YOUTH ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

Online participation in government decision making using the Internet and social networking technologies are expected to advance democracy, improve government decisions, increase citizens' trust in government, and enhance government accountability and transparency. Technologically savvy, immersed in the Internet and social networking, young citizens are creating new opportunities for governments to engage them online in consultative and decision making processes. However, not much is known about how to encourage young people to participate and engage online in these processes on a large scale. Their motivations for, and impediments to, participation are not well understood (Coleman, 2008). This paper contributes to better understanding of online youth participation and challenges of increasing participation by i) proposing a framework to explore levels of e-participation (the 'engagement ladder'), ii) presenting a field study of youth (aged 9-18) online participation in government decision making on public spending, and iii) by discussing field study results, including some practical problems and theoretical concerns for climbing the engagement ladder. The study confirmed young people's willingness to participate in government consultation then they believe in its authenticity and when they are engaged in their natural habitat – social networking spaces. The paper discusses features of consultation that motivated increasing participation and those that impeded it.

1. INTRODUCTION

Online or electronic participation (e-participation) of citizens in politics enabled or mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the Internet is transforming representative democracy and forms of political deliberation and government decision making (Tambouris et al., 2007; Sanford & Rose, 2007; Coleman, 2004; Gronlund, 2003). Unlike broadcast media that widely disseminate news and information to be consumed by citizens and thus produce 'one-way conversation' (Postman, 1986), the Internet enables interactive political discourses and inclusive citizens' engagement. By stimulating peer-to-peer content creation and sharing and creative expression, Web 2.0 and especially social networking technologies, pave the way for new models of democracy where citizens can connect with each other and with their elected representatives and engage in political dialogues and government consultations (Tambouris et al., 2007; Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005; Gronlund, 2003). These new technologies are making feasible the concept of electronic public sphere that expresses the ideal of a free, non-coercive, inclusive and meaningful participation by citizens in politics and civic affairs (Chambers, 2003; Dahlberg, 2001).

The use of ICT, the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies for political participation and engagement has a particular appeal to young citizens. Disenchanted with traditional politics, well-versed in ICT and immersed

in the Internet in their everyday lives, young people are at the forefront of online activism. Yet this activism seems to be disconnected from traditional modes of political engagement centred on political parties and governments. A disengaged youth view emphasizes declining youth interest in public affairs, government and voting in elections, accompanied by falling trust in official mass media and political institutions (Bennett, 2008). The decline in democratic participation at the time when the Internet is providing unprecedented opportunities for electronic communication and consultation on the large scale is recognized as a paradox of the information age (Coleman, 2004). The disengaged youth thesis is however questioned as young people engage in non-traditional ways. For instance, youth-led activism through social networking, via entertainment websites and campaigning against the war or globalization, are new and emerging forms of political action that are changing politics as we know it (Vromen 2007; Kotilainen & Rantala, 2009).

While this controversy persists, it is interesting to observe that the nature of youth online participation and opportunities for inclusion in democratic processes are not widely researched (Kotilainen & Rentala, 2009). There is a lack of understanding of motives and barriers for young people to engage in civic affairs and deliberative processes, and of strategies that might be adopted to attract young people to online participation and consultation. These are motivations behind this paper which aims to contribute to better understanding of possible strategies for online youth consultation in government decision making. The paper draws from a field study of a youth online consultation project conducted by the NSW Government in Australia during Dec. 2008 – May 2009. The project explored and tested the use of web-based and online social networking technologies for the purpose of engaging young people (aged 9-18) in making decisions about Government expenditure in the "Better Futures" programme that funds youth projects in NSW. The results from the study are discussed and interpreted within a conceptual model of e-participation (named the 'engagement ladder'). By investigating different modes of engagement and different strategies for attracting young people to express their preferences for youth projects to be funded in the programme, the paper makes a contribution to better understanding of youth online participation including some practical problems and theoretical concerns in increasing e-participation and climbing the engagement ladder.

The paper first presents the literature review of e-participation (section 2) and then proposes 'the engagement ladder' framework that defines different levels of online participation (section 3). This is followed by the description of the field study in section 4 and the analysis of the deployment of different engagement strategies and the resulting behaviour and activities by young people – their attraction to and involvement in consultation – in section 5. Finally, the paper discusses the challenges of youth online participation and concludes with suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 E-participation

There is a growing body of diverse literature on youth online participation, e-democracy and technological infrastructure in disciplines as diverse as information science, information systems, computer science, political science, communication studies, social study of technology, sociology and social work, and more (see e.g. Saebo et al., 2008; Tambouris et al., 2007). Numerous theoretical studies of e-democracy and e-participation explore models and principles of deliberative democracy and rational discourse relevant for the electronic public sphere (Chambers, 2003; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001; Conover et al., 2001; Dahlberg, 2001; Habermas, 1989). They define conditions for free, non-coercive, rational and inclusive debate and deliberative processes. Critical issues related to access, equality, education, communicative competence, and lack of guidelines and norms are raised calling for further empirical research.

Numerous studies examine barriers to e-participation (Loader, 2007; Tambouris et al., 2007). They include: citizens' lack of trust in political institutions that their contributions will be taken seriously and lack of commitment from politicians and government to take into account citizen contributions or to interact with citizens via ICT (politico-strategic barriers); organisational and legal barriers such as difficulty in adapting existing structures to accommodate participation through electronic media; shortages of skills and resources; constraints set by existing legislation around privacy; social barriers such as behavioural patterns, cultural attitudes, lack of political knowledge, information and technological illiteracy and unequal access to technology; technological barriers such as infrastructure deficiencies and lack of specifically designed tools;

and deployment barriers including lack of guidelines and support for e-participation tools, lack of experience of large scale implementations and insufficient knowledge exchange between research and practice (Tambouris et al., 2007). Young people face additional barriers. They are often excluded from the political process and denied rights adults take for granted (Bessant, 2003), thus they have participation barriers arising from their status as young people.

Early e-participation efforts have been based upon traditional government and policy making frameworks with centralised hierarchical structures, one-to-many communications and "push" models of interaction. These approaches treat the Internet as just another tool for the same kind of information broadcasting as traditional media (Flew & Young, 2004). This however is changing and we can read that many governments in developed countries are engaging in online consultation where participants "become authors, dispatchers, receivers, and controllers of communication" rather than passive receivers of information (Tomkova, 2009). There is a growing use of newer technologies such as chat, electronic discussion forums, group decision support systems, blogs, wikis and other Web 2.0 developments (Virkus, 2008; Sanford & Rose, 2007; O'Reilly, 2007).

2.2 Youth Participation

Young people (between 9-18) are often perceived as "apprentice" or "incomplete citizens" (Matthews, 2001) or "citizens-in-the-making" (Collin, 2008). Their participation in politics and civic affairs is often viewed as a privilege rather than a right. This is usually based on perceptions that young people are not yet capable of participating and on uncertainty about appropriate ways for them to participate (Matthews, 2001). As a result much of the youth participation literature has a narrow definition of participation as involvement in community, cultural, voluntary or educational opportunities. Even in government sponsored "Youth Roundtables" there is no commitment or requirement for government to act upon the recommendations of participants (Bessant, 2003).

There is a perception that young people have become disengaged from political processes and other civic affairs (Bennett, 2008). Evidence for this is cited in the reluctance of young people to vote in elections and the rising age of membership of political parties. Recent attitude surveys reveal young people distrust politicians and political processes (Loader, 2007). It is reported that in Canada, the United States, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, that young people are less likely to vote than their older compatriots (Archer & Coletto, 2007). A recent news article reported that over 20% of Australians aged from 18-24 are not even registered to vote (Hudson, 2009). Loader (2007) however suggests changes such as globalization, individualization, deinstitutionalization, increased mobility, consumerism and new media such as the Internet may serve to disguise participation. Young people may be participating in ways less visible to their elders, engaging in "single issue political campaigns and the politics of lifestyle, environment, global justice, anti-poverty and what have been described as the "identity project" " (Loader, 2007, p. xii). Collin (2008) summarises this as young citizens being mobilised by causes or issues rather than the state. These issues are more likely to be centred on new social movements and advocacy networks rather than the traditional associations of unions, political parties or churches.

An alternative view is that it is not young people who have become disaffected with political participation and engagement, but politicians and others involved in traditional politics that have distanced themselves from young people. By failing to understand or relate to the ways in which society and therefore young peoples' lives have changed and the important role of new media in these changes, politicians miss the potential development of young people's engagement and participation, and therefore political self efficacy, which these media may enable (Buckingham, 2007; Loader, 2007). Youth culture is heterogeneous and contextualised in use of new media which can be seen to both facilitate and inhibit democratic participation (Vromen, 2007).

Youth online participation, the use of the Internet and especially new social media technologies raise many issues for practice and research. Among the key issues is the understanding of the nature of online participation and the desired and actual degree of engagement in consultative and deliberative processes, to which we turn next.

3. ENGAGEMENT LADDER -- A FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING E-PARTICIPATION

E-participation in the civic arena is a very broad term that assumes a range of different types of participation and different levels of participants' engagement (Kotilainen & Rantala, 2009; Sanford & Rose, 2007). To define it more precisely we propose an *engagement ladder* that identifies qualitatively different levels from *non-participation*, to *passive participation* (level I), to *active participation* (level II), to *pro-active participation* in consultative and deliberative processes (level II), presented in Figure 1.
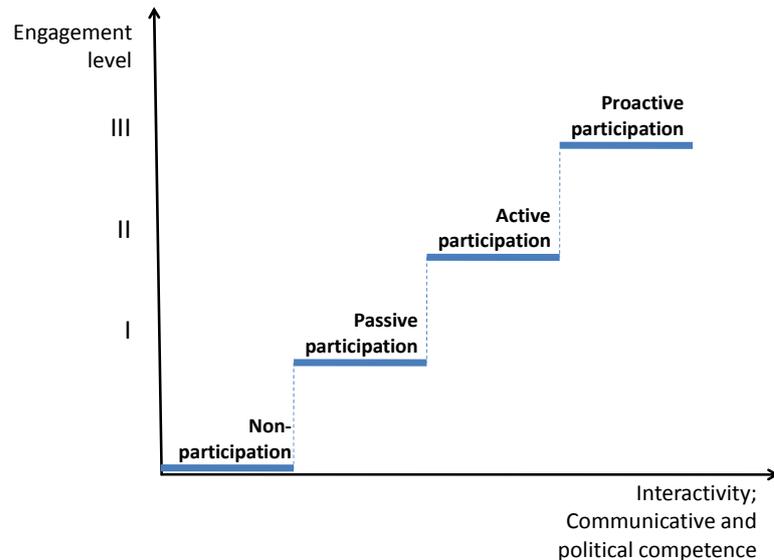

Figure 1. Engagement ladder of e-participation in deliberative and consultative processes

Young people not interested in civic or political issues or non-participants seem to be a majority. For instance, in their survey of young people in Finland, Kotilainen and Rantala (2009) found that 72% of them did not visit civic sites. They considered themselves to be a 'non-political person', they didn't believe in the opportunity to have a say or lacked interest.

Level I, passive participation, refers to practices of seeking information, accessing and consuming content available in the electronic public spaces but not contributing to them. Passive participants, also called 'seekers' by Kotilainen and Rantala (2009, p. 671), are present online, visit websites and are informed about issues and actions, but do not respond or contribute personally to them. Many government websites that disseminate information assume passive participation and count the number of visitors as a measure of success. Communication is one way and mimics the broadcast media. The requirements for passive participation are Internet access and information, ICT and the Internet competence, as well as an ability to comprehend and make sense of posted texts, pictures and videos.

Level II, active participation, denotes interactive engagement where participants respond to, comment on, and engage with issues, proposals, and debates in the public sphere. Communication can be one-to-many when for instance a government institution invites participants to debate or vote on a particular topic. It can also be many-to-many when participants respond to each others' views in a debate (Tambouris et al., 2007; Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005). Level II engagement involves interactive engagement and requires higher communicative and political competence than Level I. Active participation may range from answering questions and voting to engaging in debates. When active participants contribute to debates and create public opinion they not only require the mastery of the Internet and Web tools, but also and more importantly, ability to engage in a discourse, express ideas and articulate views in response to an agenda and others' postings.

Level III, pro-active participation, denotes the highest degree of engagement where participants initiate public debates, define agendas, attract other participants and engage in discussions about civic matters, with or without the involvement of government institutions. New social movements and advocacy networks initiated by young citizens (Collin, 2008) present an example of pro-active participation. As initiators, authors, dispatchers and controllers of communicative processes (Tomkova, 2009) pro-active participants (called 'activists' by Kotilainen & Rantala, 2009) take charge of discussions and deliberations. This level of engagement can be seen to epitomise the highest degree of democratic governance and citizens' responsibility. It thus requires the highest level of communicative and political competence.

From the government perspective engagement level I and II are of particular importance. Within the framework, the aim of governments to increase online youth participation can be articulated as climbing the engagement ladder (Figure 1):

a)   transformation of non-participants to passive participants (level I) and
b)   transformation of passive participants (level I) to active participants (level II).

In addition to these transformation processes young people, and in particular young activists, are interested in the third one:

c)   transformation of both passive (level I) and active participants (level II) to pro-active participants (level III).

Apart from general barriers to participation (Loader, 2007; Tambouris et al., 2007) the specific motivations, incentives and barriers involved in climbing the engagement ladder are not well known.

In this paper we examine transformation processes a) and b). The rationale behind the NSW Government consultation project was to investigate ways of increasing youth participation in government decision making and specifically strategies to encourage and support the transition a) from non-participation to passive participation then the transition b) from passive to active participation.

4.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve our research aims we conducted the field study throughout the natural course of the NSW Government online consultation project. The field study enabled us to become immersed into the electronic spaces inhabited by young people, observe firsthand their activities and have a limited interaction with them (Gorman & Clayton, 2005; Neuman, 2005).

The authors were part of a project team that the NSW Government Department of Community Services (DoCS) engaged to conduct the experimental youth online participation project on their behalf. Apart from the authors, the team included social and digital media experts and DoCS representatives. DoCS sought to consult young people (aged 9-18) about their preferences for funding youth projects (in amounts of $30,000 or less) under the "Better Futures" programme in 2009-2010 (a policy under the NSW Minister for Youth) in 2 regions in NSW (the North and Central Coast) involving a mixture of urban and rural populations. Apart from seeking young people's views and suggestions about actual expenditure in 2009-2010, DoCS also aimed to learn about the use of Web 2.0 social networking tools and explore whether and how young people could be encouraged to participate in government consultation and decision making.

The field study of youth consultation in the targeted regions took place from mid-January to mid-April 2009. It began with an examination of social networking sites, investigating the presence of young people from the targeted regions. It was found that young people from both regions have a strong presence online in social networking sites such as BeBo, YouTube, MySpace and Facebook but little presence on local websites, blogs or forums. These findings informed the development of a strategy for reaching young people both face-to-face and online and assisted in attracting them to a consultation site where they were invited to express their preferences.

The field study then followed the five stages of the youth consultation project:

1. Interviews. Consultation started with "vox pop" video interviews with 80 young people along the Central Coast and in Port Macquarie between January 30 and February 3 2009. Young people were interviewed about their proposals for youth projects in their region – more playgrounds, music events, sporting equipment and competitions (skating or surfing were popular), protecting environment, and so on. Interviews were conducted in their natural environments: around schools, in playgrounds, on beaches, in parks and entertainment sites. Young people eagerly expressed their views. They also answered questions

about their use of the Internet: all but one respondent regularly accessed the internet, typically spending 1-2 hours per day. The majority of online time was spent on MSN instant messenger (chat), BeBo and MySpace.

2. Short listing of proposals: The 80 interviews were analysed and the young people's proposals recorded and classified. A shortlist of the five most frequently occurring proposals was constructed:

1. Plant more trees and raise awareness about sustainability and the environment
2. Youth Centre - create a space where young people can hang out, listen to music, talk with friends
3. Sports competitions – start running skate, surf and BMX competitions and workshops for kids
4. Sporting equipment – more sporting equipment for local kids to use like footballs and other equipment for team sports
5. More Under 18 events with local bands and artists.

3. *Your Spin* - The interactive online game. An interactive online game was developed which encouraged young people to vote for the activities represented by the five proposals which they would like to be funded in their region. Each of the projects was 'advocated' by a selection from the vox pop young people's interviews, collated into videos of about two minutes in length. They were displayed in an interactive DJ game *Your Spin* designed on a web Portal. The idea of "spin" reflects the spin of a disc jockey's turntable. The key was to design an interactive game online which was 'cool'. The game used the theme of 'spin' to attract and encourage young people to have their say and express preferences for the proposals on which to spend the money. A participant can see all videos and then vote to express his/her preferences for funding. After they voted young participants were expected to click the "Get your prize" button on the Your Spin website. This button was designed to attract young people to click and open a questionnaire. The web-based survey included questions about their views of the Government's intention to consult them, their use of the Internet and social networking and also some demographic data. The prizes were downloadable tunes for mobile phones.

The design of the Your Spin game with young people featuring in all the video content reiterated a popular myth that 'everybody's a star' in the electronic space. The design was tested with young people leading to several improvements.

4. Comprehensive viral campaign. The team experimented with different "viral campaign" strategies involving traditional media announcements and interactive on line processes, utilising social networking technologies to "drive" young people towards a web portal which contained *Your Spin* game that they could play and at the same time "vote" on particular issues. Several strategies were used as part of the overall viral campaign (Bollier, 2008), including:

- The use of 'connectors' in the community: the kids in the videos were the connectors who helped spread the videos and *Your Spin* within their community;
- Enlisting the support of local schools and community leaders: In the initial week, school newsletter items were provided to all major schools in the areas targeted;
- Building awareness on local radio and TV including advertisements, announcement spots and live radio interviews;
- A *stencil campaign* (coloured chalk drawings on pavements and walls) in areas where young people gathered helped to spread the message and encourage youth to go online and check out the website;
- Building the online community in the second week of the campaign with a particular focus on high school study sites and special interest communities; Young people were invited to join online communities that were built on YouTube, BeBo and MySpace for the project.

5. Analysis and Reporting to DoCS. After two months the campaign ended and voting sites closed. The project team reported both the process and the voting results to DoCS. The Your Spin campaign attracted visitors and created many "friends" in social media communities: MySpace, BeBo and YouTube totalling **8,067 viewers** during the two months campaign. Importantly, as well as "friending" with, and viewing the videos 1,145 young people voted on the Your Spin site, 421 on the BeBo poll and 460 on the MySpace poll totalling **2,026 votes** in all (see the detailed project report Hull et al., 2009).

In both the Your Spin interactive game and the social networking page polls, music events received the highest number of votes, followed by sporting competitions, youth centre facilities, sporting equipment and environment protection initiatives. While music events ranked highest in each poll, there were some slight variations in the ranking orders from the different polls. DoCS subsequently made funding decisions in the "Better Futures" programme based on the voting results. Learning from this project about youth online participation was reported and discussed in the NSW Parliament.

As researchers we had access to all activities and social networking sites but could not have direct contact or interview with young participants. The questionnaire accessed via "Get Your Prize" button (designed to collect participants' views and demographics) was filled in by only 10 participants. Our analysis is based on observations and data collected via social networking sites.

5. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The challenge for many governments is to increase online youth participation in government decision making. More specifically governments seek to encourage and support the transition a) from non-participation to passive participation (level I) and then the transition b) from passive to active participation (level II) as defined by the engagement ladder in Figure 1. The NSW consultation project demonstrated how a considerable number of young people can be attracted to and engaged in the online consultation process very quickly with a variety of viral strategies targeting youth groups in the regions. However, not all strategies worked. And different strategies had different roles in the process. We analyse the process further to better understand the issues in online youth participation and the climbing of the engagement ladder.

Using the website Your Spin voting game and the social networking alone did not bring a large number of young people to the sites. A range of strategies both online and in traditional media was deployed to prompt the transition of young people from non-participants to passive and then to active participants. The Your Spin game was launched in the week of February 9-16. Its launch, announced with an email to the 80 "connecters" who were interviewed in the videos and acted as "stars" in the game, caused an initial flurry of activity with the game. This was closely followed by the school and community emails which reinforced the rise of views. By February 29 the activity levels dropped. This is visible in the graph of visitors to one of the sites for Your Spin interactive game (Figure 2). Another spike in activity occurs at around March 9th after BeBo and MySpace poles, and then the Facebook ads and media releases were commenced. Yet another spike occurred around the 20th March after the stencils were chalked. The track of visitors in other sites shows a similar pattern. The total number of visitors to all Your Spin sites grew to 8,067 throughout the campaign. Such success in attracting young people to Your Spin and in motivating their transition to passive participants can be attributed to several key strategies.

First, local young people featured as "stars" in the content: Your Spin interactive game involving video clips of young people proposing projects to be funded and the videos (extracts from filmed interviews) posted on social networking calling for action. These young people were the connectors in the community helping the spread of videos and the link to the Your Spin game. The proposals for projects to be funded by the "Better Futures" programme presented by these young people illustrated that young people's opinions were valued and provided audience credibility. Second, the videos looked like their own peer-created content and thus easily blended in youth networking. This was evident in their social activity and the intensity of sharing of the links to the game with their friends and family. The video content of these young people provided an important anchor for the social networking pages. Third, the campaign combined the online and the traditional media. Local school newsletter announcements, local radio and TV ads helped draw attention to the "Better Futures" programme and the opportunity for young people to be involved in the decision making. The stencils coloured in chalk on pavements and walls in busy areas where young people gathered had the same purpose. They all raised local young people's interest and motivated them to visit Your Spin sites. Fourth, building the online community in social networking through Facebook ads, videos on YouTube, the interactive Your Spin poles in BeBo and MySpace, helped drive traffic to the Your Spin game. These four strategies together were successful in increasing awareness, raising interests, motivating visits and driving traffic to Your Spin sites thus enabling the transition of 8000+ young people from non-participants to visitors or passive participants within the span of two months.
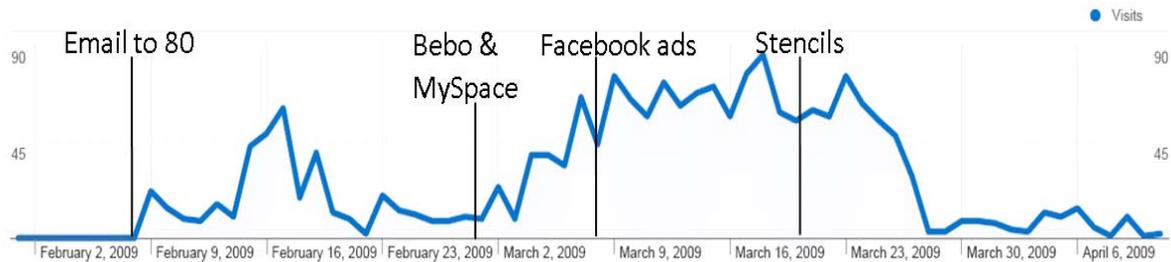
Figure 2. Visits to interactive game

It is important to note that only about 2000+ young people out of these 8000+ visitors expressed their position regarding the proposed projects and voted. In other words, only 25% of the visitors made a transition from passive to active participants. This is consistent with findings in other studies where only a fraction of 'observers' actively engaged (see e.g. Kotilainen & Rantala, 2009; Coleman, 2004). What is of interest in the online spaces is to examine the motivation and impediments for active participation. While this question deserves broader elaboration and investigation, we report here some limited findings from our field study.

To engage in voting in the first half of the consultation process required opening the Your Spin game website. The web statistics indicate that when the voting activity required a participant to move from one site to another, for example from my MySpace or BeBo to the interactive game, a considerable proportion of participants will not make the transition. Leaving a social networking site and going to another website to complete the task of voting required it seems too much of an effort. We were not able to probe why this was so or to determine what would motivate them to make the move.

Another impediment to active participation was the perception that government representatives engaged in the consultation were older people. For instance, during the project it was observed that a young person could instantly detect an older person's voice during a chat or in reading the questionnaire. They were much more likely to respond in interviews with younger staff members and to text written by younger people. This was confirmed by the very low response rate to the survey available on the Your Spin website under the button "Collect Your Prize". Despite the reward of free telephone ring tones only ten responses were received. Some comments suggested that the survey had a feel of an adult talking.

Another issue was that it treated the targeted 9-18 age group as one group (the survey was the same for all). All communications with young people throughout the consultation process – via the interviews, the website, social networking sites, and the survey – suggest that we are not dealing with a homogeneous group, as indicated earlier by Vromen (2007). Target youth segments have to be clearly identified and strategies for engagement have to be developed to cater for each segment's specific interests and needs.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Our study suggests that young people were prepared to be engaged, to communicate with the project team (acting on behalf of DoCS) and with each other, to vote and discuss issues online. This somewhat invalidates the youth disengagement thesis and supports the argument by Bennet (2008) and Loader (2007) among others, that young people are willing to participate in civic processes and government consultations when they believe in their authenticity and when modes of engagement and consultation suit their lifestyle. Our study confirmed that many young people are online and that by moving the civic activity of having a say on public spending into a lively and attractive game in the online spaces that young people inhabit, we can, as Vromen (2007) suggests, enhance participation through an interactive process, by encouraging young people to interact with each other, the game, the ideas the game represents and potentially in other civic activities.

Our study also confirms Coleman's hypothesis (2004) that online consultations provide opportunities for inclusive public consultation: the voices of young people 'heard' during the consultation would not have otherwise been heard. This is achieved by a combination of engagement strategies – that integrated the use of a website, digital media, social media sites MySpace, Bebo, Facebook, and YouTube, blog and forums,

with traditional media, local radio, TV and school newsletters announcements. These strategies attracted 8000+ young people to the website and the social networking sites in a short period of two months. As passive participants (level I in the engagement ladder) they visited the website with the Your Spin interactive game and/or social networking sites and viewed the videos. They also spread the word about the consultation, shared links and invited friends and family to join.

Several features of the engagement strategies contributed to the success. Young people from the regions were the 'stars' in the game and video extracts – they proposed projects to be funded by the "Better Futures" programme; they acted as the connectors in the community instigating social networking processes that created 8000+ friends and website viewers. This convinced young people that their opinions were valued. The video content featuring these young people provided an important anchor for the social networking pages: it looked authentic, like their own peer-created content and easily integrated into youth social networking.

The next question was how to transform the visitors or passive participants into active participants and motivate them to express their preferences about youth projects to be funded by DoCS? As the online consultation project studied shows the transformation of young people's role beyond being passive receivers of information (Tomkova, 2009) to being active participants and co-creators in Government decision making is feasible and realistic. About 25% of passive participants became active: they voted and expressed their views about the proposed projects. The study confirmed that young people are both willing and ready to engage in consultation and vote for action that would be enacted (Bessant, 2003). While transformation of 25% of passive to active participants may be a very good outcome, understanding the motivation for and the impediments to active participation are highly important. Our analysis shows that the type of 'voice' of Government representatives matters. It was shown that a non-authoritative and friendly voice of Government representative in the consultation, sensitive to the language of the target community is appealing to young people and thus might motivate their participation and engagement.

We also observed that treating the targeted 9-18 age group as one group in the consultation process was an impediment to a more active participation: this (together with an 'adult' voice) explains the low response rate to the survey. As Vromen (2007) suggested, and we confirmed, the 9-18 age group is not a homogeneous group. Online interaction with and active engagement of young people should be designed differently for younger vs older youth in the targeted 9-18 age group. Depending on a topic, specific interests and needs of young people of a certain age or with special skills/problems have to be considered and a more nuanced approach to active engagement taken.

The field study exposed many theoretical and practical questions related to the attraction to and online engagement of young people in government consultation for which the literature does not give satisfactory answers. By studying how different levels of online participation were achieved – from non-participation to passive and then to active participation – the paper helps illuminate issues involved in engaging young people in the consultation and the climbing of the engagement ladder. It also raises some further questions regarding motivations, attitudes and behavioural patterns of young people engaged in online participation. How should the web-based and social technologies be designed to attract young people and support active and continuing youth engagement in government consultations? How participation and consultative processes should be structured and facilitated to achieve desired outcomes? How should we assess both the online consultation processes and their outcomes and implications? These questions should be examined if online youth consultation is going to transform political discourse and our democracy.

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