



Active participation or just more information? Young people's take up of opportunities to act and interact on the internet

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Active participation or just more information?

Young people's take up of opportunities to act and interact on the internet

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Young people's participation in society

"We want children and young people to feel that they can influence the services they receive. We want to see them contributing to and benefiting from their local communities. We want them to feel heard and valued and to be able to make a difference." (John Denham, Minister for Young People)¹

"Digital technology has important implications for the relationship between citizen and state." (David Blunkett, Home Secretary)²

There are increasing calls for children and young people to participate in the debates and decisions made concerning their well-being, their education and their communities. These calls are fuelled partly by a growing recognition of children's rights to express themselves, participate and be heard in general³ and partly by the worrying decline in civic and political participation, especially among young people.⁴

In developing policy to support and facilitate young people's participation, key issues remain unresolved. Should initiatives be directed at children and teenagers, encouraging their civic interests and participatory skills before they are old enough to vote, or should they be directed at young voters? Should 'civic' and 'political' be defined narrowly, meaning party politics, government and voting, or should they be defined broadly, including identity politics and social movement issues such as environmental protection, animal rights, anti-globalisation, gay rights and community activism? The former may seem more urgent, since it is young people's level of interest and activity in politics with a capital P that is most obviously in crisis. Yet young people commonly declare 'Politics' to be boring, dull, irrelevant to them:⁵

"I'm not in the least bit interested in politics, and think it extremely boring." (Oliver, 17, from Kent)

Interviewer: "Ok. And what about politics? Are any of you interested in politics?"

Sean: "No!"

Ryan: "Don't be silly!" (14-15 year olds from Essex)

"I have never written to, or emailed my local MP [Member of Parliament], or the PM [Prime Minister] because I do not think my letter/email will even be looked at." (Anne, 15, from Essex)

Though, of course, there are exceptions:

"I really don't understand how people could have said that they aren't interested in politics! What about the 'Don't attack Iraq' rallies and marches? There was a massive under-18 turn out!" (Milly, 15, from Essex)⁶

Can the internet provide an answer?

Many hopes are now pinned on the internet as a means of increasing young people's participation. The internet is widely hailed as the technology to bring direct participatory democracy to the masses, enabling citizens to become actively engaged in the political process. Further, young people especially are dubbed 'the internet generation', 'online experts', etc – labels they themselves relish, and internet adoption is considerably higher in homes with children than homes without.⁷ Since the internet offers many diverse forms of interactive engagement and participation, building on young people's prior online enthusiasm and expertise seems a promising way forward.

In this report, we examine whether using the internet draws young people into participation. This hope is leading many organisations, mainly – but not exclusively – in the public sector, to develop websites, online forums, chat spaces, peer networks, and so forth, which aim to encourage young people to make use of a wide range of online opportunities, interacting and participating with each other and with decision makers.⁸

Yet, one must ask, what kinds of online opportunities, what forms of interactivity, what civic interests? Do young people embrace all or some? And why? What exactly must young people do online before society will judge them 'politically active' or 'engaged in civic participation'? To further this, how should websites be designed so as to encourage interaction and participation?

The need for empirical evidence

Despite the expansion in online opportunities, and the considerable hype centred on new e-initiatives, there are some good grounds for caution, even scepticism. We cannot rely on website producers reporting on the hits they receive, for these may be entirely unrepresentative of the young population. Nor can we rely on the accounts of young activists, for



important though they are, they too do not speak for the population.

For these reasons, the *UK Children Go Online* (UKCGO) project began with a series of focus group discussions and then conducted a national survey of 9-19 year olds around the UK, examining young people's internet use in detail (see Appendix).

This report focuses on the survey questions concerned with interactivity and participation. These questions were addressed to the 84% of young people aged 9-19 who use the internet at least once a week.⁹ Forthcoming reports will address the UKCGO survey findings in relation to education and literacy, access and the digital divide, and online dangers and pornography.

Who does what online? A broad view of participation

How many 9-19 year olds take part in online activities? Our starting point is to examine closely a variety of online activities that seem to offer promising routes towards active participation.¹⁰ In the tables and graphs that follow, evidence is presented for young people's take-up of a range of activities that might be considered 'participation', whether with peers or experts, whether for civic, political or personal reasons. Each of these activities invites from the individual user either (i) an active or creative contribution that directs or modifies the flow of events online, and/or (ii) an activity directed towards a civic or social enterprise larger than the individual exchange of information.

By comparison with traditional mass media (television, radio, cinema, the press), the activities we examine here demand more agency, motivation or content contribution from the internet user.¹¹ Hence, they suggest ways in which the internet, taken as a whole,¹² offers young people new and different opportunities that contrast with the familiar, mass reception of ready-made, professionally-produced, generally commercially-profitable information and entertainment content. In what follows, we examine children and young people's use of the internet for:

- **communicating**
- **peer-to-peer connection**
- **seeking information**
- **interactivity**
- **webpage/ content creation**

• visiting civic/ political websites

We then focus on interactivity and visiting civic websites in order to determine whether responding to the interactive offer online draws young people into an interest in civic/political content online, as hoped by those seeking to encourage young people's participation. The report concludes by identifying whether there are distinct groups of young people, defined in terms of their response to the opportunities to participate online.

Communicating

Email, chat and instant messaging are socially interactive media, meaning that users engage peer-to-peer, together constructing the communicative encounter, and so potentially reconfiguring social networks and relationships (see Table A). Among 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week:

- Email is the most popular form of online communication (72%), with more girls than boys, more middle class than working class and more older than younger children sending and receiving emails. Furthermore, girls, middle class and older children email more often.
- Instant messaging is a little more common among middle class children and is especially popular among teenagers. Middle class children and teenagers also use instant messaging more often.
- Chat rooms are comparatively little used, which is unsurprising given the safety campaigns focusing on the risks of chat and also given the recent arrival of instant messaging. It is rather more common among working class children and is little used by 9-11 year olds.

Connecting with peers

A range of online activities serve to connect peers in other ways than via forms of communication, (see Table A). Among 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week:

- At 70%, playing games online is the most popular of these activities. (Although it may not always represent a peer-to-peer connection, it does for many). Online games are more common among boys than girls and less so among older teens. Boys and younger children also play online games more often.



- Almost half (45%) of 9-19 year olds download music from the internet, with more boys than girls doing so. This activity is less popular with the younger age groups. Boys and the older age groups are also likely to download music more often.
- Only one in five (19%) visit websites of clubs they are a member of. This is more common among boys and among 16-17 year olds.
- Fewer still (14%) show an interest in visiting other people’s homepages, though it is more common among 16-17 year olds. This suggests a preference for professional over amateur websites, even though the creative opportunities to experiment with ‘user-generated content’ have been seen as an incentive for young people.

Table A: Using the internet for different types of participation, by demographics¹³

	All	Boys	Girls	ABC1	C2DE	9-11yrs	12-15yrs	16-17yrs	18-19yrs
Communicating									
Sending/ receiving email	72%	69%	75%	77%	65%	45%	71%	87%	92%
Instant messaging	55%	53%	57%	59%	50%	18%	58%	72%	65%
Using chat rooms	21%	23%	20%	19%	24%	11%	23%	26%	26%
Connecting with peers									
Playing online games	70%	75%	64%	68%	71%	78%	78%	61%	42%
Downloading music	45%	50%	39%	45%	45%	23%	47%	54%	61%
Visiting sites or clubs you’re a member of	19%	21%	16%	19%	19%	14%	17%	26%	22%
Look at other people’s personal homepages	14%	15%	15%	14%	14%	N/A	12%	19%	14%
Seeking information									
Seek information (not for school)	94%	94%	94%	95%	93%	89%	94%	96%	97%
Seek advice online	25%	26%	23%	26%	23%	N/A	21%	29%	32%
Look for news online	26%	28%	22%	28%	22%	N/A	17%	34%	41%

Base: 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=1,257), with the exception of ‘seek advice online’, ‘look for news online’ and ‘look at other people’s personal homepages’, where the base is 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=975). Note: Comparisons in bold are statistically significant at least at p<0.05.

Seeking information

Information uses, including browsing educational and entertainment sites, are near-universal (see Table A). Some of this may be the relatively passive uptake of online contents, paralleling the days of terrestrial broadcasting, but not all.

- Seeking information other than for school, done by 94% of 9-19 year olds, is slightly less common among the youngest age group and

slightly more common among middle class children.

- One in four (25%) 12-19 year olds who go online at least once a week have used the internet to get personal advice, e.g. for advice related to homework, health, sexual matters, drugs or money. This too is more common among the older age groups.
- A similar proportion (26%) of 12-19 year olds who go online at least once a week read the



news online, with more boys, more middle class children and older teenagers doing so.

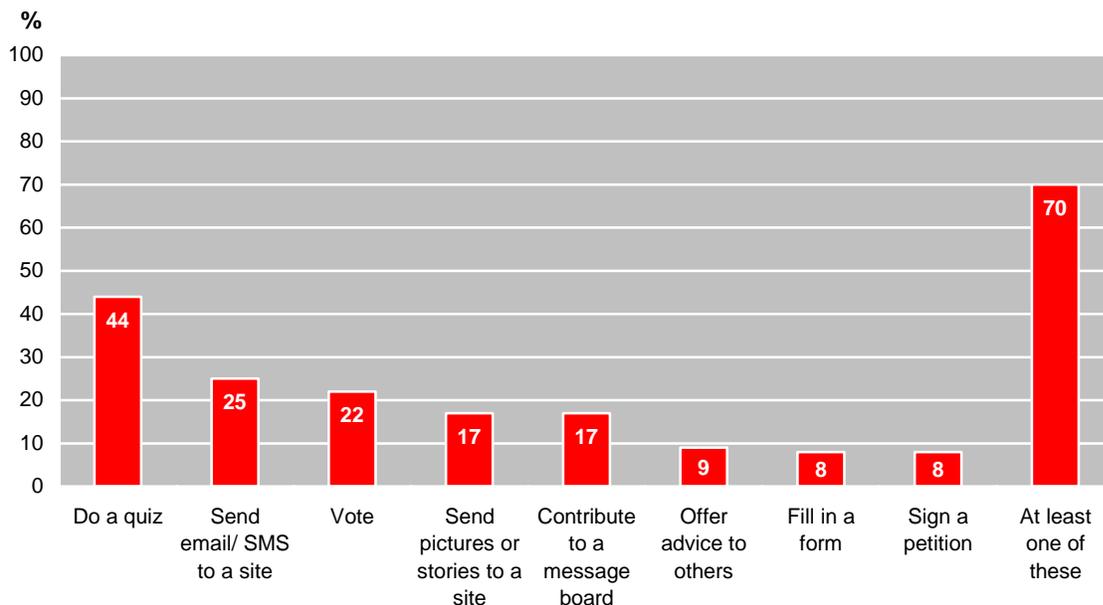
Interacting with websites

'Interactivity' has been much discussed as one of the key innovations of the internet, though definitions vary. In the UKCGO survey, we asked 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week, how they respond to a range of invitations to interact with websites.¹⁴ Each such invitation requires the user to contribute something of themselves, and each sets up the expectation that

they will receive a response, whether automatically or from another individual. Further, some imply that, by taking up the interactive invitation, the user will participate in a larger social process or a longer-term interaction with others.

- As Figure 1 shows, over two thirds (70%) report at least one form of interactive engagement with a website, suggesting a high level of interest and motivation among children and young people to be active online and perhaps helping to explain the growing attraction of the internet over television for this generation.

Figure 1: Here are some things people do on websites. Do you ever do any of these things?



Base: 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=1,257). Multiple responses allowed.

In terms of responses to specific opportunities to interact with websites:

- 44% have completed a quiz online, 25% have sent an email or text message to a website, and 22% have voted for something online – all forms of engagement regularly invited by many websites seeking to engage and attract users.
- Less common among young people, we also find that 17% have sent pictures or stories to a website, 17% have contributed to a message board, and 8% have filled in a form.

- Most civic-minded of all, perhaps, 9% have offered advice to others while 8% have signed a petition.

When we look more closely at the particular forms of interaction with websites, some specific demographic differences are evident:

- Girls are more likely to do a quiz online.
- The likelihood of sending an email or SMS to a site increases with age.
- Voting for something online is done less by working class children and the younger age groups.

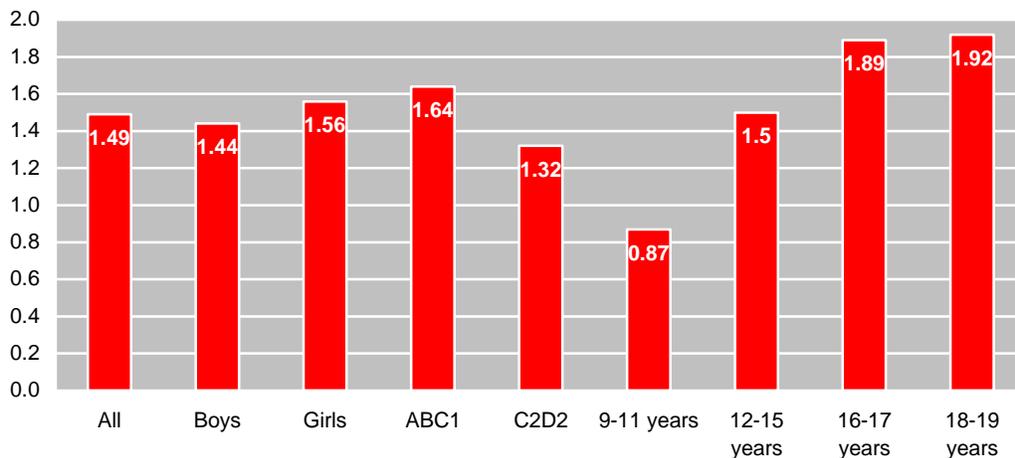


- Younger children are also less likely to send pictures or stories to a site.
- Middle class children are more likely to contribute to a message board, and it is less common for the younger age groups to do this.
- Offering advice to others is something the younger age groups are less likely to do.
- Filling in a form giving details about oneself is most common among 16-17 year olds.
- Middle class children are twice as likely to sign a petition online than are working class children, while the younger age groups are less likely to do this and those aged 16-17 most likely.

Yet, when we add together the number of ways that young people interact with websites in order to assess their breadth or range of forms of interaction, the results show that on average the breadth of interactions is rather low.

- The average number of ways of interacting is between one and two out of the possible eight (see Figure 2). This suggests that despite the many invitations to interact – to ‘tell us what you think’, ‘email us your views’, ‘join our community’, ‘have your say’ – take-up remains low.

Figure 2: Average number of ways interacted with websites, by demographics



Base: 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=1,257). Comparisons by SES and age, but not gender, are statistically significant at least at $p < 0.05$.

Again we find demographic differences:

- Middle class children interact with websites in more ways than do working class children, as do teenagers compared with younger children. This social class difference suggests the existence of a digital divide not in terms of access but in the quality and depth of use. This new divide may require some policy or educational intervention.
- The age difference is more readily explained in terms of parental concerns, for as our qualitative work has suggested, parents of young children appear to respond to anxieties over the potential risks of the internet by banning them from using

websites interactively, restricting them to simply information retrieval.

- For example, the UKCGO survey shows that, among children who use the internet at least once a week, 71% of 9-11 year olds say they are not allowed to give out personal information online (as often required in completing a quiz, voting, sending an email, etc), compared with an average of 49% for 9-19 year olds. Similarly, 29% of 9-11 year olds say they are not allowed to download things compared with an average of 17% of 9-19 year olds. Clearly, parents face a trade-off between permitting their children the freedom to explore the internet and insisting on safe practices to minimise the attendant risks.



Creating websites

Many hopes have been pinned on the new opportunities to become not only a receiver but also a producer of content. More than for any previous media, the internet makes it possible for anyone with a certain level of skills and technical resources, now fairly accessible if far from universal, to create their own content, for whatever purpose, and make it widely available on a hitherto unprecedented, even global scale.

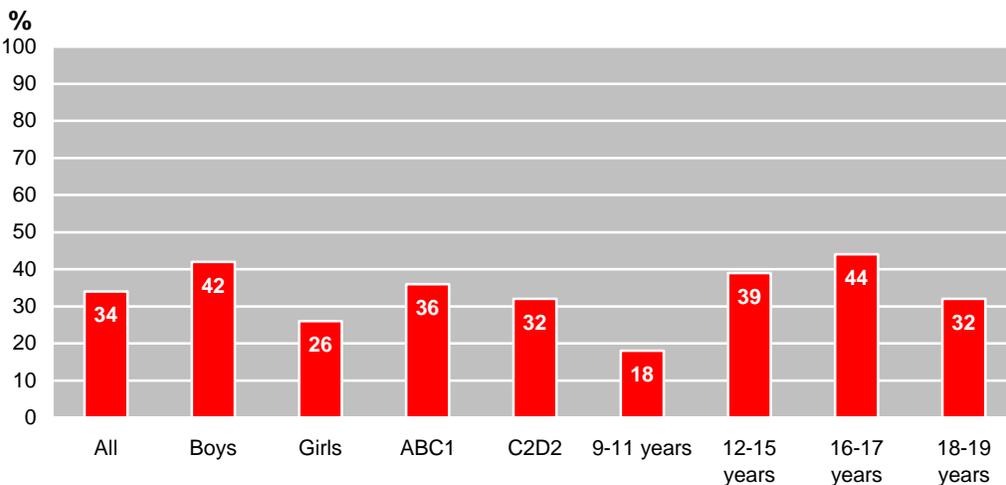
In the UKCGO survey, we asked 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week whether they have tried to set up a (see Figure 3).

- One third (34%) of young people have tried to set up their own webpage. Web design is an activity undertaken more often by boys (42%)

than girls (26%) and more by the middle age groups of 12-17 year olds than the youngest and oldest age groups. Social grade, however, does not seem to make a difference here.

- In a multiple regression analysis, it was found that while gender (boys) is the key demographic variable explaining why some young people make a website and not others, young people's experience of using the internet also makes a difference: young people who have used the internet for longer (in years) are more likely to have set up a website, as are those with higher self-efficacy¹⁵ in relation to the internet and those who spend more time online per day. Creativity online is, it seems, something that can be encouraged through the very experience of using the internet.

Figure 3: Have you ever tried to set up a webpage? By demographics



Base: 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=1,257). Note: Comparisons by gender and age, but not SES, are statistically significant at least at $p < 0.05$.

Among those who have tried to set up a webpage, we asked whether it is still online, and why they made it. Among those who have not tried, we asked why not. The findings show that making and maintaining a webpage is not easy for young people. Commonly, their webpages are not either currently online or updated regularly (Figure 4).

- Only 16% of those young people who have made a webpage say their page is online and that they work on it regularly. Further 17% say their page used to be online, but now they have taken it down; another 17% say their page is available on the net, but they haven't updated it

for a long time; 12% are not sure whether their site is still online. Indeed, the most common answer among young webpage authors is that they didn't manage to put their site online after they made it (34%). The skills or literacy required to maintain a webpage are, it seems, less widespread among young people than they would wish, given their initial interest in attempting to set up a webpage.

Figure 4 also shows that the reasons for making webpage are varied.

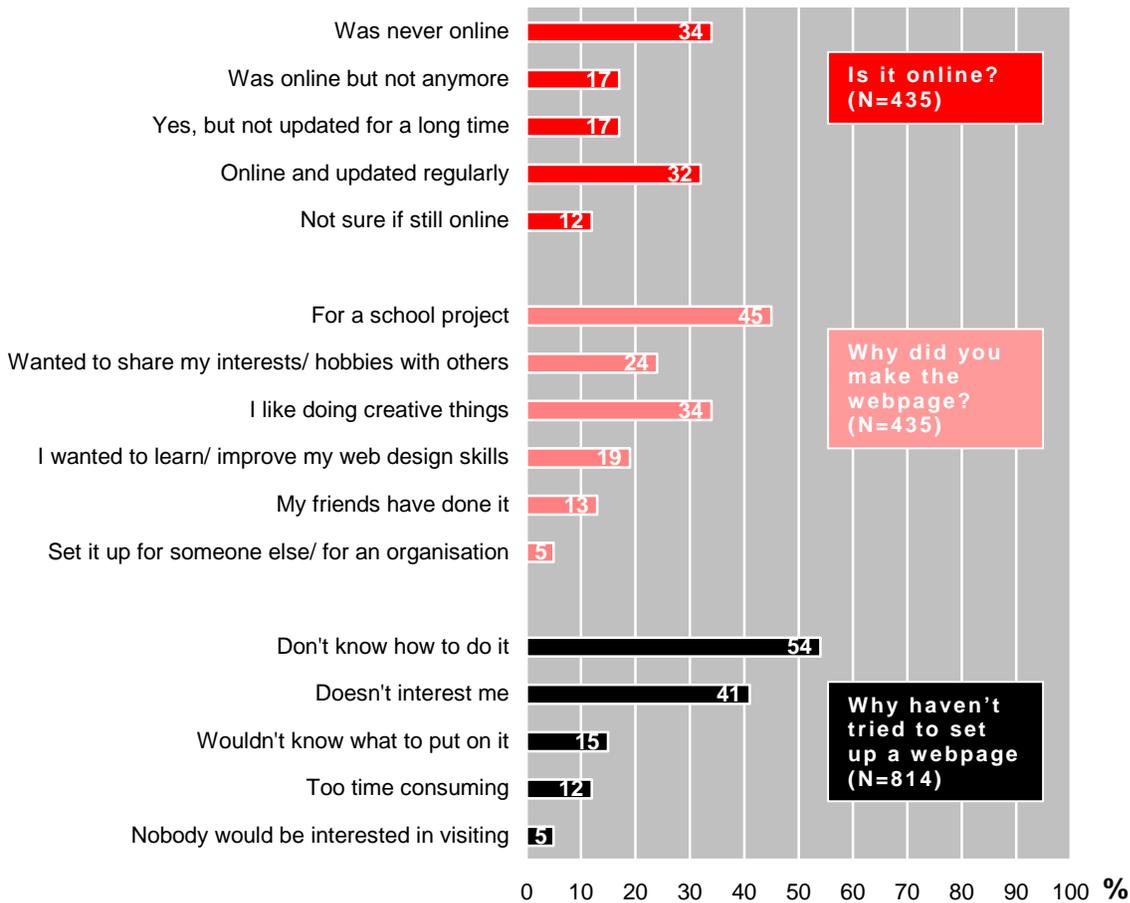


- The most common reason is for a school project, this being especially the reason why girls make them (56%, compared with 39% of boys who have made a webpage). Boys are more likely to say they made the site in order to learn or improve their web design skills (23%, compared with 11% of girls). Other reasons included wanting to share their interest or hobbies with others, enjoying creative activities or because their friends have one, and a few made the website for someone else or for an organisation. We may conclude that while young

people are motivated to create content for the internet, the school plays a clear role in motivating them and helping them achieve this activity and in providing such support to all young people equally.

"We had to make a website didn't we, for IT here? About Albert Docks. We were just given information about Albert Docks and we had to make it into a website, just stuff about Liverpool and why it's good and all that." (Nicola, 17, from Manchester)

Figure 4: Making webpages – how, why or why not?



Base: 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week and who have tried to set up a webpage for 'Is it online?' and 'Why did you make the webpage?' (N=435); 9-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week and who have not tried to set up a webpage for 'Why haven't tried to set up a webpage' (N=814)

Lastly, we asked the 65% of young people who don't have a webpage why they haven't tried to set up one.

- Reasons included not knowing what to put on it, lack of time or thinking that nobody would be interested in visiting their site. Significantly, however, more than half of them said they don't



know how to do it, again suggesting a literacy gap. This was an especially common response among the 9-11 year olds (69%), and interestingly, the youngest group was also the least likely to say that making a webpage does not interest them (28%, compared with 40-50% of the teens). These youngest children, then, have the biggest gap between motivation and skill, suggesting an ‘unmet need’ worthy of support.

Visiting civic/ political websites

The majority of sites developed both for young people and for the wider population are commercially produced as part of a business strategy of e-commerce, branding or cross-media promotion targeting the youth market. By contrast, in the UKCGO survey, we wanted to know how often young people visit sites designed to appeal to their public or civic interests, potentially linking them into wider societal and democratic processes (see Figure 5).¹⁶

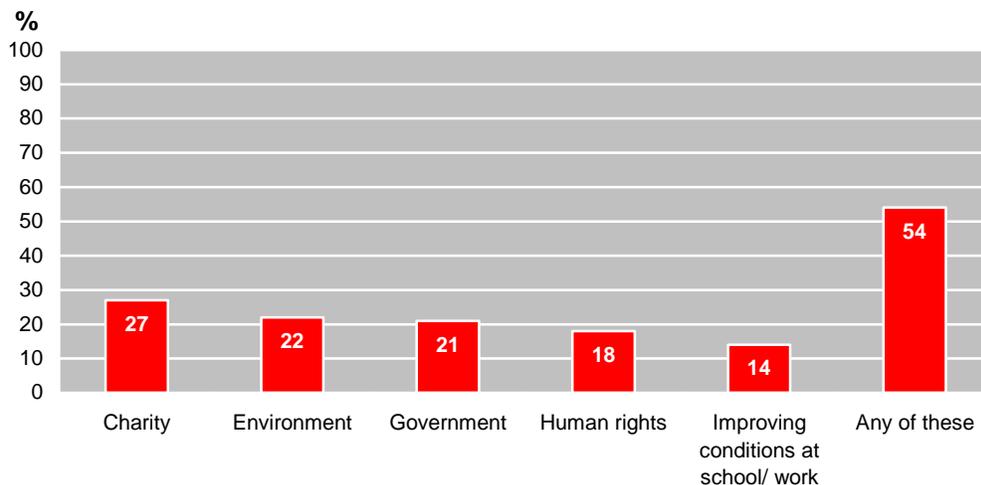
- When it comes to actively seeking out information about political, environmental, human rights or other participatory issues, over half (54%) of 12-19 year olds who go online at least once a week have visited at least one such website. Charities appear marginally more popular, but the main finding is that each civic/political area appears to generate a similar, and modest, level of interest from teenagers.

- Girls are particularly more likely to visit charity sites (31%, compared with 22% of boys) and human/gay/children’s rights sites (24%, compared with 13% of boys). Older teens (16-19) are more likely to visit charity sites (35%, compared with 20% of 12-15 year olds) and human rights sites (23%, compared with 13% of 12-15 year olds). Sites for improving conditions at school are most visited by 16-17 year olds, and Government sites are more visited by young voters (18-19) than by 16-17 year olds (18%) or 12-15 year olds (11%).

When we add together the different types of civic sites (see Figure 6), we find that:

- Girls and young middle class teenagers tend to visit a broader range of civic sites. The breadth of civic sites visited also increases steadily with age.
- On average, however, only one of these kinds of sites (out of a possible six) is visited by each individual, suggesting that overall, visiting civic websites is low on young people’s priorities. Further, only 31% of girls and 23% of boys have visited two or more kinds of sites.
- If these levels of participation are to be increased, further efforts – in design, in visibility, in communicating relevance, and in educational/ social support – will be needed.

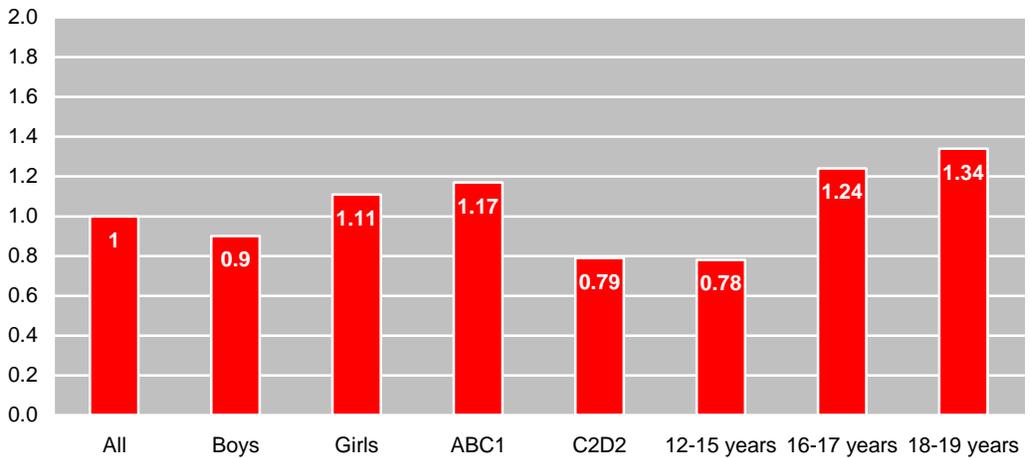
Figure 5: Have you ever visited websites about...?



Base: 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=975.) Multiple responses allowed.



Figure 6: Average number of types of civic website visited, by demographics



Base: 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least once a week (N=975). Note: All group comparisons are statistically significant at least at $p < 0.05$.

When they visit civic/political websites, what do young people do?

- The majority of 12-19 year olds who had visited such a site said that they just ‘checked it out’ (64%). Some had sent an email (18%), voted for something or signed a petition (12%) or joined a chat room (5%) on the site. It seems that for all but a minority, political and civic sites are more a source of information than an opportunity to become engaged.¹⁷
- This low level of engagement was confirmed when we asked email, IM and chat users aged 12-19 (N=828) if they discuss such political or civic issues peer-to-peer on the internet. More than half (56%) say they never talk about these issues with anyone by email, IM or chat. However, 14% have done so once or twice, 24% sometimes and 4% often.¹⁸

What about the 42% who have never visited civic/political sites?

- Most (83%) say that they are not interested in these kinds of issues. Other reasons include thinking that these sites are not intended for young people (6%), that they themselves are too young to find out about the issues covered (4%), that they do not trust or respect political organisations (4%) or do not know how to find these sites (2%).¹⁹

If we take these young people’s words at face value, low levels of online political participation

would appear to be due to a general lack of interest rather than to more specific problems, such as website design, trust or searching skills. Yet, it remains plausible that better designed websites could more effectively draw young people into political participation.

Why do some young people participate online while others do not?

The UKCGO survey findings show that in general, boys, middle class children and teenagers are more likely than girls, working class children and younger children to engage in online communication, information-seeking and peer-to-peer connection. There are some exceptions, however, most notably that girls are more likely than boys to visit civic/political sites.

Do these demographic differences provide the best explanation for variation in levels and forms of participation? Or is it, instead, that these demographic variables influence the nature and extent of internet use and that this, in turn, influences participation in online activities? For instance, is it that boys are more likely to make a webpage because they are perhaps socialised to be more interested in such activities, or is it because boys spend more time online and, thus, become more skilled in using the internet?

In other words, could the relatively lower online participation of girls, working class and younger internet users be increased if their experience and



confidence with the internet were to be increased, or would this make little difference?

To answer these questions, we must introduce into the picture some general measures of internet use, experience and expertise. In addition to the three demographic variables (age, gender and socio-economic status), three internet use variables were included in the survey: average time spent online per day,²⁰ self-efficacy²¹ and number of years using the internet. These internet use variables are, as expected, clearly related to demographic variables:

- **Age:** The youngest age group (9-11 years) has the lowest self-efficacy, the fewest years online and spends the least time online per day. In general, the older children become the higher they score on the internet use variables, except for average time per day online. The oldest age group (18-19 yrs) spends less time online per day than young people aged 16-17 years.
- **Gender:** Boys spend more time online per day, have been online for longer (in years) and have higher levels of self-efficacy.
- **Socio-economic status (SES):** Young people from the lowest socio-economic background (DE) have the lowest rating of self-efficacy, average time online per day and years of internet use.
- **The internet use** variables are also related to each other: young people who spend more time online also rate themselves as more expert internet users and vice versa, and young people who have used the internet for longer in years tend to spend longer online per day and to have a higher self-efficacy rating, and *vice versa*.

By conducting a path analysis,²² we then sought to investigate the complex relations among these variables in order to ask which young people respond to the opportunities to participate online. For a given set of variables, among which the correlations have been measured, path analysis allows the researcher to propose a causal model which can then be tested against the data.

To focus the analysis, two forms of participation were selected, i.e. interacting with websites²³ and visiting civic websites.²⁴ The former measures young people's response to the general interactive invitation of the World Wide Web, the latter measures their interest in visiting specifically civic or political sites. The analysis thus allows us to

explain each of these activities in order to ask more broadly whether those who take up the invitation to interact are more likely to be drawn into the pursuit of civic or political interests online?

These two forms of participation are found to be related to demographic and internet use variables as follows (see Figure 7):

- **Gender** directly influences visiting civic websites (girls visit a broader range of civic sites) but not interacting with websites. Gender also has a direct effect on years online (boys have used the internet for longer), but this does not then have an indirect effect on either of the participation variables, meaning that although boys have used the internet for longer on average, this does not make any difference to their level of participation online (and similarly, how long girls have used the internet for makes no difference to the finding that visit a broader range of civic sites than do boys).
- **Socio-economic status** directly influences both visiting civic websites and interacting with websites (middle-class young people visit a broader range of civic websites and also engage in a wider range of interactions on websites). Above and beyond this direct effect, socio-economic status also has an indirect effect on interacting with websites (but not on visiting civic sites) through its relationship with self-efficacy and time spent online on an average day. Hence, children from middle class families are more likely to spend more time online and they are more likely to rate themselves as internet experts which, in turn, leads them to engage in a wider range interactions on websites than working class children.
- To put this another way, the findings suggest that not only do middle class children interact more than do working class children but also that within the middle classes, those with higher self-efficacy interact even more (though those with higher self-efficacy are not more likely to visit civic sites). This suggests that if working class children were to gain in self-efficacy, this would help them 'catch up' in relation to interacting with websites, but not enough to overcome the class difference (because there is also the direct effect of class); further, one would not expect that gaining in self-efficacy would affect the range of civic sites they visit. To achieve this, a different intervention would be required.

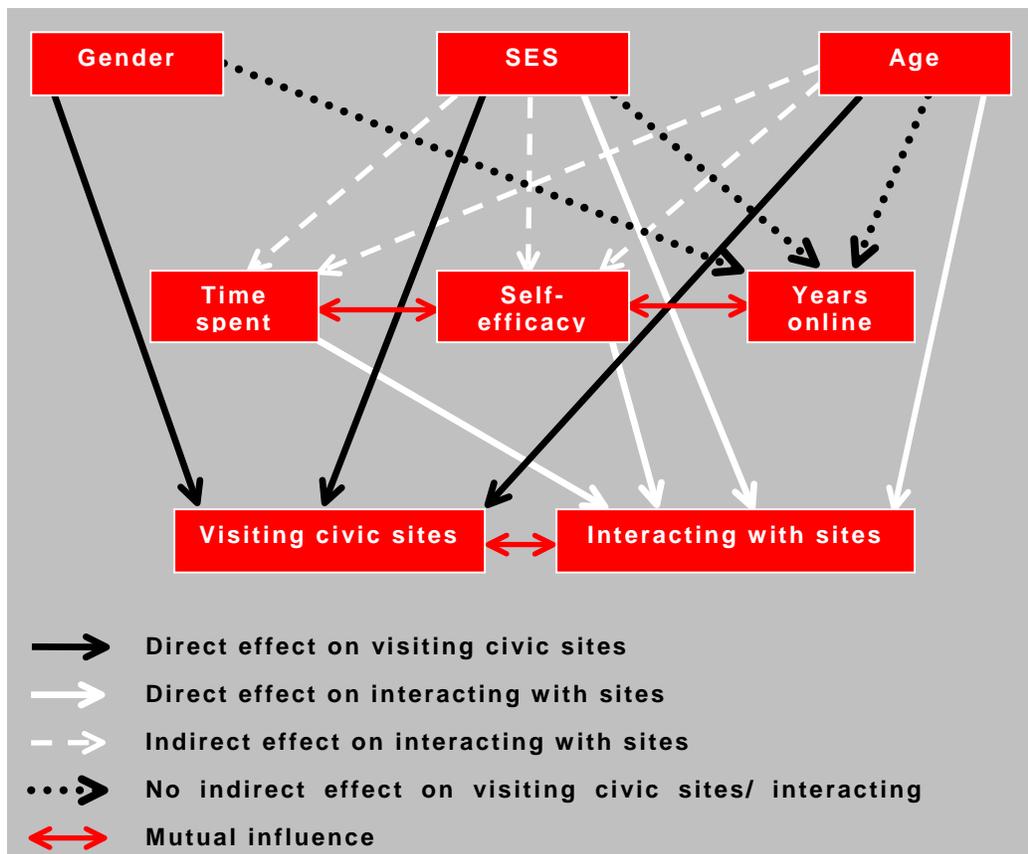


- **Age**, like socio-economic status, influences both visiting civic sites and interacting with websites directly. It also influences interacting with sites indirectly through its relationship with internet expertise and time spent online. Indeed, age is the strongest predictor of participation, with older teens both visiting a broader range of civic sites and making a broader use of interactive website features. Age also has an influence on all the internet use variables, with older teens spending more time on the internet per day, having a higher self-efficacy rating and, most predictably, having used the internet for longer in years. Since higher scores on the internet use variables lead to broader participation, age has a double effect on participation, both directly and also indirectly, through its relationship with longer average times of internet use and higher internet self-efficacy.

- There is a mutual relationship between **visiting civic websites** and **interacting with websites**. Young people who visit a broader range of civic sites also tend to make broader use of interactive website features and, conversely, those who interact more with websites are also more likely to visit a range of civic websites.

We conclude that visiting a range of civic websites is explained by demographic variables rather than by internet use, i.e. girls, middle class children and the older age groups tend to visit a broader range of civic sites. Hence, these findings provide no basis for expecting that increasing experience or expertise on the internet will lead to more of this activity. Rather, it appears that young people with certain demographic characteristics are more motivated to pursue civic interest participation than their peers, whether they use the internet more or less and whether they feel more or less self-confident.

Figure 7: Relationship between demographics, internet use variables and participation variables



Base: 12-19 who use the internet at least weekly (N=975)



However, since there is a correlation between visiting civic sites and interacting with websites in general, we may hazard the causal interpretation that, firstly, those who pursue civic interests online may be/ become more motivated to engage with the web in general and, secondly, that those who enjoy interacting with the web may become drawn into exploring civic interests online.

The path analysis also shows that interacting with websites is explained by socio-economic status and by age (with middle class children and the older age groups engaging in a broader use) but not by gender. Both older age and higher socio-economic status are related to higher average times spent online per day and higher self-efficacy, and these, in turn, are related to a broader interaction with websites. The number of years young people have been online does not make a difference to interaction with websites. Thus, age and socio-economic status, besides having a direct effect, also have an indirect effect on the breadth of interaction through these internet use variables.

Interactors, the civic-minded and the disengaged: A typology of young people online

The analysis thus far suggests that young people cannot simply be divided into those who participate more and those who participate less. Rather, a more complex explanation, based on demographic and internet use factors, leads young people to take up opportunities to participate online in different ways. We end by seeking a more nuanced characterisation of users, in order to understand how young people can be meaningfully grouped and perhaps differently addressed by those seeking to enhance their online participation.

Using the data from three key modes of participation – interacting with websites, visiting civic websites and creating websites – we conducted a cluster analysis of young people aged 12-19 who use the internet at least weekly (N=975).²⁵ This suggests three distinct groups (or ‘ideal types’) of young users of the internet:

- **Interactors:** These young people engage the most interactively with websites (especially, filling in a form about themselves online, voting for something or someone on the internet, contributing to a message board and sending an email or text message to a website), and although they are not especially likely to visit

civic websites, they are the most likely to make their own webpages.

- **The civic-minded:** These young people are not especially likely to interact with websites generally, nor are they especially likely to make their own website. Rather, they are distinctive for being much more likely to visit a range of types of civic websites, especially charity websites and sites concerned with human rights issues.
- **The disengaged:** These young people are the least active in all three areas of online participation, being much less likely than the other two groups to interact with sites, visit civic sites or make their own webpage.

Other characteristics of these groups are shown in Table B. This allows us to fill out a description of these three groups as follows:

- **Interactors:** These young people are more likely to be boys and to be middle class. They are also the most privileged in terms of domestic access, and they make the most use of the internet. As a result, they have both developed considerable online skills and discovered considerable advantages of the internet – using it not only for communication, games and music but also for advice, for news, for content creation and to respond positively to the many invitations to interact online. These young people spread their interests in using the internet widely, apparently ready to take up new opportunities as offered. Yet interestingly, this does not lead them particularly to pursue civic interests online. For this, something different – presumably based on prior interests – is required.
- **The civic-minded:** More often girls and middle class, these young people are reasonably well-provided for in terms of internet access, but this does not lead them to make more than average use of the internet. Rather, they make fairly average use of a range of online opportunities, and they consider their internet expertise to be relatively low. However, they are distinctive only for being the most likely to use the internet to visit sites of clubs they are a member of and to visit a range of civic or political websites. They are also the least likely to chat online or to download music. It seems unlikely that being presented with new opportunities on the internet is drawing these young people into new forms of participation. Rather, they appear to have developed specific interests offline and, without



feeling especially skilled, they see the internet as a valuable means of pursuing these already-developed interests.

- **The disengaged:** These young people are a little younger and from a lower socio-economic status than either the interactors or the civic-minded. Hence they are less likely to have home access to the internet or a broadband connection, helping to explain why they are generally lower, less experienced and less expert internet users. They visit the fewest websites generally, communicate less online,

and appear to gain least from the internet in a variety of ways. Although they make average use of the internet for information and for music (recall that they do go online at least once a week), they have not yet discovered the potential of the internet for a wide range of forms of participation. They are not simply disengaged as a result of low motivation, but in terms of access and skills they can be described as relatively disadvantaged. These young people, in short, remain on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Table B: Characteristics of the three groups of online participators

		Interactors	Civic-minded	Disengaged
DEMOGRAPHICS	Age	Average of 16 yrs	Average of 16 yrs	Average of 15 yrs
	Gender	More likely male	More likely female	More likely male
	Socioeconomic status	More likely ABC1	More likely ABC1	Less likely ABC1
ACCESS	Home access	Higher	Higher	Lower
	Broadband access	Highest	Average	Lowest
INTERNET USE	Frequency of use²⁶	Highest	Average	Lowest
	Average time online per day	Most	Average	Least
	Years of internet use	Most	Average	Least
	Self-efficacy/internet expertise	Higher	Lower	Lower
	Number of sites visited last week	Highest	Average	Lowest
	Number of online activities²⁷	Highest	Average	Lowest
COMMUNICATION	Frequency of using email	Highest	Average	Lowest
	Frequency of using Instant Messaging	Highest	Average	Lowest
	Frequency of using chat	Highest	Lowest	Average
PEER CONNECTION	Playing online games	Highest	Average	Lowest
	Downloading music	Highest	Lowest	Average
	Visiting sites of clubs you're a member of	Average	Highest	Lowest
	Looking at other people's personal homepages	Highest	Average	Lowest
INFORMATION	Seek information	Average	Average	Average
	Seek advice online	Most likely	Average	Least likely
	Look for news online	Highest	Average	Lowest
	Breadth of interacting with web sites	Highest	Average	Lowest
	Making web pages	Highest	Average	Lowest
	Breadth of civic sites visited	Average	Highest	Lowest

Base: 12-19 year olds who use the internet at least weekly (N=975). All group comparisons are statistically significant at least at p<0.05.



Conclusions and recommendations

This report has adopted a broad definition of online participation in order to examine how children and young people take up (or not) the various opportunities to become actively involved in a range of aspects of society mediated by the internet. Where television permits its audience to 'sit back' and relax, we have asked, does the internet invite its users to 'sit forward' and become engaged? Some of the opportunities we examine in this report facilitate peer-to-peer connection, some provide information needed to participate in society, all require young people to go beyond the content provided for them by others and to seek out, select and judge, even to create content for themselves as part of a community of actors that is bigger than any individual.

Looking across the various forms of participation online, most activities are positively correlated, if weakly, among young people. This means that the more young people use the internet for any one of these activities, the more they use it for the others; the reverse also holds.

This suggests a positive transfer of skills and interests across online activities, providing some moderate support for the possibility that young people who engage with the interactive potential of the internet become drawn into a greater range of participation, including visiting civic and political websites. Furthermore, the overall levels of visiting civic sites (more than half of 9-19 year olds) and of making one's own web content (one third of 9-19 year olds) suggest that young people are enthusiastic about trying out a range of opportunities online.

But such participation appears short-lived. They visit very few types of civic sites, presumably not finding this a promising route to participation. They may not update their personal site or even get it online, again not following through on their initial interest. We suggest that these relatively low levels of participation suggest difficulties in 'following-through' rather than in initial enthusiasm. So, rather than blaming young people for their apathy, the onus is now on content-producers and youth organisations to support and develop these initial interests in the online domain.

Similarly, the survey findings suggest that although some online activities are widespread among 9-19 year olds (especially email, seeking information in general and playing games), many

of the more 'worthy' or 'serious' opportunities are much less commonly taken up. For example, levels of news-seeking and advice-seeking, along with the use of the internet to mediate club-related or other organised social activities are all rather low, being pursued by fewer than a quarter of young internet users. These levels of participation may be lower than those concerned with young people's societal participation (on and offline) would wish.

Again, some ways of interacting with websites (completing quizzes, sending emails) are fairly common – perhaps because they are already familiar practices in other media (quizzes in magazines, phoning a radio programme, etc). But others are much less common, and this too may be because 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. Given that the take up of such opportunities online is fairly low, attention could be given to increasing young people's online participation by building further on already-familiar and commonplace activities offline.

Also of concern is the finding that online opportunities are not taken up equally. In general, boys, middle class children and teenagers are more likely than girls, working class children and younger children to engage in online communication, information-seeking and peer-to-peer connection though there are some exceptions, most notably that girls are more likely than boys to visit civic/ political sites.

The UKCGO survey also shows that boys, middle class and older teens have higher levels of internet self-efficacy, stay online longer per day and have been using the internet for longer. Crucially, however, the path analysis has suggested that increasing levels of self-efficacy and online experience may enhance interaction online over and above the effect of demographic variables, but it is unlikely to result in greater visiting of civic sites.

In other words, it appears that online interactivity and, particularly, online creativity can be encouraged through the very experience of using the internet. The same is less the case for visiting civic websites because here the key determinants of visiting such websites prove to be demographic – age, gender and social class. This suggests that young people's motivation to pursue civic interests online depends on their background and their



socialisation, and it is not affected by the amounts of time spent or levels of expertise online.

“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.” (Lorie, 17, from Essex)

Here, we might return to the lessons of our qualitative research. For young people to become more engaged with the civic potential of the internet, greater efforts are needed from the producers of civic sites to ensure that young people get something back from these sites. Beyond receiving information, it is unclear what young people stand to gain from the opportunity to ‘have their say’ online. They wonder who is listening, what happens to their votes and what will follow from their engagement. Young people certainly feel pessimistic about this, again with exceptions.

“Young people’s opinions are not at all valued, especially not by politicians.” (Anne, 15, from Essex)

“You can email your MP, but is he going to listen?” (Hazel, 17, from Essex)

“I know a friend, she has actually emailed [our MP] about the war and stuff, and how she feels toward it. And she has replied back”. (Amir, 15, from London)

“Also, like, when you send emails to people, you can also do it on MSN when the war was going on. There was like a, hmm, tribute to people in the war.” (Kim, 15, from Essex)

Nor is it clear to young people that it is ‘cool’ to take up some opportunities, a barrier which is not simply a matter of style but more importantly a matter of identity.

Pursing this question of identity, this report has found that young people who use the internet regularly fall into three categories. Interactors and visitors of civic websites form two distinct groups, both of which can be clearly distinguished from the low participators in terms of their background and other characteristics. In other words, there are those who respond most positively to opportunities to interact online. Then there are others who are already motivated to follow up on civic and political interests. The last group is disinclined to participate actively online, being, it has been suggested, socially disadvantaged – on the wrong side of the digital divide in terms of both

quality of access and quality of use.²⁸ We cannot yet know whether they will join one of the other two groups as they gain in age and experience of the internet.

The existence of two groups who participate online, both relatively advantaged but in different ways, confounds the simple hypothesis that once online, the range of opportunities will be taken up by young people. Rather, it seems that those with prior civic or political interests find the internet a useful resource for pursuing these interests while those motivated to explore the internet creatively do so, resulting in an active and creative engagement with the medium. However, this does not necessarily lead them into greater civic or political interests than before, for interaction and visiting civic websites are not to be regarded as sequenced ‘steps’ on a ‘ladder’ of participation (from minimal to more ambitious modes of participation). Rather, there are those who interact with websites but do not necessarily visit civic sites and those who visit civic sites but do not necessarily interact with websites. For those seeking to facilitate young people’s participation in society further, different strategies may be needed to appeal to each of these groups.

Such strategies are undoubtedly worth developing, however, for the overall conclusion of this report must be that children and young people are far from apathetic. Rather, they are enthusiastically ‘putting their toe in the water’, with large numbers of them making modest use of the internet, but as yet, far fewer have found the internet a sufficiently welcoming and stimulating environment to draw them into a richer use of it. The present findings suggest some ways forward:

- Design links from popular/ entertainment sites to civic/ political sites, especially to counteract the tendency of entertainment sites to be ‘sticky’, keeping users on the site rather than encouraging their further exploration of the web.
- Develop a more genuinely interactive environment in which young people’s contributions are responded to appropriately in such a way that further participation can ensue and that clear benefits are on offer.
- Address the rather dull and worthy appearance of civic sites to ensure a ‘youth-friendly’ appeal that does not undermine young people’s desire to be, and to be seen to be, ‘cool’.



- Link online participation into curriculum activities in school so that – as for creating personal homepages – other forms of participation can also be encouraged by the school (whose key advantage is that of providing skills and support on a more equal basis than exists between young people in the home).
- Consider ways to encourage younger children to participate – noting that the 9-11 year olds were the most keen, but felt the least skilled, in creating their own content.
- Address the risks encountered by young people in using the internet and, especially, parental concerns over these risks, so that both children and parents feel confident in exploring the potential of the internet safely.
- Target interventions particularly at those who appear disengaged, in order that online opportunities do not exacerbate current levels of digital exclusion.



Appendix: The UK Children Go Online research project

UK Children Go Online (UKCGO) seeks to offer a rigorous and timely investigation of 9-19 year olds' use of the internet (see www.children-go-online.net). The research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under the 'e-Society' Programme (www.london.edu/e-society), with co-funding from AOL, BSC, Childnet-International, Citizens Online, ITC and Ofcom.

Aims

The project balances an assessment of two areas of risk with two areas of opportunity in order to contribute to academic and policy frameworks on children and young people's internet use:

- 1 Access, inequalities and the digital divide
- 2 Undesirable forms of content and contact
- 3 Education, informal learning and literacy
- 4 Communication, identity and participation

Methods

The UKCGO research design consists of 3 phases (April 2003 - April 2005):

- 1 Qualitative research: 14 focus group interviews with 9-19 year olds around the UK (summer 2003), nine family visits and in-home observations (2003/4), a children's online panel.
- 2 Quantitative research: A major national, in-home, 40-minute face to face survey of 1,511 9-19 year olds and 906 parents of the 9-17 year olds, using Random Location sampling across the UK. The fieldwork, conducted via multimedia computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) with children, and a paper questionnaire completed by their parents, took place between 12 January and 7 March 2004 and was carried out by BMRB International.
- 3 Qualitative research: This will follow up findings from the survey with focus group interviews and observations in autumn 2004, together with a reconvening of the children's online panel.

UKCGO children's survey sample

In this report, percentages have been weighted in accordance with population statistics; sample sizes are reported as unweighted. The sample characteristics (N=1511) are as follows:

Age	9-11 years (N=380), 12-15 years (N=605), 16-17 years (N=274), 18-19 years (N=251)
Gender	Boys (N=668), Girls (N=842)
SES	ABC1 (N=682), C2DE (N=829)
Region	England (N=1,232), Wales (N=69), Scotland (N=161), Northern Ireland (N=48)
Ethnicity	White (N=1,333), Non-white (N=169)

Reports

Livingstone, S., & Bober, M. (2003, October). *UK Children Go Online: Listening to young people's experiences*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science. www.children-go-online.net.

Livingstone, S., & Bober, M. (2004, July). *UK Children Go Online: Surveying the experiences of young people and their parents*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science. www.children-go-online.net.

To receive updates about forthcoming UKCGO reports, please email m.bober@lse.ac.uk.



Endnotes

1 Children and Young People's Unit (2001). *Learning to Listen: Core principles for the involvement of children and young people*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

2 IPPR (2004). *Manifesto for a Digital Britain - Overview*. <http://www.ippr.org/research/files/team34/project214/Manifesto%20-%20intro%20document.pdf>

3 See UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm.

4 Kimberlee, R. (2002). Why Don't British Young People Vote at General Elections? *Journal of Youth Studies*, 5(1), 85-98.

5 Livingstone, S. & Bober, M. (2003) *UK Children Go Online: Listening to young people's experiences*. London School of Economics and Political Science. www.children-go-online.net.

6 All names of children interviewed have been changed to protect their anonymity. The research ethics policy for *UK Children Go Online* can be found on the project website, www.children-go-online.net.

7 The *UK Children Go Online* survey shows that 98% of children and young people aged 9-19 in the UK have used the internet. This figure is around twice that of the adult population: in the UK, 58% of adults aged 16+ had used the internet by February 2004 (see Office of National Statistics, www.statistics.gov.uk).

8 A recent review in the USA reveals a burgeoning of such online opportunities (see K. Montgomery, et al., 2004, *Youth as E-Citizens*, www.centerforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/youthreport.pdf). In the UK, sites include www.young.gov.uk, www.need2know.co.uk or www.epal.tv.

9 The UKCGO survey found 41% of daily internet users, 43% of weekly users, 13% of occasional users and 3% of non-users among 9-19 year olds in the UK.

10 Others are welcome to disagree with our broad definition of participation. Debating this can only be productive in guiding future research on young people, the internet and 'participation'.

11 We do not mean to oversimplify here. Of course, broadcasting and the press can support active citizens seeking information, for example, or engaging in dialogue; and of course the internet may be used for rather aimless searches or chat from which little of consequence follows.

12 We recognise that many elements of the internet have direct parallels in other technologies of information, communication and entertainment, but what is distinctive about the internet is that it combines, increasingly even converges, these different activities in a single artefact, facilitating the easy synthesis of different forms of activity and encouraging an interactive engagement with diverse contents.

13 Throughout this report, the market research category ABC1 is described as 'middle class' households and C2DE is described as 'working class' households.

14 Specifically, we asked if they complete quizzes online, send in pictures or stories to a website, offer advice to others on the internet, complete online forms about themselves, sign petitions, vote for something or someone online, contribute to a message board or send an email or text message to a website.

15 Self-efficacy (or self-rated internet expertise) was assessed on a four-point scale, with respondents being asked whether they think of themselves as a beginner, average, advanced or expert in using the internet.

16 In framing these questions, we sought to avoid the term 'politics', having discovered in qualitative work that this is a 'turn-off' for many young people. The survey questions asked specifically about visiting civic sites that concerned human rights/ gay rights/ children's rights, protecting the environment, improving conditions at school, charities or organisations that help people and Government websites.

17 In a multiple regression analysis seeking to predict which young people interact with these sites (in terms of demographic and internet use variables), only age was a significant predictor of interaction: older teens are more likely to interact with civic websites and not just visit them or look for information.

18 In a multiple regression analysis seeking to predict which young people discuss these issues on the internet (in terms of demographic and internet use variables), age and self-efficacy were significant predictors: older teens and those more confident of their online expertise are more likely to have discussed these issues with others on the internet.

19 Older teens are more likely to say they are not interested or do not trust these websites while the younger teens (12-15 years) are (unsurprisingly) more likely to consider themselves too young to be visiting such websites. Furthermore, boys are more likely to consider themselves too young, and girls are less trusting of such sites.

20 We asked 9-19 year olds to estimate the time they spend online on a typical weekday and a typical weekend day. From this, a composite score was calculated for the average time spent online per day.

21 See endnote 15 on self-efficacy.

22 Path analysis is used to assess the relative importance of various direct and indirect causal paths to the dependent variable. The statistical program AMOS5 was used to build the causal model discussed in this report.

23 A factor analysis of ways of interacting with websites showed that the eight activities measured earlier (see Table 1) do not form a single scale; rather, doing a quiz and sending pictures/stories to a website are separate from the other six. For the six items that do hold together to form a single scale, a new variable was created (range: 0-6) by adding together these ways of interacting with websites: sending email/SMS to a site, voting for something online, contributing to a message board, offering advice to others, filling in a form and signing a petition.

24 The six point scale for breadth of visiting civic sites was used here (as in Table 5).

25 A cluster analysis seeks to identify meaningfully homogenous subgroups of cases (here, individuals) in a population. For this cluster analysis, the furthest neighbour technique was used in SPSS 11.5.

26 Respondents were asked whether they use the internet several times a day/ about once a day/ a couple of times a week/ about once a week/ a couple of times a month/ about once a month/ less often/ never.

27 Respondents were asked 'Which of these things do you do on the internet nowadays?'. A composite score ranging from 0-10 was created for the total number of online activities.

28 Livingstone, S., & Bober, M. (2004). Taking up online opportunities? Children's uses of the internet for education, communication and participation. Forthcoming in *E-Learning*, www.worlds.co.uk/ELEA.