Sonia Livingstone, Nick Couldry and Tim Markham

Youthful steps towards civic participation: does the Internet help?

Book section

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

Youthful steps towards civic participation:
Does the internet help?

Sonia Livingstone, Nick Couldry and Tim Markham

(Contact details for first author)
Department of Media and Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, UK
Tel. +44 (0)20 7955 7710
Fax +44 (0)20 7955 7248
Email s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk

Biographies

Sonia Livingstone is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her current work concerns domestic, familial and educational contexts of new media access, use and regulation. Recent books include *Audiences and Publics* (Intellect, edited 2005) and *The Handbook of New Media* (Sage, edited 2006)..

Nick Couldry is Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths College and was previously Reader in Media, Communications and Culture at the London School of Economics. He is the author or editor of six books, most recently *Listening Beyond the Echoes: Media, Ethics and Agency in an Uncertain World* (Paradigm Books, US).

Tim Markham is Lecturer in Media (Journalism) in the Faculty of Continuing Education, Birkbeck College, University of London. Previously he was Research Officer in the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics. His research has examined war correspondence in relation to the sociology of journalism and the rise of the journalist as moral authority.

**Declining participation offline, rising
participation online**

Our recent Public Connection Survey, which surveyed 1017 people aged 18+ across the UK in June 2005, found that young people (18-34) are less likely to vote in national elections, compared with middle aged (35-54) and older (55+) people. Indeed, 89% of over 55s, but only 67% of under 35s, said they 'generally vote in national elections'.[1] Similarly, 75% of over 55s claimed to be 'generally interested in what's going on in politics', compared with only 61% of under 35 year olds. Yet, the survey also found, as have many others, that young people are much more likely to use the internet. Almost no teenagers in the UK are non-users (just 2-3%; Livingstone & Helsper, in press), 72% of 18-35s go online daily, while 75% of over 55s do not use it at all (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2006). Putting together the declining vote and political interest among young adults with the distinctively youthful profile of internet users, one would hardly suppose that the internet could be part of the solution to the decline in political participation among young people. Indeed, it seems more likely to be part of the problem – an update, perhaps, on Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone* thesis, in which the internet, rather than television, serves to fragment and distract a youthful public from a common sense of civic purpose.[2]

Nonetheless, a growing body of research and, especially, policy hopes to invert this pessimistic conclusion, seeking to capitalise on young people's interest in the internet to encourage them into a greater engagement with politics (Center For Media Education, 2002; Levine & Lopez, 2004; Lusoli, Ward, & Gibson, 2006; Newman, Barnes, Sullivan, & Knops, 2004). After all, young people undoubtedly use the internet to sustain and extend their communication networks, and they commit to these networks a considerable investment in time, motivation, sociability and identity. In the UK Children Go Online (UKCGO) project, which surveyed 1511 9-19 year olds, children and teenagers were found to spend, on average, between half an hour and one hour per day online[3], a little more than the half hour per day average spent by the 18-34 year olds surveyed in the Public Connection project, and much more than for older groups (less than 15 minutes for those aged 55+).[4]

In short, young people are generally enthusiastic and creative adopters of the internet – especially for communication, information, entertainment and education, enjoying their expertise in using the internet, notwithstanding some limits to these skills particularly in critical and productive literacies (Livingstone, in press-b). Thus, they are constantly connected (Clark, 2005) being, as Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross (2001) argue, primarily social rather than anti-social, oriented towards constructing community, albeit a community that sustains and prioritises their interests and in which they have a stake. But one must remain cautious as to whether these networked weak ties (Hampton & Wellman, 2003) truly merit the label of 'community', for it is unclear that such connection leads them to political or civic engagement, either on or offline.

In this chapter, we draw together the findings of two projects, one on teens, one on adults, which have been conducted separately but with overlapping theoretical frameworks and methods, in order to generate a picture of young people's sense of 'public connection'[5] as they make the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.[6] Although we cannot here disentangle the effects of generational change from life course transitions, these projects do allow us to address the common problem that, first, surveys of political participation (and of media/technology use) typically survey only adults, impeding a view of the transition to adulthood (or, problematically, relying on adult, i.e. parental, accounts of young people's media or social activities); second, surveys of young people are frequently interpreted as revealing findings distinctive to young people, without realising that, had an older sample been included, similar findings apply across the age range.

For example, in both projects, respondents were asked whether they go online for news. Among the UKCGO sample, 17% of 12-15 year olds claim to do this, compared with 34% of 16-17 year olds and 41% of 18-19 year olds. Asked the slightly different question of whether they go online to read the news at least 3 times per week, the Public Connection Survey found 40% of 18-35 year olds do this, compared with 25% of 35-54 year olds and only 7% of over 55s. There is, in short, a peak between 18-35, with younger and older age groups being less likely to seek their news online. Without the Public Connection data, one might suppose the teen data to reveal a distinctive difference from all adults; without the UKCGO data, one

would not know how online news consumption jumps in mid to late adolescence and, perhaps, assume it to be typical of younger members of 'the internet generation'.

Contextualising online news in a broader perspective reveals further that, even for young adults who get news online, longer-established media remain a more important news source, with 54% of 18-35 year olds reading a national paper at least 3 times per week, 70% listening to the radio news and 87% watching television news, all figures not very different from those for older age groups. Young people's consumption of internet news is, undoubtedly, distinctive – but it should also be recognised that the internet supplements rather than displaces other news sources (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000),[7] and television remains 'the main source' (Robinson & Levy, 1986). If we exclude interpersonal media (the mobile phone), television remains the medium that would be most missed by 16-24 year olds, just as for older ages (Ofcom, 2006: 74). Moreover, although young people have a more diverse news environment than older generations, young people's interest in the internet is insufficient to counter their generally lower levels of news consumption overall (Pew, 2002, 2004, 2005). Thus, the internet remains less important as a primary news source than recent hype about the internet replacing television consumption would suggest, leading us to disagree, at least at present, with Haythornthwaite and Wellman (2002): in the UK at least, 'the person' – even the young person - has <u>not</u> become 'the portal' to public information flows.

Online invitations to participate

According to the producers of civic websites for youth, many young people are eagerly and creatively engaging with the online invitation to join in, to have their say, to represent themselves (Livingstone, in press-a). Young people, they claim, have a right to express themselves, for their voices to become visible, and the online community is keen for their contribution: allowing young people to 'be heard' is a common feature of the design characteristics and interface of youth civic websites. Indeed, the promise of youth websites is built on the supposed parallels between young people's preferred style of interaction (dialogic, diverse, alternative, dynamic) and the infrastructure of the internet (peer-to-peer, heterogenous, flexible). More generally, governments appear optimistic that civic or political participation can be revitalised by involving the internet, thus initiating a range of projects for cultural citizenship, political socialisation, participatory deliberation, e-democracy, and so forth (Bentivegna, 2002; Coleman, 2005; Livingstone, 2005).[8]

Such optimism is not always borne out in practice. The UKCGO project asked, as one strand of the research, whether taking up the 'invitation' to interact online – completing quizzes, voting on entertainment websites, contributing to message boards, and so forth – does, in fact, lead young people (here, teenagers aged 12-17) into an online engagement with civic or political sites (Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005). Looking across the various forms of participation online, the UKCGO project found that most activities are positively, if weakly, correlated among young people (in other words, the more young people use the internet for any one activity, the more they use it for the others, and vice versa), suggesting a positive transfer of skills and interests across online activities, including the possibility that young people who engage with the interactive potential of the internet become drawn into a civic participation. However, although use of email and information-search is widespread, levels of news-seeking and advice-seeking, along with the use of the internet to mediate club-related or other organized social activities are all rather low, pursued by around a quarter of young internet users, and often short-lived, indicating difficulties with 'following-through' rather than with initial enthusiasm.. Possibly, the forms of interacting with websites that are practiced fairly commonly (e.g. completing quizzes, sending emails) may already be familiar practices offline (e.g. quizzes in magazines, phoning a radio programme). Less common practices online may reflect the fact that young people are not used to receiving and responding to requests to vote, offer advice, sign a petition and so forth in their everyday (offline) lives.

Of greater concern is the fact that online opportunities are not taken up equally. Not only do boys, middle class and older teens have higher levels of internet self-efficacy, stay online longer per day and have longer experience with the internet, but these factors – both demographic and use-related – seem to facilitate the take up of online opportunities to interact. In other words, it appears that online interactivity and creativity can be encouraged through the very experience of using the internet. However, this is less the case for the likelihood of visiting civic websites because here the key determinants are demographic – age

(older), gender (girls) and social class (higher). This suggests that young people's motivation to pursue civic interests online depends on their background and their socialisation, and it is not greatly affected by the amounts of time spent or levels of expertise online. Rather, those with prior civic or political interests find the internet a useful resource for pursing these interests; similarly, those motivated to explore the internet creatively do so, resulting in an active and creative engagement with the medium, but not necessarily drawing them into greater civic or political engagement than before. In short, interaction and civic engagement are not to be regarded as sequenced 'steps' on a 'ladder' of participation from minimal to more ambitious modes of participation (Hill & Tisdall, 1997).

Rather than blaming young people for their apathy, the finger might instead be pointed at the online and offline structures of opportunity that facilitate, shape and develop young people's participation. Focus groups with young people suggest a generation bored with politics, critical of the online offer, instead interested in celebrity and conforming to peer norms (Livingstone, in press-a). Young people protest that 'having your say' does not seem to mean 'being listened to', and so they feel justified in recognising little responsibility to participate (Lister, Smith, Middleton, & Cox, 2003; in this respect, they resemble the general UK population; Power, 2006). Indeed, evaluations of some online initiatives are less than optimistic (Liff, Steward, & Watts, 2002; Phipps, 2000): an American survey of 15-25 year olds found the internet an even less effective means of engaging disaffected young people than traditional routes, though very effective at mobilizing the already-interested (Levine & Lopez, 2004; see also Livingstone, et al, 2005). Young people are often positioned by even the most well-meaning public sector sites not as citizens but as citizens-in-waiting (Buckingham, 2000; Qvortrup, 1995) and, it seems that while they wait to become fully-fledged citizens, young people can think of better things to do with their time. Thus, one is tempted to suggest that it is those making the invitation, not those responding to it, that lack the motivation to participate in a dialogue with young people. Cammaerts and Van Audenhove (2005)show how online discussions reveal a series of constraints that undermine the freedom of the so-called public sphere online, while Bessant (2004) notes, pessimistically, that despite the many calls to empower young people through the internet, policy makers' enthusiasm tends to ignore the obstacles that youth experiences to participation socially, economically and politically, particularly the question of whose voice is being heard and to what effect.

Disconnected youth?

What, then, is distinctive about younger people as regards civic engagement? As Table 1 shows, they claim less interest in politics than do older people. But this is not, apparently, because they are <u>less</u> trusting of politics (Aday, 2005), nor because they are lower on political efficacy (Inglehart, 1977). Young people are, undoubtedly, fairly low on both measures, but they are not significantly lower than the rest of the population.

The indicators that are significantly different by age are telling: young people are lower on social capital (Table 1; see also Field, 2003) and social expectations to 'keep up with what's going on in the world'. Further, young people's sense of what is going on in the world, the public (or new) agenda, is also distinctive. When asked which, if any, of a diverse list of 18 items, 'do you generally follow or keep up to date with?', young people were significantly less likely than older people to select items concerned with traditional politics (such as 'trade union politics', 'international politics', 'what's happening in Iraq', 'the UK economy', 'local council politics', 'events in Westminster', 'funding for local services', 'debates about Europe'). They were also, perhaps more surprisingly, significantly less likely than older people to follow such single issues as 'health', 'crime', 'the environment' and 'third world poverty'. Last but not least, they were significantly more likely than older people to follow popular or celebrity issues – 'what's number one in the music charts', 'the latest celebrity gossip', 'the latest fashion in clothes', 'Big Brother or other reality television'. Note finally, that as for political trust, young people are no more or less trusting of media sources, despite their greater propensity to keep up with celebrity news. But they are rather less media-literate, an intriguing finding given their more diverse media environment, offline and online.

Table 1: Indicators of civic/political engagement, by age

Civic/political engagement	Age						Age difference?
	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
Political interest[9]	3.34	3.44	3.31	3.44	3.91	3.88	p < 0.01
Political trust[10]	2.79	2.60	2.75	2.60	2.67	2.69	n.s.
Political efficacy[11]	3.16	3.25	3.21	3.25	3.25	3.00	n.s.
Social capital[12]	2.72	2.57	2.73	2.80	2.97	2.87	p < 0.01
Social expectations[13]	3.06	3.31	3.48	3.52	3.70	3.62	p < 0.01
Media trust[14]	3.20	3.20	3.29	3.25	3.29	3.31	n.s.
Media literacy[15]	3.45	3.58	3.56	3.64	3.65	3.69	p < 0.05

Note: *Public Connection Survey* (2005) of British adults aged 18+ (N=1007). See Couldry et al. (2006, in press-a). All indicators measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

The Public Connection project used these indicators to examine who goes online to read the news, looking across the adult population (N=1017). A binomial regression analysis found age to be the key predictor (beta = -0.314, p<0.00). However, other variables added to the explanation: people of higher socioeconomic status (beta = 0.123, p<0.00), men (beta = 0.062, p<0.05), those interested in 'traditional' political issues (beta = 0.073, p<0.05), those who feel a social expectation on them to 'keep up' with the news (beta = 0.071, p<0.05) and those who consider that they know where to get the information they need (0.067, p<0.05) are all more likely to go online for news at least 3 times per week (R-squared =14.9%).

This analysis suggests that, rather than the internet encouraging political interest,[16] the internet instead provides a route to pursue already-existing civic interests. And these already-existing interests, it seems, may derive from social capital and social expectations – in short, from opportunity structures of people's everyday lives. Thus we require a structural account of the conditions of participation, the opportunity structures of the state, work, commerce, school, community and family, within which young people may exercise their agency (Livingstone, in press-c; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2004).

Offline structures of disconnection and exclusion

Few young people today are entirely excluded from internet use by lack of access, though lack of home access remains an issue for a substantial minority of children and teens (Livingstone & Helsper, in press). Website design, increasingly mirroring the 'look and feel' of commercial sites, has considerably improved the interactive potential of many civic and political sites though problems remain in supporting genuine interactivity (Livingstone, submitted). Since, however, young people's use of the internet has increased far more rapidly than their use of the internet for <u>civic</u> purposes, we must look to other explanations for disengagement. Guided by accounts of late modernity developed by Giddens, Beck and others, Bennett (1998) points to a third cause to account for both growing individualisation and declining political engagement among youth, namely the dramatic shifts in the labour market and the economy in the post-war period. He argues that what is 'replacing traditional civil society is a less conformist social world … characterised by the rise of networks, issue associations, and lifestyle coalitions facilitated by the revolution in personalized, point-to-point communication' (p. 745). Thus 'personal and local' concerns increasingly dominate over 'national and governmental' concerns (p. 748).

Young people are surely in the vanguard here, being both enthusiasts for individualised consumption but also struggling with the loss of clear structures of involvement and participation (the loss of jobs-for-life and clear employment trajectories, diminished local political organisations or trade unions, and increased economic pressures and debts) (Hill & Tisdall, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Not only do institutional structures present a stratified array of opportunities and constraints largely beyond young people's control but traditional cues to participation and citizenship are diminishing (Kimberlee, 2002; Touraine, 2000) as the commodification of childhood and youth increases (James et al., 1998; Livingstone, 2002). Moreover, despite widespread optimism regarding online youth participation, and 'despite the recognition of children as persons in their own right, public policy and practice is marked by an intensification of control, regulation and surveillance

around children, this impeding rather than facilitating the ability of organisations to encourage children's participation' (Prout, 2000), not least because 'children's participation can threaten adult hegemony and established practice' (Hill and Tisdall, 1997: 36). In short, the (problematic) online opportunity structure available to young people may be no better than that established offline. Two of the younger participants in the Public Connection project (Jonathan and Josh, both 23) complained that they had no one offline to discuss politics and public affairs with, but interestingly, although both were active internet users, neither mentioned online networks as compensating for this offline lack. We suggest, then, that it is the institutional structures (school, family, peers) that shape young people's daily lives that enable young people to engage with the civic or public sphere, whether on or offline, though the evidence regarding the social and political preconditions for young people's civic engagement (where it exists) remains unclear.

Test case studies – Anisah and Mary

During the course of these two research projects, we visited a range of people at home – people of all ages and diverse backgrounds. In this section, we present just two case studies. These were selected not for their typicality, though they are in many ways ordinary young women, but because they illustrate the as-yet tenuous links between daily life, civic commitments and internet use. Indeed, while the UKCGO project showed how, for many, an enthusiastic and regular engagement with the internet did not necessarily direct young people into online civic engagement, the Public Connection project found that, for most people, young and old, there are only limited signs of internet news consumption generating sufficiently stable habits to replace the established domestic and cultural traditions of television news viewing or newspaper reading that mediates people's sense of public connection.

Anisah[17] is from a low income Ghanaian family living on a troubled inner-city housing estate. The first author visited her initially when she was 12, in 1999, when the family lived in a very small two-bedroom flat, the computer being squeezed into the living room along with most other family activities. Her well-educated parents have placed huge educational expectations on their children, and so sought to provide the best for them, including several sets of encyclopaedias and educational CD-roms, a personal computer and internet access. An active and outgoing girl, Anisah nonetheless lived far from her school friends and so spent a fair amount of time on her own. She used the internet most days, finding it exciting to make friends in chat rooms, and enjoying feeling ahead of her classmates in having domestic internet access with which to research school projects. The internet, she said, is better than books - quicker and more precise - though her skills are imperfect: she tells us about a school project on China (the country) for which she downloaded an illustration of china (porcelain, in this case from America). By 2003, when we visited again, Anisah at 15 had become a charming and articulate teenager, doing well at school and hoping to become a designer. Having moved to a new house, she and her sister now have a bedroom to themselves and, to her delight, this also houses the computer. The internet has become, for her, a key means of keeping in contact with the friends she sees every day at school, and she chats with them late into the night. Being about to enter her GSCE year, she also revises on the BBC's revision site, *Bitesize*, which she considers extremely helpful.

In terms of civic participation, Anisah's approach to life, including the internet, has been strongly marked by her family's religious commitment, though she has become somewhat disengaged from the Church, its legacy being her striking seriousness and moral conviction. Interestingly, she is the first and only child we have observed to read the news on the homepage of her internet service provider – for although many enter through a page that contains headlines or direct links to the news, most pay no attention to this, going straight to their preferred links (email, entertainment, games, etc). She has, further, become scathing of her earlier use of chat rooms, seeing this as a pointless, and possibly risky, waste of time. (Similarly, a young working class participant in the Public Connection project - Kylie, 24 - dismissed internet discussion: 'you're talking to people that are so far away from you'; Couldry, et al, in press-b). We also have an interesting discussion about how she, unlike her peers, she refuses to download music, it being – she points out - both illegal and wrong. Thus she uses the internet in a purposeful manner – to research art work for a project, to follow her interest in design, to find a cheap flight, etc, relying largely but not solely on public-service oriented sites rather than commercial sites. And she tells us how her father, similarly, reads

the news online, particularly in order to follow the 'news and politics and what's happening' in Ghana. In short, Anisah illustrates the importance of family background – in terms of values and commitments, as well as internet-related provision and practice – in shaping the way in which a young person uses the internet for civic (and other) purposes. It is evident, nonetheless, that such civic purposes are not strong even for Anisah, that her use is fairly individualistic and strongly instrumental, and there is little evidence that she follows up on, or is drawn into, further civic engagement, having read the news or entered an educational site. Why then would one expect a less serious, less motivated or more fun-loving young person to see the internet as a route to political engagement?

Mary's use of the internet illustrates a further theme, reinforcing the importance of family background but adding to this the changing opportunity structures involved in the shift from adolescence to adulthood. Mary was 18 when we first visited, a finishing A'level school pupil living in a well-off family in the rural north of England and hoping to study medicine. Like Anisah, she is ambitious, with a supportive family. Having reached voting age, she is well aware of her civic duty, but she finds meeting this responsibility a challenge: 'I know what I'm thinking but I can't get it out properly… I can't put it into a proper argument'. Like Anisah too, she is instrumental in her information seeking, following up news or features on medicine, science, psychology and health, typically on television or in the press (- we discuss designer babies, childhood obesity, cloning, etc). Otherwise, she too fills the gaps between her studies by socialising with friends or watching 'rubbish on television'. Interestingly, her mother socialised her into reading the newspaper (*The Daily Mail*) quite deliberately: 'Mum always said I should look, she used to pick bits out for me to read, but then I suppose I just started doing it myself and I read more'; similarly, she'll watch the news headlines when the family is having their evening meal, because it's on, because her parents are watching it and because she can ask them (usually her mother) to explain the news to her. In addition to her family (including her argumentative father, with whom she tries not very successfully to test out her fledgling opinions), her school also provides a support structure that encourages engagement: she is a member of the school council, and this requires her to campaign for her own election, mentor junior pupils and 'do speeches and stuff'.

Yet the wider world of politics is something she has little interest in, happy to ask her parents' advice on how to vote, not always listening when they discuss politics at dinner, and expressing a mild scepticism of democratic participation (- 'Yeah, you're allowed to say what you think but it might not always be heard', she tells me, a view echoed by many young people). The internet – crucially – plays a far lesser role in Mary's political socialisation or civic information seeking than does the everyday domestic context of family discussion and communal television news viewing. In the first interview, she tells us about her family, school and social life, including her taste in television, magazines and radio, all before mentioning the internet, which we have to introduce into the conversation. Then she says, 'I go on MSN and talk to my friends…. I use it for school work…. I just use it for work, all search engines and stuff'. Her account of learning to use the internet differs strikingly from that of learning to read the newspapers: 'when we got it here, I started playing around and then I understood how to use it', a free style of skill acquisition often described by young people, but one lacking in the social context that might direct them towards civic or political engagement. We ask whether she'd look online to follow up something she's interested in from the world of science or medicine even, but she replies, 'I wouldn't look on the internet. I would probably ask my Mum if there's anything in the paper about it or I'd have a look in the paper and then I'd sort of have a discussion with my Mum or Dad, Mum and Dad if, 'cos they'll, one of them will have heard about it.' When pushed about her information search, she says that for technical matters, she'll ask a teacher instead, but the internet is not, even for this educated and fairly privileged young woman, a main source.

On our follow up visit, about six months later, Mary, a young adult of 19, is studying medicine at the local university. Her life on campus, in a shared student flat, is very different, and she has become far more confident and lively than the rather shy and uncertain person we met a few months earlier. She is working hard and playing hard, and though she sees her family, she's loosened the ties considerably (- saying of her father, 'well, he doesn't know what I'm doing now!'). Her media habits have changed dramatically - she no longer reads the newspaper, doesn't watch television ('I'm just hearing about things from word of mouth – I'm completely out of touch') and is about to get her own laptop with broadband internet access. Two months later, in a focus group, she told the same story from a different perspective, having now returned home for the Christmas holiday: 'I … sort of got back into the news and

knew what was going on again but all I know [normally at university] is the occasional bit I hear on the radio or what other people tell me'. The internet clearly did not work to fill the gap. In the second interview she conceded however, 'If I was desperate to know something, I'd sort of type in 'news' in Google or something, don't know', though such desperation seems unlikely to her.. However, she tells us that in the intervening period between interviews, she did indeed vote, for the first time, in a recent local election, supporting the party favoured by her mother (less because of the issues than because, as her mother told her, women had to fight for the vote and so now they must use it). Again, we see the civic commitment of the parents continued in the children, yet Mary's confusion about politics remains: 'I suppose I'm not sure about the left and right wing really. I get confused with all the terms.' However, when asked if she has become involved in organisations at university, she describes – with articulate confidence – her hopes of joining the medical students' society, the issues at stake and the processes involved; as before, the wider world of politics remains hazy (the news at the time of the interview is full of the 2005 American election, but she cannot identify either candidates or issues involved), but the immediate world of her university, and her specialism, is vivid and engaging. The internet, however, plays little role in either.

Of course there are counter examples, cases of young people for whom the internet is an important source of connection and participation (see Olsson, 2005). Equally, there are many young people who lack the civic interest, family support, educational opportunities and/or the resources that both Anisah and Mary enjoy. Our point here is that, even with the civic interest, the family support, the educational opportunities and the resources to pursue their sense of public connection and civic engagement online, Anisah and Mary do not do so to any very great extent. Simply providing internet access, or developing ever more well-meaning civic websites, is hardly going to be sufficient for the disengaged, disillusioned or disadvantaged, if this doesn't even succeed in engaging Anisah and Mary.

Conclusions

Many are asking whether the internet affords new and emancipatory possibilities to inform and engage people. Others are critical of the 'techno-enthusiasm' (Selwyn, 2004) or 'cyberbole' (Woolgar, 2002) that has accompanied its arrival into the mass market, insisting on 'the contradiction between a for-profit, highly concentrated, advertising-saturated, corporate media system and the communication requirements of a democratic society' (McChesney, 2000 preface). Not only is it the case that 'the deployment of new technologies is always biased in some way to favour certain economic or social interests over others' (Mansell, 2004: 180), but also, as Graber (2004) rather reluctantly conclude, 'the internet reinforces existing trends. It may be more than a blip, but it falls far short of being a revolution'. Winston (1996: 321), similarly, argues against the 'quite extraordinary claims' frequently made for the internet, observing that the history of technology reveals that 'most such technologies exhibit far less radical potential'. Fornas et al (2002) comment more neutrally that new media may offer both reactionary as well as transformative possibilities, but point out that the structures of the offline world shape these possibilities such that 'tenacious structures in media institutions as well as in everyday-life contexts of use and production work to delimit the transformations first promised by each new medium, reproducing instead certain inherited boundaries in the new media as well'.

This chapter has argued more on the side of the pessimists rather than the optimists (Livingstone, 2005), not because the internet is evidently undermining young people's participation, although the predominance of commercial rather than public sector content rightly gives cause for concern (Montgomery, 2001), nor because of the persistent inequalities in cultural and economic capital that shapes who gets access to the internet, though this too is important, but rather because the internet just doesn't yet show up as very important in relation to most young people's civic and political engagement, crucial though it is in many other domains of their life – education, social relations, entertainment. Undoubtedly, some young people do engage effectively with the civic/public sphere, including via the internet. Optimistic signs include the finding that young people are more likely to participate online than take part in more traditional forms of politics (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2002): while only 10% of 15-24 year olds in the UK took part in any form of political activity offline, three times that many did something political on the internet. In the US too, 38% of 12-17 year olds said they go online to express their opinion (Pew, 2001), and 26% of the UKGCO teenagers go online to read the news. The lower commitment required for online participation, compared with

attending meetings or other offline activities, may yet encourage young people. As Poppy (16, from London), reported, 'there's a Greenpeace website which had a petition about like global warming and stuff and we should do something about it. And I signed that just because it's easy and you might as well put your name down' (Livingstone, in press-b).

However, there is little evidence as yet that these young people are new to participation, or that the internet draws in those not already engaged (Levine & Lopez, 2004; Livingstone, 2005; Olsson, 2005) – the internet is not, yet, 'the answer' to young people's disengagement, though it may develop the skills and literacies required for engagement. Thus we conclude that the broad decline in youth participation might be better redressed through offline initiatives, strengthening the opportunities structures of young people's lives and the 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) available to them, rather than building websites which, though they will engage a few, will struggle to reach the majority or, more important, to connect that majority to those with power over their lives in a manner that young people themselves judge effective and consequential.

References

Aday, S. (2005). Why trust matters: Declining political trust and the demise of American liberalism. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 69*(2), 330-332.

Althaus, S., & Tewksbury, D. (2000). Patterns of internet and traditional news media use in a networked community. *Political Communication, 17*, 21-45.

Bennett, L. (1998). The Uncivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics. *PS: Political Science and Politics, 31(4)*, 740-761.

Bentivegna, S. (2002). Politics and new media. In L. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone (Eds.), *The Handbook of New Media* (pp. 50-61). London: Sage.

Bessant, J. (2004). Mixed messages: Youth participation and democratic practice. *Australian Journal of Political Science, 39*(2), 387-404.

Buckingham, D. (2000). *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cammaerts, B., & Van Audenhove, L. (2005). Online political debate, unbounded citizenship, and the problematic nature of a transnational public sphere. *Political Communication, 22*(2), 179-196.

Center For Media Education. (2002). *TeenSites.Com--A Field Guide to the New Digital Landscape.* Washington DC: Center For Media Education (CME).

Clark, L. S. (2005). The constant contact generation: exploring teen friendship networks online. In S. Mazzarella (Ed.), *Girl Wide Web* (pp. 203-222). New York: Peter Lang.

Coleman, J. C. (1993). Understanding Adolescence Today: A Review. *Children and Society, 7*(2), 137-147.

Coleman, S. (2005). The lonely citizen: Indirect representation in an age of networks. *Political Communication, 22*(2), 197-214.

Couldry, N., Livingstone, S., & Markham, T. (2006). *Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection.*

Couldry, N., Livingstone, S., & Markham, T. (in press-a). *Public Connection? Media Consumption and the Presumption of Public Attention.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Couldry, N., Livingstone, S., and Markham, T. (in press-b) Connection Or Disconnection? Tracking The Mediated Public Sphere In Everyday Life. In R. Butsch (Ed.), *Media and Public Spheres.* Palgrave-Mcmillan.

Electoral Commission (2005). *Election 2005: Turnout. How Many, Who and Why?* London: The Electoral Commission.

Field, J. (2003). *Social Capital.* London: Routledge.

Fornas, J. (2002). Passages across thresholds: Into the borderlands of mediation. *Convergence, 8*(4), 89-106.

Gibson, R., Lusoli, W., & Ward, S. (2002). *UK Political Participation Online: The Public Response. A survey of citizens' political activity via the Internet.* Salford: ESRI, www.ipop.org.uk.

Graber, D. (2004). Mediated politics and citizenship in the twenty-first century. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55*, 545-571.

Hampton, K., & Wellman, B. (2003). Neighboring in netville: How the internet supports community and social capital in a wired suburb. *City & Community, 2*(4), 277-311.

Hansard, S. (2001). *None of the Above - Non-Voters and the 2001 Election*. London: Hansard Society.

Haste, H. (2005) *My Voice, My Vote, My Community*. London: Nestle Social Research Programme.

Haythornthwaite, C., & Wellman, B. (2002). The Internet in Everyday Life. In B. Wellman & C. Haythornthwaite (Eds.), *The Internet in Everyday Life* (pp. 3-41). Oxford: Blackwell.

Hill, M., & Tisdall, K. (1997). *Children and Society*. London: Longman.

Inglehart, R. (1977). *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kimberlee, R. H. (2002). Why don't British young people vote at general elections? *Journal of Youth Studies, 5*(1), 85-98.

Kraut, R., Kiesler, S., Boneva, B., Cummings, J., Helgeson, V., & Crawford, A. (2002). Internet paradox revisited. *Journal of Social Issues, 58*(1), 49-74.

Levine, P., & Lopez, M. H. (2004). *Young People and Political Campaigning on the Internet - Fact Sheet*. The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, University of Maryland (www.civicyouth.org).

Liff, S., Steward, F., & Watts, P. (2002). New Public Places for Internet Access. In S. Woolgar (Ed.), *Virtual Society?* (pp. 78-98). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lister, R., Smith, N., Middleton, S., & Cox, L. (2003). Young people talk about citizenship: empirical perspectives on theoretical and political debates. *Citizenship Studies, 7*(2).

Livingstone, S. (2002). *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment*. London: Sage.

Livingstone, S. (2005). Critical debates in internet studies: Reflections on an emerging field. In J. Curran, and Gurevitch, M. (Eds.), *Mass Media and Society* (5th ed., pp. 9-28). London: Sage.

Livingstone, S. (in press-a). Interactivity and participation on the internet: A critical appraisal of the online invitation to young people. In P. Dahlgren (Ed.), *Young Citizens and New Media: Strategies for Learning Democratic Engagement*.

Livingstone, S. (in press-b). Youthful experts? A critical appraisal of children's emerging internet literacy. In C. Ciborra, R. Mansell, D. Quah & R. Silverstone (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook on ICTs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Livingstone, S. (in press-c). Opportunities and constraints framing children and young people's internet use. To appear in M. Consalvo et al. (Ed.), Internet Research Annual, Volume 4. New York: Peter Lang.

Livingstone, S. (submitted) The challenge of engaging youth online: Contrasting producers' and teenagers' interpretations of websites. Under review, *European Journal of Communication*.

Livingstone, S., & Bober, M. (2005). UK Children Go Online: Final report of key project findings. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.

Livingstone, S., Bober, M., & Helsper, E. J. (2005). Active participation or just more information? Young people's take up of opportunities to act and interact on the internet. *Information, Communication and Society, 8*(3), 287-314.

Livingstone, S., & Bovill, M. (2001). *Families and the Internet: An observational study of children and young people's internet use. Final Report to BT*: London School of Economics.

Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (in press). Gradations in digital inclusion: Children, young people and the digital divide. *New Media & Society*.

Lusoli, W., Ward, S., & Gibson, R. (2006). (Re)connecting politics? Parliament, the public and the internet. *Parliamentary Affairs, 59*(1), 24-42.

Mansell, R. (2004). The internet, capitalism, and policy. In M. Consalvo, N. Baym, J. Hunsinger, K. B. Jensen, J. Logie, M. Murero & L. R. Shade (Eds.), *Internet Research Annual* (Vol. 1, pp. 175-184). New York: Peter Lang.

McChesney, R. W. (2000). *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. New York: The New Press.

Meyer, D., & Staggenborg, S. (1996). Movements, countermovements, and the structure of political opportunity. *The American Journal of Sociology, 101*(6), 1628-1660.

Montgomery, K. (2001). The new on-line children's consumer culture. In D. Singer & J. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of Children and the Media* (pp. 635-650). London: Sage.

Morris, Z., P. John and D. Halpern (2003) 'Compulsory citizenship for the disenfranchised', *The Curriculum Journal*, 14(2): 1-19.

Newman, J., Barnes, M., Sullivan, H., & Knops, A. (2004). Public participation and collaborative governance. *Journal of Social Policy, 33*, 203-223.

Ofcom. (2006). *Media Literacy Audit: Report on adult media literacy*. London: Office of Communications.

Olsson, T. (2005). Young citizens, ICTs and learning. A design for a study of the media and political activity. *Nordicom Review, 26*(1), 131-140.

Pattie, C. J., Seyd, P., & Whiteley, P. (2004). *Citizenship in Britain: values, participation and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pew (2001). *Teenage Life Online: the Rise of the Instant-Message Generation and the Internet's Impact on Friendships and Family Relationships*: Pew Internet & American Life Project. (www.pewinternet.org).

Pew (2002). *One year later: September 11 and the Internet*. Washington DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project. (www.pewinternet.org).

Pew (2004) *Pew Research Center Biennial News Consumption Survey*. Available from http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/

Pew (2005). *A Decade of Adoption: How the internet has woven itself into American life*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life (www.pewinternet.org).

Phipps, L. (2000). New communications technologies: A conduit for social inclusion. *Information, Communication and Society, 3*(1), 39-68.

Power (2006). *The report of power: An independent inquiry into Britain's Democracy*. London: Joseph Rowntree.

Prout, A. (2000). Children's Participation: Control and Self-realisation in British Late Modernity. *Children & Society, 14(3)*, 304-315.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Qvortrup, J. (1995). Childhood and modern society: A paradoxical relationship. In J. Brannen & M. O'Brien (Eds.), *Childhood and Parenthood* (pp. 189-198). London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Robinson, J. P., & Levy, M. R. (1986). *The Main Source: Learning from Television News*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Mori (2004). *The Rules of Engagement? Participation, Involvement and Voting in Britain: Research Analysis for the Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society*. London: MORI.

Selwyn, N. (2004). Reconsidering political and popular understandings of the digital divide. *New Media & Society, 6*(3), 341-362.

Subrahmanyam, K., Greenfield, P., Kraut, R., & Gross, E. (2001). The impact of computer use on children's and adolescents' development. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 22*(1), 7-30.

Tewksbury, D. (2003). What do Americans really want to know? Tracking the behaviour of news readers on the internet. *Journal of Communication, 53*(4), 694 -710.

Touraine, A. (2000). *Can We Live Together?* Cambridge: Polity.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Winston, B. (1996). *Media Technology and Society: A History - From the Telegraph to the Internet*. London: Routledge.

Woolgar, S. (2002). Five rules of virtuality. In S. Woolgar (Ed.), *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality* (pp. 1-22). Oxford: OUP.

Endnotes

---

[1] These figures suggest a tendency to overclaim, since voting figures for the 2005 UK General Election show that only 37% of 18-24 year olds and 48% of 25-34 year olds voted, compared with 71% of those aged 55-64, and 75% of those 65+ (Electoral Commission, 2005). There was a significant decline in young people voting in the 2001 general election (Hansard, 2001), and their interest in the political process is low (Haste, 2005; Mori, 2004). The issue of disconnection is complex, for there is some evidence of civic activism among the young alongside, or even in response to, their disenchantment from the formal political system (Bennett, 1998; Mori, 2004; Morris et al, 2003).

[2] Robert Putnam is perhaps the best known among those directly blaming rising public apathy and disengagement on the privatising effect of television on everyday life, with Robert Kraut having originally made a similar case for the internet though, as more people have gone online, altering the profile of users and uses, he has since retracted this view (Kraut et al., 2002).

[3] Homes with children are fast acquiring multiple computers plus broadband access to the internet. The UKCGO survey found that, in 2004, 36% of 9-19 year olds in the UK have more than one computer at home, and 24% live in a household with broadband access. Furthermore, access platforms are diversifying: 87% have a computer at home (71% with internet access), 62% have digital television (17% with internet access), 82% have a games console (8% with internet access), and 81% have their own mobile phone (38% with internet access) (Livingstone & Bober, 2005).

[4] As the latest Pew figures show (2005), this begins to rival time spent on any other medium, though not displacing time spent on social relations. For, increasingly, young people conduct their social relations through a multimedia mix of online, offline, face to face and mobile phone communication that reconfigures, but does not simply reduce, the degree to which young people are in touch with others.

[5] In Couldry et al (in press-a), we define 'public connection as 'the sense that, as citizens, we share an orientation to a public world where matters of shared concern are, or at least should be, addressed'.

[6] The transition to adulthood is both a psychological and a sociological matter (Coleman, 1993), raising issues of developing identity, agency and commitment as well as those of enabling structures and institutional responses to young people's participation (Livingstone, 2002).

[7] Indeed, since many rely on the main news 'brands' online, the content thus obtained may not differ greatly from broadcast news (Tewksbury, 2003).

[8] Bentivegna (2002) summarises the view of many that the internet is 'democratic' in that, while each of its features (interactivity, facilitated horizontal communication, disintermediation, reduced entry costs for small groups/individuals, and increased speed and flexibility of transmission and circulation) are not intrinsically new, when combined they enable the internet to introduce a qualitative shift in the potential for democratic communication.

[9] Response to the question, 'You are generally interested in what's going on in politics', measured – as are all the scales in this table – on a scale where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

[10] Political Trust is a scale (Cronbach's alpha=0.76) constructed following a factor analysis of three questions: "You trust politicians to tell the truth", "You trust politicians to deal with the things that matter" and "You trust the government to do what is right".

[11] The political efficacy variable is the mean of responses to two questions: 'You feel that you can influence decisions in your area' and 'You can affect things by getting involved in issues you care about' which are significantly correlated (beta=0.33, p<0.01).

[12] Three Social Capital questions were combined, following a factor analysis (Cronbach's alpha=0.61): "You play an active role in one or more voluntary, local or political organisations", "Being involved in your local neighbourhood is important to you" and "You are involved in voluntary work".

[13] Scale constructed from responses to the questions: 'People at work would expect you to know what's going on in the world' and 'Your friends would expect you to know what's going on in the world', which are significantly correlated (beta=0.51, p<0.01).

[14] The media trust scale (Cronbach's alpha=0.65) is the mean of four variables (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree): "You trust the television to report the news fairly", "You trust

15

the press to report the news fairly", "You trust the internet to report the news fairly", "You trust the media to cover the things that matter to you".

[15] The media literacy variable is the mean of responses to two questions: 'Different sources of news tend to give different accounts of what's going on' and 'You generally compare the news on different channels, newspapers or websites' which are significantly correlated (beta=0.19, p<0.01).

[16] In a multiple regression aiming to predict interest in politics, neither overall amount of internet use nor using the internet as a news source added to the equation. What did predict political interest, with an R-squared of 29%, were news engagement (beta=0.33), class (-0.10: higher SES predicts higher interest), interest in celebrity (negatively, beta=-0.13), talking about issues (0.10), time spent reading a newspaper (0.08), listening to radio news (0.08), social capital (0.08) and media efficacy (0.08) – see Couldry, et al (in press-a).

[17] Anisah was initially visited as part of the 'Families and the Internet' project (Livingstone & Bovill, 2001) and then revisited as part of the 'UK Children Go Online' project (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Mary was visited on both occasions as part of the Public Connection project (Couldry et al., 2006).