Youth, citizenship and online political communication
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Chapter 6

Conventional and Non-conventional Organizations Online: A Broader Scope

6.1 Introduction and contextual factors

This chapter explores how youth organizations address young people online within a broad political scope. The analysis encompasses a wide variety of organizations with various aims, from electoral participation to issue campaign involvement. It also draws on survey data to build on previously reported low participation rates. It does so by examining the online interests youth have as well as their attitudes towards civic participation.

It is important to acknowledge that a division between conventional or non-conventional organizations is not necessarily explicitly apparent. However by focusing on external characteristics of organizations (e.g., funding sources, stated aims) on a practical level I characterize organizations as such. Given that the current chapter chooses a broad political scope in which to explore the aims and goals of youth organizations, such a division is helpful in uncovering similarities as well as distinctions between the two types, allowing for possible inconsistencies to arise throughout the analysis.

The chapter utilizes survey, interview and website content analysis. Part one of the study focuses on results from the user survey. The overarching research question (as reported in Chapters 5 and 6) was presented in Chapter 4; here, the focus is exemplified in the following more specific research question:

Research question 6.1: What are young people’s attitudes towards civic-political participation and how do these attitudes relate to their online interests?

Turning to the organizations selected for analysis, the interview aim was to better understand how organizations complement their objectives with their website. The interviews sought to comprehend how each organization perceived online presence; to explore concepts and expectations of youth and how they communicate with this target group; and to probe for a deeper understanding of the interviewee’s views towards democratic citizenship and how these
views have influenced the website’s content, presentation, and future plans. The second research question mirrors one of the key secondary questions present in Chapter 4:

*Research question 6.2: In a broad political context, how do web producers’ views of citizenship translate to online communication strategies on their youth civic-political websites?*

Finally, part three of the chapter turns to website content to better understand the actual online practice of the chosen organization’s websites. Using a qualitative analysis of online content, the following research question is addressed:

*Research question 6.3: How do civic-political websites address youth online, and how does the context of these websites reflect the reported communication strategies of web producers?*

*Methodological review*

In this chapter, results reported from the user survey look at young people’s attitudes towards civic-political participation as well as take a closer look at what young people are actually doing online. The aim of the interviews is to gain (theoretical and practical) information about the organization as well as the features and content of the website. Website analysis primarily covers areas of interest according to content and interactivity, as detailed in Chapter 4.

Preliminary content analysis began before the interview and helped make the interview process more fluid; specific aspects of the site such as features, campaigns, or emerging outlooks were then used to better structure the responses of interviewees. A more systematic content analysis took place after the interviews and was used to follow up any emphasis raised in the interview and highlight consistencies and inconstancies between producer views and content.

*Website typology*

As noted, the selection strategy in the current chapter represents a variation from website selection in the previous empirical chapter (Chapter 5), where I selected political party youth branches and youth organizations and classified them both as conventional organizations. In order to provide a broader theoretical approach, here I examine a wider array of UK-based youth organizations. The first group was made up of those more intricately connected with UK government politics and usually encouraged cooperation with government through official
channels. I term these conventional organizations, following the conventional citizenship dimension as detailed in the theoretical framework. The second group consisted of those professing more of a distance from governmental politics, such as those focused on issue campaigns or lifestyle politics, and that primarily (if at all) communicated with government through protest or outside pressure. I term these non-conventional organizations, following the non-conventional citizenship dimension in the theoretical framework. The following analysis will in part determine whether these categorizations fit.

Websites selected for analysis in this chapter were initially chosen starting with the selection used in Chapter 5. Two strategies were used. First, I contacted the political party/youth organizations previously analyzed to inquire about an interview and to ask for suggestions of other relevant organizations or interviewees. Second, in order to broaden the scope of analysis and include organizations excluded from previous analysis, I used the linking practices of these sites to search for more issue-based campaigns that would have by their very nature been previously excluded. For example, the information portal Youth Information, which is funded primarily by the Local Government Association and government departments, was included in the previous analysis. However, Youth Information provides links to scores of other organizations, many of which fit into the scope of more non-conventional politics. Therefore I was able to widen the scope of inquiry but at the same time, albeit loosely, remain within the context of the original website selection.

Twelve organizations were classified as conventional. These were HeadsUp, Y Vote Mock Elections, and Citizen Calling (initiatives run by the Hansard Society); the United Nations Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UNA-UK), the coordinator of the United Nations Youth and Student Association of the UK (UNYSA), and the UNYSA Youth Council President; Youth Information, eXplore Parliament, which is part of the Parliamentary Education Unit; Young Scot, UK Youth Parliament, and two associated with political parties, including the Federation of Student Nationalists and the Young Greens. Nine organizations are classified as non-conventional, including single-issue organizations focusing on animal rights (peta2, Vegetarians International Voice for Animals – Viva!, and Animal Aid) and one that favors animal testing in the name of scientific research (Pro-test); Labour Behind the Label, Greenpeace UK, and the SPEAK Network. Two further interviewees classified as non-conventional represented a coalition that held ties to a number of other large civil society organizations (The Corporate Responsibility CORE coalition), as well as an individual that has worked extensively on a number of relevant websites in terms of web development and ICT
consultancy and represented a more general overview of developments in the charity and not for profit sector (Sue Fidler Ltd).

6.2 Youth attitudes and online interests

This section addresses the intersection between young people’s attitudes towards citizenship and their internet use via further analysis of the CIVICWEB survey. Specifically, I am interested in exploring dimensions of participation and dimensions of use. Results here focus on self-reported attitudes towards civic or political participation, but also examine what young people are reportedly doing online, in terms of what type of websites they are interested in and visit the most often. The results in Chapter 5 demonstrated a lack of interest in conventional politics but at the same time, a very high rate of internet use and confidence in using it. As these findings show that the internet is a good place to locate a youth audience, it is worth first examining what they report doing online prior to an analysis of the youth-focused websites chosen for the current analysis.

This section presents an overview of UK youths’ attitudes towards civic and political participation followed by an exploratory factor analysis that uncovers the various areas of interest that youth express in different websites. It then looks at the influence of interest in clusters of websites in relation to participation, both online and offline.

Attitudes towards civic participation and political efficacy

Respondents were asked how important a number of characteristics are to being a good citizen (see Table 6.1). More than three-quarters (77.1%) found it “quite important” or “very important” to always obey laws and regulations. Also highly ranked included those who felt it was important to support those who are worse of than themselves (71.4%), be informed about world events (76.3%), and 71.9% found it important to form their own opinions independently of others.

However, when turning to more overtly political activities, opinions began to change among respondents. Results here show that only a little over half of respondents found it important to vote in elections (57%; 27.3% were neutral when asked). As far as being active in politics, only one quarter (23.6%) reported this to be an important part of citizenship (28.7% found this to be “hardly” or “totally unimportant,” and almost half of respondents were neutral). Less than half (42.9%) found it important to be active in voluntary organizations (41.2% neutral). At the same time, Chapter 5 showed that the second highest form of participation among respondents was precisely this type of volunteering. Despite this unclear result, these
findings seem to demonstrate a noteworthy discrepancy in how respondents view good
citizenship. Perhaps most interesting is the disconnection found between citizenship and
political activity. Young people clearly do not pair more general, civic responsibilities with
action in the political realm, including voting. Such results show that a higher percentage of
respondents related to more non-conventional characteristics of citizenship. This will be
examined later in more detail, but first, I turn to what young people report doing with their time
online.

Table 6.1. Reported Attitudes Towards Civic Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of those answering “quite important” or “very important”</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support people who are worse of than themselves.</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in elections.</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always obey laws and regulations.</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form their own opinion, independently of others.</td>
<td>71.9</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be active in voluntary organizations.</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be active in politics.</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be informed about what is going on in the world.</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>4.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The reported percentages represent those who responded with “Quite important” or
“Very important” in answer to the question “To be a good citizen, how important would you
say it is for a person to…?” All items were measured on a 5-point scale.

What youth do online
The CIVICWEB survey aimed to better understand how respondents spend time online. This was queried by asking what websites young people are interested in across a wide range of topic choices. Respondents were asked to rate how interested they were in visiting websites about a variety of topics1 (27 total items). These questions aimed to gain an understanding of the general interests young people pursued while online. In order to determine whether there are clusters of websites favored by the same people, here I report on the results of an exploratory factor analysis on these questions.

For these survey questions, a Principle Component Factor Analysis with Varimax rotation confirmed a loading on four factors (eigenvalues 7.05, 3.15, 3.04, 2.10; explained variance 26.1, 11.7, 11.2, and 7.7 percent). These factors were termed Global issues; Political issues; Entertainment online; and General entertainment. Global issues included an interest in a wide range of topics, including websites about the environment, animals, religion, drugs, peace, health, human rights, ethnic minorities, racism/discrimination, gender issues, social inequalities, and arts/literature. Political issues related more to conventional political interests and included websites about political parties, government, elections, and news. Entertainment online covered interest in games/software, online gaming and computer hardware, and General entertainment pertained to an interest in websites focusing on music, movies, shopping, and fashion.

The reported means demonstrated a higher interest in websites classified as entertainment as compared to global and political issues. These factors were used to construct scales of young people’s interests online. Interest in global issues formed a scale with 12 items (M=2.69, SD=.97, alpha=.93). Interest in political issues formed a scale with four items (M=2.34, SD=.98, alpha=.86). Interest in entertainment online formed a scale with three items (M=3.01, SD=1.12, alpha=.80). Interest in general entertainment formed a scale with four items (M=4.13, SD=.72, alpha=.63). These indices, including interests online, are used in the regression analysis described in the next section.

It is interesting to examine how youth interest in various types of websites influences political participation, both online and offline. Such a query can be examined through regression analysis. The key dependent variables in the reported model (see Table 6.2) are online and offline participation, drawn from the scales first described in Chapter 5. Key independent variables include the four indices constructed from the interest in websites variables (detailed above) as well as attitudes towards civic participation (measured using the seven items reported

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1 Response categories for these questions ranged from “Not at all interesting” to “Very interesting.”
in Table 6.1 that form a reliable scale, alpha=.86, M=3.7, SD=.81). Control variables include age (mean = 21.84, SD=8.6), gender (64.4% female), and education in years (M=11, SD=4.7).

| Table 6.2: Examining the Relationship Between Online Interest and Political Participation. |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                                               | **Online participation** | **Offline participation** |
|                                               | Beta  | SE   | Beta  | SE   |
| Controls                                      |       |      |       |      |
| Age                                           | .019  | .002 | -.131 | *** .002 |
| Gender                                        | .009  | .043 | -.009 | .039 |
| Education                                     | -.030 | .004 | .051  | .004 |
| Online interest in…                           |       |      |       |      |
| Global issues                                 | .155  | *** .025 | .186  | *** .023 |
| Political issues                              | .099  | ** .024 | .070  | * .021 |
| Entertainment online                          | .053  | .018 | -.044 | .017 |
| General entertainment                         | -.050 | .028 | -.049 | .026 |
| Participation                                 |       |      |       |      |
| Attitudes civic participation                 | .053  | * .024 | .036  | .022 |
| Online participation                          | -     | -    | .538  | *** .027 |
| Offline participation                         | .539  | *** .033 | -     | -    |

Note: Entries are standardized beta coefficients and standard errors. *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001.

Table 6.2 demonstrates the relationship between the four constructed indices of online interest and online and offline political participation. Specifically it presents two models: one using online participation as the dependent variable and one aiming to predict offline participation. It shows a positive and significant relationship between two of the indices – global issues and political issues – in relation to online participation and offline participation. Interest expressed via the two entertainment indices is non-significant. Thus respondents that primarily use the web for entertainment are not as politically active as those with an interest in politically or globally oriented websites.

The table also shows a significant relationship between online and offline participation, with each predicting the other. Attitudes towards civic participation significantly predicted online participation but not offline participation. Given the earlier discrepancies in attitudes between civic and more political facets, this may demonstrate that those more inclined towards traditional participation find political participation more relevant online. Finally, age was a significant predictor of offline participation. Interestingly this relationship is negative, where the younger an individual was the more likely they were to participate offline. Gender and education had no effect on political participation, either online or offline.
Drawing on these two models, it is possible to identify a number of influences on political participation. In essence, two types of young citizens emerge: online participants and offline participants. Age influences offline participants (they are more likely to be younger) but online participants have, surprisingly, more traditional attitudes towards civic participation. Both are distinguished by their online interest in political and global issues.

6.3 The web producer view

I begin the analysis by first providing a description of the websites in question, then turn to illustrating interviewee’s theoretical views towards youth as well as their objectives and describing how each of these relate to online presence. Next, I discuss issues of legitimacy and interactivity before turning to website content to substantiate these views. Both interview and web content analysis is conducted in the spirit of a grounded theory analysis. As noted in Chapter 4, the method introduced by Mayring (2000) provides a way of structuring interview results. These results are then used to shape the focus of the qualitative content analysis of accompanying websites. In the discussion I revisit the theoretical model, highlighting the comparative elements between conventional and non-conventional youth organizations and strategic and reflexive communication.

Website descriptions

Interviewees qualified as representatives of either conventional or non-conventional organizations, ranging from issue campaigns to those primarily connected with establishing youth ties to government institutions. Though all civic- or politically focused in nature, based on the conventional/non-conventional distinction they varied in their stated framework. Some primarily functioned as information providers and others identified as campaign organizations. Some, through mission statements, declared an outright affiliation with external democratic values and goals, while others held a more internal focus. For example, the UK Youth Parliament’s (UKYP) objectives are “advancement of education of children and young people in the principles and practice of parliamentary democracy and the promotion of good citizenship by the establishment of a youth parliament.” In contrast, a non-conventional organization, Viva! (Vegetarians International Voice for Animals) mainly aims to change people’s attitudes and behaviors about animal consumption: “the best way to stop the destruction and the cruelty is to stop eating animals now – go vegetarian, or better still, vegan.” They also differed in youth

2 All corresponding URLs are listed in Appendix A, Table 2.
orientation. Some are wholly geared towards this age cohort while for others youth represented more of a secondary form of address. For example, SPEAK is “a network connecting together young adults and students to campaign and pray about issues of global injustice” whereas Labour Behind the Label (LBL), though they run various campaigns aimed at a younger audience, said their “aim is to have as broad based of an audience as possible.”

**Views and strategy towards youth**

Organizations expressed views towards young people and also reported a reflection of these views in their online strategies. Some organizations expressed a clear opinion about why youth should be targeted. The Youth Information interviewee said that as an organization, they realized that “…young people were slipping through the net, there was this gap between childhood and adulthood where a lot of people were losing focus or losing their way.” Others were more reflective about youth focus:

We’ve been thinking about why we have this youth site. We’d assumed youth are a different audience, but we are in the process of re-examining it. The conclusion we’ve come to is that it’s good to have a place dedicated to youth, where we can show them that it is something they can be involved in at that age (Animal Aid).

As for an online focus, organizations saw youth as technologically savvy, and realized that if they wanted to reach this group, they needed to do it online: “Young people tend to be that much more technologically minded than an older generation might be; for them it is a very natural thing to go onto a website to find out more information about an organization” (UKYP).

Underlying the age focus is the issue of how young people were viewed as citizens. Most took a position of apathy, either stating youth are apathetic or agreeing that young people are portrayed this way. However when it came to solving this apathy, differences emerged between organizations. Both conventional and non-conventional organizations, true to their classification, agreed that issue campaigns are a better way to reach youth (rather than through traditional political channels) but used this interest in different ways. This is because their goals as organizations differed in either wanting to connect back to traditional politics or simply wanting to raise awareness of (and action towards) an issue.

To illustrate, the conventional organizations that hoped to unite youth with official political channels recognized the disparity of interest between (perceived) youth indifference and their goals, but also highlighted the importance of fighting it. When asked explicitly about
what role they saw their websites playing in democracy, the Youth Information interviewee explained her philosophy while pointed me to webpage called Countering Political Apathy. They wanted young people to know their vote counts:

...there is interest in topics so young people have been out protesting but actually they don’t transfer interest in that political issue to national government or even local government ...we’ve given it a focus about getting young people to understand at the very highest level that their vote counts...

The representative from Young Scot, a national youth information and citizenship charity, viewed apathy as stemming from dissatisfaction with party politics, and argued that most young people are interested in participating in issue-based campaigns. UNYSA told me, “People vote if they think it will have an impact on something that they care about like human rights. I think if political leaders don’t address those issues that people are passionate about, then a lot of young people and a lot of older people just don’t see the point in voting.”

As for the non-conventional organizations, on the surface this view was the same but was enacted quite differently due to their stated aims. When comparing issue-based politics (their focus) to party politics, one non-conventional interviewee (Animal Aid) argued that most young people were much more interested in participating in issue-based campaigns:

I think when people think of party politics they think they’re quite gray and boring, sort of something that old people do. If you go along to party politics meetings almost everyone there has gray hair, but with animal rights protests you’ll see lots of young people as well as old people, so yeah I think it’s more exiting, more radical, more fun.

Viva! (“campaigning for animals, fighting for change”) agreed that youth do feel apathetic, but their goal was to rather let them know that young people do have the power to make a change.

Beyond an explicit age focus, special efforts were made to appeal in various ways to a younger age group. The use of a particular youth style, though sometimes distinctive, was rarely mentioned. Rather, an affinity with youth was expressed through an interest in demonstrating that other young people were involved. The use of age-appropriate language came up when interviewees wondered aloud if their choice of text was either too complex or too condescending. Generally, however, youth focus was seen more of an issue related to content than style. For example, peta2, the youth branch of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, was launched at a punk music tour (according to the interviewee, punk artists are often
supportive of social issues like animal rights). It continues to maintain ideological links with bands that support the message.

In essence, both conventional and non-conventional organizations saw young people as citizens who need socialization in order to learn to fully participate and emerge as wholly-formed citizens. This is revealed in views towards apathy: Those connected to government (conventional organizations) cautiously acknowledged this but felt they can draw youth in by first enticing them with issues, then later showing them the importance of government. Non-conventional organizations instead were free to dismiss the importance of any eventual enthusiasm for party politics. There was a desire to be seen to connect with youth of all ages, and organizations use these methods of socialization to encourage participation that continues throughout the life span.

Such views aided in the construction of a more in-depth analysis of the structure and goals of the organization. Drawing from insights uncovered in this first phase of analysis, I now turn to a more general look at organizational objectives in order to understand why and how organizations communicate to youth in the ways that they have chosen.

*Organizational objectives and strategy*

Interviewees expressed a number of convictions about the objectives of their organization, both theoretically and more practically in terms of their websites. When queried about their goals, interviewees expanded on a coherent explanation of their primary purposes. Though they varied in their aims, conventional organizations primarily worked to connect youth to the government or other political elites and non-conventional organizations mainly focused on connecting youth to their own organization, or by encouraging individual behavioral change, as was often the case for issue campaigns.

At a basic level, all selected organizations used their websites as an information provision tool in order to educate young people, and providing relevant content to young people functioned as “putting the spoon slightly closer to their mouths” (UNA-UK). Organizations were generally very positive about the increased reach, amount of information provision possible, and ease of turning to online sources. The interviewee from Youth Information mused,

Fortunately the computer element is something that has been embraced really by everybody, particularly young people are wanting to use computers as an access to information... So rather than taking away from youth work it has added another dimension to the resource network that youth work can have.
Also frequently noted was cost effectiveness, increased access to resources, and for member-based organizations, as a tool to attract new members and put them in touch with existing members: “We see the online facilitating the offline” (UNA-UK).

Beyond an informative approach, organizations wanted to see young visitors engaging and participating in various goals and campaigns. A similarity among the organizations was this “inform then involve” approach. Basically they believed that if users digested the educative element of the organization, then young people would follow by getting more engaged or participating in political matters:

...if you understand the issues and become passionate about them, then you will automatically understand the fact that playing your part in the democratic process can have a really big impact...the democratic engagement aspect flows from that (UNYSA).

One conventional organization that was particularly close to government, the UK Youth Parliament (UKYP), assumed that engagement was already taking place (they have “already established that”), and rather focused on a policy-related goal. According to the interviewee, the ultimate goal of UKYP was to stage a successful campaign and get the government to change policy around an issue important to young people. The UKYP interviewee distanced his organization from others that are not involved in direct engagement with Parliament, as he saw this type of involvement as facilitating real political power.

In general, all organizations usually encouraged via education and engagement from their target audience. Some functioned as primarily information providers while others encouraged direct action. However, most strived for a balance between the two. The interviewee from peta2 agreed: “Basically everybody has his or her own part. Some people have strengths on particular issues and particular approaches and we want to make sure we are emphasizing those.” Young Scot noted:

We’re not a campaigning organization we’re here to gather information and then step back and say you make up your own minds about this. We don’t tell people how to vote, I mean we don’t even necessarily, we don’t even tell people to vote we just get them the information that we hope will encourage them to vote.

When asked to specifically refer to the website’s role in implementing their general engagement and participation goals, however, the tone shifted somewhat. Here, some
uncertainty emerged between encouraging participation online or offline. The interviewee at Greenpeace UK described this quantity versus quality debate as a double-edged sword. He praised the reach of the internet in mobilizing large groups of people to say, email political elites, but “it’s the personally written letters that have the biggest impact.” This view often varied based on how integral the internet was to the organization; those with adequate funding and access to offline resources could more easily rely on their websites for primarily information purposes; others were obliged to do what they could with online opportunities.

To illustrate, organizations generally fell into one of two categories: The organization itself has been in existence for many years and the website was simply an adaptation to a more technological world, or they were relatively young and have always seen their web presence as integral: One would not exist without the other. Here, a distinction was found between the two types of organizations. Many of the conventional organizations could be described as well-established offline. Some like Youth Information, “the information toolkit for young people,” were based on previously existing offline databases. These organizations mainly praised the internet for its speed and reach. Few of the conventional organizations had adapted entirely to an online structure, rather they used it more for reasons of convenience. Though this online/offline distinction was generally based on the availability of resources, one exception is HeadsUp, which operates exclusively on a digital platform in schools to provide “an online debating space for under 18s to share their views on political issues and events.” This illustrates that sometimes, despite having access to substantial funding, some organizations chose anyway to remain exclusively digital.

Non-conventional organizations, for example Labour Behind the Label, saw their online face as important in another way. This campaign organization possessed a well-known name, strong ties to a global network, and a host of provocative URLs, but had only two members of staff. The interviewee described this approach as “constructive ambiguity.” Others also functioned extraordinarily well with a small number of committed volunteers. In this respect, a well maintained website can be viewed as a great equalizer: It only takes one knowledgeable individual to promote an organization in cyberspace.

Thus far a number of patterns have emerged. Though they share important functions, such as the importance of addressing young people, a positive view of the internet as a communication tool, and the promotion of a particular view of citizenship, conventional and non-conventional organizations demonstrate different views as well as practical ways of

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3 The Crick Report, the official report on Citizenship education, did mention the promise of implementing the curriculum through the use of communication technologies.
establishing these views online. Conventional organizations are generally better-established offline, possibly due to greater funding advantages. They want to create government-friendly citizens and pursue this aim with issue-based strategies. Non-conventional organizations are more often exclusively online in terms of youth outreach, but offline they provide ample opportunities often for issue-based protest and activism, with a more abstract goal of creating government-challenging citizens. An analysis of web content allows a better understanding of these differences, which is a matter for investigation in the next section. First, theoretical differences revealed point to the issue of legitimacy and how these organizations perceive themselves in a democratic society. Two noteworthy aspects arose: One relates to the legitimacy of information (or organizational philosophy) and the other to legitimacy of interaction (or online presence).

**Legitimacy of the organization**

There seemed to be a deeper issue underlying the motivations explicated above that pointed to interviewees’ views about the legitimacy of their organization. As noted in Chapter 2, Beck (1992) also found legitimacy key: In order to play a leadership role on behalf of citizens, institutions must be seen as legitimate. Beyond why they focused on youth or whether they held certain objectives, a common declaration – stated either implicitly or explicitly – was that if people have the “right” information (that is, whatever is being offered by the organization), they would make the right choice. This ideological confidence can be illustrated in conventional organizations with the issue of voting. It seemed to be the underlying reason why organizations can say it is acceptable if young people do not vote, because they were confident that they will vote. This followed various rationales, such as: “If they understand (Parliament), then they will get engaged.” Others agreed they would “not be unhappy” with protest against the very institutions they promote (i.e., a government-directed protest), as long as this is an “active choice” and done from “an educated position.” Some did take the hard line, though. UKYP plainly stated that it was “naïve” not to vote, and such a misguided decision could seemingly only result from a young person not being exposed to the right information.

With non-conventional organizations, this was also the case, though their beliefs in what was “right” stemmed more from the particular aims of their organization rather than from a government-based legitimacy: “Certainly most of the population would agree with these issues if they knew about them so we want make sure we get word out as much as possible” (peta2). They, like conventional organizations, were rigid in their ideas about what was accurate, and this was more transparent with the non-conventional: “I think anybody who goes to our website
will quickly figure out which side they want to be on for these issues” (peta2). Perhaps this explicitness was a reaction to an opposition to, or struggle against, the existing governmental system. For conventional organizations, the issue of legitimacy also seemed to be tied with the perception of their own neutrality: “What we don’t have is the proactive need to push a message because we have no message to give. We have information about messages, but what we’re not actually making a message ourselves” (Youth Information). Conversely, many non-conventional organizations did not feel – or at least did not express – this sense of neutrality.

In order to draw out this issue of legitimacy, organizations were asked about their stance on promoting what could be seen as radical activities (e.g., unlawful protest). When asked, conventional organizations encouraged law-abiding behavior, and Youth Information stressed: “…There is no reason that [young people] can’t be active within the law. Obviously we cannot promote actions that would be outside of the law.” However when pressed to confirm whether they would support protest or other forms of disassociation from the political system, most conventional organizations (here, UKYP) admitted that, in a majority of cases, action is better than no action:

It’s not necessarily something which we would encourage. But again I don’t necessarily see it as a bad outcome because we are not trying to push people through a particular route…It’s just about getting people more engaged in the world around them. And if they take the information which we’ve given them and they go a more radical route, in a way that’s not necessarily a bad thing…it’s kind of for the health of democracy you’d rather people take an interest in what is going on than do nothing at all.

In relation to online presence, interactivity emerged as an additional issue of interest. Interactivity opens up the content of a website to outsiders and can be seen as an issue of legitimacy as the website functions as an online face of the organization. Previously and almost exclusively confident in their message and outlets, here all interviewees spoke of a lack of interactivity on their websites and how they “should” be more interactive online. They wanted “…to get people coming to the website because there’s a community there which they can participate in…our current website doesn’t really meet people’s expectations, so the hope is to be able to change it in such a way that it can meet the expectations of the changing role of the internet” (UKYP).

Others did worry that relinquishing content control could have negative effects. One example is that UNA-UK had plans to change to a website tool that local branches around the country can access and edit, but is under centralized control (currently it is not). Some non-
conventional organizations had a different perspective: Often open-source platforms (e.g., Drupal) were used to create content and interviewees expressed a desire to contribute to the open source community.

At the same time, for those that had already introduced some interactive elements on their sites, I queried about problems with controversial content. Web producers told me that they rarely had any problems with outside content. In fact, it seemed where pre-moderation (i.e., a moderator checks messages for inappropriate content before placing them on the website or forum) was in place, it had been deemed unnecessary (though still present). Only one exception presented itself, and this was with HeadsUp:

So 30 young people are sitting in this classroom with computer access and then they all realize that their comments are going up, you know, with swear words, etc. So they were posting and it was kind of carrying on and getting worse and worse and we were trying to frantically get them all, deleting them all…But now, it’s a lot better managed because if there was any kind of thing like that I just wouldn’t put them up.

Another issue of interactivity, and possibly control, had to do the move to social networking sites. Though not a primary focus in this dissertation, a number of both types of organizations mentioned MySpace and Facebook profiles. But alongside praising their reach, an interviewee from UNA-UK (a conventional organization) also admitted: “I mean, getting onto these sites was actually just to establish our presence again. We were just very aware that if we didn’t do it, someone else would and we just wanted to make sure we had a UNA identity there.” Therefore it was important to utilize social networking both to protect their image (and as UNA-UK saw it, brand) and increase their reach. Others however simply saw social networking as another way to reach their target audience: “we have a Viva! MySpace as well so we’re trying to keep up with the trends…it’s obviously a very good networking tool that young people are using now.”

Thus far, interview analysis has uncovered important findings related to theoretical views about young citizens, organizational objectives, and issues of legitimacy. But how does the actual content of these websites compare to the views expressed by interviewees? I now turn to results of the content analysis of these websites to better understand the online manifestation of these views.

6.4 Aim and reality of websites
The aim of the qualitative analysis of the websites is twofold: to further illustrate the views uncovered in the analysis of interview data and to compare what web producers say they do with their online presence to what they actually do. This section draws on earlier conclusions and examines strategic and reflexive communication online by focusing on both one-way communication (informing young users but also encouraging them to engage or participate) and interactive elements on the websites.

One-way communication online

Each website used particular strategies to inform their target audience about their aims and goals. Practically, this translated into specificities of focus, including age restrictions. Web content confirmed interviewees’ reports and demonstrated that as an age group, young people were generally age development targets in a number of ways, though many professed a wide target age-range, like Young Scot (targeting 12-26 year-olds) and peta2, who primarily works with young people aged 13-21. One target focused on the under-18 age group, often via Citizenship education in the UK school system. Both conventional and non-conventional organizations were involved in Citizenship education, though the conventional organizations far outnumbered others. For example, Young Scot (also funded by Scottish executive directorates, the local government, the business community, public bodies, and voluntary sectors) demonstrated a strong school connection in high schools in Scotland, but also provided an “Education & Training” channel for young people looking for alternative paths to education. The United Nations Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UNA-UK), the “UK's leading independent policy authority on the UN and a UK-wide grassroots membership organization,” worked through the citizenship education curriculum via Model UN (MUN), and was also in the process of developing an online Citizenship resource, “including lesson plans covering all aspects of the UN and its work.” HeadsUp forums were primarily carried out in schools under teacher supervision and provided virtual, direct interaction with political elites and claimed to wield real political influence.

A number of non-conventional organizations, particularly issue-based, crossed over into this seemingly more conventional realm by participating in citizenship education. Labour Behind the Label, a “campaign that supports garment workers’ efforts worldwide to improve their working conditions,” ran a campaign called “Fashioning and Ethical Industry” that aimed to raise awareness around those enrolled in fashion related courses. Viva! had established a network of speakers that went into schools around the country to discuss animal rights and vegetarianism. Inclusion of these organizations in Citizenship education makes sense.
considering the curriculum requirement to inform students about political structures and process but also about politically significant current events (Coleman, 2008).

Others focused on those over 18 and enrolled in universities. Animal Aid’s Ethical Student website “shows students how to thrive in university with their ethics intact.” UNA-UK also oversaw the United Nations Youth & Student Association (UNYSA), both active on university campuses. Still others attempted to reach a more heterogeneous and sometimes underprivileged section of the population.

Informing young citizens about issues that are perceived as important to them was a mainstay on all websites. Though conventional web producers often claimed to be presenting a value free position, web content showed that this was not always the case. For example, the Young Scot interviewee made it clear that it was up to young people to decide how they felt about issues. This view is somewhat reflected in the content of the website, which was divided into an impressive number of issue-based sections for example on Law, Sport & Leisure, Money, and other general areas of interest. But when it came to the “Have your Say” channel, encouragement in a particular conventional direction was apparent:

Are you fed up of people speaking for you? Well, now's the time to get clued up and find your voice. You can also discover what goes on in the world of Scottish politics and how you can make a difference.

Opportunities for action in this case are directed at the government; this was further illustrated with a number of corresponding links that provided more information about the political system. The Young Greens, also classified as a conventional organization, showed their focus with a stronger level of critique not seen on other conventional websites. On the “About Us” page:

One of the most common questions we have encountered is “Why should I be political?” We have seen our government ignore massive protests and even mislead us, on war, schools, university fees and now nuclear power. When the government is so detached from the country and even the world, we cannot influence them with words and numbers. Our alternative is to use democracy and elect the future.

One-way content was also used for purposes of expressing legitimacy of the organization. Both types of organizations provided links in order to demonstrate their affinity with certain other initiatives or issue positions. On the Pro-Test (“standing up for science”), website, links pointed to like-minded organizations that gave more in-depth reading material
about the issues (e.g., the Research Defence Society). Others opted to minimize external sites, rather supplying all or most relevant information through their own content. A good example of this was on the Y Vote Mock Elections site. They created a student area (“Welcome to your area of the Y-Vote Mock Election site”) where young people could read up on election information and study the “Election Jargon Buster.” The only external links available were given on a political party information page, for example on the site for England: “The major English political parties are listed on this page. To find out more about each party click the logo or party name to visit a page with details of their general policies and pledges.”

An interesting illustration of legitimacy promotion via one-way content appeared on a number of non-conventional organizations. Particularly on sites that encouraged active campaigning a disclaimer sometimes appeared making it clear that the organization was in no way tied to “lawless” behavior. One example is found on the SPEAK Network website (“a network connecting the emerging generation to campaign and pray on issues of global justice): “Disclaimer: PLEASE NOTE: We are not in any way affiliated with the animal rights group in Oxford.” Because of another (i.e., animal rights) group’s similar name, the SPEAK Network and its more distanced connection from governmental politics may have led to misunderstandings about what the organization – though tied to a religious base – is actually promoting. (The interviewee confirmed this: “We discussed the confusion this might cause but they were definite about keeping their name”). Beyond information provision, the websites also contained interactive elements.

*Interactive communication online*

Interview results showed that interactivity, no matter what the stated purpose of the website, was seen as a positive development. As interviewees verbalized a similar distinction, following Xenos and Foot (2007), I began the analysis of website interactivity following two trajectories. The first is transactional interactivity, which is enacted by collecting personal information from users and also facilitating means for users to donate to the organization. Though Xenos and Foot focused on political party websites, this can also be applied in a broader context. The ability to contact the organization (and in the process, collect information about users) was present on all websites, mirroring the findings for this feature in Chapter 5. More common on non-conventional websites was the ability to join the organization, as they often rely on membership fees and donations for support. Viva!, for example, allowed potential members to join various supporter’s categories (e.g., Viva! Friend, Activist, Life Supporter) that varied in their financial obligations.
The second type of interactivity is coproductive, which allows users to comment and candidly interact with the producers or political elites on the site, (e.g., allowing youth to upload their own podcasts or comment on an embedded blog). As in Chapter 5, transactional interactivity was present on the websites much more often than coproductive interactivity, though as noted by the interviewees the latter was considered an area for future improvement.

Organizations often included polls, where users could make a selection from a pre-approved list of options, usually related to a contemporary topic but sometimes aimed to facilitate feedback on the website. Blogs and other obvious means of more elaborate coproduction were generally scarce. Where such interactivity did appear was only made clear through the interviews: Interviewees often claimed to be interacting with users via email and sometimes through more structured focus groups, and did claim to incorporate such feedback on the website, though it was not particularly apparent in the content. Where such coproduction was apparent, it often had more to do with the strategic aims of the organization, rather than an explicit effort to allow young people to change or comment on the mission of the organization. For example, the purpose of HeadsUp is to provide an online forum and discussion platform between young people and politicians, so online discussion (and with it, users’ contributions to this discussion) was at the heart of the operation. Interactivity was also facilitated not just between user and producer, but also was used in encouraging the user to spread the message of the organization. For example, the Animal Aid website offered a number of videos one of which was entitled “Don’t Back the Cruelty - the dark side of horse racing.” After viewing, users could “Get Active” in a number of ways to support the issue, but could also “Send this page to a friend.”

However, these two types of interactivity did not account for a principle issue that dominated interactivity on the selected websites: the issue of pre-moderation. Pre-moderation was described earlier by the HeadsUp interviewee and entails the organization checking for inappropriate content before placing it on the website. Specifically, if user-generated content is put up in real time, without delay or pre-moderation, it is clearly more transparent in its influence on content. The most obvious example from a technical standpoint is a website that utilizes a wiki format, where any registered user can alter the appearance of the website. In the selection considered here, this level of direct interactivity was rare, though more delayed forms (as described above) abounded.

All interviewees agreed that the importance of the website will increase over time. But with issues such as interactivity, what does this say about producers’ willingness to consent to less control over the message? For most organizations, coproductive interactivity is still
hypothetical. If realized, what are the consequences for the philosophy of the organization? These questions, along with a concluding look at the results found in this chapter, are discussed in the next section.

6.5 Discussion

The final section of this chapter discusses findings from the user survey, interview analysis and content analysis of corresponding websites. Again addressing the theoretical model, it will also lay out the online communication strategies of these conventional and non-conventional organizations.

Figure 6.1: Theoretical and Practical Framework of UK Youth Organizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical focus</th>
<th>Online content</th>
<th>Young users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Shaping government-friendly versus government-challenging citizens</em></td>
<td><em>A way to demonstrate legitimacy</em></td>
<td><em>Caught between these perspectives</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conventional organizations**

Youth are an important target group, and their apathy shows a need for assistance in getting back to traditional politics. Need to be more interactive to let young people know their voice counts (legitimize democracy). A disconnection with conventional citizenship.

**Non-conventional organizations**

Youth are an important target group, are apathetic towards traditional politics and need to focus instead on campaigns that are important to them. Need to be more interactive to let young people know their voice counts (legitimize campaign goals within democracy). An attitudinal connection to non-conventional citizenship but may not yet acknowledge its role in democracy.

*Meshing users, strategies and websites*

This chapter has examined what young people do online, what web producers say they do to attract young citizens, and the actual website content. Before turning to an explicit look at the theoretical model, the contrasts and similarities between conventional organizations and non-conventional organizations are placed in comparative categories (see Figure 6.1) and their perspectives are examined in relation to interview, and content, and user data.
Conventional and non-conventional organizations both see youth as an important group to focus on, but conventional organizations attempt to bring youth back to government through various forms of education and action while non-conventional organizations challenge this standard by rather focusing on particular issues. Both types of organizations find themselves operating within a climate of political change, where traditional approaches are losing legitimacy and non-conventional organizations are still working to gain it. Granted, both types express concern about maintaining their legitimacy. Conventional organizations convey this through the importance of maintaining their brand, focusing on being aware and responsive to those operating under their slogan. Online, these strategies aim to establish legitimacy in line with their theoretical aims: The “have your say” focus of conventional organizations works on a larger scale to legitimize democracy by demonstrating connections to government bodies and officials. Non-conventional organizations express more of an issue with legitimizing their campaign goals by highlighting the legality of their actions. They sometimes struggle with negative media representations but are confident that their approach will prosper. They also work to create a community of like-minded supporters to strengthen the possibilities for campaign success.

The user survey shows that respondents were more likely to see the importance of non-conventional characteristics of citizenship. They reject the importance of some conventional notions, like voting. Less than one-quarter find it important to be “active in politics,” and at the same time an interest in global issues is a significant predictor of both online and offline participation. Regression analysis concludes that attitudes towards civic participation significantly predict online participation but not offline participation. This points to the possibility that young people perceive offline participation as more outside the scope of citizenship, and provides a possible hint towards understanding the lack of political participation reported in Chapter 5. These results demonstrate the challenges and opportunities facing both types of organizations: Conventional organizations must attract youth who are clearly turned off from their brand of politics, but both organizations face a group of young people that, at least for those that have more positive attitudes towards civic participation, are keen on online forms of participation.

Theoretical model and methodological progression

In sum and turning back to the theoretical model, conventional organizations work to shape government-friendly citizens, while non-conventional organizations more indirectly encourage the construction of government-challenging citizens while emphasizing their own
Figure 6.2. Theoretical Positioning and Communication Strategies of Youth Organization Websites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional organizations</th>
<th>Non-conventional organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategic communication on a conventional website (type 1):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strategic communication on a non-conventional website (type 2):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Goal-oriented:</strong> socialize youth with specific language and through relevant issue campaigns to direct interest back to traditional politics</td>
<td>• <strong>Goal-oriented:</strong> socialize youth and encourage engagement directed towards campaign goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Persuasive:</strong> convince youth of their legitimacy within democratic society</td>
<td>• <strong>Persuasive:</strong> we have the right information and perspective on the issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>One-way communication &amp; transactional interactivity:</strong> most content does not encourage interactivity. Young people were often encouraged to provide information to the organization</td>
<td>• <strong>One-way communication &amp; transactional interactivity:</strong> most content does not encourage interactivity. Young people are often urged to become members and/or donate to the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Top-down:</strong> content is generally produced by the organization</td>
<td>• <strong>Top-down:</strong> content is generally produced by the organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflexive communication on a conventional website (type 3):</th>
<th>Reflexive communication on a non-conventional website (type 4):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Goal-modifying:</strong> directed at own activities with the goal of maintaining funding. Critical of non-conventional approaches</td>
<td>• <strong>Goal-modifying:</strong> directed at audiences and members. Critical of conventional approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Responsive:</strong> youth language attempts to demonstrate an understanding of youth political culture</td>
<td>• <strong>Responsive:</strong> youth language attempts to demonstrate an understanding of youth political culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Coproductive interactivity:</strong> see the need to increase coproductive interactivity to demonstrate reflexivity, but generally have not implemented it to a level they consider satisfactory.</td>
<td>• <strong>Coproductive interactivity:</strong> see the need to increase coproductive interactivity to demonstrate reflexivity, but generally have not implemented it to a level they consider satisfactory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Bottom-up:</strong> little evidence without pre-moderation. Interview data reveals youth feedback but not made evident on the website</td>
<td>• <strong>Bottom-up:</strong> little evidence without pre-moderation. Interview data reveals youth feedback but not made evident on the website</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of facilitating either strategic or reflexive communication, organizations use their websites ultimately to exercise strategic goals, with conventional organizations using issue campaigns – among other strategies – to direct interest back to
traditional politics. On the other hand, non-conventional organizations tend to rely more exclusively on online resources to reach campaign goals and build a supporter base. Reflexive communication by conventional organizations aims to demonstrate to youth that their voice counts but more often, seems directed inwards and hints at an understanding of the importance of maintaining funding. Non-conventional organizations also tend to direct their reflexivity inwards, and at the same time maintain an end goal of staging successful campaigns, which clearly requires a reflexive understanding of their supporters. Figure 6.2 provides a summary of the placement of these websites within the theoretical model.

With the current political climate of changing notions of citizenship and new uses of communication technologies, the analysis conducted here reveals theoretical underpinnings of youth organizational websites and gains insight into what kind of citizens each type of organization is trying to shape. Particularly in reference to youth, the socialization element is in place for both types of organizations. Young people are seen as technologically savvy, but still needing guidance in issues of citizenship. This philosophy extends across the board, and shows an urgency to reach youth while they are still open-minded: “Get ‘em while they’re young.”

Even though one interviewee (UNA-UK) claimed, “We’re not promoting a black and white view of the world,” clear values are being taught. This is best exemplified in a distinction between shaping government friendly citizens versus shaping government-challenging citizens. Conventional organizations are most interested in educating young people about the current system and encouraging their participation within it; non-conventional organizations, expressing discontentment with this system, support engagement with more independently formed campaigns. Either way, the doctrine requires conforming to a certain mindset of shared values – “ours,” not “theirs.”

In terms of online communication, strategically youth organizations operate by attracting their target audience (and making their content interesting for this audience) and building numbers and participation through online or online-to-offline campaigns. The theoretical distinction between conventional and non-conventional organizations holds true when it comes to strategic aims. For example, conventional organizations agree that they provide issue-based information and engagement opportunities on their websites in order to grab attention with a hope to ultimately grow interest in more traditionally arenas. The combination of emphasis here was shown when I asked the Young Greens interviewee what their ultimate goal (via the website) was: “Get young people involved in politics and environmental and social justice issues.” The non-conventional websites, particularly those that are single-issue based, did see the connection between involvement in the issue and citizenship, but their ultimate aim was
not to establish ties to institutional politics. Rather, the single issue itself was often seen as the most important goal.

The more abstract strategy of citizen building is what leads to a necessary reflexivity online. Reflexive communication became apparent particularly in two arenas: when talking about either their own activities or their audience’s activities. Conventional organizations, with a focus on their own activities, remain grounded in traditional citizenship partly because they depend on government funding to continue. Rightly so, they do not see a reevaluation of theoretical mission to be necessary or beneficial – unless it leads to a new manner of building government-friendly citizens. Non-conventional organizations on the other hand tend to focus any reflexive action on their audiences or supporters, as financially they depend on individual citizens who share their ideological values. An additional form of reflexivity – focused on rival’s activities – emerges when organizations were asked to comment on their particular aims. This also varies between types, with conventional organizations often criticizing the non-conventional by pointing to the fact that citizenship only counts when it includes government. Similarly, non-conventional organizations criticize rival organizations for differing strategic aims but also comment on the fact that conventional organizations get it wrong with their aim to send youth back to traditional politics.

Allowing interactive content on the website shows that organizations are open to the perspectives of their audience in shaping their aims. However given the lack of this interactivity, a struggle is illuminated between how they think they should appear and how reflexive they are willing to be. Further, when organizations mention interactivity they seem to be focusing more on strategic aims (i.e., how it can contribute to prescribed goals) than being ultimately concerned with audience input. This observation points towards the difficulty of separating reflexive aims from strategic ones, at least in relation to youth organizations in this context.

Results here have shown that youth organizations recognize an evolving democratic society and even conventional organizations are sometimes addressing young citizens with issue or lifestyle concerns. At the same time, they see online technology allowing for more interactive, global forms of communication. Because of this, it also seems relevant to address more explicitly how the internet can be used to support more non-traditional notions of citizenship. In the final empirical chapter of this dissertation, I focus on such a notion: the issue of political consumerism.