Youth, citizenship and online political communication
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Chapter 8

Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this dissertation aims to summarize insights gathered in the proceeding empirical chapters and establishes conclusions about democratic citizenship and political communication within this context. It begins by revisiting the research questions and discussing findings. On the basis of the research findings it next critiques the theoretical model, taking into account combined insights from a theoretical and methodological perspective. The final section of this chapter turns to youth organizations and policy makers and examines two matters of importance: the divide between conventional and non-conventional organizations and the evolution of the web. It discusses how these may influence the future online environment particularly in relation to youth organizations.

8.2 Research questions and findings

This dissertation began with the overarching question: *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?* In order to answer this question empirically, three methods were utilized: a user survey, content analysis of websites, and interviews with web producers. Before providing a concluding response to the main research question, I first address the research questions specific to each empirical chapter.

Chapter 5 focuses on website content in an electoral context. It asks the questions: *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? And how do young people use the internet and what are their reported political participation rates, both online and offline?* Results from two types of conventional (political party youth branch and youth organization) websites active during the 2004 EP election campaign for the European Parliament in 2004 illustrate that relatively few (11 out of 30) focused on the election campaign itself, demonstrating a preference for promoting general forms of engagement as a more permanent activity. Websites do reveal youth-friendly language, issues that relate to youth and encouragement of participation. Biographical content (“about us”) is the most common information feature on both types of
websites, and the largest variation is in the presentation of issue positions (present on a majority of political party sites). As for engagement features contacting the producer is almost always possible. Information features and most engagement features fit the definition of strategic communication, which is goal-oriented and often persuasive in its approach. Political party youth branches encourage young members to vote with information about candidates and with more ideological statements about voting, thus placing the importance of voting in terms of citizenship. Youth organizations provide similar content but aim to get young people participating more generally as citizens.

The user perspective also plays a role in Chapters 5. Analysis reveals that survey respondents are frequent, confident internet users, setting a positive tone for youth organizations hoping to reach them online. However, this does not reflect in online or offline political participation, with two slight offline exceptions in volunteering for an organization and more so in talking about social or political issues with family and friends.

Chapter 6 provides an expanded focus, away from specific elections, and asks three questions. The first two entail: *In a broad political context, how do web producers’ views of citizenship translate to online communication strategies on their youth civic-political websites?* And *how do civic-political websites address youth online, and how does the context of these websites reflect the reported communication strategies of web producers?* Results show that both conventional and non-conventional organizations see the importance of using websites to counter youth political apathy and promote their various aspirations. As in Chapter 5, youth organizations use their websites primarily for strategic communication: Conventional organizations borrow from non-conventional strategies by using issue campaigns to direct interest back to traditional politics. Due to access to generally smaller financial means, non-conventional organizations rely more often on online resources to reach campaign goals. Reflexive communication – goal-modifying and responsive – by conventional organizations appears to be directed inwards and highlights the importance of maintaining funding. The non-conventional find it more important to maintain a reflexive understanding of their supporters. Both types of organizations work to establish a legitimacy in line with their theoretical aims: The conventional do so by demonstrating connections to government channels, and the non-conventional express the need to legitimize their campaign goals by highlighting the legality of their actions and their growing supporter base.

The third research question in Chapter 6 queries: *What are young people’s attitudes towards civic-political participation and how do these attitudes relate to their online interests?* Results illustrate that online, entertainment is the biggest draw for youth and though fewer in
number, political and global information seekers are also more likely to participate politically both online and offline. Analysis also shows that attitudes towards civic participation significantly predict online participation but not offline participation. These results provide indications of how young people perceive the political and point to overall low rates of participation, reflecting the challenges and opportunities facing youth organizations in encouraging both online and offline participation.

Chapter 7 focuses on political consumerism: 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? And also asks: How does website content provide further understanding of the notion of socially conscious consumers? The chapter uncovers a sample of seven websites that use political consumerism as a tool to reach young people, addressing users as both SCCs and CCCs. Adding to Chapter 6 findings, conventional organizations that utilize consumerism again demonstrate its use as a strategy to regain control over youth’s democratic participation, using it as a stepping-stone to getting youth involved in traditional arenas. Conversely, non-conventional organizations may not engage with government, but do turn to pressure directed at corporations (i.e., outside the realm of more traditional political participation), providing another example of how non-conventional organizations operate in the political sphere.

The chapter builds on the previous survey analysis and queries the nature and prevalence of political consumerism and its relationship to political participation (Who are political consumers, and how does political consumerism relate to more traditional forms of political participation?). Results from the user survey show that young people, though demonstrating low political participation, are active as socially conscious consumers (SCCs, or those that primarily utilize consumption behavior) and also, though not as often, as critical citizen consumers (CCCs, an identity more steeped in acts of participation). Results also demonstrate that political consumerism is distinct from traditional civic and political offline participation. Further, although a positive, significant relationship is found between socially conscious consumption and online participation as well as offline civic participation, this relationship disappears with offline political participation. This shows that socially conscious consumption does in fact influence political participation, and supports the argument that it is a distinctive path to citizenship worthy of further study. However, the fact that it is not tied to offline political participation points to a possible move away from traditional democratic participation.
Finally, I return to the primary research question of this dissertation: 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? In sum, results demonstrate that youth organizations are aware of young people’s shifting political selves, but struggle to match this understanding with their aims and goals. Through their online presence, both conventional and non-conventional organizations provide content that solidifies a variety of engagement structures from electoral content to issue-specific information about political consumerism. However, conventional organizations use this insight to tie interest back to traditional political spheres (thus creating government-friendly citizens), while non-conventional see youth interest in particular issues as key in itself, and more indirectly encourage the building of government-challenging citizens while keeping a focus on campaign goals. The horizontal link of the findings in each chapter illustrates differences in how conventional and non-conventional organizations use the web, but also shows distinctions in communication style, both of which are detailed next.

8.3 Theoretical lessons

This section focuses on the theoretical contribution of this dissertation and ends with suggestions for new research questions. The current research has examined the assertion that the ways political elites communicate to citizens is influenced by their view of citizenship. At the same time, simultaneous changes in the political communication system have left scholars divided as to the nature of this influence. Blumler and Gurevitch’s (1995, 2000) system perspective contains three elements: political institutions, media institutions, and citizen audiences. This must be continuously adapted due to internal (mutual adaptation between political elites and media, and between political elites and citizens) and external (changes in communication technology) sources of instability. The adaptation of online communication tools has demonstrated a new dynamic between political elites and media – elites now can create an unmediated presence online – but also between political elites and citizens, where the internet allows citizens to participate on a much more equal level with elites.

With a focus on how youth organizations communicate to young people via their websites, Figure 8.1 provides a reminder for the theoretical model developed in Chapters 2 and 3. Specifically, the model provides a means theoretically to identify organizations as either conventional or non-conventional in their citizenship focus and based on such a dimension, search for ways in which the organizations utilize strategic and reflexive communication online.
Figure 8.1. Review: Four Varieties of Online Political Communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic communication</th>
<th>Conventional citizenship</th>
<th>Non-conventional citizenship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Online content is goal-oriented and persuasive</td>
<td>Type 1: Strategic communication on a conventional website</td>
<td>Type 2: Strategic communication on a non-conventional website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One-way &amp; transactional interactivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Top-down</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflexive communication</th>
<th>Conventional citizenship</th>
<th>Non-conventional citizenship</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Online content reflects a desire to be seen as goal-modifying and responsive</td>
<td>Type 3: Reflexive communication on a conventional website</td>
<td>Type 4: Reflexive communication on a non-conventional website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coproductive interactivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bottom-up</td>
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Democratic citizenship: key findings

Despite the potentially problematic nature of including a wide variety of organizations in each classification, results do show distinctions between citizenship views and online address. As noted earlier, conventional organizations see connecting youth to government as a primary goal, by providing online information about the political process or opportunities to engage with political elites, with both aiming to improve relations between youth and politicians. Whether it is an electoral focus, a more general focus on education and participation, or the introduction of issues like political consumerism, through their online communication they aim to reestablish government ties with youth. Non-conventional organizations are less interested in such a connection to institutional politics, and are keener to form social movements of (young) citizens that rally around particular issues and challenge institutional methods of dealing with these problems. They also view solitary behavior change (towards a particular issue, for example, becoming vegetarian in support of animal rights) as a successful outcome. These organizations have adopted a motto of self-change: Rather than waiting for institutions to improve, they have taken matters into their own hands, and act with specific, ideologically driven goals in mind. Exceptions do exist, and most notable is the Young Greens. They are a political party but even in name have an issue focus. They are happy with lifestyle changes on the part of their
website content provides a critical eye towards the government. Such an approach is unusual for a conventional organization, and perhaps points to an example of a future meshing of conventional and non-conventional identities.

Differences in citizenship perspective are also illustrated when looking at political consumerism. On conventional websites, the underlying assumption is that established forms of participation are necessary for good citizenship. However, from a non-conventional view of citizenship, socially conscious consumption can be seen as participation in and of itself (Stolle, et al., 2005). This view is supported by the fact that all of the non-conventional organizations in the selection primarily focus their external protest at corporate targets, leaving government (mostly) out of the equation. Both types of citizenship may encompass the same types of behaviors: writing letters, speaking to friends, protesting for a cause. But conventional citizenship has meant action via the state, not the corporation. The old goal was legislative change, but new goals incorporate corporate policy change, though both are based on citizen pressure.

On a broader level, what kind of democracy is being promoted in this context? Three general types of democracy were distinguished in Chapter 2, varying in their views towards the communicative role of citizens. These types include pluralist, participatory and deliberative democracy. Pluralist theorists often see the role of citizen participation as minimal, with communication generally taking place from political elites to citizens, and the citizen’s primary role is voting. Participatory theorists attach a greater importance to citizen participation and their ability to communicate with the state, arguing that “good” participation is vital in a healthy democracy. Deliberative theorists argue that rational, critical debate is necessary, and must include the possibility to revise normative concepts of democracy. Therefore political elites must hold a strong reflexive role and provide citizens with ample opportunity to participate in numerous ways. The current research demonstrates that more youth organizations show a preference for participatory democracy yet lean towards deliberative democracy as an ideal. Such conclusions can also be seen when turning to results of online political communication.

Political communication: key findings

This dissertation began by distinguishing political communication as either strategic or reflexive. The internet provides an opportunity for unmediated, strategic communication, but at the same time allows citizens to speak back, prompting the possibility for reflexive communication. Results here show clear examples of online strategic communication, but reflexive communication is harder to identify.
For example, reflexive communication is more difficult to pinpoint with a focus on content (as in Chapter 5), and later chapters incorporate interview data to improve on this analysis. In Chapter 6, reflexive communication among all organizations became apparent when reflecting on the activities of their respective audiences (more so with non-conventional) and their own activities (with conventional). The reflexivity of conventional organizations is geared towards receiving approval from existing power structures more than from young people themselves, but also seeks to regain legitimacy from youth that have fallen out of favor with traditional political expression. Reflexive communication on the part of non-conventional organizations aims more at the ultimate approval of their members: They recognize the value in maintaining a pure ideological stance, though they are often stringent in their positioning on a focal issue (e.g., animal rights).

But these results are also sometimes difficult to interpret for a different reason, providing two issues of critique. One, there is a difference between reflexive communication present on websites (the content) versus what producers say (the philosophy). Along with this inconsistency, strategic and reflexive communication are not distinct elements of an online communication strategy, but rather are intertwined. Reflexive communication is responsive and interactive, and used to handle difficulties or adjustments in strategies and motivations. Online, interactive communication can be reflexive if it is used to compel (and incorporate) feedback from citizens. For example, Young Scot created its Environmental Channel due to feedback from users, but the user-inspired nature of this content is not made clear on the site. As illustrated, where this reflexivity emerges is in the interviews with producers who report being open to youth input. But this is not often demonstrated for online visitors. Simply, there is a gap between reported organizational reflexivity and reflexive communication online.

It could be that where present, the addition of reflexive content (or the claim that youth input is used to create that content) is just a strategy to appear more legitimate. This conclusion was first put forth in Chapter 6, when examining legitimacy of information (or organizational philosophy) and in contrast to legitimacy of interaction (or online presence). Such a conclusion demonstrates the level of internal and external pressure that youth organizations face in maintaining institutional reflexivity. It also points to the idea that reflexivity then determines strategic action. Therefore, instead of distinct communication types, a mix of strategic-reflexive communication is revealed, allowing organizations to monitor their strategies and choices based on the current political environment, and leaves them subject “… to chronic revision in the light of new information” (Giddens, 1991, p. 20). Particularly in the continuously changing environment of youth citizenship, this argument is persuasive.
What emerges is that although differences exist between the strategic and reflexive aims of conventional and non-conventional organizations, these aims are difficult to differentiate. Rather than operating in separate contexts, these two types of communication work in tandem, and political communicators can be seen as “strategic reflexive agents” (Stanyer, 2007) simultaneously using both types to meet their goals: “The process of reflexivity is seen as allowing the effective achievement of a particular goal in a fast-changing socio-political environment” (p. 4). With an analysis of Jessop’s work, Hay (2002) points out that the “strategic environment itself is strategically selective – in other words, it favours certain strategies over others as means to realise a given set of intentions or preferences” (p. 129). Political actors must determine which strategies are appropriate in any given situation, and this is established with the way they utilize reflexive communication. Political actors must be aware of the changing communicative environment so they must reflexively examine their strategies and motivations, which constitutes a continuous process of modification where political actors “modify, revise or reject their chosen means to realise their intentions” (Hay, 2002, pp. 131-132). Hay places such theorizing in the broader context of structure and agency and sees this as one of the greatest challenges currently facing political analysis. Take an interviewee confirming her view of young people as apathetic towards party politics. She points to web content that works to entice young visitors back to traditional participation via issue campaigns. Until now, such web content providing one-way information about an issue was classified as strategic communication. However, when allowing the analysis to include institutional reflexivity rather than separating it from content, reflexively this interviewee is demonstrating an understanding of youth citizenship, but at the same time is using this reflexive view to bring young people back to traditional politics, a strategic aim.

Theoretically, a new method of analysis emerges, one that takes into account organizational philosophies of strategic-reflexive communication. But practically speaking, youth organizations must find a way to demonstrate such reflexivity through online content. Based on results here, organizations generally have not yet reached this goal. To illustrate, I turn once again to a conceptualization of online interactivity. Borrowing Xenos and Foot’s (2008) terms, transactional interactivity was previously attributed to strategic communication and coproductive interactivity to reflexive communication. Xenos and Foot (2008) point out a clear preference for one over the other: “Keeping in mind the strategic imperative of campaign organizations, it is thus unsurprising that forms of interactivity other than those that serve a clear transactional purpose are less attractive” (p. 63). Youth organizations develop a website in order to reach strategic goals; such a strategy is traditional in using media to reach audiences. Xenos
and Foot (2008) also provide a rationale for avoidance of more reflexive forms: “At the same
time, campaign organizations also have strategic imperatives to resist these forms of
co-productive interactivity, on the very same grounds that they shift power, and control, away
from the campaign itself” (p. 65). Simultaneously, online users and particularly youth are
increasingly demanding the ability to interact with producers (see e.g., Sundar, Kalyanaraman,
& Brown, 2003; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005) and organizations must respond to
this demand.

Figure 8.2. Summary of Theoretical Findings and Refined Research Questions.

**Strategic-reflexive communication of conventional and non-conventional organizations**

- **Goal-oriented** in that communication is directed towards the mission and aims of the
  organization; **goal-modifying** in that both are willing to borrow strategies from the
  other type of organization in order to reach these goals (true more with conventional
  organizations than non-conventional)

- **Persuasive** in that they generally use content to provide information in line with their
  ideology; **responsive** in that they claim to react to youth and allow their views to
  shape online content, though this is rarely verifiable through analysis of web content

- **Transactional interactivity** contributes to gaining information, loyalty and
  sometimes funding from young people, and is quite common; **coproductive
  interactivity** contributes to allowing young people to feel that their voices and
  opinions will help shape these organizations; this content is rare

**Refined research questions**

- **As strategic-reflexive actors, how do conventional and non-conventional
  organizations perceive the other’s approach, and how does this comparison impact
  their own decision-making processes?** (entails a more explicit comparison from an
  organizational viewpoint)

- **How are the notions of direct and delayed interactivity manifest on websites, and how
  does such content contribute to goal modification?** (based on content)

- **How do young people use civic-political websites, and what types of interactivity do
  they require in order to feel that their voices are being heard?** (based on user data)

At least in the empirical data analyzed here, these definitions miss an important facet of
interactivity often present on websites: the notion of pre-moderation (when a moderator checks
messages for inappropriate content before placing them on the website or forum). Such a
strategy is especially relevant in a youth-driven context, where web producers may be more
concerned about young people being exposed to on the one hand, unseemly content, but on the other, conflicting messages about the organization.

As was introduced in the discussion in Chapter 6, the terms delayed interactivity and direct interactivity help to further clarify this issue and present one direction for future research. Delayed interactivity encourages visitors to contact the producer and contribute content or make suggestions that would change the content of the site: Such two-way exchanges may modify the content or structure of the site, but implementation is entirely left to the discretion of the web producer. On the other hand, direct interactivity allows users to comment and candidly interact with the producers or political elites on the site, in real time (e.g., as mentioned in Chapter 6, this could mean allowing youth to upload their own podcasts or comment on an embedded blog).

Taking these insights into account, Figure 8.2 provides a summary of the theoretical findings of this dissertation research. In particular, it presents conclusions based on strategic-reflexive communication within conventional and non-conventional organizations. Further, based on these findings, it offers recommendations for refined research questions.

8.4 Methodological lessons

This dissertation utilized a number of methods, attempting an analysis built on the classic communication model of sender-message-receiver. These elements included the perspectives of youth organizations (the sender), website content (the message) and reported characteristics of young people (the receiver). The research project also drew on data from two large-scale research projects, the Internet and Elections project and the CIVICWEB project. Participation in both of these initiatives provided a great deal of inspiration but also to some degree constrained the methods of data collection. This section will qualify these issues and end with recommendations for improved methodological approaches.

The dissertation aimed at methodological congruence where all parts of the research – the theoretical grounding, research questions, and research methods – “are all connected and interrelated so that the study appears as a cohesive whole rather than as fragmented, isolated parts” (Creswell, 2007, p. 42, citing Morse & Richards, 2002). This strategy proved rather successful in comparing and contrasting interview data and content analysis of websites. However, the user survey, although focused on the same national context as the organizations and their websites, proved more challenging to incorporate into concluding insights.

The Internet and Elections project offered a means to analyze website features within an electoral campaign context and structured the data collection in Chapter 5. Within the broad
theoretical aims of this dissertation such a focus was limiting, but did help to provide an important understanding of the electoral perspective. The most notable constraint was likely the focus on the 2004 EP election campaign. Future research interested in electoral content might focus on a national election, possibly revealing more online activity on the part of these organizations.

The survey used a non-random sample of participants. The CIVICWEB survey was conducted online (via the MTV UK website) and though this strategy yielded a high number of respondents, little can be concluded about the target population as respondents were self-selective in nature. On a demographic level this resulted in an overrepresentation of females and ethnic minorities in comparison to UK census reports. It is possible that respondents were overwhelmingly non-political because they were regulars on MTV’s website, thus already demonstrating their preference for online entertainment rather than civic or political action. This is speculation, but reflects on the larger need to acknowledge that survey results should be regarded in the same manner as they were reported: as exploratory. The data delivered a good first look at young people in the UK and without it this dissertation would have been less complete. But future studies should utilize a random sample of participants to more accurately report on the civic-political nature of young people in the UK, in order to provide more inferentially sound results.

Beyond sampling concerns, the survey did not make available an in-depth portrait of what young people actually do online. Although the survey did supply a wide variety of information about online practices of youth as well as their attitudes and behaviors towards civic participation, it neglected to probe how young people use these sites. Livingstone et al. (2005a) were able to comment on different levels of engagement with online content, but this was not possible given the structure of the CIVICWEB survey. Future research, perhaps also qualitatively based, could more deeply explore actual practices online, in order to assemble more accurate insights for academics as well as youth organizations. Finally, given the broad scope of the survey, queries related to political consumerism were minimal. The three survey questions that probed socially conscious consumption were focused on purchasing behavior and responses may have contained an element of social desirability. Future research can justify devoting an entire survey to studying such behavior, and may include qualitative explorations of youth perceptions of political consumerism.

The use of semi-structured interviews provided an in-depth look at interviewees’ theoretical views of the organization and youth and their thoughts on website content. Upon reflection, as is often done in grounded theory, it would have been helpful to have made use of
participant verification by holding follow-up interviews. As noted earlier, it would be wise to explicitly pursue differences between organizations in opposition to each other, which would help to clarify findings and make more sense of content. Such follow-up interviews, though not possible here due to time constraints, could provide a more detailed query into areas of specific concern, for example political consumerism. Due to the general nature of the interview focus interviewees were only briefly asked to elaborate on their thoughts regarding the relevance and role of political consumerism. Future research could employ an interview guide that exclusively focuses on this issue.

In terms of website analysis, the small number of relevant sites for political consumerism may point to a current lack of saliency for youth organizations. This may be a result of the strict criteria used to judge their inclusion, though time will tell if political consumerism is a trend that will grow in importance. Future studies, particularly those operating from such a focus, could examine either content or interview data, rather than relying on relevant data from both for inclusion. Finally, youth as a population continues to increase in its diversity. This dissertation has not addressed differences in youth engagement by gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, or religious belief, to name a few. If we argue for an increasing diversity in how citizenship is perceived and how individuals act within a democracy, then viewing youth as a homogenous entity is mistaken, especially when certain forms of digital participation still exclude some, such as minority youth with less access to technology.

In general, the nature of data collected in this project is descriptive and exploratory. However the available data and methods, though not necessarily ideal, form a coherent look at the nature of youth citizenship and online political communication, and provide good introductory indications for understanding youth citizenship online. Limitations are partly due to project restraints but also the exploratory nature of the topic itself. To make future explorations more robust, the following methodological approaches are recommended:

- Interviews with web producers should more explicitly seek out contrasts between conventional and non-conventional organizations. The interview process should leave space and time for follow-up interviews, allowing for clarifications between organizational viewpoints and web content.
- Website content analysis should proceed with more specific theoretical guidelines in mind, particularly pertaining to interactive online content.
- In order to better understand the young user perspective, more in-depth, possibly qualitative data analysis should seek to uncover young people’s actions on specific
civic-political websites of interest. Research should also work to determine the 
strategic-reflexive communication on the part of citizens, and better understand their 
role in demanding responsiveness from elites.

- Projects that hope to combine one or more of these methods should specify a higher 
  level of congruence between methods, possibly returning to a more traditional 
  application of methodological triangulation.

8.5 Issues for future consideration

This dissertation research is applicable in both a theoretical and a practical setting. 
Theoretically, it provides an approach to studying political communication systems particularly 
in relation to youth citizenship. On a more practical level, the research is also relevant to policy 
makers who are interested in gaining insight into addressing young people and their changing 
political environment. It also encourages youth organizations to examine their perspectives on 
citizenship when looking to form or update an online presence.

The conventional/non-conventional divide

Results have shown that conventional organizations point to the importance of 
connecting to traditional institutions, as they see this is where true political power lies. Bennett 
and Entman (2001) call this arena the policy sphere, where “ideas and feelings explicitly 
connect with – are communicated to, from, or about – government officials, parties, or 
candidates for office who may decide the outcomes of issues and conflicts facing society” (p. 4). 
According to conventional organizations, citizens turning away from this sphere are a serious 
problem, as is addressing citizens solely in relation to single-issue campaigns: Such a strategy 
would only weaken the policy sphere. Non-conventional organizations operate with the belief 
that the policy sphere is already deteriorating. If it continues to see less activity on the part of 
citizens, it will no longer be representative of their wishes and will not fulfill its democratic role. 
To non-conventional organizations, this is not a crisis, since they envisage possibilities for 
influencing political power in other ways. Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) see such a non-
conventional tactic as highly problematic: “Their increasing visibility and clout are potentially 
disintegrative, because the raison d’être of such bodies is to promote particular values, interests 
and demands with little regard for their relations to other values and claims or to the availability 
of resources in the public purse” (p. 165). At the same time research has shown that this is 
precisely what young people tend to see political parties and the government doing: acting 
outside their best interests. Perhaps a bridge between conventional and non-conventional
organizations is warranted. While advocating a civic commons in cyberspace, Bennett (2008) warns that current trends point to a continued disconnection from conventional politics, particularly on the part of young people. Bennett supports the continuation of conventional organizations borrowing strategies from the non-conventional realm. But what about the feasibility of connecting non-conventional organizations with institutional politics? Such a solution would necessitate a bridging of communication on the part of conventional and non-conventional organizations. Reflexively, both would need to open up their ideological viewpoint and see the merit in following a new approach. Based on results here, this is rather unlikely. Since conventional organizations are often at a financial advantage, this would require monetary support of the work of non-conventional organizations and also the more abstract granting of institutional legitimacy. Coleman (2008) suggests: “One might conclude that a more constructive role for [the government] would be to provide resources for grassroots activists to use without political interference” (p. 200).

In considering such options, questions raised in Chapter 1 are relevant on a more theoretical level. Do we want to create citizens who participate in existing political institutions, or do we encourage them to challenge the government and those in power? Do we think government should take the responsibility for problematic issues in society, or do we think that individual citizens can work towards change without bureaucratic support? Here I raise an additional question: Does not democracy need both perspectives to remain a healthy and vital system? Despite their differences, both conventional and non-conventional organizations seem to provide valuable spaces for young people to explore outlets for citizenship. Online, both can pursue similar forms of strategic-reflexive communication in order to better reach their desired audience, yet continue to contribute their relevant aims of challenging or supporting the current democratic system. This chapter ends by highlighting the evolution of the internet and how changes in this realm can also assist youth organizations, both conventional and non-conventional, in their goals to reach young people.

The evolution of the web

The web is a potential tool of revival for democracy, and deliberative democracy in particular, given its interactive capabilities. Online technologies continue to expand and become more interactive, and users are able to leave the confines of more regulated online spaces and take charge of generating new places of interaction. One evolution that is particularly relevant is the rise of Web 2.0 and advances in social networking. Since this project began, organizational websites remain a fundamental structure for online information, but some organizations
Additionally maintain external blogs, wikis, and the perhaps now required Facebook, MySpace and YouTube profiles. This move is universal, as both conventional and non-conventional organizations that want to be active on the web must evolve to where their users are. What that means is that if an organization does not establish an “official” Facebook group, then someone else – with either friendly or hostile intentions – might do it for them. Beyond interpersonal communication, users of social networking sites form around political issues and challenge institutionalized assumptions. This can be seen for example in the realm of electoral politics: The Facebook group “One million strong for Stephen Colbert” reached its goal in just nine days, with over a million citizens declaring their affiliation with a comic figure – who will be running as a Republican and a Democrat in South Carolina because he would “like to lose twice” – rather than support a “legitimate” candidate.1 Embracing social networking sites may be a result of organizations wishing to maintain a brand image, but it also shows willingness to let youth hold more power, particularly when it comes to critiquing strategies but also ideological goals of youth organizations.

Results from the current research demonstrate that youth organizations have an almost universal wish to become more interactive. So why has it not yet been implemented? It was generally not for a lack of resources, especially considering the free options now available. Again appears the issue of control. Interactivity can be seen more as a struggle for authenticity, a struggle for intellectual property and a struggle for control over a text. In other words, interactivity “…has resulted in new tensions in the author-text-audience relationship, predominantly by blurring the distinction between author and audience” (Cover, 2006, p. 140). Downes and McMillan (2000) also find control to be critical to interactivity: The shift of control can be troubling to political elites and professionals who are used to holding power. Allowing direct interactivity – almost a necessity on sites like Facebook – means less ability to manage the message, as those that are active in posting messages on these sites are connecting themselves to the organization’s ideological message and thus their reputation. In an open, online space, people can come together and bandwagon with great ideas, but if this happens organizations have to worry about brand management, moderation, and audience management.

Though many organizations have found successful ways to communicate online, one in particular provides a good example of balancing these online communication issues and reaching young people. Greenpeace UK has been in existence since 1971 and has had a website since the mid 1990s. Content-wise, Greenpeace UK does not appear to have a youth target, and

the interviewee confirmed this: Most of their supporters are in their 30s and 40s. In order to attract young people, they put up a MySpace page and on that page have tailored content for this age group. They also have a non-profit page on Facebook, with conference and climate camp announcements, and a moderately active (and interactive) dialogue on “The Wall.” Greenpeace UK has adopted an interesting formula: Rather than struggle with presentation or catchy URL names, they did without creating a website designed for youth and instead used their well-known name to jump directly into social networking sites. This perhaps represents a best of both worlds scenario: It requires a loss of control but not on the official website, and it allows Greenpeace UK to receive widespread feedback from the youth they would hope to attract. Further, though, Greenpeace does not address socially conscious consumers online but does strongly advocate for resistance against corporate targets. At the same time, they sometimes combine corporate and government pressure in creating a successful campaign: “…it’s almost targeting corporations in themselves but also using them as lever for legislation as well.”

For youth organizations, online presence has become a necessity. But an information-based website is sometimes just not enough, particularly with young people who want to know – and see – that their voices are heard. Youth organizations recognize and articulate this, but in order to fully adapt to this changing environment – particularly for those connected to existing government structures – they will have to embrace a diminished sense of control in exchange for interactivity. Their current ambivalence towards interactivity may be tied to such issues, or perhaps it is only a matter of keeping up with shifting technology: Future research may reveal an increase in reflexive communication online.

This dissertation has addressed the issues of democratic citizenship and political communication in the current political climate. Youth organizations, from political party youth branches to information portals to animal rights groups, acknowledge that they want to provide skills that allow youth to be more actualized as citizens, whether it is via participating in traditional realms or pursuing more issue-based aims. Within this climate of evolving democracy, it is important to continue pursuing a better understanding of how organizations address young people online and how such communication may influence conceptualizations of citizenship.