almond & Verba, 1963; Barber, 1984; Franklin, Mackie, & Valen, 2009; Hart, 2009; Held, 2006; Pateman, 1970; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). In this context, many governments assert that they regard the democratic participation of young people[[1]](#footnote-1) as an unquestioned good, although this is mainly conceived within the parameters of institutional participation – voting, volunteering for political parties, working with or starting campaigns over community issues (Banaji, 2008). Emerging out of this prior scholarship, and out of our participation in the EU-funded Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth (CATCH-EyoU, 2015-2018) project[[2]](#footnote-2), across eight EU countries, the research discussed below focuses on data collected with British youth in the months leading up to the 23 June 2016 UK Referendum. Our main research question investigates *how recurrent representations of young people’s citizenship within discursive spheres of UK media and policy are linked to each other in challenging or reproducing barriers to the recognition of young people’s civic and political engagement and participation.*

**Representations, Policy and Practice**

In line with Gramsci’s theoretical articulation of the mechanisms through which those in power win cultural consent from those who are governed (1971), media institutions form part of ‘the dominant symbolic environment of society’ (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 34), interacting with, informing, responding to, and influencing political processes and policies. Silverstone’s concept of the ‘mediapolis’ nuances the above framework for understanding how media construct and boundary the moral spaces inflecting the civic and political life of individuals and societies (Silverstone, 2006). Research has demonstrated relationships of influence between (biased) media representations and political policies (Entman, 2007; Ramasubramanian, 2011), and between social or political movements and media representations (Bakardjieva, 2012). Collectively, media and government possess the means to define and inflect the dominant ways of imagining and communicating about young people as civic actors. These discourses are both refracted through and contradict the experiences of youth stakeholders working daily with young people, with limited (or no) ability to correct biased discourses. Their expertise in navigating representations and policies for young people represents an informed, critical view of the policy effects of discourse. While research on media and policy domains is extensive, there has been less triangulation across discourse, policy and practice to construct a picture of the tensions, barriers, and opportunities arising for young people.

**Civic Engagement and Participation**

Recognising that myriad forms of engagement and participation in public life constitute ‘acts’ of citizenship (Isin & Nielsen, 2008), in this article the terms ‘civic engagement,’ ‘active citizenship,’ and ‘political participation’ are used interchangeably to acknowledge the semantically diverse and sometimes opaque ways of recognising citizen agency. ‘Civic’ refers to some form of public participation in either civil society or politics (Almond & Verba, 1963); from a moral standpoint, civic engagement is normatively theorised as being ‘good’ and for the benefit of the public (Marshall, 1950), whilst actions that challenge laws, norms and institutional structures are usually not recognised as civic in media or policy spheres, and are often criminalised (Banaji, 2008). Our working definition of civic participation and engagement is inclusive: individual or collective civic or political participation, with a broadly collective aim, characterised by both normative *and* non-normative forms of public interaction. From this perspective, civic participation encompasses more than voting and volunteering, online petitions, and protesting, and subjects the notion of ‘radicalisation’ in politics to critical scrutiny. Civic actions can also belong to the repertoires of the alt-right or the radical left, and may encompass lurking, commenting and trolling on liberal and conservative websites or refusing to vote when there is no candidate that represents one’s views. Civic activism could mean monthly food bank volunteering or doing a charity walk/run; equally, it could mean (illegally) occupying an absentee Russian billionaire’s London mansion and turning it into a free homeless shelter,[[3]](#footnote-3) or making a point about one’s British values by vandalising a Polish social club in Hammersmith with racial slurs days after the EU referendum vote for Brexit.[[4]](#footnote-4) This conception clashes with a normative tendency in media and policy discourse to define ‘good’ citizenship as law abiding and democratically virtuous.

Our study explored the extent to which such ideas of civic participation – normative, non-normative, and flexible – were included in or omitted from media and policy discourses, and from the experiences of youth stakeholder experts working with youth on a daily basis. In the following sections we discuss how such discourses shape possibilities for youth civic engagement and participation.

**UK youth citizenship: normative structures, differential experiences**

Histories, structures, contexts and opportunities (or lack thereof) are deeply significant for understanding contemporary young people’s civic and political engagements and actions (Isin, 2009; Soler‐i‐Martí & Ferrer‐Fons, 2015), and yet they are undervalued ‘in relation to democracy, participation, and the building of civic values and cultures’ (Banaji & Cammaerts, 2015, p. 116). Social disadvantages and media stigmatizations of youth from particular economic, cultural and geographical groups can and do lead to differential access to and experiences of citizenship (Banaji & Cammaerts, 2015, p. 116). This happens, in particular, through the exclusion or misrepresentation of non-normative civic endeavour (for instance, volunteering by economically deprived youth within their families and communities, or protests that include vandalism).

Discursive constructions of youth participation in media and policy spheres often reduce the issue of youth political performance to simplistic binaries of voting or not-voting (Edwards, 2007). While young people remain disaffected with political institutions (Henn & Foard, 2012; McDowell, Rootham, & Hardgrove, 2014; O'Toole, 2003; Pilkington, 2015; Sloam, 2014), they still engage in formal politics, and many vote. Yet the vast majority of young people’s everyday political and civic participation flourishes in informal arenas, at a distance from mainstream media and the political establishment (AEGEE Europe, 2014; Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2016; Dezelan, 2015; LSE Enterprise, 2013). From the more clicktivist forms of participation (online petitions) to street theatre, occupation of public spaces, artistic and spectacular events, local volunteering in refugee kitchens and shelters, and alternative media production, a rich network of youth civic action is evident, aligned by a single common thread: a distrust of politicians and formal politics.

Existing literature (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Bennett, 2008; Bessant, 2016; Loader, 2007) suggests that positive experiences of guided or autonomous youth participation, even in dissent or protest that fails to achieve its stated goals, can increase young people’s commitment and efficacy as citizens, binding them further to their communities and to democracy as an ideal. Conversely, negative experiences in which expectations are crushed – through action being sanctioned, ignored, or instrumentalised – can prove alienating, reduce trust in institutions, and damage confidence in democracy and self-efficacy (Banaji, 2008). The impact of unfulfilled expectations on the legitimacy of those who rule and govern in democratic institutions is high, since young people have been shown to have the most idealistic views of democracy and an appetite for participation (Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2004).

**Youth on the Media Margins**

Mass media representations complicate and are complicit in the problematic relationship between political institutions and young people. These representations remain sharply differentiated by social class (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Vromen, 2008), and often rely on sensationalist tropes and narratives. Previous studies on the portrayal of young people in British news media identify a ‘symbolic criminalisation [that] fits young people into patterns of crime reporting that have long been critiqued as vehicles for exaggerating public fears and promoting increasing state power as a viable solution to crime’ (Wayne et al, 2008, p 88). Symbolic criminalisation extends to mainstream media representations of youth active citizenship (Cushion, 2007). When young people across the UK argued against student fee hikes through demonstrations and gestures of symbolic insurrection (Cammaerts, 2013), they were disproportionately sanctioned. Effectively, young people’s active dissent from government policy was reframed by the media as anti-social behaviour.

Mainstream media discourses about youth also ignore participation in informal settings such as ‘youth clubs or centres, community media initiatives, nongovernmental organizations, social movements, or sports clubs’ (Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2014, p. 662) where young people are socialised as citizens. While scholars such as Loader (2007) and Carpentier (2011) have shown how new media is offering (some) young citizens a wider repertoire of representations and tools for self-representation, a majority of commentaries locate young people’s citizenship within unproblematic binaries : ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘violent’ or ‘vulnerable,’ ‘motivated’ or ‘lazy’ (McDowell et al., 2014). Worryingly, as anti-democratic movements involving youth gain notoriety, they may even potentially become fodder to support existing media discourses of ‘problematic’ young people.[[5]](#footnote-5) Through a consistently negative framing of the civic legitimacy of young people, such conceptualisations appear to have real world effects of discouraging powerful adults from working pro-actively for young people’s social inclusion.

**Youth on the Policy Margins**

Concurrently, public policy discourses share features of this ‘problematic’ framing, while also embodying a key site in which older adults’ decisions impact young people’s lives. Educational policies in particular are believed to play a vital role in sustaining and revitalising links between young citizens and democratic institutions (Crick, 1998). However, actual citizenship education (CE) provides an example of how theoretical articulations of youth citizenship in public policy can limit civic imaginaries for young people in the UK. Since being introduced as a mandatory school subject in 2002, CE has floated between theoretical perspectives – leading to practical implementations – depending on the party in power, from ‘global’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ (Osler & Starkey, 2005) under Labour, to the Conservatives’ ‘fundamental British’ values (Department for Education, 2014). From 2002-2010 under the Labour government, CE was supported by NGO-led citizenship, human rights and global education projects and initiatives with a cosmopolitan flavour (Mejias, 2017). In 2010 the incoming coalition government effectively enacted a conformist and top down conception of citizenship for young people based on establishing a national distinction between the UK’s civic values and those of other countries. Youth-specific policies such as these, couched in language such as ‘fundamental British values’, parochialise curricula and reframe citizenship and civic action as bounded primarily by nations. Our recent study of young people in 40 focus groups across the UK (Mejias & Banaji, 2017) found that an on-going lack of sustained, informed discussion about the European Union in media, and within schools and colleges, partially deprived even older adults of the resources to argue in favour of remaining in or leaving the EU (Ibid). Although many young people are ‘standby’ citizens ready to act about specific issues (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), policies, open-ended educational opportunities and balanced media representations seem requisites to connect increased interest with substantive civic action. The next section briefly details our methodological approach.

**Methods & Data**

Our study used qualitative approaches to triangulate themes on the representation of young people and their citizenship across three distinct areas:

* Mainstream news media
* Policy documents
* Youth policy and work experts

Media data and policy document data were both collected and analysed simultaneously, before moving on to semi-structured expert interviews. This allowed for an iterative process wherein themes emerging from the discourse analysis of media and policy data informed the development of interview questions, and insights from interviewees allowed us to frame our conclusions coming out of policy analysis.

Our dataset specifically included:

Representations of Young People

* Content analysis of 2 national and 1 local newspaper across four 2-week periods

Policies for Young People

* Thematic analysis of 10 government policy documents on young people

Views of Youth and Adults Working in the Youth Sector

* Semi-structured interviews of 14 youth policy and practitioner experts

Gathering multiple forms of qualitative data about policies and media allowed us to identify recurring and salient themes and to contrast written or visual representations with informed opinions on the nuance and diversity of young people’s experiences of civic and political life.

*Sample 1: Media Data*

Our data relating to UK mainstream media consisted of content searches of three newspapers – *The Daily Mail, The Guardian* and *The London Evening Standard* – over four 2-week periods (7-21 May 2014 and 2015, and 16-30 September 2014 and 2015). *The Daily Mail* (DM), a ‘tabloid’ newspaper, was selected primarily because it has the second largest circulation, and because its generally conservative reports, sensationalist headlines, and editorials reflect other UK news outlets with high circulation levels (such as *The Sun* and *The Express*). *The Guardian*, a ‘broadsheet,’ was selected because of its national profile and reputation for progressive-left mainstream reporting, to provide a balance of political perspectives to the sample. The *London Evening Standard* (ES) *–* with a considerably smaller circulation than *DM* and *Guardian*, but accessible across the UK online – was selected because of the newspaper’s local, free daily distribution on London’s public transportation system, which is heavily used by school and college age youth. This selection attends to potential access issues identified by Banaji & Cammaerts (2015, p. 127) as inflecting the news material consumed by different social groups of youth.

We ran keyword searches using ProQuest (*Guardian*) and online archives (DM, ES) for the following terms: Europe/EU; Young/young people; youth; teen/teenager; citizen; activism; and election/politics. These search terms corresponded to our CATCH-EyoU consortium’s research design replicated across 8 countries. As this focused on how Europe, citizenship and young people were individually and collectively represented, many results – such as those about EU issues or national politics – did not include discussion of young people. We are also mindful that our search parameters could have included additional keywords such as children, students, pupils, or activists, and acknowledge that our dataset operates within these practical limitations. After removing duplicates and articles that were not explicitly about British or European politics (e.g. articles about sport in Europe, or about politics in non-EU countries), and performing a random selection of 20 results from the *DM’s* overuse of the words ‘teen’ and ‘teenager’ (184 articles) that would have imbalanced the dataset, our final corpus comprised 631 articles (256 DM, 283 G, 92 ES) with one or more keywords in the title. Over half were headlines about Europe or the EU (N=331). As many articles made no mention of youth, we focused analysis only on the sub-corpus of articles that explicitly discussed youth (N=161).

*Sample 2: Policy Document Data*

Our study identified and analysed the 10 most recent and relevant policy documents reflecting the range of youth-focused policy articulations in the UK (Table 1). These included:



*Sample 3: Policy Expert Data*

Semi-structured interviews with UK politicians, policy makers, and practitioners sought to elicit respondents’ perspectives on youth and citizenship in relation to their experiences in the field. While none of our interviewees claims to speak on behalf of others, their knowledge of the youth policy arena in the UK or of one particular aspect of it (e.g. media, education, civic participation, or criminal justice) is substantial. Specific questions asked included:

1. How would you define the parameters of what a young person is?
2. What is a young *citizen* to you? What attributes and characteristics might you assign to one?
3. What are the connections between how the policies you work with frame young people’s civic roles and the actual participation of young people whom you work with?

These questions allowed respondents to formulate their own representations of both youth and youth citizenship in connection to policy, in order to facilitate comparison with media and policy discourses.

Table 2 illustrates our sample:



Expert respondents were selected via snowball sample using youth stakeholder networks developed during the first year of our research study. Many politicians and policy-makers contacted declined participation, so we note a possible sample bias towards critical stakeholders who self-selected participation due to the perceived value of our study.

**Coding and Analysis**

In content and thematic analyses, using codes to generate initial themes for data categorisation and analysis is an accepted method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Saldaña, 1998; Wayne, Henderson, Murray, & Petley, 2008). Across the three datasets, following Banaji & Cammaerts (2015) our approach identified dominant themes that were then organised into sub-categories for later analysis. This allowed for the identification of common or diverging themes and categories across the data sets. For media datasets we identified the number of articles corresponding to a particular theme or themes, while for policy documents and expert interviewees (audio recorded and transcribed to text), we focused on the articulation or absence of themes. Finally, our analysis further categorised data to identify the consideration of theoretical or practical barriers to youth citizenship across the distinct datasets. Because of the large amount of overall data, the analysis reports broad themes identified across each dataset.

**Results**

**News media representations**

We found overwhelmingly negative characterisation of young people across a majority of 161 articles analysed. These representations were characterised by three distinct discourses. First, the notions that young people are perpetrators of crime; second that they are victims of crime; these two often appear in tandem. The third characterises young people as deficient and incapable in social, political or economic contexts.

*Young people as criminals (39 articles)*

The majority of coverage of young people in the DM and ES falls into this category. The DM’s coverage of teen crime was more extensive than all other types of reporting about youth combined across the three newspapers; interestingly, the Guardian rarely used the word ‘teen’ or ‘teenager’ in any article title. ES articles usually mentioned ages and number of youths involved (e.g. ‘Fifth youth arrested over murder during Roehampton burglary’[[6]](#footnote-6) and ‘Fourteen-year-old amongst Operation Handel arrests targeting West End drugs gang’[[7]](#footnote-7)). In this and in a similar DM article (‘Jail sentences are 'only way to stop knife crime', says top judge as he reveals weapons are carried by those as young as 12’[[8]](#footnote-8)), young people are discursively constructed as a criminal group who require firm intervention from UK legal systems and adults. Conversely, thefew *Guardian* articles characterising young people as criminals take a constructive, helpful tone (e.g. ‘The key to freeing young men from the grip of crime,’[[9]](#footnote-9) ‘Joint enterprise law criminalises young, black men’[[10]](#footnote-10) and ‘Keeping a lid of simmering youth anger.’[[11]](#footnote-11))

*Young people as victims (46 articles)*

Here young people are characterised as highly vulnerable, whether as victims of violence and/or criminality, or as disadvantaged, marginalised, neglected, mistreated, and needing protection. One DM article (‘Two men trafficked and raped eight teenage girls after grooming them online, taking them to hotels and plying them with alcohol before abusing them’[[12]](#footnote-12)) provides an example. Young women are depicted as vulnerable to sexual victimisation; susceptible to suggestion and easily persuaded (‘teenagers were groomed via social media sites’); prone to making poor choices; (‘six girls were taken to a hotel and given alcohol’); and frequently engaging in illegal and irresponsible behaviour (drinking alcohol). Similarly, the ES sensationalises teen victimisation through the lens of serious crimes (‘CCTV released of man sought by police after teenager is stabbed five times on tram in south London,’[[13]](#footnote-13) and ‘Islington stabbing: Teenager stabilises after violent knife attack left him at death's door’[[14]](#footnote-14)). *The* *Guardian* characterised youth as victims of either (on- or offline) abuse, or of deficient or negligent public policies (jobs and mental health).

*Young people as incapable (13 articles)*

Of particular interest for our paper, this discourse presents young people as deficient and lacking capabilities. Within this larger definition, they are also characterised as ignorant, lazy, irresponsible, vain, privileged, and/or unready for the future. One article (‘Universities ordered to ban campus hate preachers: Cameron demands clamp down to 'protect questionable young minds’[[15]](#footnote-15)) highlights the power of government to use legal methods to define threats that young people are not capable of negotiating with as much finesse as older adults. Cameron’s desire to ‘protect impressionable young minds’ from hate preachers on university campuses demonstrates a discourse of adult superiority and youth vulnerability. The article uses official figures (including the government’s ‘new Extremism Analysis Unit’) to provide the authoritative voice on radicalisation. In contrast, it paternalistically positions the National Union of Students, who opposes the regulations, as needing strong guidance (‘The Government has urged the National Union of Students to drop its opposition to the anti-radicalisation strategy’).

*The* *Guardian* also positions young people as susceptible to radicalisation (‘Schoolgirl jihadis’[[16]](#footnote-16)), incapable of managing responsibility (‘Surge in young people seeking help for exam stress’[[17]](#footnote-17)), and lazy (‘Why should teenagers be allowed to sleep in for as long as it suits them?’[[18]](#footnote-18)). Meanwhile the ES, with an eye on London’s rising costs of living and competitive job market, often frames young people as a charitable cause, recommending that adults should sort out their essential life problems for them (‘London’s young people need someone to stop skyrocketing rents’[[19]](#footnote-19) and 'London youngsters need “skills guarantee” scheme to help them find jobs'[[20]](#footnote-20)).

*Positive characterisations: ‘Good’ Citizens (22 articles across 4 themes)*

The rare positive characterisations of young people can be divided into 4 distinct representative frames: altruistic (3 articles); civically or politically engaged (8 articles); heroic or brave (4 articles); or capable and resilient (7 articles). These characterisations also contribute to an inflexible set of moral values associated with young people’s actions in the civic sphere.

Our analysis found no explicit references to young people’s active citizenship or civic participation as defined in our introduction and discussed in the theoretical literature. Only three articles across the 161 reported on young people’s engagement with political institutions. Two from *The Guardian* provide positive and reflexive reporting of youth active citizenship (‘Young people must be able to challenge – and change – the status quo’[[21]](#footnote-21) and ‘Scotland's young, feisty Yes generation has nowhere to go’[[22]](#footnote-22)), while the third from DM voices negativity. Citing a 2014 YouGov online survey of 1005 people aged 17-21, ‘Two million young people will not vote in 2015’[[23]](#footnote-23) presents young people as disengaged and ‘fed up… because they think politicians care more about pensioners and celebrities.’

**UK policies for and about young people**

In riposte to the almost entirely pessimistic and simplistic media coverage of youth and civic participation, the UK government’s most recent comprehensive youth policy document *Positive for Youth* (2011), was termed a ‘radical new approach to youth policy’ (p. 4) because it emphasises *positivity* as a conceptual framework. ‘Positivity’ supposedly acts as a counterpoint to assumed negative generalisations amongst the British public about young people. Ironically, the document rejects negativity while explicitly associating youth as a demographic with the 2011 UK-wide riots:

I reject negative stereotypes of teenagersand believe that 99% of our young people are already responsible and hard working and want to make the most of their lives and make the world a better place. This policy document is not a knee jerk reaction to the summer 2011 disturbances but a sustainable long-term strategy from a Government that is unashamedly positive about our young people. (UK Government 2011, Ministerial foreword, NP)

 ‘Negative stereotypes’ ‘knee jerk’ and ‘unashamedly’ make clear the writer’s wish to frame positive conceptions of youth as innovative and altruistic. Further embedded discursive assumptions about young people are evident in this passage:

There are 4.5 million teenagers in England today. Despite some widely held prejudices, most of them are doing well, and over 85% report high life satisfaction. Most young people aspire to succeed in their education and enter work, and to make a positive contribution to their communities. They have loving – if sometimes anxious – families or carers who encourage them and help them learn from the mistakes that are a natural part of growing up. They have more in common with previous generations than many believe. (UK Government 2011, p. 3)

The three phrases ‘widely held prejudices,’ ‘if sometimes anxious’ and ‘more in common…than many believe’ strongly imply that this positive news is *surprising* to its audiences, and that the government is setting out to educate other adults about what ‘real’ young people are like. Young people are constructed within two contradictory frames: law-abiding aspirational agents, and helpless victims.

In other documents examined, there is a contradiction between the emphasis on independence and youth voice, and the emphasis on using compulsory education or training schemes to control young people’s mobility and time. Although they are rhetorically framed as valued ‘consultants,’ they are also seen as needing to be moulded and/or controlled into being acceptable citizens: ‘We will: raise the participation age so that young people are required to remain in some form of education or training for longer’ (UK Government 2011, p. 4). This policy change reflects an inherently punitive and distrustful approach to young people and also disguises the government’s inability or unwillingness to provide satisfying employment or humane welfare for those who are not in education. The notion of youth rights is not mentioned. In contrast, the *human rights* of young people appear to be at the heart of the Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh approaches to youth policy; all mention the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The three devolved administrations also provide clearer guidance for government support of and provision for young people than the UK government.

Meanwhile, the UK’s *Prevent Guidance* (2015) asks schools and teachers to observe and report forms of political debate between young people that may encourage or lead to ‘radicalisation,’ providing a salient illustration of how young people and adults who work with them are being drawn further into conservative surveillance cultures. Entirely unreflexively, the document represents young people as passive objects of governmental efforts to protect them from terrorist ideology and ideological approaches from radicals. Schools are conceptualised as sites of government-sanctioned knowledge and information on terrorism, and as implicit battlegrounds for the careful inculcation of a specific set of government-approved beliefs on:

* ‘Fundamentally British values’ (p. 10)
* The ‘existing duties [of schools] to forbid political indoctrination’ (p. 11)
* The securing of ‘a balanced presentation of political issues’ (p. 11)
* the ‘need to identify and divert those involved in or vulnerable to radicalisation’ (p. 20)

The UK’s *Prevent Guidance*, with more practical consequences than *Positive for Youth* for organisations such as schools and colleges dealing directly with young people, characterises them as being always potentially problematic – via susceptibility to terrorist views/ideology – if government insufficiently protects them.

**Youth expert stakeholder interviews**

Youth policy and practitioner expert stakeholders interviewed began by describing young peoplein terms of *types and levels of civic opportunities and activities*. A 24-year-old local councillor, founder of a youth engagement organisation, personifies what another interviewee termed ‘the active citizenship pipeline’ for youth. This phrase implies a traditional institutional pathway for young people to become politically active via existing structures such as school, family, or community.

A number of different constructions were used by expert interviewees to identify and describe *disengaged or inactive young people* as a subset of all young people targeted by policy. Across the interviews we found a spectrum, from administrative or essentialist discourses about particular groups of young people who are inactive/hard to reach, to meta-critical discourses and ones about structural barriers to engagement that are faced by specific groups of young people.Young people were also spoken of in terms ofstructural barriersi.e. the *status and privilege (social capital)*, or lack thereof,needed to engage in many forms of youth participation. For some expert interviewees, a lack of social capital prevents some young people from having access to the kinds of opportunities/activities (volunteering with charities and political parties, reading the newspapers, representing local organisations, voting) that are deemed worthy of the label ‘active citizenship.’

In contrast to policy document narratives of victims, positivity, rights, and duties, several of the expert interviewees had a complex view of active young people as*heterogeneous, inclusive and dissident.* To them active young citizens are not just those who participate by voting or volunteering) and they don’t just create problems by becoming homeless, addicts or criminals. Echoing Cammaerts et al. (2016) and Buckingham and Banaji (2013), two expert interviewees emphasised that young people’s political and civic activism and engagement often goes unrecognised, is misconstrued as apathy and uncivicness, or stigmatised as individualism, whining and political immaturity.

Most of our expert interviewees discussed the ways that national youth policy is shaped, sometimes overtly and often directly, by the ‘problems’ that adult authorities or particular wings of the state, national media and bureaucracy, (such as the police, the education department, the BBC) have with young people or perceive young people as having. This list of ‘problems’ is instructive and political: 1) single mothers (both being and having been brought up by single mothers); 2) joining gangs or paramilitaries; 3) knife crime; 4) truancy; 5) ‘bad’ teaching and failing schools; 6) online (Islamic) radicalisation; 7) obesity; 8) addiction; 9) lack of ambition; and 10) lack of trust in authorities such as the police. Although our expert interviewees themselves mentioned some of these as issues, their primary concern was with a quite different list of problems, which they know young people in the UK encounter on a regular basis, summarised in Table 3 below.





Overall, young people were conceptualised by our expert interviewees as:

1. Citizens or citizens-in-waiting who have rights and use services;
2. A specific group of citizens with complex needs and relationships to adult policy;
3. Constructed by adult/governmental discourses; and
4. Potentially and actually active participants or ‘partners’ in policy processes and politics.

The roles attached to these constructions range from ‘citizen’, ‘partner’ and ‘service user’ to ‘advocate’, ‘commissioner (of services)’ and ‘activist’. All of our expert interviewees pointed out that recent policy documents name young people as ‘partners’ in various ways. They mentioned that this is usually a ‘discursive fiction’ occasionally taken seriously by local youth practitioners and policy-makers. Expert interviewees were not so much cynical about these phrases and rhetorics as fierce about wanting to make the ‘equity’, ‘quality education’, ‘partnership’ and ‘citizenship’ promised or hinted at by policy documents work in practice, and in *all* young people’s interests.

Finally, there was both enthusiasm and caution amongst our expert interviewees about the ways in which digital spaces and tools might contribute to consultation and inclusion of young people. One NGO respondent’s entire youth news service is provided online. However, another expert working in the Scottish government felt that not all young people are ‘digital natives’:

The idea that everyone’s on Facebook, no it’s not. Everyone’s on Instagram, Snapchat, mobile phones – all these things come with problems…in some areas you can’t even get a mobile phone signal.

Everyone interviewed was careful to insist that face-to-face and offline consultation, at times and in venues that suited young people, were an absolute priority. The assumption that where there is no time or money for face-to-face meetings, young people will be ready and waiting to be consulted online is belied by evidence. As one interviewee, a coordinator with a national youth citizenship organisation, shared:

One of the biggest things that came out of [a national consultation of 1 million young people] is that young people don’t value online participation, they don’t see it as meaningful, or as something they really engage with, what they want is somebody to come out and listen to them and to feel like it’s going to be taken into consideration and see the change.

Moving youth service consultations and policy documents for youth into digital arenas, in this sense, is an added barrier to youth inclusion and participation.

**Discussion**

*Media representations: reinforcing conceptual barriers to equity and inclusion*

Our analysis of UK media in 2014 and 2015 demonstrates that young people are stigmatised by the national mainstream media, and in particular by the tabloid press. Further, young people are only recognised as being ‘active’ when they conform to very specific conformist civic traits; only in *The Guardian* is there evidence of a critical perspective on youth activism. The concept of civic engagement is largely absent from media discourses about youth. Across the three newspapers, there was a remarkable consistency in treatment of young people as a transparent category, and as problematic; they were seen as troubled or troublesome, easily influenced, apolitical, playful, and irresponsible. When they were framed optimistically, it was because of perceived moral virtue, and these characterisations were associated with adult civic identity. There were interesting differences between the editorial perspectives underpinning certain discourses: while DM and ES most often employed a blame-the-victim approach in reporting on youth problems, *The Guardian* framed such problems as functions of broken or unstable institutions.

*Policy documents: theoretical and practical barriers to inclusion and participation*

The UK policy documents analysed conceptualise young people rhetorically as agentic, but also vulnerable to victimisation or supposed radicalisation. They are not yet full citizens but are in need of ‘choice’, ‘tools’ and ‘opportunities’, ‘guidance’, surveillance, and ‘initiatives’ from governments, schools, families and media. All this apparently is to prevent them from ‘falling out of’ education, employment or training – and in the current securitised political climate, to prevent them becoming indoctrinated by terrorist ideologies and actions. The policy documents were replete with discursive justifications for punitive regulation and legislation about – but actually against – those under the age of 18. While the rhetoric of ‘voice’ and ‘consumer choice’ heavily inflect policy discourses and even make their way into how policies and programmes for young people are enacted, they are undercut by a mistrustful and paternalistic government rhetoric that becomes embodied practice. We recall Buckingham’s argument that young people ‘are ceaselessly urged to be ‘mature’ and constantly reminded that they are not’ (Buckingham, 2000, p. 202).

*Youth experts: Navigating conceptual and practical barriers, expanding conceptual possibilities for inclusion and participation*

Our expert interviewees expressed strong similarities in their complex and constructive conceptualisations of youth citizenship, and in their critiques of national (UK government) policies, with very little difference in views about what defined either successful or problematic youth policies and/or civic practices. In contrast to journalists and commentators, most were in agreement that there is a range of young people from extremely deprived areas, with multiple needs, or surviving against the odds, and who are in contact with public services, to those from privileged backgrounds and families, who have little contact with or requirement for state youth provision because their needs are met by ‘private’ providers. Most strikingly, our interviewees wanted to dispel the (false) consensus that appears to misshape most media, policy and academic discussion of young people: that young people’s political issues and sensibilities are entirely separate and different from those of older adults. Just like adults, young people are affected by national and international politics (and by media representations of such politics), by whether their families have fled from war or simply moved across European borders to find work in the UK, by the UK’s decision to leave the EU, and by an austerity agenda that raises fees, cuts housing, health provision, grants and benefits for the young.

Overall, our study finds that young people are defined in contradictory ways, yet nonetheless frequently grouped monolithically in public policy and media discourse. For politicians, young people are the vital future of the nation, and the pioneers of the 21st century. Yet in actual political decisions, and in policy and media language, they are conversely framed as non-productive, needing intense protection and support, with social problems requiring legal, moral and policy solutions. The nuance and context of young people’s lived experiences and their civic engagement is absent from the treatment of youth as citizens. The breadth of their concerns and interests in society are segmented from the rest of the citizenry as ‘youth-specific,’ when in reality the majority of youth concerns are linked to class, race, religion, sexuality and gender, and as such, similar to adult concerns.

Media and policy documents largely define perceptions of young people in the public sphere, forming a highly portable consensus about their homogeneity, developmental immaturity and vulnerability to manipulation or crime. This consensus constrains their possibilities not only for existence, but also for what is considered ‘acceptable’ civic participation. In an interlinked UK public sphere – from the schools where young people learn, to the media environments (both news and entertainment) that they are constantly exposed to (increasingly through social networks); to the everyday social, economic, cultural and geographical contexts that shape youth realities – young people are repeatedly reduced to simple binaries of citizen or victim, criminal or contributor, and materialistic or socially conscious. The diverse and complex voices, views and lived experiences of young people mediated through adults who work with them regularly are included in mediated constructions of young people only in limited and curtailed ways, usually to serve prevailing interests.

**Conclusion**

The tendency in media and communications is for media messages and discourses to be deconstructed rigorously, but in isolation from policy and practitioner discourses. This would suggest that these discourses circulate in discrete and hermetic ways. Our approach in triangulating discursive, policy and practice research to elucidate connections and interrelations across domains offers a new way of understanding how particular interest groups are *framed* and *constrained* in their civic possibilities. Our original thematic analyses of media messages and policy documents about and for young people, and analysis of expert interviews with young activists and youth policy-makers, reveal three distinct insights: (1) most adults who work in the fields of youth activism and policy have more accurate, useful and critical understandings of young people’s needs, contexts and diversity as citizens than that expressed in media or policy narratives; (2) the nuanced perspectives of young people and of these adults is lost or unheard, to the detriment of young people and of the political sphere; and (3) a diverse repertoire of productive forms of youth active citizenship – critical, playful and dissenting – are discouraged, excluded, delegitimised or criminalised in public policy and mainstream media in the UK. Additionally, the absence of varied, context-contingent lived experiences of young people from national discourses about youth has led to citizenship outcomes where young people are simultaneously critical but invisible. Thus, media representations and some policies for youth foster an arbitrarily binary understanding of politics and policy as being either youth-centred or adult-focused, and further widen the chasm between ‘accepted’ notions of youth active citizenship and how young people actually enact citizenship. Young people are essentially ‘backed into a corner’ by the inflexibility of such ideological scholarly, policy and media discourses regarding their civic possibilities. Efforts to understand or expand democratic youth citizenship practices and outcomes must surely challenge the role of the mainstream media and of national policies in facilitating the widening gaps between young people and political institutions.

A task for future researchers is to better understand how successful youth citizenship movements that are critical or outside of normative representations and processes manage to mobilise young people despite the discursive ‘corner’ into which they are backed. Another is to debunk myths about the comparatively ‘high’ levels of participation of older adults, who certainly vote, but may not read media propaganda critically, nor bring any creative democratic actions to the political table. The kind of critical triangulation that we argue for challenges researchers to adopt holistic approaches to the empirical study of youth citizenship, and to be reflexive about the potentially contradictory ideological and normative assumptions embedded in prior scholarship about young people. Future scholarly focus on young people’s vaguely defined – and institutionally normative – ‘participation’ or ‘engagement’ must not rely on unreflexive studies of self-reported political identities or actions, but must instead attend to critical analyses of the discursive socio-political context and relationships of power shaping the civic environment and opportunities of young people and other groups who face discrimination.

In the current political environment – in which the role of media in enabling and constraining politically extreme or radical viewpoints has become both significant and volatile – research on youth participation must expand into unseen and emerging spaces, both to uncover the breadth and depth of creative youth citizenship, and to address the unequal gaps in civic provision and discourse that continue to reproduce repressive generational participatory structures.

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