Youth, citizenship and online political communication
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Chapter 3

Political Communication Online

3.1 Introduction

Despite the positive potential that the internet holds for increasing engagement, especially among young people, the question remains as to how these new, online forms of practicing citizenship either counteract or replace the decrease in traditional means of participation. The aim here is to explore how youth organizations are using websites to contribute to the acceptance of non-conventional citizenship, or if they instead use their online presence to promote traditional notions.

While centered around the previously described theoretical understandings of citizenship, the current chapter focuses on the notion of online political communication, highlighting literature that examines the role of the internet in changing how both citizens and political elites communicate with each other in an online environment. The field of internet politics, though widely representing a positive stance on possible changes for democracy, must also be understood within an environment of exclusion, where those with greater access to technology are the primary beneficiaries of such developments (Norris, 2001).

This space for inquiry is strengthened by an increasing use of communication technologies in political arenas. I explore both theoretical and empirical research that examines the communicative role of the internet and how online space is used for civic and political purposes. I put this research within the context of strategic and reflexive communication, and end by adapting the theoretical model in terms of online political communication.

3.2 Democracy online

Democracy online, or e-democracy, refers to the use of communication technologies to broaden political participation between both political elites and citizens and among citizens. Hacker and van Dijk (2000) call this digital democracy: “A collection of attempts to practise democracy without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions, using…technology…as an addition, not a replacement, for traditional…political practices” (p. 1).
How researchers define and conceptualize democracy online is complex, with a number of scholars having worked to typologize theoretical divisions. Hacker and van Dijk (2000), for example, claimed that theorists seek to apply a combination of direct and representative democracy to information and communication technologies, or ICTs. In direct democracy, citizens play an important participatory role. Since many western societies have seen a steady decrease in party-political democratic participation by citizens, some have embraced the notion that the internet may help to increase participation and involvement in relevant arenas. Citizens can, for example, more easily communicate with those in power via email and online forums.

Many have acknowledged the potential of these communication features and have applied them to democratic theory. In their comprehensive look at the literature on democracy and technology, Harrison and Falvey (2001) stated that the underlying principle in a great majority of relevant investigations is that they “…seek to understand how some qualities that we associate with democracy can be preserved, promoted, extended, or in some way improved through some of the many forms of communication behavior that take place through diverse forms of communication media” (p. 2). These authors have connected the concepts of democracy and communication, and see a main issue in such research being that some would like to work with the existing political system and expand it online, and others have viewed the internet as having the potential to facilitate new forms of democracy.

Dahlberg (2001) noted three arenas where literature falls in this field. He identified the liberal individualist model – an outlook that promotes individual interests – as the most common, followed by the communitarian model, which is centered around the idea that democracy is based on shared values that form community, and deliberative democracy model, which insists on more “democratic interaction,” and thinks of individuals as “public-oriented citizens;” further, it “sees dialogue as helping participants move towards understanding and agreement despite their differences” (p. 167). The online potential for deliberative democracy has been widely covered in the literature. To take part in such deliberation, citizens first need access to and understanding of relevant information, and technology could help to progress this knowledge (Rucinski, 1991). Others have pointed out the importance of acknowledging that technology does not inherently facilitate deliberative engagement (Coleman and Gotze, 2002).

As noted in Chapter 2, citizen participation plays a central role in each of these perspectives. Whether or not the internet can increase rates of political participation has been an issue of debate for a number of years (Barber, 1997; Browning, 1996). At the same time, others are critical about the quality of online participation. For example, online talk within forums is now commonplace and some have praised these venues as an online “civic commons” (Blumler
& Coleman, 2001; Klein, 1999) while others call such virtual places “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2001) as they are often filled with like-minded individuals simply reinforcing preexisting beliefs and opinions. After examining a number of Dutch discussion websites, Brants (2002) found that “the Internet is seen as an instrument for education, opinion forming and aiding and legitimizing decision making, and the limited and elitist level of participation are problematic both for the legitimacy and the well functioning of the system” (p. 186). Others argue that there are notable differences between signing an online petition and participating regularly in a forum, or taking that online participation offline to join a protest or a movement (Bimber, 2000).

The internet: features and possibilities

With a wide range of democratic potential attributed to the internet, scholars see the role of communication as central to these theoretical views. It is important to form an understanding of what differentiates the internet from other media and what makes it a new technology worth exploring. Chadwick (2006), taking a technical and comparative view, defined the internet as “…a network of networks of one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, and many-to-one local, national, and global information and communication technologies with relatively open standards and protocols and comparatively low barriers to entry” (p. 7).

Online communication allows a possible interaction between the sender and receiver, provides an inexpensive means of supplying large quantities of information, and offers communicative forms for the message that both political elites and citizens wish to send. Further, the possibility of constant feedback online allows for a continual shift of information between interested parties. Older media forms were generally restricted to one-to-one (e.g., the telephone) and one-to-many (e.g., the television) forms of communication. However the internet allows for many-to-many communication where information is produced and received by a multitude of political actors.

As websites are the empirical focus of this dissertation, it is necessary to point out how this particular online construction has been theorized in a democratic context. As noted in Chapter 1, websites are seen as an online structure of communication. This dissertation looks specifically on the websites of youth organizations: This online structure (Schneider & Foot, 2002) provides an official window to the world. The focus here is on participatory websites, a term that implies their function extends beyond an official “about us” space and attempts to engage interested parties in a variety of ways. I envisage online structure as a way of communicating a particular stance on citizenship. Therefore a website can be visualized as a
space for communicating relevant aims of the producer but also as a direct link to the user, providing a means for citizens to respond in various ways they see fit.

**Political actors and online communication**

Political organizations are providing information online to citizens on a wide basis. From political parties to government sponsored citizenship schemes, from engaging the general population to focusing on specific groups such as young people, political elites are exploiting the internet in many ways. And citizens are using these resources: During the 2004 election campaign in the US, 37% of the voting-age population went online to look for political news and information. They used email to talk about candidates and debate issues, and also participated by donating to candidate campaigns or volunteering.¹ In the UK, information seeking is increasing across the board, from reading online newspapers to seeking humorous content. The internet is becoming the most prominent source for informal learning. However, civic use of the internet remains relatively low, with few citizens contacting elected officials or searching for information about them. According to the Oxford Internet Survey, only one-tenth of internet users signed online petitions, which was the most popular civic activity engaged in by respondents. However, one-third of respondents reported interacting with government online, though this interaction is much lower than reported in other European countries and in North America (Dutton & Helsper, 2007).²

Empirical research has connected types of political communication with online technologies. Some say that communication technologies may help to address perceived disengagement from democracy. These arguments take two directions. One view sees online communication as facilitating traditional forms of political engagement, and the other sees their contribution as more relevant to addressing new forms of citizenship. Although some have found that politics online simply mirrors politics offline (Margolis & Resnick, 2000), many hold a positive view of the internet for its potential role in democracy.

### 3.3 Reconnecting to government: conventional politics online

The current section focuses on literature that looks at how the internet can reach citizens in order to draw them back to traditional politics (e.g., Lusoli, Ward, & Gibson, 2006). The claim follows that online technology may be able to capture the interest of particularly youth,

¹ For more detail, see the Internet and Campaign 2004 report from The Pew Internet & American Life Project, located at [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/150/report_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/150/report_display.asp)
² This data and analysis is drawn from the Oxford Internet Institute survey "The Internet in Britain in 2007, retrieved from [http://www.oi.ox.ac.uk/microsites/oxis/](http://www.oi.ox.ac.uk/microsites/oxis/)
who are already active online and knowledgeable about high tech communication (Ward, Gibson, & Lusoli, 2003). This online interest will then transfer to increased rates of traditional participation. A great deal of research has examined the content of such political websites, both in general (Gibson, Ward, & Nixon, 2003; van Selm, Jankowski, & Tsaliki, 2001; Ward & Gibson, 2003) and focused on youth (Bennett & Xenos, 2005; Macintosh, Robson, Smith, & Whyte, 2002; Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004; Ward, 2005).

In terms of conventional politics, one logical arena in which to examine web content is during election campaigns. Foot and Schneider (2002) identified several developments within this context, including new forms of collaboration between competing political actors and parties, novel and improved methods of extensive citizen mobilization, and shifts in types of campaign practices.

There is a growing number of studies that have observed and reported on the types of political information and action opportunities offered on the internet, particularly in Western countries with a widespread online presence. European research into political websites has looked at how political parties are adapting new ICTs in examining party competition and campaigning online, internal party democracy, and the role of parties within democracies (Gibson, et al., 2003). Some analyzed Dutch political party websites and the concept of digital democracy (van Selm, et al., 2001; Voerman, 2000; Voerman & Boogers, 2002) while others examined candidate websites in recent Finnish election campaigns and showed that some candidates (mainly incumbents, female, and the relatively young) did use the web to provide traditional campaign material but rarely utilized interactive features (Carlson & Djupsund, 2001), though more recent research on the Finnish case demonstrated that young voters see candidate websites as a valuable resource (Carlson & Strandberg, 2007). With survey research and content analysis of political party websites, research in Britain looked at how politicians use the internet (Gibson & Ward, 1998) and also reported on the inconsistent, mainly leaflet-like candidate websites during the 2001 general election campaign (Ward & Gibson, 2003).

In the electoral context of the US, studies found a variety of features provided on political websites, such as interactivity, links to other political sites, and opportunities for political participation, both on and offline (Foot & Schneider, 2002; Klenenberg & Perrin, 2000; Schneider & Foot, 2002; Schneider & Larsen, 2000). Other research concluded that political sites consist of little more than online versions of offline material. For example, Kamarck (1999) analyzed political websites from the 1998 senatorial and gubernatorial races. Her study showed that most sites are composed of “brochure-ware,” or political pamphlets providing issue stances as well as candidate histories. Schneider and Larsen (2000) also found a prevalence of this
material in their analysis of websites for the eight major candidates in the 2000 US presidential election.

Much of this research has in fact concluded that providing more political information online does not increase civic or political engagement. If political parties and other political actors are simply placing previously offline information on their websites, then they are doing nothing more than technologically enhancing old methods of communicating with the public. Further, they are not taking advantage of the unique opportunities the internet provides them to interact with citizens. The research above shows that some websites are rather static, simply providing information previously available offline. However, as Chadwick (2006) pointed out:

The problem with such perspectives now is that they largely based their analyses on the relatively static and top-down styles of websites that characterized politicians’ approaches in the mid-1990s…it seems clear that a new form of online campaigning based upon more interactive forms of communication, particularly blogs, creates a different sort of environment – ones which appear to have lowered levels of apathy and increased citizen participation (pp. 25-26).

One of the first examples of successful online mobilization was Howard Dean’s campaign for the 2004 US presidential nomination for the Democrat party. Dean supporters rallied on a grassroots level, encouraging donations and support for the candidate. Although Dean failed to win the nomination, the campaign took an unknown Governor from Vermont to a prominent position in the race, demonstrating that online citizen mobilization is very possible and rather powerful (Trippi, 2004). Grassroots citizen mobilization continues to play an important role in election campaigns, for example in Barack Obama’s campaign for the Democratic primary in 2008 (Ambinder, 2008).

More recent examples of online campaigning from other countries also demonstrate a shift towards political elites embracing online possibilities for communication. Lusoli (2005) summarized general themes uncovered by a number of researchers during the 2004 European Parliament election campaign. Online, political parties and candidates were the most active, with some seeing an online presence as a necessity for successful campaigning. Adamic and Glance (2005) examined the activity of political bloggers during the 2004 US election campaign, and demonstrated a dynamic growth of citizen voices in campaigns online. Foot, Schneider and Dougherty (2007) analyzed the 2004 Congressional elections in the US where online information seeking from citizens has doubled since the 2000 election season. They find even as
citizens go online, mobilization opportunities are still limited in comparison to information provision and opportunities to get involved in the campaign.

Youth-oriented websites

Research has also studied the content of youth-focused websites. An emerging youth civic culture has been identified in countless numbers of websites that work to promote and make possible different forms of youth civic and political engagement. In their comprehensive look at youth civic organizations, Montgomery, et al. (2004) discovered that such websites, often based on offline organizations but occasionally entirely digital, encouraged young people to vote, volunteer, become socially active, and be aware of racism and tolerance, to name a few. Through examining about 400 websites in the US, they found the following to be the most common goals of websites geared towards youth civic development:

- Promoting knowledge about a particular issue or set of issues;
- Promoting youth voice or empowerment of youth as members of society;
- Promoting the skills necessary for youth to promote and engender change;
- Promoting civic attachment, social trust, or community building;
- Promoting team building or leadership skills (p. 17).

Similar research has taken place in a European setting. E-initiatives that seek to make contact with the young segment of the population have been investigated in Scotland, describing a system of e-democracy designed especially for young people of pre-voting age (Macintosh, et al., 2002). Such initiatives allowed youth the opportunity to discuss significant issues online. Debating and voting, which resulted in enthusiastic responses from the young participants, also took place on the web (Smith, Macintosh, & Whyte, 2003). Conversely, an analysis of youth parliament websites in the UK – like the Scottish Youth Parliament and The Children and Young People’s Assembly of Wales – demonstrated that while they provided comprehensive coverage of political issues relevant to youth, there was actually very limited online interaction available (Gerodimos, 2005).

With websites geared specifically towards youth, research shows a division between the content found on traditional political sites and websites geared towards more general engagement. In their study of youth engagement sites and election campaign sites active in the 2002 US election campaigns, Bennett and Xenos (2005) showed that the former provided political content and supplied interactive content in “youth” language, and political candidates
did not show such initiative online as often as youth-focused organizations. Xenos and Bennett (2007) later compared their 2002 analysis with youth-focused websites active during the 2004 US election campaigns. They found that the number of sites available has grown and there was an increase in both the amount of political information as well as issue discussion. There was also a more densely networked environment, though youth engagement sites have developed at a quicker rate than campaign and candidate sites. Also during the 2004 US election campaign, Foot, Schneider, and Dougherty (2005) discovered that in a general (non youth-focused) sample of websites, only 8% targeted youth; however, this rose dramatically when focusing on political party websites. Twenty-seven percent of these contained a direct appeal to youth, although they did not provide an explicit youth website.

These examples, as in the discussion surrounding conventional citizenship in the previous chapter, demonstrate both a more traditional approach to electoral politics in particular but also a bridge between traditional political institutions and grassroots organizations. These combined initiatives show an evolving understanding of citizen interest and mobilization. However, they still work to bring citizens back to conventional politics, whether it is through involvement in a political campaign or more civic endeavors. In sum, conventional organizations see institutions as essentially good, and the essence of these structures is replicated online. The “problem” then, remains finding ways to get youth engaged.

3.4 New possibilities: non-conventional politics online

If from a theoretical viewpoint democratic society is evolving and is, for example, becoming more individualistic and tied to lifestyle, and online technology allows for more interactive, global forms of communication that can facilitate information sharing and networking of these shifting democratic views, then it also seems relevant to address how technology can be used to support non-conventional citizenship. It has been argued that less traditional political organizations (social movements, for example) with a looser structure thrive on the many-to-many variety of communication that is found online (Bennett, 2003c). Theoretically, the notion of citizenship is coming under scrutiny. Researchers are increasingly finding that citizens, in particular young people, are interested in and are pursuing engagement with political issues outside of traditional institutions.

As noted, sometimes these strategies involve traditional political elites but also other, more bottom-up organizations and networks play a role in this evolution. As noted in Chapter 2, some argue that expanding the definition of what is political will provide legitimacy to new forms of engagement and participation that previously existed outside traditional boundaries.
(Dahlgren, 2003). This is happening in the online world where citizenship is expressed in alternative ways. Citizens are able to network on a global scale, use new media to then interact offline, or simply share relevant information with a like-minded, worldwide community. Youth are apt at forming online networks around current issues (Smith, Kearns, & Fine, 2005). Content creation takes place when individuals are able to produce their own blogs, vlogs (video blogs), and podcasts. Issue-based campaigns focused on current events, for example in coordinating rescue efforts during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Glaser, 2005).

Coleman and Rowe (2005) focused on young people’s practice of sampling and remixing content and argued that this helps create new and individual meaning to media texts. Bennett (2003a, p. 3) claimed that “activist networks…can sustain long term political initiatives even in the absence of the strong central coordination and the organizational resource that seem to be required for success in more conventional advocacy politics.” Further, it is possible that those engaging in these forms of online citizenship with a focus on globalization, for example, see no need to participate in traditional politics. “Many of the participants…do not appear to see a contradiction between their national political apathy (not voting in elections) and their transnational engagement” (Chadwick, 2006, p. 30).

Interest groups and social movements can sometimes be considered as more bottom-up examples of e-democracy, though some are also close in philosophy and funding to their institutionalized counterparts. Dahlberg (2001) pointed to online initiatives like Democracy Network (democracy.net.org) and Politics.com as examples of projects that attempt to “provide individuals with both the information necessary to make the best choices for themselves on all available political options and the means of registering these choices” (p. 161).

Bennett (2003a) explored the concept of global citizenship and studied online activist networks in relation to Nike and Microsoft in which he identified the presence of permanent campaigns, networked (rather than centrally organized) organizations that use the internet’s organizational structure to thrive, and showed how such online initiatives can cross over into the traditional media. Smith and Smith (2000) analyzed the role of the internet during the WTO protests in Seattle and look at how global networks of activism thrive through online communication. Kahn and Kellner (2004) said, “the global internet…is creating the base and the basis for an unparalleled worldwide anti-war/pro-peace and social justice movement during a time of terrorism, war, and intense political struggle” (p. 88).

Chapter 2 introduced the concept of political consumerism and based on past literature presented a citizen-consumer typology of the socially conscious consumer (SCC) and the critical citizen consumer (CCC). Such a concept is also relevant online. The SCC can use the internet to
seek information about the products she purchases and can also purchase these products online. As a CCC, she can also actively monitor corporate action and join likeminded others intent on keeping global giants in check, or use the internet to follow aims such as organizing and participating in global protest designed to endorse a rejection of the corporate world, or even engage in hacktivism or culture jamming.

3.5 Conceptualizing communication online

Ideal-typically, the media regulate the messages sent from politicians to citizens. In doing this, the media hold both a gate-keeping and a filtering role, sorting and editing which information the public will receive about election campaigns as well as which politicians are involved in the process. Politicians, organizations and individuals have always been able to evade traditional media sources to some extent by providing their own literature to the public through such methods as distributing literature and holding meetings. Advances in technology, such as the internet, provide a restructuring of the political system so that political actors can now supply an original, unmediated message. With its combination of textual, auditory and visual components, the internet provides an increased opportunity to present civic and political material to citizens. It is also possible for citizens to communicate on a wide scale with each other and in grassroots networks, thus bypassing political elites.

Mediated communication (in this case, between political elites and citizens) encompasses both strategic and reflexive varieties. These can be manifest in a variety of ways online. Before turning to each of these, background on the concept of interactivity is necessary. Every new technology has come with high hopes of democratic promise and this is also true of the internet. The internet can be viewed as a channel of interactive communication, particularly in providing a vital connection between citizens and government (Norris, 2003a).

Interactivity is a dynamic and evolving concept. The concept of interactive communication initially meant to describe face-to-face communication (Rafaeli, 1988) but has evolved as communication technologies have become more complex in their possibilities for interaction.3 Downes and McMillan (2000) concluded that interactivity should be viewed in terms of power shifts and continuously evolving definitions. They saw interactive communication as at a minimum, two-way, and as having a flexible outlook on the concept of time, such as when messages are received. Finally, they saw it as communication that “transcends geography and creates a virtual place” (p. 161; Kenney, Gorelik, & Mwangi, 1999).

3 It should be noted that Rafaeli and others do acknowledge feedback mechanisms in “old” media like letters to the editor as early forms of mediated interactive communication.
Bordewijk and van Kaam (1986) created a four-part typology of information traffic (reproduced in McQuail, 2005, p. 147, see Figure 3.1). The typology shows how each element is related in terms of central versus individual control of information and also central versus individual control of time and choice of subject. The arrows in the figure demonstrate a shift in information traffic from allocation to conversational and consultative patterns. As noted by McQuail (2005), “this implies a broad shift of balance of communicative power from sender to receiver, although this may be counterbalanced by the growth of registration and a further development of the reach and appeal of mass media” (p. 147).

Figure 3.1. A Typology of Information Traffic (Bordewijk & van Kaam, 1986, reproduced in McQuail, 2005, p. 147).

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    Control of information store    
              Central          Individual
    Control of time and choice of subject
              Central          Individual
            Allocation        Registration
                        Consultation    Conversation
```

Each element of Bordewijk and van Kaam’s (1986) typology can be linked to interactivity. Allocation provides a minimum of interactive engagement, and is placed within the context of a single broadcaster; this can also take place online, as with computerized election campaigns (van Dijk, 2000). Consultation takes place when a user searches for information already provided by a central source (e.g., information placed on a website), and feedback is again minimal, other than the opportunity to record patterns of access. Registration records access patterns (e.g., when “cookies” are enabled on an internet browser) and conversation takes place when individuals interact with each other, using technology that impersonates face-to-face interaction. Both registration and conversation also include electronic polls, referenda, and electronic debates between citizens (van Dijk, 2000).

As pointed out by Cover (2006), these definitions allude to interactivity as a feature inherent within technology rather than an innate form of communication. In what they term as two broad approaches to studying interactivity (i.e., the “interpersonal-type communication” and the “mediated environment” approaches), Kim and Sawhney (2002) argued that these “...are
centered on the technical capacity of interactive media – capacity to simulate interpersonal-type
communication and maximize the ‘breadth and depth’ of sensory experience” (p. 220).

More recently and most relevant here, Xenos and Foot (2008) distinguished between
transactional and coproducive interactivity. Their theoretical argument took place within the
context of websites involved in online political (electoral) campaigns, though this distinction is
quite relevant for both types of communication focused on here. Transactional interactivity is
accomplished through “carefully managed forms of exchange… a preference for features that
return strategic goods for the campaign while involving a relatively small investment of
resources” (p. 63). Coproducive interactivity embraces “the notion of interactivity as user-
control…by clicking, typing, accessing, and surfing a site the user provides input that generates
noticeable changes in output” (pp. 64-65). Xenos and Foot argued that coproducive interactivity
is favored by young internet users. At the same time, web producers are the least likely to adopt
this type of interactivity, as it gives more power and control to the user. Stromer-Galley (2000)
showed that political campaign managers are not particularly interested in adding this type of
interaction to their websites, due to the risk and problems it might create.

Strategic online communication

This dissertation makes a theoretical distinction between strategic and reflexive
communication. Strategic online communication is primarily made up of one-way online
communication. One-way communication is generally based on the notion of sender to receiver.
It utilizes a broadcast model and does not request or receive feedback from audience members
or users. Organizational websites operate as an official, online face for interested viewers and,
on the surface, generally focus on information provision, though often in a variety of innovative
ways. These strategies are often tied to the manner in which individuals use websites, which
differs considerably from offline methods. Sudweeks and Simoff (1999) explained this notion of
browsing or surfing to exemplify the distinction:

In contrast to the traditional linear search along shelves of book in a library, the
Internet user follows a weblike nonlinear search in which most ‘pages’
emphasize eye-catching designs and attention-grabbing movement rather than a
sequential and logical presentation of information (p. 32).

Strategically, web producers use these methods to get the attention of young people,
often in an effort to provide information, which can be seen as one-way communication with
their audiences. For example, elites that provide the text of a political speech (or the video of
that speech) on their websites can be considered one-way communication. Bennett (2008) notes that conventional, “dutiful” citizens most often participate in organizations that employ one-way modes of communication. Earlier examples of conventional politics online showed that strategic communication is often at the heart of online initiatives. Such strategic communication can also be seen in linking practices.

Linking practices allow organizations a uniquely online way to provide information from both internal and external sources. “The link is the first significant new form of punctuation to emerge in centuries, but it is only a hint of things to come. Hypertext, in fact, suggests a whole new grammar of possibilities” (Johnson, 1997, p. 111). As a strategic form of communication, linking to other content on their website or to similar organizations demonstrates an affiliation to a particular ideology.

Strategic communication can also be demonstrated through interactivity, particularly in relation to Xenos and Foot’s (2008) transactional interactivity. This may include features that allow organizations to gather information from visitors, such as email addresses or demographic particulars.

**Reflexive online communication**

Reflexive communication requires an influence between those involved in the communicative exchange. Online, this means that the web producer is not providing all information and instead allows also users to provide feedback. Reflexive communication can be one-way, for example by providing information on the website as requested by users in a previous interactive exchange. Primarily, though, reflexive communication takes place through allowing coproducive interactivity, like enabling comments on news stories or blog postings online, or allowing users to rate features or leave feedback in other ways. It includes opportunities to influence the content of the site, whether this is through direct interaction with web producers or through allowing a communicative environment that fosters the growth of a citizen-driven network. Examples may range from an on-site blog with comments enabled to creating a collaborative website in Wiki format, where users have the same level of content control as producers. Interactivity can also allow users to comment on the democratic norms inherent in the site, for example whether a producer allows viewpoints contrary to the stated mission of the website. As youth are the focus in this research, I now turn to a look at their role particularly in relation to the internet.

### 3.6 Youth and online communication
Young people are often seen as the most “wired” of all age cohorts and are online and active more than their older counterparts. In addition, internet access in Europe is on the rise, predominantly with younger users (Lee, 2008; Norris, 2003b). Young, highly educated and high-income people are more likely to be present online (Hubregtse, 2005). As noted in Chapter 2, at least in relation to conventional political engagement, youth are also the most (party) politically disengaged group of citizens (Youniss, et al., 2002). The younger generation is a key group to focus on when examining websites’ roles as online opportunity structures. Whatever the activity, be it information seeking or engagement, certain skills are necessary on the part of the user in order to participate in online democracy.

Prerequisites of internet use

A key prerequisite of internet use is internet literacy. Some see a clear precursor to examining the internet’s civic potential as first ensuring that the target group can effectively use the technology. Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper (2005b) situate internet literacy according to the following elements:

Access. Internet literacy is required to access both hardware and online contents and services, and to regulate the conditions of access.

Understanding. Internet literacy is crucial for effective, discerning, and critical evaluation of information and opportunities online.

Creation. Internet literacy permits the user to become an active producer as well as a receiver of content, enabling interactivity and participation online (p. 6).

The issue of access, often problematic in countries with wider discrepancies in internet penetration, is called the digital divide. The digital divide refers to the notion that technology, like wealth and power, is not equally distributed among or within society. Worldwide, there is overwhelming evidence that societies with higher economic development also have great internet penetration (Norris, 2001). Therefore it is difficult to speak of the internet as having the potential to bring in all – let alone previously excluded – individuals to democracy. Current research has shown this divide to be shrinking, for example, in the US context, especially in relation to race and gender.⁴ Similar discrepancies are present in the UK, where at the same time almost all households and schools have internet access. However, these assertions are based on

general access rather than specific use, since access does not guarantee that citizens are participating online in civic or political ways. This idea has been termed the democratic divide, referring to the divisions between those able to use the internet for enhancing their political participation and influence (Mossberger, Tolbert, Stansbury, McNeal, & Dotterweich, 2003, p. 9). Buckingham (2007) concluded that there is a new digital divide between what youth do in school and what they do in their free time. He argued that young people need to develop both critical and creative forms of digital literacy.

**Young citizens online**

Youth nowadays have grown up with the internet, and have developed ways of communicating, networking, and learning that were not available to older generations. These groups are widely known by names that reflect this upbringing: “dotnets” are those born between 1977 and 1987, who grew up with the technology coming of age. Generation X (1965-1976), on the other hand, was slightly older and therefore did not receive this same level of technological socialization. The most recent classification is Generation Z, referring to those who have lived their entire lives in an environment of digital technology.

Distinctions exist in how youth utilize online resources. Based on the responses of young people (of those who use the internet at least weekly), Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper (2005a) classified three sets of young users: “interactors,” the civic-minded, and the disengaged. Interactors were those most likely to interact with websites, as in contributing to a message board, filling out a form, or participating in an online vote. They were also more likely to create their own websites. The civic-minded were not as likely to interact or make their own websites, but they did enjoy visiting a variety of civic sites, such as those related to human rights or charity issues. The disengaged were the least likely to participate in any of the above activities.

How do citizens and particularly youth use these websites? Scholars have shown that youth do engage with public affairs, although outside of traditional institutions (Coleman & Rowe, 2005). They are, for example, apt at seeking online information (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005) and forming online networks around current issues (Smith, et al., 2005). Youth-focused research has also looked at online consumer culture and potential harms made possible by the internet (Becker & Schmidt, 2004; Caplan, 2003; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). Livingstone and Bober (2004) explained that education and learning represent “approved” uses of the internet, but after consulting with children and young people, it was shown that they were much more enthusiastic about using the internet as a communication medium. They argued that through this communication aspect youth can “explore, experiment and so gain a wider range of
internet-based skills, confidence and expertise that may carry over into traditionally defined ‘educational’ uses” (p. 414).

When youth were queried specifically about their curiosity in perusing political content, other results emerged: Seventy percent of 18-25 year olds in the US viewed the internet as a practical resource in searching for political and issue information (Delli Carpini, 2000). Research in Britain showed similar results. Using focus groups and surveys of young people conducted for the UK Children Go Online project, Livingstone, et al. (2005b) found that 58% of 12-19 year olds have visited civic-minded websites (e.g., sites concerning human rights, gay rights or children’s rights, environmental issues, those focused on improving conditions at school, or charitable organizations). Most of these young people simply “checked out” the site (64%); others sent an email (18%) voted or signed a petition (12%) or joined a chatroom (5%). However, these results show that young people are often using such websites as more of an information source than as an opportunity to become engaged. Of those that have never visited such websites, the great majority stated it was because they are not interested in such issues.

At the same time, Coleman and Rowe (2005) revealed that young people preferred to interact with youth-created content, and are not impressed with websites that are information-heavy. Youth participated by demonstrating, signing online petitions, or boycotting, rather than conversing with political parties or other traditional institutions, even through online venues. This investigation also found that style is an important element in attracting young audiences, though youth are more drawn to what a site stands for or how it empowers them to take action rather than its design.

Political engagement, electoral and otherwise, rests as much on the capacity and willingness of citizens to participate as on their actual engagement (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Subsequently, using the internet for civic or political activities is probably the most helpful for young people who are already engaged, at least according to traditional definitions of engagement. Following this position, it is a complex task to reach those who do not already hold an interest in political matters: “The ability of new technologies to increase the motivation to act appears to be the least well-theorized and understood aspect of the potential for increasing civic engagement” (Delli Carpini, 2000, p. 8). Given young people’s extensive use of the internet, such opportunities are important to study for their role in encouraging responsible citizenship.

With online forms of communication, youth discover innovative ways of gathering information, interacting with others, and producing their own content, referred to by some as
“power creators” (Lenhart, Fallows, & Horrigan, 2004). Young people are often at the core of rising alternative forms of engagement and participation and are involved in activities such as culture-jamming, virtual communities, online protest and blogging. At the same time, though young people are interested in political issues, they often cannot match their enthusiasm with thorough knowledge of the issues, which has a negative influence on participation (Sloam, 2007).

3.7 Theoretical model

Chapter 2 provided an understanding of conventional and non-conventional citizenship perspectives. Taking these insights into account, here I present a theoretical model (see Figure 3.2) that refers to four types of online communication, particularly in reference to those provided on civic-political youth websites. It sees strategic and reflexive communication (a practical aim) as utilized in particular ways based on the type of citizenship endorsed by the organization (a theoretical aim).

Strategic communication is goal-oriented and generally persuasive in its aims. It is often top-down, from political elites to citizens, and rarely or superficially seeks feedback from its intended receiver(s). Traditionally, democratic institutions communicate strategically with citizens like through political speech, where a representative delivers a monologue to citizens during an election campaign. Strategic communication can be mediated by new technologies, such as on an information-rich website that provides a source of political knowledge for visitors. Strategic communication on a conventional website (Type 1 in the model) provides political knowledge in line with this view of citizenship and aims to promote conventional activities and obligations. Strategically, this organization uses its website to supply citizens with information and opportunities for interaction in ways that coincide with its theoretical view, for example by providing a webpage explaining how Parliament works with the aim to help youth better understand how laws are made. Strategic communication on a non-conventional website (Type 2) draws on a more individualistic, lifestyle-oriented view of citizenship, defined by a concern about global issues and the direct link between the identity of a citizen and her politics. The personal is political, and users are educated about globalization, consumer politics and other non-traditional political matters. Such a website may provide an array of information about a specific issue campaign, with little mention of traditional politics. Rather than highlighting a responsibility to participate in democracy in a traditional way, it instead uses strategic communication to demonstrate to youth the importance of less conventional activities.
In contrast, reflexive communication can be defined as a continuous, goal-modifying process. Reflexivity is the ability of actors within a system to learn and apply their knowledge to overcome problems as they arise. Bottom-up communication takes place between citizens and a responsive political elite. Reflexive communication can produce knowledge and understanding through exchanges with others; those involved in the communicative exchange influence each other, so one person is not providing all information or steering the direction of communication.

Figure 3.2. Four Varieties of Online Political Communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic communication</th>
<th>Conventional citizenship</th>
<th>Non-conventional citizenship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Online content is goal-oriented and persuasive</td>
<td>Type 1: Strategic communication on a conventional website</td>
<td>Type 2: Strategic communication on a non-conventional website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One-way communication &amp; transactional interactivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Top-down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflexive communication</th>
<th>Conventional citizenship</th>
<th>Non-conventional citizenship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Online content reflects a desire to be seen as goal-modifying and responsive</td>
<td>Type 3: Reflexive communication on a conventional website</td>
<td>Type 4: Reflexive communication on a non-conventional website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coproductive interactivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bottom-up</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The conventional organization that incorporates reflexive communication (Type 3) uses its website to (openly) evaluate its strategic aims and better understand young people. It encompasses communication that in essence operates to allow political actors to better understand the political environment and possibly change their aims to be more in sync with their intended audience. This may be reflected in coproductive interactivity when communicating with its target audience. The organization may choose to ask for feedback from young people about their views towards conventional politics, to learn how to better draw in young citizens, and better understand their particular view of citizenship. Youth views are then displayed as an integral part of the website. Reflexive communication on a non-conventional website (Type 4) aims to gather and incorporate feedback from citizens to learn and adapt their
perspective, and recognizes the need to continuously reexamine campaign goals and ensure that the audience is responding positively to online initiatives. There is an emphasis on allowing visitors a say in order to achieve the goals of the organization.

3.8 Summary

This chapter has provided a discussion into the theoretical issues surrounding citizenship and its specific application online, incorporating elements of theory, practice and use. It looked at research examining how political elites and young people are adapting to online spaces. It compared those operating in conventional realms versus those in non-conventional arenas, and presented a view of political communication online in relation to strategic and reflexive varieties. It presented a theoretical model inherent in this research project, showing how it can be applied to online communication. This model provides a means to first identify youth organizations as fitting a theoretically conventional or non-conventional citizenship focus. Then, based on such a dimension, it becomes possible to examine the methods that such organizations pursue in communicating both strategically and reflexively online.