Youth, citizenship and online political communication
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Chapter 4

Research Design

4.1 Introduction to the research design

This chapter introduces the research design used in this dissertation. It presents the research questions and provides a summary of the planned research, relating it back to the theoretical model in Chapter 3. The remainder of the chapter details each chosen methodology.

Summary of planned empirical research

Jones (1999) argued, “the ‘classic’ model of communication (sender-message-receiver) is not only a tempting one with which to build analyses of the Internet, it can be a valuable first step” (p. 13). This dissertation brings together three main areas of interest: The perspectives of youth organizations (the sender), the content of their websites (the message), and the reported attitudes and behaviors of young people (the receiver). Empirically each of these is examined in the coming chapters. Website content is studied through a mix of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, focusing on participatory websites of youth organizations. The perspective of youth organizations is examined through semi-structured interviews with web producers. Finally, youth perspectives are analyzed through an online user survey, which aims to gain insight into the target group of these youth organizations.

Generally, research involving the internet focuses on online information sources, how this information is retrieved and processed, or the possibilities for interactive communication online. The current dissertation research explores how both one-way and interactive content is presented via the web. Analyzing such website content is a good way to understand both strategic and reflexive communication. By nature websites are subject to fluid change. Content can be updated continuously to reflect the importance of certain events or messages, therefore providing a means to study both types. Interviewing the producers of this content provides further insight into communicative practices.

1 In the course of this research social networking sites have become very popular, with both individuals and increasingly with organizations. This was also reflected in the interviews conducted; however the focus here remains on the content of the organization’s own URL. This may be seen as a weakness but at the same time helps to narrow the focus of the research.
**Empirical application of the theoretical model**

The theoretical model details two types of organizations, those that represent conventional and non-conventional citizenship, and two forms of online communication, strategic and reflexive. In this dissertation the model is applied – with several methodological approaches – by examining three separate political contexts in order to understand the phenomena under study. The first (seen in Chapter 5) is that of an election campaign, where websites examined are considered to hold a conventional focus on citizenship. The second (Chapter 6) encompasses a broader political scope: Organizations are initially classified as conventional or non-conventional based on a preliminary examination of their mission and the theoretical positioning apparent on their websites. A third arena (Chapter 7) is that of political consumerism, and this analysis examines if and how this approach is pursued on civic-political youth organizations. The methodological progression inherent in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, which is now detailed in the remainder of the current chapter, is visualized below (see Figure 4.1). It specifies the citizenship focus (of youth organizations) in each chapter, how websites were chosen for analysis, and the relevant empirical data analysis.

**Figure 4.1. Methodological Progression.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizenship focus</th>
<th>EP election campaign (Chapter 5)</th>
<th>A broader political scope (Chapter 6)</th>
<th>Political consumerism (Chapter 7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>Conventional &amp; Non-conventional</td>
<td>Conventional &amp; Non-conventional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth sites chosen for their potential to contain election-related content</td>
<td>Start from websites in #1, expand theoretically through other linked and recommended organizations</td>
<td>Start from websites in #2, select those that provide relevant content and interview data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature &amp; qualitative website analysis</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, qualitative website analysis</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, qualitative website analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User survey (report on traditional participation)</td>
<td>User survey (report civic/political attitudes and online use)</td>
<td>User survey (report prevalence of political consumerism, tie to forms of participation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Political communication in a democracy exists in many forms. As argued, communication between political elites and citizens – the primary area of focus in this research project – is both strategic and reflexive. Each empirical chapter examines and unpacks the strategic and reflexive communication styles of the chosen youth organizations, comparing and contrasting their reported methods (with interviews) and the content of their websites (via content analysis). These views will also be evaluated against the reported views of young people, their target audience. Details of each part of this analysis are provided in the following sections.

Research questions

The research questions guiding this study look at citizenship in a democratic context as well as how communication is being played out online, in terms of content as well as producer and user views. The primary research question is: How are websites addressing youth (dis)interest in politics and how does that fit the nature of young people’s conception and "living" of democratic citizenship? Several secondary questions\(^2\) will be considered in answering the primary research question. The first of these, dealt with in Chapter 5, concentrates on a traditional political event and examines the online content of conventional youth organizations within this context:

During an election campaign, how are party and otherwise politically motivated websites addressing young people, and how do these sites compare in the information they provide and the engagement opportunities they offer for users?

The next question allows a comparison between the communicative approaches of conventional and non-conventional youth organizations, and is the focus of Chapter 6:

In a broad political context, how do web producers’ views of citizenship translate to online communication strategies on their youth civic-political websites?

Inherent in this discussion is the perspective of young people, as their attitudes and behaviors inform the online communication strategies of youth organizations. Therefore a third

\(^2\) Each empirical chapter also contains a number of sub research questions within each area of inquiry. However, in order to avoid confusion, here I highlight only the primary questions.
question, of which relevant elements are addressed in Chapters 5 and 6 focuses on the perceptions of youth:

*How do young people view their role as citizens, and how do they use the internet to gather information, articulate views on issues with a political nature and/or participate politically?*

Finally, the issue of political consumerism presents a case study approach to understanding how non-conventional and possibly also conventional organizations are utilizing such a focus on their websites. This issue, exemplified in the final research question and addressed in Chapter 7, encompasses elements of youth perceptions as well as online communication from the perspective of youth organizations:

*How do youth practice political consumerism, and how does this compare to youth organizations’ perceptions of this notion as well as the reality of their online content?*

The secondary research questions address three specific elements. First, they examine each aspect of the sender-message-receiver model; second, they look at various periods of political activity that reflect an evolving citizenship theory (election campaigns, a look outside the realm of electoral politics in a broader political context, and a particular focus on exploring the blending of citizenship and consumerism); and third, they highlight a variety of methodologies, from quantitative to qualitative website analysis along with semi-structured interviews and an online user survey. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I explain the rational behind the methodological progression, and provide a detailed account of each method used.

### 4.2 General methodological progression

This empirical study utilizes a number of qualitative and quantitative methods (Bauer & Gaskell 2000; Gerodimos & Ward, 2007) but also deals with a number of data sources. The process known as triangulation is a useful concept to reference in order to understand this procedure. Triangulation “entails using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena” (Bryman, 2001, p. 274). More specifically, Schröder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray (2003) pointed out that “Triangulation proper, in which primary data sets are being collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods, should be distinguished from research designs that use one method as an auxiliary strategy for gathering information to be fed into the
research material of the other” (p. 356). Schröder, et al. cite Jensen (2002, p. 272) as referring to this as facilitation rather than triangulation, a more precise term to relate to the empirical structure of this dissertation project.

At the same time, though, triangulation may be applied here in a different way. Generally it has been seen as a way to utilize different methods in examining one phenomenon. The current dissertation research instead triangulates around a theoretical concept, as exemplified in the theoretical model. For example, a more traditional application of triangulation might examine the use of the internet during the EP election campaign, and utilize quantitative content analysis of websites and qualitative interviews with producers in relation to this specific period of study in order to enrich understanding of this event. The research here takes a different approach to triangulation and gathers data, both quantitative and qualitative, from various time periods in order to draw broad conclusions about the current state of citizenship and online communication. Lunt and Livingstone (1996) argued that “different contexts of data collection do not invalidate each other but rather they illustrate the truism that different contexts generate different kinds of data with different meanings” (p. 14). Either way, the best solution according to Schröder, et al. (2003) is “…probably not to make too strong claims for our triangulated findings either way…Therefore, when we get different findings from different methods, the challenge is to understand why” (p. 359).

Issues of website selection, youth focus, reliability and validity

A number of methodological issues arose throughout the research process. Two issues were particularly relevant to website selection. The first related primarily to the fluid nature of online content. As noted in the introduction in Chapter 1, the focus is on youth organization websites in the UK. However, websites are sometimes difficult to choose by country because of their global nature. For some of the electoral campaign-based websites, this was not such a vital issue since those represented (e.g., political parties) had a clear, national stake in the elections or at least a focus on UK participation in those elections. As the research focus broadened, website choice became more difficult. I was hesitant to exclude organizations that had a stronger stake outside of the UK, since often they also contained UK-specific elements. One example arose with an issue-based organization called peta2, the youth version of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The primary site is US-based, but within the website they maintain an
explicit UK section\(^3\) (as well as one in the German language) that utilizes outreach methods particular to a British audience. Because of this section it was included in the analysis. With this example in mind, the guiding rationale – particularly for organizations with an international focus – is that they were included if they maintained at least a partial UK focus, in order to locate a similar cultural and language base for content.

A second issue that arose was the logic of youth. This related to both a clear definition of what age range young people actually consist of as well as the broader question of how youth-focused an organization must be to be included. The age range varied considerably when conducting the first phase of research during the EP election campaign, where youth were defined as anywhere between the ages of 18 and 30. Chosen websites generally identified a target group within this age range, as professing a specific age range is one of the clearest ways in which an organization can clarify its youth focus. The issue of voting age was more important for election-based research, but as I moved to a broader focus this became less relevant. Some sites focused on youth under 18, and others focused exclusively on university students. Still others did not explicitly profess a youth focus at all but did so implicitly through features that cater to a younger age cohort (e.g., establishing a presence on social networking sites, or addressing a topic that has been shown to be popular with young people, like the environment). With such variation, a strict criterion was not deemed appropriate.

Third, the research dealt with issues of reliability and validity, particularly in relation to combining qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, qualitative research has been criticized for a lack of reliability. This is mainly due to the fact that qualitative research is inherently subjective; however, reliability is expressed in the standard of analysis, interpretation, and conduct of the research project. By transcribing interviews, for example, the researcher is able to provide a clear indication of the data that were used in subsequent analysis. Further comparison also builds on the strength of combining the two methods:

Qualitative research has greater ecological validity, because informants can put items on the agenda, researchers can probe, the data are strongly contextualized, etc. Quantitative research, conversely, has greater reliability, because its more formalized procedures of data collection and analysis increase the likelihood of obtaining consistent data and consistent codings; and its findings have greater generalizability, because of the larger samples and the sometimes random techniques used to recruit them (Schröder, et al., 2003, p. 349).

\(^3\)http://www.peta2.com/index.aspx; the UK site is linked from the homepage and located at: http://www.peta2.com/uk/
Validity can be difficult to acquire especially when dealing with latent concepts. Therefore by embedding a project in relevant literature, a researcher can make an assertion of validity. Another issue of validity is generalizability. In qualitative research statistical significance cannot be obtained, but by reaching a threshold of emerging patterns (i.e., conducting interviews until the obtained perspectives begin to repeat themselves) one can speak of theoretical saturation and conclude that the data results are justified. The issues noted here play an important role throughout the reporting of findings, and will be mentioned when appropriate. I now turn to a description of the empirical work conducted for this dissertation.

4.3 Website selection and analysis: EP election campaign

Election campaigns are known for increased political activity, particularly in the media, and addressing citizen’s participation within in this context is one way to view conventional citizenship. To understand what was available online in the context of the 2004 EP election campaign, I conducted a content analysis of information and engagement features. The first provides a more persuasive approach to communicating with citizens; the latter encourages the citizen to virtually talk back. Therefore this approach fits into theoretical model in that it addresses conventional citizenship but also looks for both types of political communication present on the chosen websites.

Website selection

Website selection is a challenging endeavor, especially in a continuously changing online environment. Some have defined and analyzed an entire online population (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, Callaghan, & Yared, 2002), but most research must delineate stricter criteria as to which websites to include.

The first analysis took place during the 2004 EP election campaign and focused on websites in the UK, within the context of the Internet and Elections project.4 I chose two types of organizations that addressed young people during this election campaign: youth sections of political parties and youth-oriented organizations. Bennett and Xenos (2005) provided a related comparison in what they termed the “Electoral Web Sphere,” which includes campaign websites produced by candidates, and the “Youth Engagement Web Sphere,” which is defined as “non-campaign political engagement and voting sites explicitly targeted at younger age groups” (p. 4).

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4 The Internet and National Elections project took a global perspective in examining how the internet sees political practice online. The research team consisted of 30 researchers from 22 countries. For a detailed summary of the project, see Jankowski, et al. (2007).
Youth branches of political parties exist in order to attract young, politically active or curious citizens and to encourage political engagement in a particular ideological direction; youth organizations appeal to young people for comparable but often less overtly party-political reasons.

I identified two types of organizations that addressed young people during the election campaign: political party youth branches and youth organizations. As the focus here was on an electoral time period all organizations were classified as conventional in their approach to citizenship.

Using a two-step approach, websites in the UK were identified in the months leading up to the EP election campaign. Initially I chose websites that explicitly cater to youth. As a further prerequisite for inclusion, websites had to have a realistic potential to contain information about the 2004 EP election campaign, and this was determined with a preliminary examination of their content and focus. For example, a website could explicitly mention the election with a countdown to vote, reference particular candidates, or more implicitly demonstrate a general interest in electoral politics, like through a clear commitment to democratic (conventional) citizenship as declared in a mission statement.

I used two separate sources to compile the website list used in this research (Norris, 2003b): “Governments on the WWW” and “Political Science Resources.” Governments on the WWW provides an online, comprehensive list of political party websites in Britain. I searched each party site in order to determine if a youth section was present. From this directory, I included political party youth branches with an online presence. These findings were then crosschecked with Political Science Resources. I located youth organization websites using the United Nation’s listing of youth and student coordinating bodies in the UK. Additionally, in late-April 2004, I utilized two search engines. The first was Google, set to search for websites in English and specifically in the UK. The second was Yahoo, where “UK only” sites were

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5 This focus represents the first slight modification from the Internet and Elections Project in relation to the identification scheme. The project, which surveyed a broad range of websites within each participating country, aimed to identify site producers in a range of areas. Website identification of a more general selection of UK websites in the same time period revealed an almost complete absence of participation from a number of sources, including Business and Political Professional organizations (Lusoli & Ward, 2004). Further, website selection resulted in no relevant youth-focused websites classified as Citizen, Press, Religious, or Labour Union. Therefore, I chose to combine Candidate and Party sites into one category termed “political party youth branches,” and Educational, Non-Governmental and Portal websites were referred to as “youth organizations.”


7 Retrieved from http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/parties.htm

selected. I did these searches with the aim of ensuring that all relevant sites were identified within the two specific producer definitions.

The identification of youth websites took place in the six months before the election campaign. I browsed the chosen sites several times throughout this time period in order to monitor the degree of activity. Any other relevant organizations were added that had obtained a web presence that matched the above criteria. The initial search took place in February 2004 using the above-mentioned sources and was repeated in late-April 2004 in order to ascertain the accurateness of the list. Website identification was completed on May 7, 2004. In total, I selected 30 UK-based youth sites for analysis. Of these, 12 belonged to youth branches of political parties and 18 to youth organizations. The websites were coded two weeks before the EP elections using a frame employed by all Internet and Elections Project researchers, which is elaborated on next. A list of all relevant websites is found in Appendix A, Table 1.

*Website analysis: feature analysis*

New communication technologies provide an online structure for citizens, or a “structure of political opportunity” (Eisinger, 1973, p. 11). Online structure is defined as “an electronic space, comprised of various html pages, features, links and texts, within which an individual is given an opportunity to act” (Schneider & Foot, 2002, p. 5). Offline or more traditional structures for political action include, for example, offices where campaign workers promote an electoral campaign, or town halls where candidates gather public supporters to rally support. Online structures, like political websites, now combine the availability of both online (e-mail contact or links to other political sites) and offline (opportunities to distribute campaign materials) action. Through their online presence they can encourage political interest by providing opportunities to find information, though this information is usually consistent with both citizens’ specific political interests and their partisan preferences (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Sunstein, 2001).

Content analysis is a well-established method in the social sciences (Krippendorff, 1980). It can be approached quantitatively, as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p. 18), as well as qualitatively, which produces more in-depth, rich results. Content analysis is also seen to encompass a broader range of investigative possibilities, and in this case is viewed as “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of a message” (Holsti, 1969, p. 14). Consequently, content analysis is conducted both in an inductive manner as well as a more deductive one.
Content analysis of websites is relatively new and has rapidly grown in popularity (McMillan, 2000; Weare & Lin, 2000). It has been approached in a variety of ways, though the scope of such analysis has sometimes been limited in its interpretive ability. Analyses that utilize online political content need to adapt to aspects of contemporary political communication, including changes in content, space, time and reach (Gerodimos & Ward, 2007). Quantitative-based measures have been used in a variety of studies to examine online content. For example, among other identified variables and categories, Gibson and Ward (2000) also performed a word count of various sections. While examining youth political websites in the US, Bennett and Xenos (2005) used a coding scheme that focused on 16 different political issues as well as technical and substantive features.

The first method utilized in this project and also used in the Internet and Elections project is termed web feature analysis and “consists of examining the features of websites as inscriptions of political actions on the part of site producers, enabling or constraining political actions by site visitors” (Jankowski et al., 2007, p. 4). This method represents a comprehensive look at the content of websites and is applied to the 30 websites chosen for analysis in Chapter 5. All coders involved in the project were required to successfully code five training sites and ten archived English-language sites in order to measure inter-rater reliability. The average score for agreement over all coding categories was 86.9% (Dougherty & Foot, 2007).

I examined the chosen websites for their provision of both information and engagement features. Information features consist of election content, biographical information, candidate endorsements, issue positions and comparisons, speeches, election-related calendars, and information about the electoral or voting process. The presence of such features allows the visitor to gather relevant information about the election campaign as well as broaden her general political knowledge. Engagement features let the website user interact with the producer or other visitors and provide participation opportunities for activities and actions both online and offline. The following engagement features were coded: the ability to contact the producer or receive an e-mail newsletter; to become a member of the organization; to engage in previously offline activities, such as donating to the party or organization or registering to vote; to contribute to a forum space; to write a public support statement for a candidate, party or other relevant

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9 Qualitative analysis is also used in Chapter 5 and will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.
organization; to send links and e-paraphernalia to others; to distribute materials offline, and to volunteer. A full list of items coded in the feature analysis is found in Appendix B.  

Website coding took place in a two week period before the elections, and focused on the availability of the earlier described information and engagement features on each selected website. These features were seen as contributing to “provision of election-related information, opportunity for discussion and debate, and opportunity for undertaking election-related political action” (Jankowski, et al., 2007, p. 7). I also used a qualitative approach to explore mode of address towards youth as well as types of encouraged participation, either online or offline. The results of the first empirical study are detailed in Chapter 5.  

4.4 Semi-structured interviews

Leaving behind the analysis of websites active during the 2004 EP election campaign, data gathered from semi-structured interviews provided insight into the producers’ viewpoints as well as contributed to a better understanding of website content. Analysis of these interviews aided analysis in both Chapter 6, which examines websites within a broad political scope, and in Chapter 7, which focuses on the notion of political consumerism. The interviews explored producer views of citizenship (conventional and non-conventional) as well as their views towards online communication. This analysis is contrasted with (qualitative) content analysis of the websites, which assisted in identifying disparities between perceptions and the actual content. This approach is useful in an exploratory study as it leaves room for potential discrepancies between perceptions and use. Further, in the results chapters, the use of multiple quotes from interviewees (Creswell, 2007) as well as text from the websites demonstrates the viewpoints of conventional and non-conventional organizations.

Review of methods

Qualitative interviews contribute to descriptions and interpretations of the arena under study: “Participants have more or less opportunity to answer questions in their own terms” (May, 1993, p. 92). The choice of interview method usually depends on the research question itself, or on the qualitative approach, which informs the overall research design. This inquiry was primarily carried out through semi-structured interviews and focused on individuals that

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10 Several information features coded by the Internet and Elections Project were not incorporated into my analysis. These included the presence of images (which were anyway ubiquitous on the chosen websites), and terms of use and privacy policy statements.

11 Elements of this research are also addressed in recent publications (see Lusoli & Ward, 2005; Ward, 2005; Ward, 2007).
could be seen as experts in both their organizations and the website. This interview strategy is supported: “The best research on elites has utilized a combination of methodological approaches to deepen the research findings” (Hertz & Imber, 1995, p. ix). Further, qualitative research is helpful when the aim of research is to extensively explore experiences, practices, and attitudes of a group in order to establish meaning. This corresponds to the primary interest in talking to these individuals.

Elite interviewing, as it is known in political science, concerns both the target group and the research technique that is used. “Elite interviewing can be used whenever it is appropriate to treat a respondent as an expert about the topic in hand” (Leech, 2002, p. 663). In the current dissertation, interviewees were seen as strong representatives of both organizational philosophy as well as knowledgeable about website content, and were thus considered elites. The research technique most commonly used in elite interviewing is the semi-structured interview.

Semi-structured interviews, a form of qualitative interviewing, allow for a more complex and in-depth portrayal of the issues at hand (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). Semi-structured interviews can highlight a number of explicit themes but may also derive much of its form from open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow for increased complexity and depth in responses, and allow for a critical comparison between individual attitudes and beliefs. More specifically,

Open-ended questions…are most often employed when the researcher cannot anticipate the various ways in which people are likely to respond to a question. They are used to stimulate free thought, solicit suggestions, provoke people’s memories, and clarify positions. Further, they give respondents a chance to vent frustrations and state strong opinions. They are indispensable for exploratory studies in which the researcher’s main purpose is to find the most salient aspects of a topic… (Dillman, 1978, p. 87).

In essence, “the main advantage of such interviews is to offer purposive topical steering” (Flick, 1998, p. 106). This method is appropriate given the fluid nature of citizenship combined with the fast-moving changes in the online world of political communication; speaking directly to representatives of these organizations provides an inside look at the rationale behind the website content and contributes to the aim of revealing possible inconsistencies between views and content.

The interviews conducted in this research project had two primary objectives. The first was to gather information to better understand the interviewee’s position as well as the features and content of the website. In this way, the method may be seen to encompass the arena of
information interviews. The second objective was to better understand the theoretical views of interviewees and how they connect with the more practical level of website content. Therefore, through analysis each interviewee can be seen as corresponding to a particular position in relation to citizenship and communication. Jensen (2002) called these respondent interviews: Here, the respondent is conceived as a representative of one or more social and cultural categories. The assumption is that these categories are inscribed in, and can be recovered from, the respondent's discourses with reference to the media, in this case, websites.

Use of communication technologies in semi-structured interviewing has led to new opportunities and greater ease in reaching and communicating with target individuals. When done with elites, access to the internet is most likely not a problem, and online interviewing offers a cheap alternative to the costs of telephone or face to face interviewing. When utilizing instant messaging software, online interviewing can be seen as an extension of email interviewing but differs in that this type of interview is conducted in real time, where the interviewer enters a message and the interviewee responds. Further, a transcript is automatically generated. In the recent past, online interviewing usually took the form of email interviews or via chatting. Due to advances in internet telephony software, I conducted interviews over Skype or Skypeout, which mirrored the experience of telephone interviewing. Approximately eight interviewees had an existing Skype account and the rest provided a contact telephone number.

Selection of interviewees

The selection of interviewees included decisions regarding the number of interviewees and the choice of organizations to focus on. First, rather than seeking a representative sample of organizations, “purposeful” sampling strategies are more relevant for qualitative interviewing. The goal was to find individuals who are experts in the necessary area, and who are willing to be interviewed (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 119). Second, when using a theoretical sampling approach as in the current research, scholars agree that between 20 and 30 interviews across a range of comparative possibilities is sufficient (Douglas, 1985) though conducting up to 50 or 60 interviews is also possible (Creswell, 2007, p. 67). This facilitates the saturation of a theoretical classification.

In selecting interviewees, I drew from a broad range of civic-political websites with a focus on youth in the UK. The selection procedure consisted of the following: I began by reviewing websites chosen for the 2004 EP election campaign website analysis. If they were still

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12 Skype is a peer-to-peer internet telephony network. Skypeout is a service that allows for landline calls from the internet. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skype for more information.
active and also had contact information available, I contacted each organization by email and requested an interview with a relevant individual. This way, the organization was able to choose who they felt would be the most appropriate, expert individual based on the email request (the full text of this request is available in Appendix C). A positive response meant the interviews were scheduled right away; no response resulted in a reminder email being sent one week later. At this point, interviews were either scheduled or declined. A small minority again ignored the request and was not contacted further.

For those that responded positively and completed an interview, at the conclusion I asked them to name other key individuals at relevant organizations who might be willing to talk to me. This process is known as snowball sampling and has been criticized for its lack of representativeness (Arber, 2001), but this issue was partially remedied by the fact that I contacted both those more intricately connected with government politics (conventional organizations) as well as those more distanced (non-conventional organizations). As noted, by definition the organizations chosen for analysis during the EP election campaign were considered conventional; however, names and links to more non-conventional websites were sometimes presented online in either positive or negative ways. Thus perusing links to other organizations on the websites expanded the pool of potential interviewees. This relates to, at minimum, a loose association between organizations, but also represents potential paths users may take in visiting the websites: “The links that join those various destinations are links of association, not randomness….a Web surfer clicks on a link because she’s interested” (Johnson, 1997, p. 109). With this strategy, individuals recommended to me followed different trajectories and therefore provided a wide range of theoretical outlooks, and also resulted in an ongoing pool of contacts in case a new area of theoretical interest arose.

I began querying potential interview contacts on June 10, 2007, and finalized the process on September 6, 2007. In total, I contacted 44 organizations and received 26 positive responses, although five contacts did not follow through after initially agreeing to an interview. Six contacts denied the interview request and the remainder (12) did not respond. A list of all 21 interview contacts (12 classified as conventional and nine as non-conventional), including interviewee function and initial theoretical classification is found in Appendix A, Table 2.

Creation of the interview guide

Semi-structured interviews make use of an interview guide that includes a checklist of relevant topics. In comparison to a predefined questionnaire, an interview guide aims to address all major topics, though the order in which the topics are brought up is not firmly set. Further,
such a format allows for appropriate question restructuring as well as follow-up questions, allowing the interviewer to expand on appropriate topics.

The interview guide consisted of several major topic categories: queries regarding the interviewee’s position and responsibilities, views on youth, objectives of the website, views regarding democracy and citizenship, and future directions for the website. Each of these topics included various components and questions. I approached each of these topics with open-ended questions, giving interviewees the opportunity to answer as fully as possible due to their individual circumstances. Interviewee time availability differed and sometimes certain topics were chosen over others due to time constraints. This decision was made based on the classification and general themes of the organization under query.

Interview analysis

Twenty-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with website producers. In-depth interviews lasted between 20 minutes and one hour and 30 minutes, with an average time of 44 minutes. Each was recorded; this is common practice in semi-structured interviewing. For example, Deakin and Parry (2000) based their research about the Treasury on 30 interviews with senior officials and were able to record almost all their interviews: “The inhibiting effect was minimal and the advantage of generating a text agreed between subject and interviewers was very substantial” (p. 12). Based on the recording, interviews were transcribed and the text was sent to the interviewee for approval.

Creswell (2007) pointed out that identifying an approach to qualitative inquiry “enhances the rigor and sophistication of the research design” (p. 45). After transcription, all interviews were, as common in qualitative research, subject to an analysis based to some extent in grounded theory. Such analysis should be “grounded” in data from the research environment, and resulting theoretical explanations are produced in the responses of participants in the study, rather than from a pre-existing theoretical perspective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Where I differ from the traditional application of grounded theory is that first, I pre-identify (i.e., before data gathering and analysis) a theoretical model and classify organizations as either promoting conventional or non-conventional citizenship, and second, I examine online communication based on strategic and reflexive aims. These initial theoretical identifications do not, however, change the questions or thrust of the interviews or content analysis and was open to challenge based on the responses received. A grounded theory

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13 See Appendix C for a complete version of all core areas and potential follow-up questions, including the email text initially sent out to potential interviewees.
approach particularly informed the basis for qualitative website analysis, which explored emerging categories from the interview analysis (see Section 4.4).

Within such a tradition, Mayring (2000) introduced a method of analysis for such qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Transcripts were read in their entirety, and from this initial impression were coded for emerging categories. Theoretically speaking, this process involved a focus on disparities between the original classification of the organization (either conventional or non-conventional) as well as emerging methods of communication. I extracted relevant assertions or statements from these categories, summarized them and provided relevant explanations. The next step entailed sorting the condensed transcripts into relevant dimensions and, through a process of re-reading and continuous modification (Mayring terms this “feedback loops”), I chose issues to focus on based on reoccurring patterns of response, theoretical relevance, or noteworthy variations. Throughout the empirical chapters quotes are used to illustrate these occurrences and are also included in order to provide examples of the more general communicative themes at the heart of this research. Immediately after each interview, I summarized preliminary thoughts, placed data into initial themes and thought about how these themes fit into the theoretical model. I also evaluated the interview process for topic comprehension and possible exclusions or new areas of inclusion for future interviews.

Throughout this period the websites were consulted in a more systematic way, drawing from interview findings as detailed in the next section. Such a “zigzag” process is common in grounded theory analysis (Creswell, 2007) and is further specified in the description of qualitative website analysis.

4.5 Qualitative website analysis

After an interview with the web producer was confirmed, relevant websites were then consulted for an initial analysis in order to build knowledge about the content and better inform the interview process. Qualitative website analysis is utilized to varying degrees in all three empirical chapters. Though it follows an overall strategy throughout the three arenas of analysis, it is applied in various ways to the context inherent in each empirical chapter. In Chapter 5, it expands on the feature analysis of websites, and in Chapters 6 and 7 it focuses on emerging categories of interest from the interview analysis.

Review of methods

Qualitative research is useful when research aims to look more deeply at elements like experiences, practices, and attitudes of a group, and is done primarily to establish meaning.
Montgomery, et al. (2004) performed a qualitative look at several youth issues and projects in the US, and as in the current dissertation, qualitative analysis was complemented with in-depth interviews with relevant organizations. A variety of studies have attempted to make their findings more comprehensive by examining website content but also interviewing key personnel to generate a more definite understanding of the intended message. After conducting a content analysis of British politics sites, Ward, et al. (2003) conducted interviews with key personnel. Jackson (2004) compared a content analysis of British political party e-newsletters to interviews with the e-campaigners of the five parties in order to better comprehend their political marketing strategy. Singer and Gonzalez-Verez (2003) monitored online newspaper content and contacted website editors in an effort to better grasp the meaning of political content.

As with interview analysis, qualitative analysis of websites followed a hybrid grounded theory approach. Strauss and Corbin (1990) described a process that starts with open coding, or coding the data for main information categories. Then axial coding emerges in order to create categories around a core area of interest in order to better understand what causes, strategies, and consequences resulted from this phenomenon. At this point, researchers generally interrelate these categories and form a visual model (Creswell, 2007). As noted earlier, this research project differs slightly from the traditional grounded theory method. As a theoretical model was already in place, two core areas of interest were developed before data collection (i.e., citizenship and communication dimensions). However a form of axial coding was used to determine the relevant causes, strategies, and consequences related to web producer’s viewpoints. Website content was then analyzed for these instances and results specified applications particular to the web content itself.¹⁴

In Chapter 5, qualitative website analysis is utilized to more closely examine electoral content but also youth address. No interview data were available in this context so the frame of reference stems from feature analysis results of selected websites. I focused on two primary areas of analysis: mode of address and structure of participation. In order to better understand mode of address I explored online content to examine how youth in particular are communicated to and how youth cultural elements are incorporated to raise appeal. As for the general structure of participation endorsed on the websites, I looked for supported types of participation as well as how the organization uses its website to encourage offline participation. The presence of interactivity is explored in both analytical foci by examining forums or blogs and the stated use of user feedback.

¹⁴ No appendix is provided for the qualitative content analysis due to its exploratory nature.
The analysis in Chapter 6 and 7 was inspired by the topics included in the interview guide, interview analysis, and was loosely structured by the theoretical elements inherent in the initial model. As the last section demonstrated, semi-structured interviews were meant to first, comprehend how each interviewee perceived the online presence of her or his organization; second, to explore concepts and expectations of youth, and how they saw fit to address this target group; and third, to probe for a deeper understanding of the interviewee’s views towards democratic citizenship. Keeping these findings in mind and being aware of possible inconsistencies and necessary clarifications, qualitative analysis followed a broad scope, though the main areas of interest can be classified according to elements that encompass strategic and reflexive communication. Broadly speaking, these relate to website content and interactivity. This analysis aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how selected websites address key issues, and helps clarify positions expressed during interviews with web producers.

Though actual findings are presented in the Chapter 6, areas of interest within content include but are not limited to the ways in which relevant issues are defined and the variety of perspectives presented, the voice of the website, or rather, how much users versus producers contribute; the ways in which youth in particular are addressed (is there a specific “youth” language used?), how the website incorporates different cultural elements to appeal to users (i.e., celebrity endorsements, the website/organization’s “brand”); types of participation that are implicitly or explicitly addressed and encouraged; and how the website ties online information and engagement opportunities to offline participation. Areas of interest within interactivity are features such as forums or blogs (and the level of their use); but also ways in which feedback is (perceived to be) received and used; systems that are set up in order to filter feedback or contributions (e.g., moderation); use of open systems of production (e.g., open-source software, creative commons licenses) and evidence of an expansion beyond a more tightly controlled website into social networking sites (e.g., MySpace or Facebook profiles). Using these areas as a starting point, typologies were developed from the data rather than being predefined:

Typologies are distinct, discrete classifications of information that help to give order to a confusing, continuous mass of heterogeneous information. In some way, this continuum of information has been divided into discrete regions where points within each such region bear qualitative similarities to each other, whereas points in different regions bear qualitative differences to each other. The construction of meaningful typologies, therefore, is the foundation of scientific inquiry (Sudweeks & Simof, 1999, p. 37).
This analysis was meant to complement the interview and quantitative content analysis process, in terms of understanding organizational perspectives on citizenship in terms of website content. It was also used to better structure the responses of interviewees. For example, if an interviewee was explaining thoughts on moderation, and the organization also maintained a Facebook profile, I could ask the interviewee to expand on her/his logic regarding control of the website and the reasons for this expansion into more interactive territory. In Chapter 7, I examine more specific elements in relation to the notion of political consumerism, drawing particularly from the theorized notions of the socially conscious consumer and the critical citizen consumer, and what interviewees reveal about such distinctions.

4.6 User survey

Understanding the audience – in this case, young people in the UK – is an important step in assessing the effectiveness of youth organizations’ aims and strategies. By additionally drawing on user data, this dissertation is able to gather evidence on all three aspects of relevance: sender, message, and receiver.

Review of methods

A variety of researchers have recognized the need to compare online content with user perceptions and uses of websites. The survey utilized here is contrasted with both content and the perceptions of the web producers. While analysis of website content is a useful starting point, some see the only reliable way to judge their actual impact is through a better understanding of their users (Gerodimos & Ward, 2007). For example, Norris (2003b) matched up the content of party websites with survey data from the users of those websites. Gerodimos (2005) conducted an in-depth content analysis of UK youth-engagement websites and then compared results to the outcome of student focus groups.

Web-based surveys “offer significant advantages in terms of reach, speed, and economy” (Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 71). Respondents see an identical survey in appearance as long as browsers are compatible, and ease of completion is facilitated through the use of a computer interface. Data collection and management is also consistent and smooths the process of analysis. Web surveys are often used to reach individuals with internet experience and also youth in particular (Beebe, Mika, Harrison, Anderson, & Fulkerson, 1997), presenting a fitting choice given the focus of this dissertation. Surveys conducted via the internet also have a number of shortcomings, particularly in relation to sampling issues. It has been argued that
online surveys are best used when focusing on non-probability samples, given the difficulty of obtaining a random sample of participants online (van Selm & Jankowski, 2006).

**CIVICWEB user survey**

The survey was conducted via a European-wide project called CIVICWEB, a project that focuses on the production and the nature and characteristics of civic and political websites and the uses and interpretations of these sites by young people. The survey targeted young people in each country participating in the project, including Sweden, the Netherlands, Hungary, Spain, Slovenia and Turkey as well as the United Kingdom. The current research focuses on the survey conducted in the UK, which yielded a total of 1,215 respondents.

MTV UK agreed to place the survey banner on its website. The link to the survey URL was active on MTV UK’s competitions page for three weeks (October 7 to October 28, 2007). MTV requested that the banner was not placed on any other website in the UK. The survey link was also announced to a number of young people in the context of both university lecturers and a number of groups for underprivileged youth. Potential respondents were offered the chance to win an iPod in exchange for their (one-time) participation.

A number of questions were included on the CIVICWEB survey in relation to political consumerism. These questions were formulated through consultation with a number of sources, including 2000 DDB Life Style Study, CSR/MORI, and CIRCLE research funded by Pew Charity Trusts. Questions were either taken directly from these surveys or were adapted to the specific needs and format of the CIVICWEB survey. A list of questions contributed to the political consumerism dimension as well as relevant variables used in the analysis is found in Appendix D.

It is necessary to acknowledge the shortcomings of such a survey. The issue of primary importance is that the survey did not utilize a random sample of participants. Due to the self-selective nature of respondents, it is statistically impossible to make accurate predictions about the political nature of young people in the UK. This methodological weakness has not gone unnoticed, however, and I have refrained from formulating hypotheses, instead presenting analysis, findings and conclusions in an exploratory manner.

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13 See [http://www.mtv.co.uk/channel/mtvuk/competitions](http://www.mtv.co.uk/channel/mtvuk/competitions). There was not room for the survey on the MTV homepage, which is primarily reserved for commercial content.

16 For more information, see Keum et al., 2004, which utilized the 2000 DDB Life Style Study; see [http://www.cseurope.org/whatwedo/consumerattitudes_page08.aspx](http://www.cseurope.org/whatwedo/consumerattitudes_page08.aspx) for CSR/MORI; and Andolina, Keeter, Zukin, and Jenkins (2003) for information on the CIRCLE research project.
Research Design

Survey analysis

The aim of the survey was to form an understanding about young people’s internet use, the level of expertise and the functions of their internet use, their awareness of and interest in a variety of websites including civic-political sites. It also queried respondents on a wide variety of online and offline political participation and attitudes towards citizenship, as well as levels of social trust and general demographics. Each empirical chapter draws on relevant results from this survey data.

Chapter 5 takes a primarily descriptive approach and reports on demographics and general interest use, as well as online and offline participation rates of respondents. Chapter 6 explores attitudes towards civic participation and political efficacy, and provides a closer look at young people’s interest in a wide variety of websites. The potential influence of these online interests on participation, both online and offline, is explored through regression analysis. The primary focus of Chapter 7 is on political consumerism, and a variety of statistical methods are employed to better understand how young people see this issue and how it relates to other forms of more established participation. Each empirical chapter provides detailed descriptions of utilized statistical analyses. The next chapter begins a series of results chapters that build on each other both theoretically and methodologically.