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# **The challenge of engaging youth online: Contrasting producers' and teenagers' interpretations of websites**

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## **Keywords**

Youth, political participation, internet, civic engagement, encoding/decoding

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## **Abstract**

Media research has long known that those who produce content and those who receive it construe textual meaning differently. Such differences may be interpreted in political, cultural, institutional and psychological terms. However, the insights from audience reception and ethnographic studies have yet fully to inform research on responses to online content. This article addresses attempts to overcome youth civic disengagement through the design and promotion of public sector, internet-based contents and services. Specifically, it integrates interviews with website producers and teenage users to compare and contrast the encoding and decoding processes in an exemplar website ([www.epal.tv](http://www.epal.tv)). An analysis in terms of genre reveals a range of communicative challenges for website producers in terms of subject matter, formal composition and mode of address. Further, critical questions arise in relation to the action consequences of online participation, interface design as this relates to teens' internet literacy, and the power relations instantiated between producer and user. It is concluded that audience studies can constructively be extended to the analysis of internet use and, substantively, that the policy challenge lies less in the question of whether youth is civically engaged and more in the question of who will listen to youth if and when they do become so engaged.

## The challenge of engaging youth online: Contrasting producers' and teenagers' interpretations of websites

### The 'problem' of youth participation

Fifteen year old Faseeha is dismissive about politics: "I don't want to know...I don't really like politics ...it's too hard". Ben (17) is equally negative: "Why care about something going on miles away when you've got something going on in a hundred metres?" (Livingstone, in press). Young people's apparent disaffection with politics has become a focus of widespread attention in academic, policy and public debate. Understanding and explaining this lack of interest is less easy. Is young people's political participation low because they lack political knowledge, motivation or efficacy (Olsson, 2005)? Or is it because we have defined 'citizenship' (Lister, Smith, Middleton, & Cox, 2003), or 'politics' too narrowly (Bennett, 1998)? Or, because of a decline in the institutional structures within which young people were traditionally socialised into adult responsibilities (Kimberlee, 2002)?

Within these continuing debates, some are asking whether the internet can make a difference (Bentivegna, 2002; Coleman, 2005). Possibly, the very architecture of the internet – its flexible, hypertextual, networked structure, its dialogic, interactive mode of address, its alternative, even anarchic feel – particularly appeals to young people, fitting their informal, peer-oriented, anti-authority approach, making this an environment in which they feel expert and empowered. Thus, it contrasts with the traditional, linear, hierarchical, logical, rule-governed conventions often used in official communications with youth. Among youth organisations, public sector policy makers and commercial content providers, this optimism is spawning 'an abundance of civic and political activity by and for youth', including many websites which 'invite young people to participate in a wide range of issues' (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles & Larson, 2004: 2). Yet official opportunities may not result in youth participation, and it seems that young people are not only cynical about politics but they are also cynical about politics online. One 17 year old (quoted in Livingstone, in press) said, "At the end of the day, you're going to look at what you're interested in. And if you haven't got an interest in politics, you're not going to get one from having the internet".

Young people certainly use the internet for participation, broadly defined, including information seeking, online newspapers, peer communication, emailing/voting/interacting with websites, content creation and visiting civic or political websites (Pew, 2005). However, there is a gap between the opportunities to participate online and the degree to which young people take up these opportunities. In the 'UK Children Go Online' project, although half of 12-19 year olds (54%) had visited a civic website, 64% of them just checked out the information and did not interact with the site (e.g. by sending an email, contributing content, completing a quiz). Path analysis suggested that interactive and creative uses of the internet are encouraged by the very experience of using the internet (facilitating the gaining of interest, skills, confidence, etc.) but that visiting specifically civic or political websites is less stimulated by the mere encounter with the online environment than by demographic factors, with older, middle class girls being most likely to visit these sites (Livingstone et al., 2005a).

### Encoding/decoding online

This gap between opportunities to participate online and young people's everyday responses is not only important for political science but is also a matter of communication. The political roles of government and citizen are also communicative roles of producer and receiver. Young citizens are also media audiences or users, with their specific forms of media literacy, expectations and interests. This article

draws on the encoding/ decoding model, developed originally to understand the 'interpretative gap' between the mass production and audience reception during mass communication (Hall, 1980), to ask whether this can be extended to the study of new media, as they become increasingly diverse, networked and ubiquitous (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006).

As a communicative medium, the internet comprises a specific range of technological forms and content, modes of address and expressive conventions. The communicative roles of speaker and hearer, authority and laity are not as clearly delineated as for one-to-many communication. Yet a gap remains between the social milieu of those who produce civic websites and the everyday social contexts and competences of their young users. Since textual meaning is always polysemic, leaving gaps or spaces for reader interpretation, websites are open to multiple interpretations not necessarily anticipated by their producers. Texts may instantiate strategies of closure to control the 'role of the reader' (Eco, 1979), but whether these are successful is an empirical question. Since audiences for mass communication can be active and heterogeneous, even resistant, in their constructive and sometimes surprising readings of television texts; the same will surely apply to people's readings of interactive online texts (Livingstone, 2004).

## Methods

As part of the 'UK Children Go Online' (UKCGO) project, which investigated 9-19 year olds' access and use of the internet (Livingstone & Bober, 2005), an exploratory phase of the research included five in-depth semi-structured interviews (1-2 hours each) with those responsible for youth websites, conducted at the respondent's place of work.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, nine paired depth interviews were conducted in secondary schools with 12 girls and 5 boys aged 14-15 (see Table 1); these lasted approximately one hour and took place in front of a computer connected to the internet. Using a detailed open-ended interview schedule, the teens were shown between several youth-oriented public sector websites selected from a varied list, and asked to navigate, select and discuss the content together, with prompting where needed from the interviewer.<sup>2</sup> All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Since the intention is to explore the potential for an encoding/decoding analysis, this article focuses on one website to triangulate responses of its producers and teenaged users. *Epal* (<http://www.epal.tv/>) is a Government sponsored pilot website for the Greater Manchester area, funded by a scheme labelled 'venture capital for the public sector' as part of the UK-wide *Connexions* project.<sup>3</sup> Unremarkable in itself, this site was selected as typical of many low budget, public sector sites developed to appeal to young people, thus exemplifying one among several forms of online participation targeted at teens (Montgomery, et al, 2004). It is hoped that the analytic method developed in this article can then be extended to other types of participatory website.

Table 1 about here

## The interpretative contract

Reception theorists argue that texts inscribe an implied author and reader, these not necessarily mapping onto real people but being textual constructions that instantiate assumptions about who created and who might read the text (Eco, 1979; Iser, 1980). Similarly, drawing on Goffman's (1981) unpacking of the 'speaker' and 'hearer' into the complex participation framework that maps communicative and social roles for all participants, Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 54) described this as specifying:

'the perceived rights of the variously arranged participants to affect the course of the communication, their responsibilities to act in certain ways and according to certain evaluative and epistemological criteria, the overall gratifications which are to be achieved, and the nature of the social process of which this event is one part.'

This communicative contract of textually-inscribed rights and responsibilities is far from neutral. How might these communicative roles be embedded in the design of, and response to, civic websites? Jensen (2005, p.98) follows Williams (1977) in identifying three characteristics of genre online:

1. *Characteristic subject matter*: the most variable level of analysis, dependent on cultural/historical contexts, with the identification of scope or topic drawing on distinctions such as public/private, narrow/broad or local/global.
2. *Formal composition*: for Williams, this points to 'certain kinds of technical solution to persistent problems of composition' (p.184). Websites vary, for example, in being narrative or didactic, open or members-only, linear or nonlinear.
3. *Mode of address*, which Williams called 'stance', meaning the 'basic (social) organization which determines a particular kind of presentation' (p.183). Websites vary, here, in terms of being monologic/dialogic, providing different kinds of interactivity (McMillan, 2006), etc.

The present analysis began by asking how the subject matter, formal composition and mode of address together shape the participation framework for online youth engagement (see also Ridell, 2005). Put simply, these characteristics of genre translate into three critical questions: what is being communicated, how is it being communicated, and who is communicating to whom?

#### *Subject matter*

Following 'very serious market research', *Epal's* producers conceived the aim, they told us enthusiastically in the language of the UK's New Labour Government (DeMarchi, 2003; Needham, 2003), of 'joining up' services for youth by facilitating a 'partnership' among 'stakeholders' (service providers, civic bodies, youth organisations, employers, etc), each of whom could 'pour content into it'. For young people, however, the aim of 'joining up' services was puzzling. 'Joined up' content confuses familiar distinctions between leisure/school, home/work, political/social, fun/useful, etc, leading the teens to ask, what kind of site was this? For example, Tabia didn't see the point of a youth-specialist site, saying that if she wanted advice, "I'd just go Google and just type in 'advice on drugs'".

A second implicit question for the teens was, 'is this meant for me?' While 'youth' is an official category for public sector provision, it is not how young people select media. The teens regarded the site's target audience (13-19 years old) as too broad, being sensitive to whether the illustrations and information implied users young than them (seen as patronising) or older (seen as 'adult' and therefore 'boring'). As Mia says of *young.gov* – it's "a bit boring" and Natasha adds, "it looks quite grown-up". The interviewer points out, "it says it's written by young people," but Mia is not persuaded – they must be "older young people". Kanita (talking about *Epal*) observes that a site made by teens for teens would be more interesting, compared with what "the adults think the teenagers are gonna want to look at".

Ironically, although in principle, the internet affords niche content dissemination, the justification required for public sector resources demands measurable success in terms of 'mass' indicators. As the producers put it, the site must be 'a universal service', meeting Government targets for 'inclusion'. *Epal's* producers even speculate on whether they can reach users older than 19 or the parents of 13-19 year olds. They want to "think of the user as a person", providing information that "could apply to virtually anybody on the planet", while being "extremely relevant" to young people. Matching the generic implied user with particular empirical users is, however, a difficult circle to square.

#### *Formal composition*

The 'look and feel' of the home page ('Welcome to *Epal*') resembles a youth magazine, with its brightly coloured mix of text, image and interactive opportunities, a youthful cartoon-style avatar ('Asha') to help the user navigate the site, and three primary routes into the site (see Figure 1). These are labelled 'Create' ('Be a creative

champion' - for user content creation, including contributions from 'young journalists'), 'Issues' (for 'all the important information you may need', these ranging from global warming and volunteering to young people's rights at work), and 'Interact' (where teens are invited to 'check out our lively forum' and 'have your say on the site!').

Figure 1 about here

The producers described the site as "funky" and "cool". Their decisions regarding the 'branding' of the site, along with 'franchising', 'product development' and 'targeting', were again discussed using the private sector discourse endemic in public services (Needham, 2003). But they lacked the resources of the private sector. For example, originally they hoped for "a Lara Croft style game... with lots of useful information around the edges...because young people like playing computer games". Having discovered a sophisticated computer game would "cost millions", they had to rethink, and 'Asha', the 'E-pal', was born. Still, the team remained excited, hoping to "use new technology to innovate to deliver public services to young people differently", because 'technology adds value'.

Initially, the teens were appreciative, though they did not perceive the site as either 'funky' or 'cool' – Ethan called it "cheesy" and "dull". Mia and Natasha wanted "more girly" colours and more "wiggly lines". Moreover, behind the home page, not untypical of public sector sites, the expensive design features fall away (see Figure 2), just one click taking the user to a simple list format, coloured a dull plum. This accesses a striking array of information (where else would teens go to discover their rights at work?) in a far from striking manner. For example, the issue labelled 'Lesbian gay and bisexual' contains some 150 words of friendly text, plus a linked essay on 'A modern history of lesbian and gay rights', a box containing the address and remit of a local gay support group for youth, and five links to further organisations. Though such information is not readily available to young people, the formal composition undermines its appeal.

Figure 2 about here

Indeed, there no personal stories or photos, no games or interactivity, not even any advertisements, 'just facts', 'just information'. As Tabia said, "this hasn't got a picture, just chunks and chunks and chunks of writing". Just as the teens asked, 'is this site for me?' in terms of age, they also asked it in terms of social class, for 'lots of writing' is perceived as 'middle-class'; thus the site seems 'adult' because it is too old and too highbrow. For some, the emphasis on facts seemed – unexpectedly, from the producers' perspective, to be biased. For Luke and Mumtaz, issues should be presented as deliberative debates: Luke explained, "say they was fighting about the war, you'd need to know that from both sides". Mumtaz agreed: "it's like a form of propaganda, they're just trying to always like harass us with like good points but they just don't like wanna-", "they don't show you the bad ones", finished Luke.

#### *Mode of address*

Who is talking to whom? The implied author is instantiated in the figure of the e-pal herself – Asha.<sup>4</sup> But the speaker behind Asha is unclear, a feature typical of mass media but not usually of interactive communication. The producers explained that *Epal* is 'not branded as a *Connexions* product' because they wanted to avoid something that 'looks like another government site' - they wanted it to be 'something that young people would look at anyway'. They were rightly concerned: as Chloe said of commercial brands, "young people trust these companies more", and she did not think that "young people understand the government". She added, "You don't really talk to your friends about the government but you talk about the latest brand or whatever". Hence, the url selected was '*epal.tv*' rather than '*epal.gov*' because the market research showed that young people prefer media-based sites, '*dot.org*' and '*dot.uk*' feel 'official' and '*epal.com*' was taken. In justification, the producers described the site as potentially 'an entertainment hub' accessible through PC,

mobile and digital TV. Yet the site hardly presents itself as for entertainment, and nor would this have justified the project's funding.

Even when the authors are young people themselves, their status is unclear. The 'Create' section contains a miscellany of short essays written by teens having 'their say' on subjects such as 'football in crisis', 'reactions to the news', 'my fear of fireworks' and 'societal rant'. But the user wants to know, who are these people, where does this text come from, how was it selected or edited? These questions are not answered by the site. Moreover, the site contains no 'about us' link, despite the 'we' who addresses the user.

The relation between speaker and hearer is further confused by the claim to a dialogic mode of address which is, in practice, largely monologic. The producers enthusiastically explained their ambition to provide an experimental, flexible resource with which to consult and engage young people. *Epal*, they claimed, is not just about information but also "about participation in the broadest sense", because services for young people "need to engage with young people in a participatory way". They criticised sites made to meet institutional targets, seeing *Epal* as having "a front end that is very participatory" and "youth-oriented", providing young people with "opportunities to put their own content [onto] their site". Yet the participation they anticipated – participation in what, exactly? – was hard to explicate. Is *Epal* primarily intended to deliver government services to youth or to inform government about youth, to increase knowledge or to facilitate civic action?

Tellingly, the producers said, "we're putting lots of bits of fun" in the "hope that young people will throw lots of stuff at it" so that they can "check they are hitting the mark". The haphazard nature of the anticipated exchange with young people contrasts with the considerable planning that has gone into other aspects of the project (funding, for example) and is reminiscent of Eco's (1979) closed text, where the more the author seeks to address the 'lowest common denominator', the more the result is aberrant readings, with the reader 'throwing' at the interpretive process whatever 'stuff' comes to mind. In well-meaning statements such as, young people 'need to know about a lot more these days to make the right choices', a preferred reading emerged, namely that authorities 'need' young people to know certain things, in order to make what adults consider 'the right choices'. The producers expressed little uncertainty over these needs or choices and the possibility of alternative views was little acknowledged. Thus, a model emerges of one-to-many information dissemination, contrary to the overt claim that this is a dialogic site 'owned' by and for young people.

### Locating online participation in everyday contexts

The above analysis does not exhaust the range of comments offered by the producers and young people. An audience-centred approach listens to what respondents have to say, and further analysis revealed three additional themes in the interviews. Theoretically, these take us beyond the relationship between text and reader (encoding/decoding) to acknowledge that between empirical reader and the social contexts of everyday life (Press & Livingstone, 2006).

1. *Action*: in engaging with texts, as with any social activity, the actor may ask, what will follow from my actions? This is a key question especially for texts that attempt to encourage public participation.
2. *Literacy*: with media (or internet) literacy linked to social capital, political literacy and critical literacy, the issue is what extra-textual knowledge resources users draw on in interpreting websites.
3. *Power*: the critic asks, in whose interest is a particular discourse or activity? Under conditions of reflexive modernity, a similar critique of the interests at stake also characterises the public's response.

Translating these themes into questions, one can ask – what follows from participating in this website, what (else) do young people know about participation,



and in whose interest is such participation? As before, the responses of producers and users are integrated although here the producers have less to say than the users.

#### *Action*

"I think it's a good idea for everyone to, um, have a say on what's being done", said Georgia. Young people are keen to have their views heard, yet they consider that they are rarely listened to. As Luke said, "they should put more effort into reading it [young people's views] so they can do what we ask". He added, "well, we might think they should listen to us but from their point of view, we can't vote so there's no point in listening to us... we can say one thing, but they don't have to do it". He judged the site not as informative but as seeking to persuade young people to believe politicians care about them – "it's probably so when we're able to vote that we'll be on their side".

The teens remained hopeful of participation, however. Extending the idea of the *Young Scot* site to a possible *Young Londoners'* website, Mumtaz said "they could... arrange us meet... people like, you know, the prime minister perhaps and ... MPs... so you can address arguments and they could listen to them." Critical but not cynical, these boys were clear about the issues they wish to express views on, listing things that affect them directly: education, what to do after leaving school, getting a job, unemployment, global warming and how it could affect London. Luke wanted to explain to politicians that the link between youth and crime is "because we ain't got nowhere to play football and we're messing around 'coz of this". But their focus was on the consequences of participation, not on talk for talk's sake. And perhaps because they feel little listened to, some doubt that their own views have value: "I don't think I'd go on 'coz I don't have um ideas about anything - it's just rubbish" (Chloe).

Mumtaz was particularly aware of recent cases in the news where people expressed their views without effect: "You know, like the war in Iraq, there are some people protesting, and same as for the fox hunting. Some people are protesting but the government just ignores them". He also recounted the 'Fathers for Justice' protest (in which a stuntman dressed as Superman climbed Buckingham Palace)<sup>5</sup> as illustrating how far the public must go to be listened to. He concluded, "you have to break the law to do something". Luke agreed: "yes, that's the only way, because it'll get, it's a free way to get people on the news". By comparison, sending comments to a website with little guarantee of return is hardly inviting.

Lest one suppose young people are simply cynical, it is noteworthy that some describe an alternative context where they feel efficacious - the school council. Chloe enthused about their recently-introduced school council "which I think is a really good idea 'coz it's our school mostly". Pupils' proposals, from decorating a Christmas tree to acquiring lockers for students had, it seems, produced results. Interestingly, their discussion included an account of how the council is constructed: they knew about the mechanism linking pupils to the forum, and they knew of the action (new lockers) consequent on discussions in the forum. Neither of these features was apparent to them on the *Epal* site.

#### *Literacy*

Beyond matters of presentation, the teens encountered problems of interpretation. As reception analysis stresses, a text can only be meaningful if it can be decoded with the interpretative resources available. Tabia read from the *young.gov* site, 'you could be a volunteer' and asked, "what does that mean?" For those who do not know, the site provides no answer. On the UK Youth Parliament site, Mumtaz was confused with the abbreviation UKYP, thinking it stood for UK Independence Party, which made him think the site is "biased". On the BBC Teens site, Mia and Natasha (and the interviewer) were confused by a section entitled 'Breaking up', which they expected to be about boyfriends but turned out to be advice about parental divorce. The teenagers struggled also to interpret dialogue boxes and

feedback messages, this pointing up both the limits on their internet literacy and the designers' failure to anticipate these limits (Isaacs & Walendowski, 2002).<sup>6</sup>

The interaction between literacy and design is vital. One consequence of masking the official nature of the site was that young people could not readily determine its authority, since identifying the producer (along with checking the date) is a recommended method of checking site reliability.<sup>7</sup> As Bailey said when told who made the site, "there isn't anything that says it's from *Connexions*... [it] looks if like some other people had made it". Joe and Bailey tried to find out who made the *Need2know* site but couldn't, though Bailey knew that "usually it would tell you". He concluded, "they've done it so that no one is to know about where they are ... they kind of keep it secret". These boys preferred the *BBC Teens* site, recognising the BBC, and the doctor giving advice, as trustworthy. Yet branding may not be sufficient: when Luke and Mumtaz were asked to work out who produced the *BBC Teens* site, Luke gave up: "no I don't see anything".

In addition to reliability, safety turned out to be important to both producers and users, made salient by media panics about online paedophiles and official internet safety programmes. One outcome is a generalised distrust of the internet, particularly among inexperienced internet users (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005b). As we saw, Luke and Mumtaz did not trust personal advice even on the *BBC Teens* site - "you don't really know who you're talking to...it could be a paedophile or someone" (Mumtaz). Yet to preserve the 'look and feel' of the site as 'fun' and 'funky', the producers kept safety in the background. When interviewed, they reported considerable care over issues such as user authentication and pre-moderation of user-generated content. To their young users, however, the absence of positive safety guarantees was worrying.

When *Mykindaplace* announces, 'we want your real life stories', and Mia added, "you can send a photo as well", Natasha responded not to the invitation but to its safety implications: "why would you send in a photo, that's just stupid .... I'd give out my name, I wouldn't give out my phone number or my address or anything like that". When prompted, the girls tried to register on the site, expressing scepticism at every step: asked to enter their mobile phone number and complete a registration form, they recounted stories of phone scams, sure that there'll be an unexpected payment: "it probably says somewhere really small right in there", says Natasha.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Zara routinely gives out a fake email address and name - "obviously I'm not putting my first name...I'm not that stupid". Yet not all are so literate, reinforcing the importance of safety considerations: Molly's description of engaging with one site suggests confusion over just what she became involved in and with whom: "I once found err... it was this little note thing, and you could like type things in and it'd send a message straight back to you...I wrote back to it, and they'd like write back to you and ask you things".<sup>9</sup>

#### *Power*

Are critical readings made of youth websites, or are teens merely disengaged? The producers did not anticipate resistance, building no openness or alternative readings 'against the grain' into the text itself (as occurs, for example, in successful games like *The Sims*). Few signs of critique were evident among the teens interviewed, and some were indeed simply uninterested. Reminiscent of Morley's (1980) disengaged youth, Kanita showed little interest in the sites and instead took us to a Chinese website she preferred. Exceptions included Mia's complaint about the school's filtering process - that although the school blocked fun, phones and sex, it had not blocked advertising, though "we don't really need to know about that".

Generally, such critical readings as occurred seemed associated with a literate approach to the internet or with a politicised family background: Ethan - both internet literate and politicised - complained that *Epal* is 'so stereotypical' for it assumes that all young people like David Beckham. By contrast, Mia and Natasha,

rather unsophisticated internet users, liked the *BBC Teens* site,<sup>10</sup> going straight to the pink half of the screen as intended by its producers. Asked, 'might you look at the blue bit?', Mia was clear: "nah, I'd go straight to the pink bit". Zhen Juan was more internet literate: she keeps an online diary on *LiveJournal*, has made a poetry website using *Frontpage* and another with music and film reviews. She echoes Ethan's comment in criticising *BBC Teens*: "it's just like the typical things that you find on a teenage website - yeah, teenagers are like this, therefore...it's just a very stereotypical thing of how teenagers are".

The contrast between Bailey and Ethan points up these consequences of differences in internet literacy. Bailey – the less internet literate boy - thought the *Epal* site was made by teens while Ethan thought it made by adults for a stereotypical teen. Similarly, Bailey was interested in a story posted about video games on the 'create section' while Ethan paid it little attention. Bailey was ready to reflect on the story, saying, "many kids have violent games but not all people go around killing their friends. I play games like this just for fun"; he and Joe discussed a recent news story about a boy who used to play violent video games and killed a friend, wondering whether "it could have been the game". Ethan described how he regularly uses online forums to post comments on politics and news: "I'm very argumentative." He explained that, being brought up in a fairly left-wing family, "I tend to take more of an interest in anti-Bush-type stuff". Experienced in more diverse, interactive forums, he was dismissive of this short posting with its two brief comments appended, but was excited about the youth protest against the Iraq war.

Reaching the 'average' young person is, clearly, difficult. Those who are informed about an issue find youth sites superficial; others may be briefly attracted but equally easily confused or distracted. For example, Joe - being interested in golf - read *Epal's* career advice about professional golfing but was unimpressed. Kanita, finding little about China on the site, visited a Chinese site instead. Mia was easily sidetracked by reading personal stories and didn't read the information that accompanies it. Illustrating Eco's warning that the closed text's appeal to the lowest common denominator can misfire, Samantha – who has made several websites herself - explicitly rejected the generic 'youth' category, preferring a site that "appeals to different people... you can't really get one that would please everyone". The producers did not see things this way for, as they explain, although they do not wish to address the 'Blue Peter kids' ("all coming from really nice families, who've got parents who encourage them to do it – this service, it's not just for them") nor the 'hard to reach', disadvantaged kids that social services already targets, they do aim to appeal to all those 'in the middle'. Yet they showed little recognition of how this group is differentiated.

## Conclusions

When public (and private sector) bodies seek to engage people through the internet, they must conceive and implement this engagement through the design and construction of an online text. And since engaging with symbolic texts rests on a range of analytic competencies, social practices and material circumstances, such websites can be understood as addressing users by anticipating certain kinds of knowledge, motivation and agency. By exploring the encoding and decoding of one website, this article has explored an analytic strategy for critiquing the 'promise' of participation online. While the findings for other sites will vary, the framework developed here is, I suggest, sufficiently abstract to apply across diverse sites (see Table 3).

Table 3 about here

The vertical dimension integrates the often-separate approaches to audience reception and audience consumption: the left column examines how the implied reader is inscribed into the virtual text, while the right column examines how the realised text depends on the contingent ways in which real readers are embedded in

diverse contexts of everyday life. Instead of asking, simply, about producer, text and audience, this framework focuses on the relations between them – particularly, on how the producer anticipates the audience or user, and how the user understands and responds to how they are addressed by the producer. The horizontal dimension explores the generic contract, or participation framework, enacted during the communicative interaction. Reading across the table, it becomes apparent that the subject matter and the expected action consequences of engaging with that subject matter contribute to the producers' and users' perception of the purpose of engaging with such websites. The formal composition of the text sets an interpretative task for the user, demanding a range of skills and competencies that contribute to the form of the resulting communication. The mode of address instantiates an anticipated relation between producer and recipient which maps a power relation between them, raising the question of whether recipients follow or resist the meanings offered – a question of communicative effect. Methodologically, I have translated the six cells in the present analysis into six guiding questions for analysis, while acknowledging that future research may refine or amend these further.

This approach points up some communicative challenges in the effort to reach young people, thus adding to our understanding of why the internet is not (yet) 'the answer' to young people's civic disengagement.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to the popular discourses that blame young people for their apathy, I have argued that the social and discursive structures of participation online do not sufficiently facilitate youth participation because the communicative relationship between producer and user is inadequate. Despite the best intentions of those producing youth civic websites, and despite the many invitations to 'have your say', it seems that far from young people not listening to adults, 'we' – adults, politicians, website designers, youth organisations – are not listening to young people (see Bessant, 2004). Young people do not believe that their emails, discussions or contributions to websites are being listened to. This suggests that, in terms of design, a more open, contextualised, youth-centred approach is required to the production and marketing of websites (e.g. Hansard Society, 2005; Macintosh, Robson, Smith, & Whyte, 2003). For, as Eco (1979) argued, because closed texts limit readers' interpretative flexibility, making assumptions about readers' interests and guiding them to the 'preferred reading' (Hall, 1980), the communicative process becomes more hazardous for the author/producer: actual readers may reject the implied reader and generate an alternative, critical or even comic reading; by contrast, the more the text offers a collaborative, open approach to the reader, the more effective is the communication.

Jensen (2005) calls for 'a politics of interactivity', arguing the need for an analytic toolkit by which the textual strategy of website providers can be appraised (see also Burbules, 1998; Kress, 2003). One might also call for a 'politics of literacy' to analyse how users, from their different vantage points and with their different knowledge resources, respond to the online invitation to participate. Indeed, users must be anticipated in all their diversity, this contingent on the (often unequal) contexts of young people's everyday lives; the generic category of 'youth' seems particularly problematic as the implied reader of participatory websites. For the purpose, surely, must be to provide what young people might want instead of, at worst, regarding the web as a means of as delivering young people to public service organisations (as also for television; Smythe, 1984). Otherwise, society will turn a potentially dialogic, diverse and interactive medium back into one that is monologic, homogenising, and haphazard in communicating effectively with youth - a fate already characteristic of mass media, especially television, and precisely the opposite of that anticipated for the internet.

**Table 1: Interviews with young people**

| <b>Schools</b>  |   | <b>Participant pairs interviewed</b> |                   |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Oxfordshire (children from mixed backgrounds, achieving results above national average) | 1 | Natasha, 15 (f)                      | Mia, 14 (f)       |
|   | 2 | Chloe, 15 (f)                        | Georgia, 14 (f)   |
|   | 3 | Samantha, 15 (f)                     | Zhen Juan, 14 (f) |
| London (mainly working class children, achieving results above national average)        | 4 | Tabia, 15 (f)                        | Faseeha, 15 (f)   |
|   | 5 | Sally, 14 (f)                        | Zara, 14 (f)      |
|   | 6 | Luke, 15 (m)                         | Mumtaz, 15 (m)    |
| Yorkshire (mainly working class children, achieving results below national average)     | 7 | Ethan, 14 (m)                        | Kanita, 15 (f)    |
|   | 8 | Molly, 14 (f)                        | (No show)         |
|   | 9 | Joe, 14 (m)                          | Bailey, 14 (m)    |

Note: all names have been changed to pseudonyms.

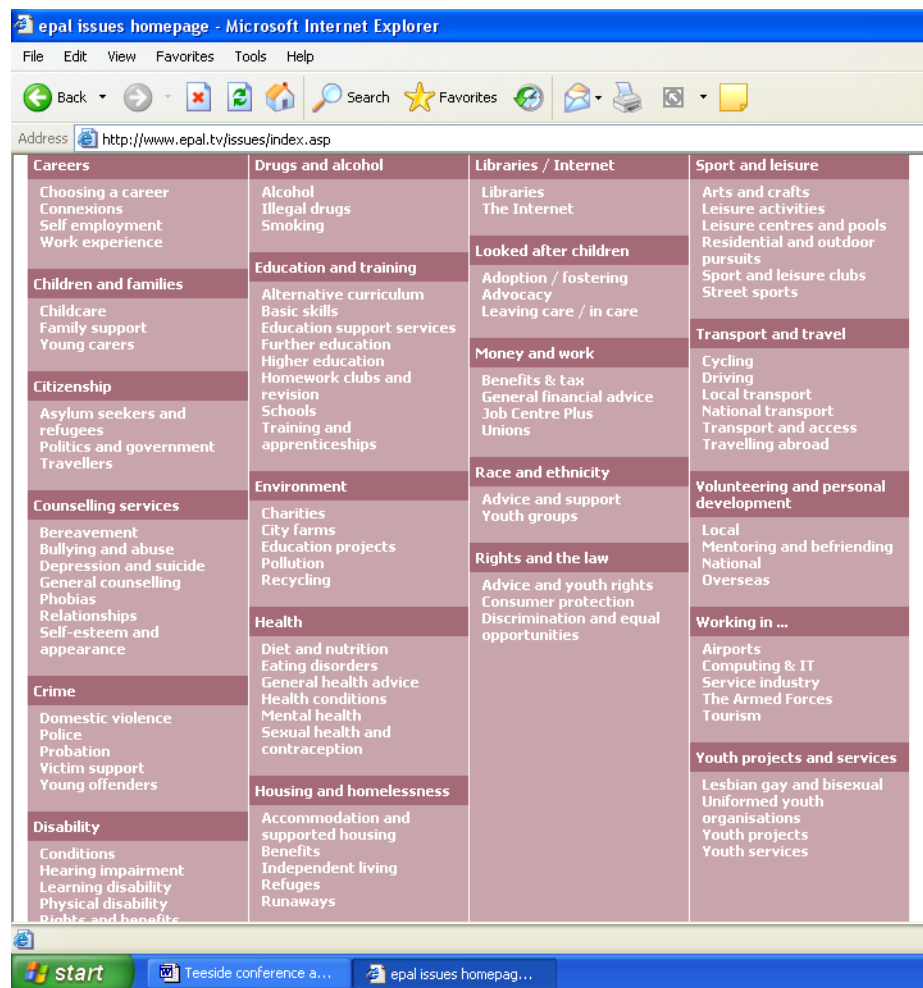
**Table 2: Framework for relating the analysis of website producers, text and users**

|                              | <b>Relating producer, text and reader</b>                  | <b>Relating text, reader and context</b>                                       |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Communicative purpose</b> | <i>Subject matter</i><br>What is being communicated?       | <i>Action consequences</i><br>What follows from participating in this website? |
| <b>Communicative form</b>    | <i>Formal composition</i><br>How is it being communicated? | <i>Media literacy</i><br>What (else) do young people know?                     |
| <b>Communicative effect</b>  | <i>Mode of address</i><br>Who is communicating to whom?    | <i>Power and resistance</i><br>In whose interest is such participation?        |

Figure 1: The Epal homepage



**Figure 2: The Epal issues page**





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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Those interviewed represented the following organisations (and websites): Department for Education and Skills ([www.need2know.co.uk](http://www.need2know.co.uk)), Epal - Greater Manchester Connexions (two producers interviewed together; [www.epal.tv](http://www.epal.tv)), Childnet Academy ([www.childnetacademy.org](http://www.childnetacademy.org)), BBC Children's Online ([www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc) & [/cbeebies](http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies)) and BBC Teens ([www.bbc.co.uk/teens](http://www.bbc.co.uk/teens)).

<sup>2</sup> Mainly UK-based sites identified on the basis of popularity, prominence and recommendation, they included civic/political sites and sites offering personal advice, as well as sites that combined different forms and contents to provide a broad service to children and young people. The sites included *Connexions' Epal*, *BBC Teens*, *Need2know*, *Young.gov*, *Dubit*, *UK Youth Parliament*, *Talk to Frank*, *Mykindaplace*, *TheSite.org*, *Children's Express*, and *Rock the Vote*.

<sup>3</sup> *Connexions* is an online portal, [www.connexions-direct.com](http://www.connexions-direct.com), as well as a High Street walk-in service providing a wide range of information and advice for 13-19 year olds.

<sup>4</sup> Confusingly for a British site, Asha speaks with an American accent – “because that’s the software we’re using”, and usefully, they suggest, this avoids regional accents, instead drawing on the excitement youth feel for American culture (the producers compare her to Buffy).

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<sup>5</sup> In the UK in 2003/4, prominent public protests were organised against the invasion of Iraq, both for and against fox-hunting, and by the Fathers for Justice group.

<sup>6</sup> For example, not only does Ethan decide that the website does not provide careers information (though it does), but when the interviewer encourages him to seek such information, he finds it hard to locate, selecting the 'create' rather than the 'issues' option to look for this. Later, I check this out, searching for careers using the 'search this site' facility; the result was the message, "You can't access this page because either your session has expired or you don't have a high enough user status to access this page."

<sup>7</sup> The *Epal* site reveals design decisions regarding reliability that users may not recognise. The fact that there are only links to public sector sites, for example, puzzles Tabia: "they should have a link to like - say you go to *Google* and you type in um advice on drugs, then they should have like a list of links to other websites that you could go to." The task of ensuring the reliability of all linked sites requires resources that Tabia has not considered, but the result is that public sector sites provide fewer links than either they or their users would wish.

<sup>8</sup> Should they read *Epal's* Terms and Conditions (though as Mia says, they have "too much writing"), the teens would not find them reassuring: "The business partners, strategic partners, purchasers of our business and suppliers may gather information for their own purposes and for that reason we cannot exercise control over the uses to which they apply your personal information. It is our belief that when we supply your details to them, they will keep your details secure and not pass them on to third parties and only use your details to market their own products to you".

<sup>9</sup> Teens' relative lack of literacy prompts filtering by schools, which brings its own problems. The interview with Mia and Natasha was impeded by the school's internet filter (preventing access, for example, to sections of the BBC Teens site): Mia complains, "it's so stupid, loads of things are restricted".

<sup>10</sup> This site is divided vertically into a pink half with advice for girls and a blue half with advice for boys.

<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, some young people do engage effectively with the civic/public sphere, including via the internet, but there is little evidence as yet that these young people are new to participation, or that the internet draws in those not already engaged (Livingstone et al, 2005a; Olsson, 2005).