

Online Communities of Interest for Youth Participation

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Abstract

Young people's attitudes, beliefs, issues and needs are as important to creating a healthy society as they are complex, yet many studies report that young people as community members are among the most distrustful, cynical and disengaged from traditional politics, policies and politicians. The broader challenges of online community engagement are further complicated for the 12–25 cohort by a range of issues relating to legal status, social status, contemporary cultural context and issues specific to life-stage development.

This paper sets forth the challenges surrounding online youth engagement, particularly with regard to young people's antipathy toward government, and discusses the socially exclusive tendencies of adolescence especially in terms of online activity. The Online Communities of Interest project is proposed as a government intervention that explores the new *modus operandi* afforded by the internet in the relationship between providers and users of information.

Keywords

Young people, e-democracy, disengagement, youth participation, online community

Introduction

On 23 June 2005, in its daily current affairs program *Hack*, Australia's most popular national youth radio broadcaster Triple J aired a segment on a new Private Members Bill being introduced to Parliament in New South Wales by Greens parliamentarian the Hon. Ian Cohen, MP. The Bill proposes lowering the voting age in New South Wales from 18 to 16. Mr Cohen elaborated for *Hack*:

Ian Cohen: I think we've got a situation where many young people are impacted by law and government of the day and it's just reasonable given the high level of communication that young people have... the internet and electronic communication... they have a pretty good idea of what's going on. Now these young people can learn to drive, take up full time work, pay taxes, have children, even defend and die for their country and I think its reasonable that the voting age is lowered to give them the opportunity to participate, and also to have a say against government that often rails against young people and

actually uses young people as scapegoats in an undeserved manner. It shouldn't be a case of age like this, I mean at one stage they didn't give women the vote, indigenous people had to struggle for the vote. This is a case of young people that can make decisions in many cases as responsibly if not more responsibly than older people. So I think it's about time that they did get the vote and I think there's a lot of support in the community for it.

The segment then introduces Sam Dastyari, president of Young Labor, the youth wing of the Australian Labor Party, in New South Wales. Mr Dastyari supports the Bill, commenting to interviewer Cath Dwyer:

Sam Dastyari: The fact is that 16 year olds these days have as good if not better understanding of politics than most 70 year olds. When you're paying taxes at fourteen and nine months, it's only fair that you should have a say in how those taxes are spent by the time you're 16.

Interviewer: But do you think most 16 and 17 year olds actually want to vote?

Sam Dastyari: The biggest problem facing young people in politics is political apathy. Young people aren't interested in politics because they feel like they can't make a difference, they can't make a change. If you start giving more young people a vote, give young people a greater voice, they are going to be able to make change, they are going to be able to shake the nation, and that's going to get more people involved in the political process.

The suggestion that young people are apathetic toward the political process is common in many countries, both in the media and in the literature concerning youth participation. That young people are disengaged and further disengaging from traditional forms of democracy across the world we can say is true with a degree of certainty, and few experts would disagree with Mr Dastyari that youth disengagement is due to a presiding feeling of inefficacy, a frustration with the system, a feeling that a young person can't make a difference and can't make a change. That the result is apathy however, I would argue is somewhat near-sighted, perhaps even a selective vision proffered by the political elite.

The term apathy suggests an indifference, a lack of interest or concern. I propose however that perhaps a more accurate term to describe youth disengagement is 'antipathy', a settled aversion, dislike and even repugnance. While apathy may be a descriptor for some of the youth population, I suggest that the more widespread feeling is an active dislike and even bitterness toward government and those involved in its ministry and its bureaucracy. The

distinction is important because antipathy, having a more active nature, is both more threatening and potentially more useful, to reinvigorating youth participation in democracy.

Youth disengagement

As illustrated by Hack (Triple J 2005), in most democratic countries across the world young people are disengaged by law from the basic rights of citizenship and democracy, that is until they reach the age of 18. As government policy generally tends to follow the youth studies definition of the cohort, with a lower limit somewhere around 12 years old and the upper limit around 25 or 30 years old, this legal restriction in itself accounts for about one-third of the disengagement of young people as an audience.

But concern about more widespread youth disengagement hasn't emerged through evidence that the voting age isn't low enough. Rather, the indicator that gives the most obvious evidence to the consensus that young people are apathetic is that when they are mature enough to vote, they are not exercising that right.

As Chen and Young pointed out in their article for Melbourne newspaper *The Age* in January 2005, "During the Federal election only a few months ago, 60,000 votes were not counted because the ballot paper was completed incorrectly. Studies show only a small proportion of invalid votes are deliberately spoiled. It seems most of these voters are failing to exercise their democratic right because they don't know how to complete the paper correctly", and furthermore, "... the Australian Electoral Commission is increasingly concerned that up to a quarter of Australians aged 18–25 years may not have enrolled to vote." (Young et al. 2005) Further evidence of young people's failure to vote is given by reports from the 2001 UK general election, which claim up to 60 per cent of people in the 18–25 age group declined to participate.

While there is certainly logic in Sam Dastyari's proposal that by giving younger people a voice, you create a larger voter cohort, therefore increasing the sway they may hold over the result of elections, the reality is that increasing the voting age is a tokenistic gesture toward participation and more likely that any resulting increase in efficacy will be marginal to negligible. For one, the ageing population in Australia will continually decrease the segment size allocated to the youth vote over the coming decades, but more importantly voting as genuine participation in democracy is a cause for widespread skepticism and even a somewhat irrational behaviour.

"The chance that a single vote will make a difference to the outcome of an election is vanishingly tiny... Yet millions of citizens do go to the polls in national elections — behavior that has long puzzled political scientists... But ever since Stanford psychologists George Quattrone and Amos Tversky demonstrated the "voters illusion" in 1984, an irrational motive has emerged... People seem to think "If I vote, others who

think like me will vote too, but if I abstain, others like me will abstain too.” But this thinking confuses correlation with cause. Although your vote might be indicative of similar behavior, it cannot cause others to vote. It’s the same argument elsewhere: the volume of applause in a theatre would be imperceptibly less if you didn’t clap...when was a war lost for lack of one volunteer... “What if everyone thought like that?” seems a compelling objection. But how can my private decision influence the decisions made by myriad others? This is what psychologists call “magical” thinking — and it is widespread. Studies of gamblers show craps players throw the dice hard when they want high numbers and gently when they want low ones. Keeping your fingers crossed and cheering TV sport are common” (Ayton 2001).

In Australia those over 18 supposedly don’t have the luxury of the decision anyway because voting is compulsory. However, given the high-to-almost-certain likelihood that one of the two major Australian parties will win any given Federal election in Australia, if an individual does not feel their values are effectively represented by one of those parties usually the best they can do is lodge a ‘protest vote’. This can be achieved for example, by deliberately spoiling the ballot paper, or by casting a vote inverse to the preference list you think would predict the likely sequence of winners (i.e. placing the candidate least likely to win as the number one choice and those most likely to win as the last choice). While there is no research providing evidence for the proliferation of protest voting amongst young people in Australia, it serves here as an example of the dilemma surrounding voting as democratic participation and the possibility of an unmonitored way young people may be expressing their antipathy toward government.

For a more colourful example of the antipathic tendencies of youth we need look no further than the infamous ‘Woodstock — Three days of peace and music’ of 1969. During this cultural landmark of the 1960s a generation of youthful idealists converged, riding the waves of the counter-culture movement. Their approach to voicing grievances with ‘The Man’ pioneered many forms of modern protest and left a legacy, for better or for worse, that today still characterises many young people’s attitude to political participation. The flower children challenged government policy, institutions and authority not through voting, political party membership or participation in governance structures, but rather through massive participation in social/cultural events that embodied their counter-cultural and anti-war values (Tiber 1994). Despairing of their democracy and powerless over their president’s war-mongering, the young people began to turn rebel to society in the name of global peace, love and understanding.

For better or for worse, resistance and antipathic tendencies toward society’s conventions and traditions can be identified in many contemporary young people’s attitude to government and society. This may partly be due to the nature of adolescence, a period characterised by

search for identity and self understanding, but may also be partly due to the legacy of our baby boomer parents. Woodstock is clearly the archetype for today's most popular youth events in Australia, the Big Day Out, Splendor in the Grass, The Falls Festival and Summer Field Dayz, whose combined annual participation probably easily attracts the benchmark of 500,000 young people set by Woodstock in 1969.

Yet these are only a few of the larger drawcards within the Australian youth counter-cultural landscape. Consider participation in counter-culture further and we may discover a multitude of ways in which the modern world's young people mobilise in the name of community, economy, society and culture. There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that many young people do willingly participate in various activities of political relevance but that these activities are often in less traditional or unconventional forms. These include signing petitions, participating in demonstrations and becoming members of social movements (such as ethical consumerism) and interest groups forming through the Internet (Blanchard 2003; Barnard et al. 2003). From graffiti crews to web discussion forums, Greenpeace to emerging arts communities, local music events to online gamers' clans, young people tend toward enacting their values and beliefs through their peer groups. In so doing they operate beyond government's reach, participating in a society that they can influence and contribute to a world separated from the frustratingly bureaucratic and tokenistic democracy of the elected representative system. The appeal of these non-traditional political activities lies in the fact that they allow for more proactive forms of peer-to-peer activity and involvement than traditional forms of participation such as political party membership (Molloy et al. 2002).

It should be noted that some criminal behavior could even be an extension of this same societal antipathy, and argued that social disasters such as the youth riots in Macquarie Fields, a suburb in Sydney's west, so condemned by Australia's media earlier this year, could have stemmed from the same frustration with society that causes the success of youth-focused music festivals and participation in web discussion forums. In an online interview with Australian current affairs program 60 Minutes, one former police detective indicated that these riots were not the product of poor education or poverty, and New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, on the fourth day of the riots stated, "I'm not going to have it said that this behaviour is caused by social disadvantage" (Socialist Equality Party 2005). Yet it is clear that youth rioting on the streets is an expression of angst and repugnance toward authority, and it is feasible that this event is an example of the antipathy of political disengagement at its most extreme. If so, youth participation may be about more than ensuring equal rights to democracy, it may also concern duty of care and the mental and physical wellbeing of children and young people. Young people's disengagement from government then could be responsible for, or at least related to, far more social problems than we give it credit for.

Fast forwarding nearly four decades from Woodstock, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) State of the World's Children 2003 report suggests that young people's disenchantment with governments and related institutions and their subsequent disengagement from the democratic process is perhaps the United Nation's greatest concern regarding the health of democracies across the world (Bellamy 2002). Furthermore, young people are not alone in their disenchantment with democratic processes. In almost every western country there is a collapse of confidence in traditional models of democratic governance (Coleman et al. 2001). What in previous times may have manifest itself as a passionate resistance, today has evolved into a dark and threatening spectre of near absolute disenchantment. It seems that not only is a whole new generation growing up divorced from political life, but their parents, guardians and role models have paved the way for them on a path that leads to a totally detached citizenry. In the context of a world-wide trend toward the decline of social capital (Putnam 2000), democracy itself appears to be at threat.

Importantly however, young people do also participate in society in positive and productive ways and have been historically. There is a will from young people to participate. They have played critical roles in shaping and reshaping public opinion, public policy and public responses (Pittman 1996). Pittman also suggests that in addition, young people already control considerable social and economic capital. There are even more compelling arguments against the popular assumption that there is a contagious plague of apathy involved with youth, whether directed at the current 'information age' generations or the general life-stage condition of being young. But whether it's apathy or antipathy — the unproductive noise of youthful idealism or a great source of innovative ideas — many modern democracies now formally concede that "young people have the ability and therefore the right to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives" (Office of Youth Affairs 2002; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 1997).

Universal citizenship is central to our contemporary understanding of democratic government (Manning et al. 2004). As a ratified signatory to the Articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Australian federal government has acknowledged that those under 18 years of age have the ability, and therefore the right, to be involved in decision-making (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 1997).

The National Youth Charter sets forth the Australian government's commitment to the principles of youth participation (MCEETYA 2004), and through The Queensland Youth Charter, the Queensland Government in turn has recognised its obligation to involve young people aged between 12 and 25 years in government decision-making regarding the development of state government policy, programs and services (Office of Youth Affairs 2002). Consultations undertaken by the European Union highlighted that many young people too see participation as a necessary factor in democracy. Participation however is not just

about asking young people for their opinions on the various issues that may impact on, or be of interest to, young people. Instead, participation can be perceived as the gradual learning process of both parties (Commission of the European Communities 2001).

Yet the problems of participation in democracy are not only related to its contemptible stigma but also to the warp speed of modern life. As Stephen Coleman suggested in his workshop forum at the Queensland University of Technology in 2004, “civic moral obligation is a dubious proposition” — that is, expecting people to believe that it is their obligation as citizens to engage with government is unrealistic. In a world of competing demands and hyper-communication people just do not have time.

“A lot of people want to make changes and are passionate about issues, but they don’t want to devote their lives to it” (Manning et al. 2004).

Furthermore, research indicates that there is a pervasive cynicism towards politicians, the media and traditional forms of political action particularly amongst young people. This cynicism is particularly well documented in the literature pertaining to advertising and marketing. “By the time they were in their late teens, children born after 1980 had been subject to as many as 20,000 commercial messages a year for a decade and a half” (Syrett et al. 2004). Within an era of ubiquitous consumer camcorders and digital audio recorders, home media production facilities and media education through schools, the current generation is media savvy like never before. Their ability to distinguish perception from reality, penetrating the hype and motives of media messages is unprecedented and results in a constant interpretive scepticism. This scepticism “...implies that they recognize that advertisers have specific motives, such as persuading consumers, and thus that advertisers’ communications may be biased and varied in their truthfulness” (Bao et al. 2002).

The teenage market is a multibillion dollar industry worldwide, they are important as both a future market, as an influencer of parents spending patterns and as a primary target market for many products and services. They have billions of dollars of income annually and that income is largely disposable. However, “...today’s teens have access to more information than previous generations. They are literally inundated with information through a variety of media such as televisions, radios, magazines, and the internet” (Bao et al. 2002). The result is they are more sophisticated in their ability to research products and more cynical and analytical of advertising messages.

D-Code, in their benchmark work *Chips and Pop*, asserts that technology and mass media saturation have had a clear impact on the Information Age generations during their formative years (Barnard 1998). The other key point they make however points out the intergenerational commonalities between teenagers, whether during the 1920s, 1960s or today. That is, ‘they

are rebellious, risk-takers, idealistic and easily adaptive'. It is then the combination of these factors that has resulted in the current dilemma of youth disengagement, whether reaching out to them with advertising or to engage their participation in governance.

In order to connect with the teen audience, advertisers and marketers have turned to underneath-the-radar tactics, the most glamorous and mystified of which is the practice of 'coolhunting' (Southgate 2003). Coolhunting in essence involves infiltrating the culture of early adopters, innovators and the generally 'cool', in order to predict trends and gain an insight into the elusive qualities that might make a brand or product the next 'it' thing. Marketing to teens then becomes an exercise in the strategic manipulation of the audience's thirst for nonconformity (Bao et al. 2002). It has equally been noted in marketing literature though, that "the aura of effortless authenticity and confidence that most commentators agree are the key constituents of being 'cool' cannot be bottled up and sprayed on brands that are produced by companies that patently do not espouse these values" (Syrett et al. 2004). While perhaps sounding somewhat dubious as a research discipline, even somewhat unethical, the practice of coolhunting, the study of teen antipathy and the qualities of cutting edge trends, is not without merit or insight into the world of young people.

We know that part of the pubescent teenage life-stage is a degree of angst, anguish, confusion, questioning and a desperation to be understood and to understand. On the contrary it seems however, that the last thing teens want is for adults to understand their world, for during this period of development from childhood to adulthood, this is how "they can differentiate themselves from those older or younger than themselves" (Clarke 2003).

"This is such an important part of puberty; there must be a sense of mystery and enigma about what they do, the way they dress, the music they listen to, for them to become independent young people" (Clarke 2003).

It is at this stage the teenager shifts focus from family to friends in the search for personal development and identity, and it is these peers' opinions that become all-important to interests, lifestyle, fashion, purchasing behaviour and participation in activities.

"The peer group is of course paramount to the teenage years, and rejecting parental values, and moreover all adult values, allows the move towards adulthood to begin. Parents and teachers become less the source of all wisdom and knowledge, and teenagers actively seek new ways to dress, new and different music to listen to, new language, and have new and different aspirations" (Clarke 2003).

To this end, in their choices and decisions about what they do or don't participate in, what they will or won't buy and what values they subscribe to, teens want to be exclusive and

cutting edge. They like trying new products before they become popular. They want to be different to others outside their age bracket, and even within their age-bracket they embark on a process of sub-cultural exploration and division. By participating in these peer groups, young people develop and revise personality characteristics, values and habits that they will retain for years to come. It seems then that teens probably emerge into adulthood having a very different sense of community to the one that is the subject of government and citizenship. Having developed their sense of identity within closed network contexts, it is no surprise then that “campaigns targeting the masses simply don’t work on them” (Bao et al. 2002). Political campaigns included.

E-Democracy for young people

In an international climate of civic concern, the Internet’s potential to connect citizens with their representatives and governments is a promise of hope for contemporary democracies. As the Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP, puts it in his foreword to Open Source Democracy, “The Internet has the potential to produce an information-rich world in which all citizens are able to communicate, educate and legislate in a way previously considered impossible” (Rushkoff 2003).

Paralleling the souring of the government–citizen relationship, recent times have seen another significant trend, the emergence of the information age. A new generation is growing up delving the depths of the internet, immersed in information and all that the networked new media environment has to offer. The information age is having an impact on many aspects of the social fabric that binds these young people together, and their parents are not far behind them in this trend either. The extent of the effect is a study of much interest in today’s society and culture related disciplines, and its potential significance is not being underrated.

As Arnold (2003) points out, “social interaction is the ‘killer application’ of the Internet” and many others have recognised that young people especially are driving it. Horrigan (2003) found that there is a trendsetting Technology Elite in the US of which one-fifth are young people (average age of 22 years). In terms of the Australian population, 32.8 per cent of all the people who used the Internet in Queensland were between the age group 10–24 and “persons aged 10–19 years were the most likely to use a computer at home” (Office of Economic and Statistical Research 2001).

While the Internet and other information and communications technologies are the cause for hope of emerging forms of participation, interestingly it seems that at least some of the blame for citizen disengagement has been caused by communications media. If young people’s disengagement from politics were a crime, it is the family friendly six o’clock news and the daily mainstream newspaper that would be the primary suspect. Politics has adapted for the news imperative of the ‘sound bite’, “...commercial television provides only a few minutes of

political coverage in each nightly news bulletin. Political comment is reduced to a soundbite each from the major party leaders and policies are trivialised and turned into repetitive catchphrases” (Young et al. 2005). The new ‘spin politics’ is more an exercise in manipulating the media for popularity resulting in a “shallow and adversarial debate” (Young et al. 2005).

Coleman and Bulmer (2001) argue that “communications as presently organised is sucking both the substance and the spirit out of the politics it projects.” What is needed, they propose, is both “visionary and practical” government interventions that explore the new *modus operandi* afforded by the Internet in the relationship between providers and users of information.

That technology has the potential to advance democracy is rarely in question. If democracy requires an elected few to represent the interests of the many, surely more communication between the two parties improves their understanding of each other, and the more effective the representation becomes. In recent years a great deal of literature has been published and progress has been made in the emerging field of e-democracy as governments across the world take up initiatives. The recent take up in e-democracy is part of a bigger shift over recent decades from a hierarchical institution oriented view of government to a more ‘dynamic and network-based way of thinking and working in policy processes’. The ‘participation revolution’ has met the information age and a number of tentative first steps have been taken.

In order to further discuss e-democracy it is useful to make a couple of preliminary distinctions. E-government and e-governance it seems are the electronic yin and yang of public affairs. The word ‘government’ refers to “a public organization set up by a society for the purpose of pursuing that society’s development objectives” (United Nations 2003). It is the “institution or agents that perform the governmental functions” (Anttiroiko 2004) and an e-government “is a government that applies ICT to transform its internal and external relationships” (United Nations 2003). Governance on the other hand “refers to the new modes and manners of governing within policy networks and partnership-based relations”. It is the business of involving, coordinating and creating coherence from the information generated by a wide variety of actors including corporations, international organisations, public organisations and the general community. E-governance is the new process of coordination, the action of involving stakeholders through ICT tools.

By this definition, then, e-government concerns itself with the entire spectrum of government business from the application of technology to the improvement of internal administrative business processes (such as management information systems), to the process of information sharing amongst advisory boards and committees and citizen engagement online. E-democracy is then a part of e-government and an extension of the modern governance-oriented participative approach to government.

As the OECD (2003) report points out “It is impossible to report on electronic engagement of citizens without discussing democratic engagement in general; technology is only an enabler, facilitating existing, or in some cases, new methods of engagement.” Community engagement and participation has mushroomed over the last two decades in democracies as the response to ongoing and increasing reports of voter drop out, citizen disenchantment, disengagement and “politicians’ loss of credibility, and finally public apathy” (Putnam 2000; Blumler et al. 2001). Community cabinets, citizens’ juries, visioning consultation workshops, engagement forums and public surveys, as a result, are now regular exercises in government business.

These have produced results, but generally the citizens who participate in government-led engagement exercises of this kind have something at stake in the issue being discussed. These approaches are particularly effective in local-level government planning because the decisions made have very real effects on communities and quality of life. State and federal-level governments have the more difficult task of engaging large numbers of citizens in the business of making decisions. The issues are abstracted from reality, often questions of societal values that are complex and philosophical, embedded in legislation and precedent.

I propose that a wholly engaged citizenry, and therefore a genuinely democratic society, will remain out of reach by these methods due to the complexity of issues, the time and effort required to deliberate on them and the pervasive mood of inefficacy in a world of increasing demands on private life and leisure time. In this we see the dichotomy between public and private interest that faces government in engaging citizens, and especially in engaging young people. The government’s duty is to act in the interests of the community. Individuals on the other hand, in the context of their own private lives and personal interests, act in their own interests (excluding the possibility of other incentives). We shouldn’t overlook of course the philanthropic minority who actually take a vocational interest in the good of society and the world, however the vast majority of people are in other vocational categories.

Coleman and Gotze (2001), in *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation*, identify key areas where new thinking is needed in the development of e-democracy. While the principles outlined by Coleman and Gotze, with their emphasis on mutual learning, connected citizenry, and shared responsibilities, offer a good start to online engagement with young people, the unique characteristics of young people provide an extra set of complications to the challenge. How then, might an audience cohort predisposed to resistance, be convinced that engagement with governance is a genuine gradual learning process? Can rebellion and cynicism be channeled for productive influence and collaborative change? What can governments do to facilitate collaboration with young people? How can young people learn to trust in the processes of governance? Can e-democracy connect the most cynical citizens with the most affluent institutions?

The Online Communities of Interest Program

Many governments in Australia and across the world operate a youth participation and/or an engagement website. However, young people in general, do not actively seek to participate in traditional government decision-making processes out of personal interest. Young people are aware of and strongly concerned about a range of economic, social and environmental issues, but are however cynical about traditional politics, policies and politicians. Furthermore they are offered only a limited number of methods or channels through which they may engage with government online. Most frequently surveys are used, sometimes forums, rarely online chats, but just as it is with offline consultations, young people are not offered the option of deciding the topics on which they are consulted or the means by which they are consulted.

The current practise of recruiting young people into structured and formal engagement processes designed by government for government, rather than by young people for young people, severely limits the level of interest that young people have in engagement activities. Where government decision-making intersects with a specific topic of interest to young people however, the response is strong. Reconciliation, environmental issues, noise regulations, copyright, refugee rights or even a concept as abstract as 'globalisation' have all inspired young people to political action and involvement.

The conventional approach to e-democracy, and most community engagement programs, can be characterised then as being largely 'government centric' — that is, they seek to engage only those people inherently interested in engaging with government on discrete nominated topics. 'Government centric' approaches limit results from the outset due to the marginal numbers of young people that have a vocational inclination to engage with government, and the scarcity of issues on the agenda that are of specific interest to young people. As such many young community members, who have important knowledge to contribute and would otherwise participate if the topic areas were specific to their personal interests, are excluded from the possibility of engagement.

On the other hand, young people are willing and able to own and develop community-based web sites in order to achieve youth participation and engagement outcomes. As an example of politics-related websites for young people there are Australia's Vibewire¹ or YouthGas² websites, which are run by volunteers with little or no funding from the government. Looking beyond political content there are a myriad of websites and forums on the web that are managed and populated by young people. Take the Time Off Message Board (TOMB),³ the

¹ <<http://www.vibewire.net>>.

² <<http://www.youthgas.com>>.

³ <<http://discussion.timeoff.com.au/>>.

Depot Club Forum⁴, In the Mix⁵ and Noise Theory⁶ as but a few of the more popular and self-sustaining examples local to Queensland.

In response to the challenges posed by youth participation and the habits of online social activity conducted by young people, I propose an approach to engaging young people online in government decision-making by strategically linking more conventional approaches to e-democracy and online community engagement with a program that recognises young people's inherent tendency toward exclusivity, resistance and peer-to-peer activity. Designed as a research project/feasibility study, the project involves the establishment of a government-run program that provides young people with a suite of online communication and online community building tools, encouraging them to develop networks based on their own interests. Through virtual ethnography and action research, the project will discover and develop tools, systems, protocols and processes by which government and young people can embark on a mutual learning journey with the eventual goal of developing trust and appreciation of, and collaboration in, governance.

The Online Communities of Interest project is essentially designed to investigate how a program providing support for youth-managed and populated online communities can be leveraged by government and potentially integrated into the continuum of online engagement processes to achieve better representation of young people in political engagement activities, thus combating their antipathy toward government. Using an action research approach the project's expected outcome is the design of an innovative new youth participation and engagement program, potentially with broader applications across the whole community and government in Queensland.

The basic premise is to generalise a suite of Internet services to provide a technical infrastructure for online community building. Through a process of application, similar to a grant round, and also involving a process of ongoing acquittal, groups of enterprising young people would be provided a ready to customise, ready to operate solution, allowing them to focus on content creation, rather than system specification and technical development. In removing the technical barriers to entry more young people will then have access to participate in the development of content for the site without the need for HTML or esoteric technology skills.

In order for online community to be successful, participants need to have a sense of ownership of their online networks. As such community ownership is one of the key design principles of the Online Communities of Interest program. To enable community ownership a

⁴ <<http://www.depotclub.com/forum/>>.

⁵ <<http://www.inthemix.com.au/>>.

⁶ <<http://www.noisetheory.org/>>.

domain name, membership management system, content management system, online communication systems and a range of advice relating to the development and operation of online communities will be provided to users of the Online Communities of Interest program.

Young people will be invited to submit applications for online community support. The merits of their application will be assessed according to criteria such as:

- the interest specified by the group, its potential to attract a broader community of young people, its relevance to state government issues and its value to the interests of the research project
- the number of members that the community has already attracted (if any)
- the amount of activity that the community has already generated (if any)
- the ability of the nominated community development team to successfully develop an on-line community
- commitment to ongoing acquittal and government engagement processes.
- commitment to participation in the research requirements.

As well as the social hypothesis driving the work, there are economic and technological drivers and benefits here as well. Centralising and standardising the technologies and services related to supporting online communities allows for economies of scale in the costs associated with each community instance. Domain names may be purchased in bulk for as little as AUD\$25 per annum, and shared storage and bandwidth infrastructures average the costs of hosting over a spectrum of usage amounts. Further, standardised content management systems will provide interoperability between communities that, in the future, could allow for automated processes of information gathering and distribution from and to a mass audience in a customised and manageable way. Replication of content through XML/RSS feeds from site to site as interest topics converge in published work would allow for such functions as automated news feeds, alerts and content sharing.

A network of networks emerges; marginal interest groups find they have expertise to offer local governance groups that are otherwise beyond their spheres of activity, state governance committee's discover expert groups to gather information from for decision-making and, as the provider, government has access to the meta-network and ultimate control over the provision of service, but not ownership of the agenda and content of individual nodes. As such the program of online support operates somewhat like a franchise, providing the operational principles and procedures related to the management of healthy and productive online communities and entering into an agreement with the managers of each online community to set forth the terms and conditions by which their service is provided. Government, as the service provider, also retains the rights to the ultimate failsafe measure in the event of absolute social disaster — the 'off' switch. This may sound extreme but such

arrangements are standard fare in the web hosting industry, required by legislation and perfectly acceptable to web site owners.

The Queensland Government's Department of Communities plans to trial this program over the coming two years, with research outcomes and a proof-of-concept network of online communities being the goals. A further partnership agreement between the Department of Communities and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has already resulted in the establishment of a technical proof-of-concept online community web site for young people <<http://sticky.net.au>> which, while being more the result of the QUT-managed Youth Internet Radio Network project, demonstrates the technology platform on which the Online Communities of Interest project will be based. Dues to their shared requirements further areas where QUT and the Department of Communities can collaborate have been identified such as shared development, purchasing and maintenance of hardware, software and hosting.

Conclusion

Whether or not you sympathise with some of the bolder allusions about the nature and dangers of youth disengagement discussed herein, you will agree that youth participation is a nebulous and labyrinthine concept, part psychology and part social/political science. Yet in order to really grapple with the problem of youth disengagement, and perhaps look toward the reinvigoration of democracy in general, we need to traverse these paths toward an understanding of what lies at the heart of all this frustration and inefficacy. In an age where people are communicating more than ever, how is it that we have become more detached from our government than ever?

Some would argue that youthful antipathy or resistance to our very system of democracy is the result of idealism and naivety. Or perhaps there is a prevailing apathy, implying that young people's cultural and social activities are a form of hedonistic escapism? Political aversion amongst the current generation of young people may even be a reaction to marginalisation, social disadvantage or exclusion. On the other hand, perhaps there is some truth in the proposition that the system is not working, that conventional media channels have diluted the substance of politics into a shallow and adversarial debate and the community is rightfully skeptical. If youth is characterised by idealism and rebellion perhaps complacency and the desire for security comes with age? If so perhaps then, it is the older generations we should be accusing of apathy? But whether apathy or antipathy — the unproductive noise of youthful idealism or a great source of innovative ideas — the reinvigoration of democracy is a necessary and daunting task. It is in the context of this heterogeneous quandary that efforts toward encouraging youth participation in government decision-making must stake their claim, even as parliamentary democracy as a system of government comes under a great deal of scrutiny and increasing pressure.

This paper, in the discussion it presents, theories it purports and the project it describes, sets forth the challenges and proposes that which is effectively a response to Blumler and Coleman's call for both "visionary and practical" government interventions, exploring the new modus operandi afforded by the internet in the relationship between providers and users of information. That it pushes the envelope of government's comfort zone should be taken as par for the course in projects of this type. Perhaps the success of such a project requires too much cultural change, both within the organisation of government and in the broader sense. However, if genuine participation is really our democratic goal, the Online Communities of Interest project is certainly an avenue worthy of investigation.

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