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CivicWeb
Deliverable 16
A Qualitative Analysis of European Web Based Civic Participation Among Young People

This report contains a series of country-specific discussions of focus groups with young people in Europe who use online civic initiatives, young people who are active in offline civic organisations and those who are not engaged in civic organisations online or offline. Samples of 45-60 young people from seven countries have been analysed: Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom (in alphabetical order).

This Work Package was coordinated and the report edited by Magdalena Albero-Andrés, Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicación, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Spain and Tobias Olsson, Lund University, Sweden with Albert Bastardas-Boada, Spain and Fredrik Miegel, Sweden

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We would like to thank all the young participants in our focus groups across the seven national contexts for their time and for allowing us to use their words and opinions to support our ideas. All names have been changed to pseudonyms or initials to maintain anonymity. We also extend particular thanks to those participants or older adults who acted as contact people in the setting up of focus groups.
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Executive Summary

Aims, Methods and Theoretical Underpinning

1. Our general objectives in this report into European web-based civic participation among young people, CivicWeb deliverable 16, have been twofold: first to offer an analysis of which young people use various civic websites, why and in what ways; and second to explore the connections between offline civic engagement or disengagement and online participation.

2. We wanted to explore the ideas about the internet as well as internet practices within different socio-cultural contexts. More specifically, we wanted to explore the reasons young people have for political and/or civic engagement and how the internet helps them to pursue their interests in this field. This part of the research also aimed at exploring the degree of civic/political education of the participants and their responses to civic content online, the motivations for both on and off-line civic participation by young people across Europe and the social circumstances in which sustained web-based participation occurs.

3. We conducted focus groups interviews in each of the seven participant countries with diverse groups of young people between 15-25 years of age. The focus groups were conducted in-between April 2008 and February 2009.

4. We took into account several concerns that arose from the results of the previous work packages. The focus groups’ selection took into account these concerns, but also the recent history and changes in civic/political participation in the different national contexts, and the specific issues that generate civic/political participation in each of them.

5. Although the selection of focus groups varies from country to country, according to specific national contexts, the general criterion used in the selection of the focus groups was that those could give insights into the motivations and contexts of specific sub-categories of users (or non-users) of the internet. To some extent, the survey conducted for our project (Deliverable 8) was a help in this respect. Most of the focus groups provided us with some insight into young people’s perceptions of civic/political participation and engagement, and motivations and reasons for this participation or lack thereof, and insights about the role the internet plays. The role of family (and inter-generational relations), friends and social contexts in the ways young people understand political/civic issues was also explored. All together, the focus groups included young people who are active in traditional politics (i.e. political parties) and in traditional and new social or civic movements, but also young people who are not involved in civic and/or political activities.

6. The contributions of the participants in our focus groups cast an interesting light on what diverse groups of young people feel about politics and civic issues, and also on the ways in which young people are shaping internet use according to their own interests and motivations.

Key Findings

About uses and perceptions of the internet among young people in Europe:

7. In many but not all cases, the internet appears to be a naturalised part of young people’s everyday lives. Our seven different selections of focus groups included primarily young people who have a great deal of experience in internet use, many of
who are able to make effective use of the internet for leisure, communication and information purposes.

8) Social factors are important influences for how the internet gets used. Classical sociological factors such as class, ethnicity, age, religion, etc. appear to affect the ways in which young people approach and use the internet. Amongst these, the one showing most clear patterns in relation to internet use and civic participation in most groups and across most of the countries is socioeconomic class.

9) Young users have a degree of critical reflexivity vis-à-vis the internet as a medium. When discussing the internet as a medium the users present opinions like ‘you cannot really trust your sources on the internet’, ‘the internet is not that good for discussions as they quite often become very heated’, ‘on the internet your actions are easily monitored’, or ‘it’s better to meet face-to-face than to discuss things on the internet’. When comparing the internet to other media, young users in our sample sometimes point to newspapers as more reliable sources of information.

10) Some significant internet practices among European youth emerge: educational and pedagogic uses, solving everyday problems or information seeking, consumption – both socially conscious and mundane, communicating with friends and family, consuming news online, participating in organisations for leisure and civic purposes.

**About the internet and young people’s civic engagement and participation:**

11) The internet is an important tool for already engaged young people. The different national reports make it obvious that all kinds of internet applications have been shaped into important resources for young peoples’ civic and/or political engagement. In focus groups with already active young citizens the internet is constantly presented as for instance a ‘hub’ for political activities, or as an important ‘node’ for civic activities.

12) Looking across our large sample of focus groups, we find these patterns in different kinds of political and/or civic organisations. The internet appears to be an important tool for groups as diverse as political parties youth organisations, various kinds of already established activist networks, and for communities of civic interest.

13) The internet is also an important resource for minorities (political, ethnic, regional or religious). It is worth noting the special attraction that the internet seems to have for all kinds of minority groups when it comes to civic and/or political action. The internet’s open architecture – the fact that it opens up spaces for voices to be heard and for people to meet and interact – provides a basis for these groups, and for their expressions of and debates about identity, in ways that the traditional media landscape has not done.

14) The internet is a public sphere for a number of young people in Europe. The internet opens up spaces for public, or semi-public, discussions between young people. However, it important not to overrate the significance of all of these discussions or to homogenise the content – not all young people participate in such discussions and the ones who do participate most often do that rather sporadically.

15) Nevertheless there are a large number of examples in our data of young people describing their participation in various online civic fora – such online participation is covered in all national reports and in various focus groups.

16) There are very few cases of attractive website designs inspiring civic engagement and participation. Looking at our focus group data, from all over Europe, there is one really interesting thing missing – cases where a specific website *per se* (through, for instance, its interactive attractiveness and/or good design) makes young people
become engaged in civic issues. This counters a familiar and often repeated line of thought that it is by amusing and entertaining young people (on the internet as well as elsewhere) that you can attract their attention and make them ‘engaged’ in civic initiatives.

17) There are, however, some cases of internet practices inspiring and motivating participation. Despite the lack of any simple cause and effect relationships between specific websites and young people’s civic engagement we do find a number of interesting ways in which the internet, in a rather immediate way, does inspire civic engagement. For instance: 1) file sharing issues, and 2) issues concerning the threat of surveillance of internet practices.

**About young people’s civic engagement and participation:**

18) The most significant characteristic of the civic and political engagement among the participants in the focus groups is that it tends to concern predominantly issues of immediate proximity for the participants: individual and group identities, particularly linked to a sense of discrimination, and current life situation are key.

19) A common view of traditional governmental or party ‘politics’ and ‘politicians’ among young people across our entire sample is that most of the respondents see politicians as corrupt, boring or hard to understand, only working for their own interests, and far removed from the everyday needs and realities of common citizens.

20) A large proportion of respondents across the partner countries felt that things need to change (inequalities, corruption, lack of housing and job opportunities, high prices, religious, ethnic or regional discrimination, police harassment of civil protest, government censorship of internet sites and more) but that they themselves cannot change them.

21) This above-mentioned lack of efficacy was often related to a) their feelings about the unresponsiveness, untrustworthiness and distance of politicians; b) it was also related sometimes to actual experiences of having participated (in schools councils, e-petitions or demonstrations) but having not been listened to or managed to change anything and c) it was occasionally related to fears about how active participation or political critique might impact on them as individuals (and make them targets of the state, the police or other aggressive citizens with opposing views).

22) However, in most of the groups, when young people are involved in civic activities that are related to their immediate contexts (both on and off-line) they seem to feel more confident in their capacity to change things, to help to achieve a better society.

23) Civic and political interests do seem to be related, in a number of cases, to having a family and/or close community that are interested in these issues and concerns.

24) In a number of cases also, local civic achievements, the feeling of being active together (solidarity), the feeling of having organised an event or campaign and received some positive feedback from peers or older adults seems to generate a degree of efficacy that encourages and motivates further participation even if the overall campaign did not achieve its immediate goals. This further participation can take the form of online or offline initiatives.

25) A general lack of interest in formal politics reappears when it comes to the European level. However, we must add at least two additional layers to this: a) with notable exceptions, most focus group participants usually present either a lack of knowledge of European politics or a sense of distrust about it, and b) many
interviewees also seem to lose their sense of motivation and affiliation to politics and the civic sphere (that we can sense at the national levels, and that is clear at local or regional level) when discussing Europe. These points are best illustrated by the fact that throughout our focus groups the European level of politics is hardly commented on except in those cases where they are specifically asked to do so; talk of European politics does not seem come as naturally as talk of national politics. However, a small minority of the respondents did feel that European identity or identification was a way of avoiding aspects of national cultures that they wished to get away from or were critical of.

26) A majority of the civic and/or political participation and engagement, in particular sustained engagement, described and identified across these focus groups with young people in Europe appears to begin and to end off-line in real communities or communities of interest, even if the internet has explicitly provided a space, a tool, or a focal point for aspects of this engagement.
Introduction

Magdalena Albero-Andrés

The aim of this section of the CivicWeb research was to focus on young people in relation to civic engagement and the internet in a qualitative manner. Our objective was to offer an analysis of which groups of young people use civic websites, which do not and why. We wanted to explore the ideas and views that different socio-cultural groups of young people in the 15-25 age range have about the internet as a means for communication, learning and social participation. More narrowly, our main focus was to explore the reasons young people have for political and/or civic engagement and how internet is helping them to pursue their interest in this field. This part of the research also aimed to explore the degree of civic/political education of the participants and their response to civic content online. In order to do so, we conducted focus groups interviews in each of the seven participant countries. The focus groups provided insights on what websites young people use, why, and how they use them, and how the websites might motivate or work against political and civic participation in other aspects of young people’s lives.

When we approached this part of our research, we took into account several concerns that arose from the results of the previous work packages. For example, the review of literature on youth civic engagement and the internet (Deliverable 4) explored fears about youth apathy in relation to politics and suggested that internet provided civic potential mainly to those who are already interested and engaged in offline civic/political activities. Also from the interviews with the producers (Deliverable 13) we learned that, producers feel that the internet is basically an information tool for young people. However, this raised several questions, such as what percentage of young internet users have political or civic interests, and why. Or to what degree politically or civically active young people are satisfied with the use producers make of the internet in their organisations. Or why and when, and under what circumstances, young people became producers themselves. And, to what degree are sites able to reach and attract young people who have not shown any interest in civic or political activity before. Other important issues, that arose from the findings of the broad survey of civic websites (Deliverable 6) and the close analysis of specific types and categories of civic websites across partner countries (Deliverable 14) are the general lack of interactivity that is found in many websites, the tendency to define young people in terms of age and to treat them as a homogeneous group, the use of old media as a source to update information, and the close connection between offline and online civic participation. And the results from our quantitative survey of young people’s civic activities on and offline suggested the endurance of a digital divide among the respondents in all the countries, especially in terms of education and living situation. The results from the online survey also suggested that people in the 15-25 age groups, in all the seven countries, use the internet primarily for accessing communication, entertainment and lifestyle websites with only a minority (around 25 percent) using it for civic purposes. However, the findings discussed in Deliverable 8 also informed about the existence of generational political and civic trends, and of the potential of the internet to create and connect groups that share the same interests.

The selection of focus groups thus took into account the above mentioned concerns, and, additionally, the recent history and changes in civic/political participation in the different national contexts, and the specific issues that generate civic/political participation in each. Although the constituents of focus groups vary from country to country according to specific national contexts, the general criteria used in the selection of the focus groups was that those could represent specific sub-categories of
users (or non-users) as identified in the survey (Deliverable 8). These sub-categories were generally based on demographics, location and relationship to the civic and political sphere or to the internet, but they include, for example, young people with extreme political civic attitudes or commitments, and also those who are particularly alienated from civic participation. In some of the focus groups, participants were asked to visit particular sites, and their navigation, interest, responses and evaluation of the sites were monitored. Most of the focus groups provided us with some insight into participants’ individual and group perceptions of civic/political participation and what role internet plays in motivating this. The influence of family, friends and social contexts was also explored.

All the focus groups were conducted between April 2008 and March 2009. There are a total of 70 focus groups (10 from Hungary, 9 from the Netherlands, 10 from Slovenia, 13 from Spain, 10 from Sweden, 7 from Turkey, and 11 from the United Kingdom). The average number of participants in each of the focus groups was four people but at either end groups varied between two and eight participants. The international sample of the focus group participants offers a roughly equal balance of male and female participants in the 15-25 age range. The focus groups include people that are active in traditional politics (i.e. political parties) an in traditional/new civic movements, but also young people that do not have any civic or political activity. A grouping in several of the countries was ‘young bloggers’, and another was Facebook users.

During our focus groups sessions we looked for possible answers to research questions that have guided the CivicWeb project. Specifically, we wanted to explore the following:

- In what ways does the use of the internet relate to young people’s social identifications as gendered beings with specific dis/abilities, class positions, religious and sexual orientations? How do young people from different groups engage with technology and with available forms of civic participation?

- How do national traditions and histories of civic participation (political, religious, etc.) translate into internet uses, and to what extent does the medium change notions of national civic participation?

- To what extent does internet provide new ways of building knowledge, social capital and community among young people?

- How, why and under what circumstances young people use or perceive the web as a ‘producer’ medium, as an opportunity to generate their own representations of events?

- Do new media simply offer more efficient ways of doing ‘old’ things (such as mobilizing and organising people for social action), or do they change the nature of what is being done?

- How do young users develop skills for effective communication – and the forms of ‘civic literacy’ that are required for participation – through their online experiences?

The interview sessions with the different focus groups used these central research questions as a scaffold with specific questions in each context initiated by the researchers. As such, the sessions were roughly divided into three parts: one focusing

1 To see a complete list of the focus groups themes and participants, please go to the Appendices at the end of each of the national reports.
on the self-presentation of the respondents, one on the broader social and cultural interests and experiences of the respondents, and the last exploring the socio-cultural significance of the internet for civic/political engagement and participation. In the first part some respondents gave information about their socio-cultural backgrounds, personal interests and families. In the second part, different themes arose more or less strongly in different groups, but issues related to gender, identity, class, traditional politics, offline engagement and motivation for civic/political participation were raised by many of the respondents and frequently debated between them. In the third part, the conceptualisation and use of the internet, differences between the internet and old media, the use of the internet for civic and/or political action, internet and political education, and the comments on civic/political websites, were themes addressed in different ways in different groups.

The contributions of the focus groups from the different countries, and from different regions and socioeconomic strata within each country, cast an interesting light on the issue of what young people feel about politics and civic issues, but also about the ways in which young people are shaping internet use and political action in according with their own interests and motivations.

Similarities are found in many of the countries with respect to the tendency to identify politics with politicians, and to do so in an overwhelmingly negative manner. Perhaps the most important of these similarities is that most of the respondents see politicians as corrupt, ambitious, selfish, verbose, inaccessible and far removed from the everyday needs and realities of young people. Also interesting is the fact that that a large proportion of the respondents in most of the partner countries felt that things in society need to change but stated that they can’t change them.

However, as will be seen in the individual national reports, our focus groups also reveal that when young people are involved in civic activities that are related to their immediate contexts or to issues they feel passionate about, and have had experiences of active solidarity with others, they seem to feel more confident in their capacity to change things, to help to have a better society.

The interests and motivations of young people with regards to the internet appear fairly similar in all seven partner countries. A majority of members of our international sample seem to use the internet extensively for communication, information seeking and entertainment. And, according to a majority of the focus group participants, the internet does not seem to prompt sustained civic or political participation. However, equally clearly, young participants who are already active and interested in civic/politics issues now use the internet as an invaluable source of information both on news and on offline activities, and as a cheap and efficient way to contact other people that share the same interests locally, nationally and internationally. Our sample also yields the occasional respondent in each country who went online seeking one specific aspect or kind of information and ended up joining or participating in a civic group or organisation either on or offline in a more sustained and enthusiastic manner because they ‘stumbled across’ the organisation or group on the internet.

Setting aside such similarities between the samples, the different national reports portray concepts and types of civic/political action and of internet use that are closely related to the specific historical and cultural characteristics of each of the partner countries. While these issues are taken up in greater detail in the concluding section of this overall report, here we comment briefly on some of the most salient country-specific findings which might shed light on other national reports that do not highlight the same specific issues. Following the (alphabetical) order in which the national reports appear in this deliverable, these findings are as follows:
The report from Hungary presents a situation in which civic participation and engagement is scarce across the population, and this includes young people. Those involved in civic or political activities had a direct personal interest in an issue that they spoke of as connected to their families and friends and got involved in related civic activities step by step.

The Netherlands report highlights young people’s opinions on the purpose of blogging. Blogging is, apparently, seen as a personal activity, with friends in mind as an intended audience. Also, in young people’s estimation, the sheer number of bloggers reduces the prominence or importance of an individual blogger to the minimum.

The report from Slovenia displays a situation in which young people seem to get politically or civically active not only for altruistic motives, but also for the need to acquire certain skills and build social networks, which they could not do outside of civic and political organisations.

The Spanish report focuses on a combination of new and long-time issues that move young people to political and civic participation. The use of internet in civic/political participation appears to be closely related to the previous practices in offline action, and also to the closeness that the issue has to their immediate contexts and generational needs. Family traditions in civic/politic participation play an important role in the decision to get involved.

The Swedish report suggests that the internet can be shaped into a reason for civic engagement and participation. This is to say, young people’s everyday internet practices in Sweden do sometimes become their point of departure for civic engagement. Young people’s file sharing practices together with the fact that these practices are threatened by legislation and surveillance were found on occasion to make them civically engaged.

In Turkey, there were a significant number of the focus groups participants who pointed out that the internet came as part of a project of western modernisation before Turkish people were prepared for it. These young people added that even though it seems like older people are disadvantaged since they do not have sharp internet skills, most young people have a very limited sense of what is out there and do not use the internet to their advantage for civic participation.

The United Kingdom report shows that cultural and/or sub-cultural goals, personal and familial morality, a strong sense of injustice either personal or communal, and strong faith, ideological, political, or other identity (gender, sexuality, and ethnicity) seem to be the most common motivations for sustained civic/political participation. Most of these cut across generations, applying equally to young people and other adults.

The seven national reports that follow are an attempt to make a socially situated analysis of the role of internet in social life. By doing qualitative analysis with a small sample of young people in seven different European countries, we’ve tried to bring our small contribution to the study of the social uses of technologies and youth civic engagement.
Hungarian National Report

Éva Bognár and Judit Szakács

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Introduction

The aim of this report is to introduce the results of Work Package 10, Deliverable 9, in the course of which we have carried out ten focus group interviews with young people. Having looked at all three traditional dimensions of media – producers, content and users – in previous work packages, in this work package we have been focusing on young people’s understanding of politics and civic issues as well as their civic practices and internet use. Our perspective differed from Work Package 9 (which surveyed the users of civic websites) in methodology: instead of surveys, research participants were organised into focus groups, a method ideal to make people think together, offer views, reach conclusions and form opinions none of them would have come up with on their own (Rubin and Rubin, 1995:140).

Selection of participants

With data from the previous work packages in mind, we kept in consideration the theoretical and analytical goals of the project when selecting potential participants. We felt that it was necessary to cast a wide net over Hungarian society, ensuring the diversity of participants with regards to socio-economic markers such as class, ‘race’, ethnicity, gender and more. When sampling for variety in socio-economic background, we relied on the assumption, confirmed by several surveys, that vocational schools tend to enrol young people of lower-socioeconomic backgrounds, while pupils in prestigious academic grammar schools or in institutions of higher education tend to hail from better off, middle- and upper-class families. It is worth noting, in this context, that the Hungarian educational system has often been criticised for reinforcing social stratification, (see, for instance, Gazsó, 2006; Balázsi et al., 2005, or in English, Radó, 2004). Thus, different types of schools were selected and several focus group participants were recruited through them. With regards to gender, all-female and all-male groups as well as groups where the genders mixed were all arranged. Hungary’s only sizeable ethnic minority, the Roma were also represented in two focus groups. A further aspect includes geographical variety. Since too many studies on ‘Hungary’ concentrate on the capital only, three groups located in the countryside were also included: one in a prospering city in Western Hungary (Győr), one in a less well-heeled regional centre of the Great Plain in central Hungary (Kecskemét), and one in a small town an hour West from Budapest (Tata). Several participants in these (as well as in some other) focus groups turned out to be from villages, thus representing varying degrees of urbanism for the study.

In addition to the variety of socio-economic groups that were included, however, it was also felt necessary to ensure diversity with regards to the main questions of the research project, that is, the participants’ level of civic engagement and their attitude towards the internet. Thus, there were groups formed on the basis of the participants’ connection to a particular civic site and some where we had not had prior knowledge about their involvement; there were groups with young people heavily engaged in civic or political activities, and some with young people not particularly interested in civic issues. This strategy resulted in a situation where most focus groups included
participants who had known one another more or less closely. To avoid some of the disadvantages arising from this condition, Krueger's (1994) guidelines were followed and it was made sure that the participants in a particular group are of roughly equal social standing.

Recruitment process

The most daunting difficulty we faced when organising focus groups is that people were simply not interested in participating. Hundreds of emails and phone calls, long hours of trying to convince people to take part had to be invested by researchers. We also found Esterberg's (2002) second point true: even if people agree to participate, many of them fail to show up for the actual interview session. It was found that the only way to make sure the young people to be interviewed would be present was to conduct the interview at a school in class, which, however, raises ethical issues regarding the voluntary nature of their participation in the research.

An aspect that has to be paid attention to when reading the report relates to the fact that this phase of the research spanned almost a year, involving turbulent political events. Thus, some of the interviews were conducted before the 'financial crisis' hit, and one of the Roma sessions was held before the recent upsurge in anti-Roma sentiments and violence in Hungary. Such external factors have probably had a great effect on the views and attitudes of our research participants.

The focus group interviews

During the actual sessions, the usual problems of having one or two overly dominating and some exceedingly shy participants were encountered. A further complication concerned time: some of the interviews were carried out during a school class, which meant a rather strict time constraint for the interview; this was a compromise that had to be accepted for the interview to happen. All of the interviews were voice-recorded, and most of them were also captured on film. Notes were also taken for most of the interviews. The interviews were transcribed by one of the two researchers. The protocols of keeping participants' identities confidential were followed at all times.

The interviews follow a similar structure; in order to ensure comparability, some of the questions were raised in every group. Utilising Davison’s (1983) theory on the third person-effect, namely that participants tend to let their guard down and to speak more openly when asked in indirect manners, interview sessions included a part when photos of persons were shown and participants were asked to imagine the person's background, interests, political views and civic involvement. It is believed that via this indirect approach, the respondents revealed more of their own views on civic and political engagement as well as of their prejudices than through direct questioning.

Short description of the focus groups

Zhoriben

The focus group interview arranged around using Zhoriben, a now defunct social network site for the Roma ethnic minority, was the first one carried out, and it anticipated some of the complications ahead. Careful planning nonetheless, only two participants showed up for the interview session. A young man and woman, both were of Roma background, and both were registered to the site; he used it enthusiastically, she never logged in. They had both started Roma-related discussions on various discussion boards before; both experienced lots of negative, racist responses. The two participants had had a passing acquaintance with each other, and the personal
dynamic between them needed to be taken into account for the analysis of the interview.

**Tata**
The second focus group interview was set up in the small town of Tata, in the town’s locally prestigious academic grammar school. Pupils in this school are usually children of the local intelligentsia, though the background of the focus group participants has not been discussed. Participants all signed up to a call for the interview made in person by one of the researchers. The session took place in the afternoon when classes were over in a classroom. The group was an all-girl group consisting of six 11-graders, all of whom happened to participate in the civic activities taking place in town around the time of the interview. The issue causing the civic outrage directly concerned them: the school they were attending was in train to be given over to the Catholic Church and to be turned into a religious all-boys school. Their experiences of civic participation were overwhelmingly negative. The joint conclusion of this discussion settled around the necessity of leaving Hungary, at least until ‘things get better’.

**Győr**
This focus group was organised around an existing group in the city of Győr, one of the most prosperous cities in Western Hungary. The six participants, aged 17-23, are engaged in the publication of an independent local monthly paper and a blog on issues of public interest. The interview was conducted in a community centre where the participants usually have their editorial meetings. Two of the young men dominated the interview; the two female participants spoke somewhat less frequently.

**Students, Budapest**
Three young men aged 18-22 from Budapest, who knew one another, participated in this interview, taking place at an empty classroom of Central European University. They are of upper-class background, with one attending an elite academic grammar school, the other two being (presently or formerly) college students. While they were interested in civic issues such as environmental protection or the fight against racism, they were sceptical of the notion of them being capable of ‘changing the world’. The participants had known one another before the interview. All three of them contributed to the interview to similar degrees.

**Vocational school - 1, Budapest, all-boy group**
An all-boy group organised in an all-boy school of transport mechanics, the six participants aged 15-19 were, ethically problematically, hand-picked by the deputy headmaster for the interview. They did not know one another. The session took place during a class in the empty assembly hall of the school. Although the question was not discussed, it is highly likely that they are of a working-class background. They were very reticent about causes or issues they find important. The age difference did not seem to matter; the youngest participant appeared to be the most eloquent when discussing civic issues.

**Vocational school - 2, Budapest, mixed group**
Another group comprising a lower socio-economic segment of society, its members attend a secondary school where they learn a trade and now work towards a high school diploma. The seven young men and two young women, aged 19-20, talked to the researchers during a class. They were most concerned with an issue of personal relevance for them: when their school was merged with another one, the existing infrastructure was found insufficient for the increased number of students; as a result, they have all their classes in the afternoon (instead of the regular morning hours). Although this situation is disadvantageous for them in many ways— they do not believe in the possibility of change. They had taken no steps against this arrangement beyond
complaining to their form teacher. There were participants, particularly one of the girls, who barely contributed to the discussion.

**Roma group**

This group consisted of seven young persons of Roma origin, aged 19-21, attending an ethnic Roma secondary school, aiming to earn a high school diploma. This implies two things: 1. Given that they attend an ethnic school, it is likely that their ethnic background is of some importance for them. 2. Since it is a secondary school, they are – or will be, when they graduate at the end of the academic year – more educated than the majority of Hungarian Roma (e.g. Kemény et al., 2004). The session, organised during their English class, was one of the most complicated interviews carried out for the project. The issues raised seemed to induce strong emotions, leading to heated discussions with people often talking simultaneously, cutting one another off, dominating over the couple of less vocal group members. Not surprisingly, participants were most concerned with the anti-Roma sentiments and violence currently sweeping over Hungary, many of them having experienced discrimination themselves, but sceptical about any solution being found.

**Kecskemét – youth workers**

Participants of this focus groups had been recruited by the Helpi team (Youth Counselling Center in the town of Kecskemét, centre of the Central Hungarian region which falls behind the national average in economic achievement). The group consisted of four youth workers: 3 females and one male between the age of 22 and 25. Two of the participants had known each other before the interview. The focus group took place in the public library of Kecskemét, but three participants were from neighbouring villages. One of the interviewees was particularly articulate and vocal and slightly dominated certain parts of the discussion.

**Urban cyclists**

The movement for urban cycling, Criticalmass, is the most successful civic movement in Hungary: They mobilised 80 thousand people last year for their annual demonstration and the movement made the issue of cycling a serious topic in Hungary, especially among young people. That is why we decided to dedicate one focus group to the issue by recruiting urban cyclists. The intention was to invite young people who do bike in Budapest, but whose level of engagement in the movement varies. We posted the invitation on the website criticalmass.hu, but recruited participants through other channels as well: we asked friends of friends to invite young people who bike in Budapest. This mixed recruitment process resulted in a very interesting group with five participants (one female, four male, aged 18-24). Four interviewees were involved in the cyclist movement, but to varying degrees: one is an official organiser, one is very much involved but informally, one has just started to participate and one is very active online but has not been involved as an organiser offline. And one of the young cyclists had hardly heard of the movement before the interview but turned out to be involved in other civic organisations. The difference in the level of engagement gave a very interesting dynamic to the focus group. In addition to the usual themes, the main topics of the discussion were the participants’ experiences with urban cycling, with activism in general and in the Criticalmass movement in particular. All of the participants were university students; two were not from Budapest (one from an industrial city, the other from a small town). The focus group took place in a classroom at the Central European University.

**Party members**

This focus group consisted of four active members (three males and one female aged 21-24) of the youth branch of the Christian Democratic People’s Party. The party is in opposition in the Parliament in close cooperation with the biggest rightwing party Fidesz. The youth branch has an MP in the Parliament. We chose the formal way to
get in touch with the organisation: we sent an email to the address we found on the party’s website. The interviewees are students of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University. They all consider Christian values and religion to be an important part of their lives and are willing to do what they can to shape the society according to their conviction. Nevertheless, it is clear from the interview that participation in the party’s life is as much about social life as it is about politics. According to them, the influence of the family is the most important factor when it comes to their political ideology.

Internet use

In this section we look at the main points emerging from the focus group interviews with regards to the interviewees’ practices and concepts of the internet and other media.

First of all, somewhat surprisingly, all the interviewed young people do use the internet on a daily basis regardless of social status, education, age or gender. However, there is a difference in the type of sites they visit and in the scope of activities they carry out online.

The primary online activities of all the interviewees are related to communication: keeping in touch with friends or meeting new people mainly through social network sites and instant messaging, along with sending humorous emails and videos to each other. The other widespread use is for the reading of news online. These activities are of high importance and mentioned first in all the focus groups, although what qualifies as ‘news’ clearly differs, with interviewees coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds preferring tabloid news sites. In the case of these participants (focus groups vocational school 1 and 2, Roma group), the use of the internet is limited to such uses. In contrast, interviewees coming from middle-class backgrounds (focus groups győr, tata, urban cyclists, students) engage in a wider range of activities online: reading news and blogs, getting information about local events, cultural programs, in some cases downloading music and films and shopping online are part of their daily activities. Therefore the difference in internet use lies in the type of online activities that are part of the interviewees’ daily practice rather than in access, time spent online or even quality of access.

‘M: Do you use the internet?
(Nodding)
M: Where, how often?
N: a lot (laughing)
M: A lot? What does it mean?
N: Well, I go home, turn it on and then it's basically on while I'm home.
M: And what do you do?
N: Well, I chat with my friends. Sometimes play games, that's it.
M: And you guys? (Nodding)
J: If I have the time I get online every day. I chat with my friends, email.
M: Email?
J: Yeah, we send each other pictures, videos. Funny ones or on cars. Sometimes MyVip, iwiw [Hungarian social network sites].
Sz: Yeah.
(the others all agree)’ (vocational school-1)

As in this excerpt, participants across the board reported that ‘the internet was on’ continuously when they were at home. This not only signals that the internet became a self-evident, ubiquitous part of life for young Hungarians of very different socio-economic background, but it also presupposes a higher quality access (certainly not dial-up connections with its time-based charges) for even those participants whose families might be financially hard-up,
The following quotation exemplifies the internet use of interviewees of higher socio-economic status found in all of the focus groups comprised of participants with such background:

‘M: What do you do online?
P: What don’t I do… I shop…
A: News, studying, activism…
P: Exhibition, tickets, email, poker, iwiw.
A2: Critical mass.
All: Yeah, that’s default.
(…)
A: I read Figyelő [newspaper]
Á: Yes, reading the news, opinions on blogs, cycling-related news on criticalmass.
P: Chat.
A2: iwiw.’ (urban cyclists)

Downloading content was mentioned in two groups. In these instances interviewees seemed slightly embarrassed admitting that they download films and music on a regular basis.

‘I download stuff, that’s why the pc is always on. That’s where I get music from. But I do buy CDs too, I swear! I mean real CDs, not writable ones...’ (győr)

Reading the news online as a daily activity was mentioned in all the interviews. Again, the use of non-traditional media outlets (such as blogs) appears to be the ‘privilege’ of the more educated: interviewees participating in vocational training and coming from a disadvantaged background do not read blogs. On the other hand, high school and university students did mention blogs as an important source of information and knowledge as well as entertainment.

If reading blogs is an activity mostly taken up by young people with a middle-class background, then commenting, producing content is that of an even smaller group: very few of them mentioned such activities. Those who did fall under two categories: one girl in the Tata focus group reported to write a blog of private matters, on which her friends (in the focus group and outside of it) comment. Matters of public interest, on the other hand, were reportedly blogged about by a small subgroup in our sample: the engaged. Interviewees brought up such activities in two focus groups: the one with urban cyclists and the one with editors of a newspaper and community blog ‘Alternativa’. It may seem obvious, but it is important to point out that in these cases once they start commenting, they do not restrict it to sites closely related to their subject of engagement, but extend it to any site of interest.

‘M: So what do you do on criticalmass?
P: you post things related to cycling that you find elsewhere.
A: or give each other advice on things in forums or comments
M: Any other site you might post on?
Á: yeah, alleycat, obviously [another bikers’ portal], sometimes lmv.
(…)
P: I do comment on articles on Nemzeti Sport [National Sport newspaper] and időkép [site on weather and pollution]
(…)
A2: Totalcar [website on cars], subba… ‘ (urban cyclists)

In the rest of the focus groups, interviewees claimed never to post comments to blogs, even if they do read some; and uploading pictures to social network sites seems to be the limit of their online content production activities. The important exception to this was found in the focus group organised around the Roma social network site, Zhoriben. Both of the participants there reported to have launched various topics (usually related to Roma issues) on discussion boards. Due to the limited size of our sample, no definite conclusion about this can be drawn, but one can speculate that the
more state-of-the-art technology of blogs seem to be preferred by our higher-class interviewees, while 'yesterday’s’ main means of discussion, forum boards are utilised in our sample by the participants from a lower socio-economic background.

From some of the remarks interviewees made when talking about their experience when using the internet, we can reconstruct the concept the interviewees have of the medium. Besides the easy access to information and entertaining content brought up in all focus groups, those with experience of online discussions appreciated other features of the internet as well. The community-building potential as well as quick feedback and the belief that people interested in similar issues can significantly contribute to a debate and create something ‘great’ were the most valued aspects of the medium.

'M: We have been talking about the problems when it comes to commenting and posting online. What is good about it?  
B2: I guess it’s vanity…  
D: I agree.  
B2: So when you read a normal comment, it cheers you up.  
B1: Yeah-yeah.  
B1: And you can add to your original post if someone recommends a related link. Or if they tell you their intelligent, normal opinion that you can build upon.  
M: In the case of a good blog the original post is about twenty percent, the rest is coming from comments. The blog that is very much like this is Judapest where comments are way better than the blog post at times. There is a lot of information, background that the writer of the original post had not seen… so they basically build each other... So a good blog is where there is a community.’ (győr)

The importance of the community from a more practical perspective was expressed in the critical mass focus group:

A: the community is very helpful, when I had a question about a tyre, I posted it and I got ten comments in an hour. It really helped.

An interesting case is that of the editors of a newspaper and blog. Even though they are aware of the advantages of the blog format (cheap, flexible, potentially able to reach a bigger audience, feedback and reaction from readers etc.), the printed newspaper still feels more attractive and superior to the blog:

M: and the blog, how did you start the blog [the printed format preceded the blog format of the newspaper]?  
M: We started it cause there was no paper.  
D1: But we had it earlier, didn’t we?  
D2: yes, we did.  
B1: ‘Yes, but until then it was like ‘oh, we have the printed.’’  
M: How was it?  
M: (:) in November we found out we had no money.  
(…)  
M: And then we said that we should start a blog. And why not, we can have ads and all. But the motivation wasn’t there: it was not updated, not fresh. We didn’t care, we didn’t write. (…)  
M: And what’s the difference, what do you do now?  
M: I think that we are doing it all wrong. The circulation of our newspaper is 1500. And anyone can read our blog! So we have a potential 15 million readers through our blog! [there are approx. 15 million Hungarian speakers around the world] (laughter). With the newspaper we reach a maximum of 6-7000 people. So if we were clever we would push the blog and we could do a portal with multimedia and search and... but you need time to do all this… (…)  
B2: I don’t know, I prefer the real, printed newspaper that I can hold in my hands.  
D: yeah.  
(…)  
B2: actually, I write more provocative stuff to the blog than to the newspaper.  
M: why?  
B2: I don’t know, this is the kind of medium…  
D2: It tolerates more.  
B2: Yes.
And people react too…

\( \text{M: And how about the audience? What do you have in mind?} \)

\( \text{D1: the audience of the newspaper is basically locals.} \)

\( \text{G: Yeah, cause it is hard to circulate.} \)

\( \text{D1: But the readers of the blog come from all over.} \)

\( \text{M: Mainly from Budapest…} \)

\( \text{M: And besides what you have said about being more provocative, what’s the difference?} \)

\( \text{M: well the blog… the point of the blog is that I can react immediately to news.} \)

\( \text{G: so current events.’ (győr)} \)

Many of the interviewees brought up strong negative points when talking about their experience online. The notion according to which the internet can be a ‘waste of time’ and ‘useless’ appeared in the focus groups with less privileged interviewees, but the views that one has to be careful to not to spend too much time online because of the addictiveness of the internet and that there is a high risk of finding unreliable and inaccurate information online were present in other focus groups as well.

The more thorough critique of the internet however was present in the discussions with young people who are the most active online. The prevailing opinion is that online discussions can become pointless, hard to follow and repetitive. Also, people end up having the same discussion over and over again no matter what they begin with according to these interviewees. Online discussions turn rough and aggressive much more often than face-to-face ones and these features keep some of the interviewed young people from commenting on certain popular websites.

‘B2:… I don’t usually do that (commenting) because it is a bit… it scares me away when I see there are two hundred comments and I know it really is pointless because nobody is going to read it…” (győr)

‘M: The problem with comments is that if the blog is big and has no fulltime moderator then anything, I mean anything goes really. For example at the Antagon blog we see this now that we would want to have posts about the printed media. So when we say that Paul Lendvay is not qualified to be the ombudsman of Népszabadság [biggest Hungarian daily], then everyone gets there and start going on about what a big commie this Paul Lendvay is… and they don’t get that that’s not the point. (…) I think all those spam comments really scare people away.’ (győr)

‘B1: There was this post about cartoons. And then these people came, about thirty of them and started calling each other names back and forth… And I can imagine them sitting at a table and beating each other up and I didn’t dare to write anything. I had an opinion, but I knew both sides would say I am stupid. And I didn’t want to get into this.’ (győr)

‘B1: In every single discussion, no matter what the post is about right around the thirtieth comment someone would start going on about the Jews or the commies. (everyone agrees)

M: Yeah, the very same topics come up after thirty comments.’ (győr)

Given the rampant anti-Roma sentiments in Hungary, it is not surprising that the Roma participants starting Roma-related discussions on forum boards also emphasised their negative experiences about online discussion. As a potential solution, the ‘safe haven’ of Zhoriben (a site for the Roma that is open to invited users only) was discussed in this group: you can have intelligent discussions if you do not have to deal with racists.

It does not come as a surprise that the two groups where moderation policies came up as an issue were the ones in which interviewees had experience with online discussions (forums and blogs). Three positions crystallised throughout the focus groups with regards to moderation and relevant issues (censorship and malignant users): those interviewees who presented the first position in the discussions welcomed all comments and opinions; according to another position, certain comments are malignant and destructive but the best way to deal with users posting such content is to ignore them (or have the community deal with them); and finally, the third position...
One of the Roma participants in the Zhoriben group also heavily moderated his forum boards; the other one dealt with a particularly irritating commented via email.

As we have noted above, interviewees’ accounts of the range and nature of their online activities were different in the groups with participants of a middle-class to those of a working-class background. We have observed the same pattern with regards to use of other media: there is a divide between the more educated (high school students, university students) who read newspapers or dailies and hardly watch television and the less educated (students in vocational training, technical school) whose major source of information is television.

**Politics and civicsness, issues of concern and participation**

In this section we are exploring the results of the focus group interviews with regards to the interviewed young people’s views and attitudes on politics, civic issues, engagement and participation. These topics have been at the core of the discussions and evidently were present in explicit or implicit form in most parts of the interviews. The analysis is based on what interviewees said throughout the whole of the focus groups, but there was a section in each and every interview that proved to be extremely fruitful in dealing with this issue. At one point, we asked interviewees the following question: ‘What comes to mind when you hear the word “politics”’. The question generated interesting comments and discussions that provide rich material for analysis.

The most striking phenomenon with regards to the reaction to the word ‘politics’ is how alike the interviewed young people’s first responses were. In all groups regardless of age, gender, social background, ethnicity or level of engagement, the first reaction was
surprisingly similar: young people in all of our focus groups condemn ‘politics’, which they all seem to interpret narrowly, to mean only governmental and party politics. This similarity went so far as to the choice of words. Young people with very different background used the exact same phrases, made very similar jokes and hinted at the same issues when responding to term ‘politics’. The word ‘Audi’ for example (referring to the type of car used by politicians working in the government) came up in three focus groups.

The most palpable observation about the interviewees’ first reaction is its negativity. Young people in our groups wholeheartedly revile politics, as reflected in their use of the words ‘I have to throw up’, ‘filching’, ‘chaos’, ‘scandal’, ‘losers’, ‘stealing’, ‘corruption’, ‘conflict’, ‘lies’ etc. Besides the strong negative feelings, the comments clearly expressed that young people identify politics with parties, politicians, the government and the Parliament. Their first reaction often included the names Gyurcsány and Orbán, [name of the Hungarian prime minister and the leader of the opposition] as well as references to the Parliament and various parties.

Apparently, politics is not only sad and outrageous, but also distant and far from the reality of young people’s everyday lives. According to most of the interviews, politics has nothing to do with them and even more importantly, they do not want to have anything to do with it. Interviewed young people do not feel invited (or such attempts from politicians do not seem genuine to them) and would rather stay out of ‘politics’ altogether.

M: What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘politics’?
B1: Filching.
(laughter)
G: Well, this chaos that we have here... I think.
M: What?
G: This chaos. I don't even try to follow it any more. I've separated myself from this whole thing a bit.
D: Yes, you'll lose the thread if you insist on following the events... Maybe it's not worth getting into it that much. At least this is what I feel at the moment.
M: The others?
G: I'm totally staying out of politics.
M: Staying out of it? And what do you think about when you hear ‘politics’?
G: Well, I'm absolutely not interested in political issues, so...
M: And what comes to mind when you hear the word?
G: I don't know... no association comes to my mind.
B1: The Greek polis... (laughter)
B2: To me right now the first thing about politics, the first series of pictures that occurred to me was the prime minister's face turning to crying when he made his speech about yesterday's train accident...
B1: Yeah, I'm sure they wrote it to him in parentheses 'crying'.
(general laughter)
B2: Yeah, I can imagine that he got stuck [in his speech] and then he pretended really well that in addition to his lots of problems this [accident] really touched him, and to me this is what occurred about the word politics.
B1: That it's a sham.
B2: He really sold it.
M: I see it as very entertaining, as a cabaret, what's going on here... I see it as a high quality Hungarian cabaret... like when István Nyakó [spokesperson for the ruling Socialist party] calls someone something one day and then the opposite the next day, and then he explains why he was right the first time and the second time, too...’ (győr)

Some of the young people in this group (M, B1 and B2) clearly follow political news: they referred to current events and could name politicians when describing their feelings. G, on the other hand, while quick to express her rejection of what she thinks ‘politics’ is, claimed to refuse to get engaged with political issues. Of great interest for the purposes of this research is the fact that whether following politics or changing the channel when the evening news starts, all of the young people in this loose circle of
friends condemned ‘politics’. The ones who chose to remain ignorant about it (G, D) identify it with chaos; the others deny politicians the possibility of sincere emotions, even when they talk about such tragic events as a train crash. It needs to be noted that earlier that day, the news portal these young people said they read regularly ran an editorial on the prime minister’s speech with a very similar conclusion – but even if they were familiar with the article it does not invalidate their scepticism with regards to the sincerity of politicians..

'M: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word ‘politics’?
Zs: Chaos.
T: I am not interested. I don’t read or watch such things.
J: Our mayor has been arrested. Seriously, mayor of the 7th district.
T1: Gyurcsány. (Prime minister)
A: Losers, stealing… what else can I say?
I: Two more Audis. ‘ (vocational school-2)

This excerpt exemplifies the similarity of reactions even on the level of word choice: Zs differs from D in the previous group in all important socio-economic markers, yet they had the same word come to mind (‘chaos’) as a reaction to politics. Emphatic non-engagement is also obvious in this group.

'M: What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘politics’?
A: Quarrels.
E: Lethargy.
N: Lies.
K: Only bad things.
N: Yeah, negative things.
A: The building of the Parliament comes to mind. It looks good. (laughter)
(…) A: I personally don’t want to be involved in this politics-thingy.
M: What does it mean?
A: I don’t want to know what’s going on because it just makes me desperate.
E: I work myself up that there are such liars and tyrants in this country.’ (tata)

Again, the notion of ‘staying out of it’ is very emphatically brought up.

M: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word ‘politics’?
A2: I have to throw up.
P: Audi (laughter)
A: I don’t know, negative feelings.
A2: Conflicts, divisions, instigations.
(…) T: This deep pain that it is what it is. It’s a huge disappointment. I would love to engage in politics, but today it’s impossible. (…) It’s impossible to have a normal public sphere. But having to throw up did come to mind too, it’s just that A2 was faster… (urban cyclists)

This excerpt, while confirms that participants in many ways expressed the same feelings, also signals that in some groups the discussion about politics took a turn: interviewees engaged in a conversation about the ‘potential of politics’. They discussed how politics could and should work in a better world. This turn happened in groups with participants of a higher socio-economic status; interviewees with a working-class background did not seem to think that politics could change. Interestingly, even in the cases where conversation was taken to this ‘second level’, politics remained to be understood as an essentially top-down affair.

S: I would never think of Politics when I hear ‘politics’. I mean with the positive connotation and its real meaning. I can’t express myself properly… So the first and second and third thoughts don’t have anything to do with the positive meanings.
M: Still, you just brought it up…
S: Yeah, but it’s the hundredth association.
M: And what is this thing that ‘you don’t think of’?
S: Politics as discipline. Or as knowledge necessary for the improvement of a country - and politicians as improvers for that matter. This is not what I have in mind when I hear the word ‘politics’. (students)
A: I thought of this new party, LMP.
A3: What?
A: Did you hear about them? There is gonna be a new party. There is this association dealing with environmental issues and conscious consumption, the Védegylet. Its members founded a new party. LMP – Politics Can Be Different [Lehet Más a Politika]. An organisation outside the current party system.
V: Which side are they on?
A: They are a green party, they don't consider themselves to be on either side.
V: I don’t think politics can be neutral. There are certain issues and you must have a position on those, cause if you don't, then why are you doing politics? (…) There is the issue of abortion for example. What is this neutral party going to say about it?
A: Ask them.
V: Maybe I will.
A3: And if they have a position on that then they belong somewhere?
V: Certainly.
A3: But they might agree with another party when it comes to another topic.’(kecskemét)

As the excerpts demonstrate, young people discussed the possibilities of ‘better political parties’ and whether there is a place for a party outside the dual party system, but stayed within the framework of politics as the business of parties and politicians. This was true even for focus group members who, as it came to light during the interviews, were in fact involved in activities that could be considered ‘civic’ or ‘political’. Some participants in the Tata focus group organised demonstrations and collected signatures to save their school; they also regularly participated in calls for collecting litter around the lake of their town. Yet these activities do not get interpreted as having anything to do with ‘politics’. There is one exception to this rule, and that is the group of young urban cyclists: participants of this group eventually brought up the issue of personal responsibility and the belief that one can make a difference. Even though these interviewees seemed to be torn between the hopelessness of the political situation and the belief that one has to take responsibility for the matters one cares about, unlike participants of the other focus groups, it did occur to them that the solution could potentially be in their hands. Their reading of the present situation did not differ from the others’, but their answer was activism instead of avoidance.

Á: My reaction is so-so. I am a bit of an optimist. You can do something if you want to.
A2: I think it's better to remain on the personal level. Or maybe on the level of a narrow circle of friends. I don’t want to save the world…
Á: Hey listen, what I’m doing is actually sort of saving the world as far as cycling is concerned.
A2: If it was possible to join, it would definitely scare me away that I could become one of them.
Á: Yeah, sure. But you can't do it without some risk.
A2: It would be too risky. Even the possibility of turning into them would scare me away.
T: We all have some responsibility. We clearly hit rock bottom, that's true. And it's also true that you can't build a castle from shit, but neither from not taking responsibility. That doesn't lead you anywhere either.
Á: Everyone thinks of the four parties when they hear the word ‘politics’. We don’t think of what we can do for ourselves or for others.
A: That's what we should overcome.
Á: This is what politics is supposed to be about, isn’t it?
A2: Well, primarily for others.
Á: I did have my preferences when it came to parties, but now I don’t like anyone. There is not a party I like.
P: You can found one.
Á: True. We should found a bikers’ party. That would save the world…” (urban cyclists)

In some of the focus groups issues and causes interviewees felt strongly about were brought up without explicit questions. If not, when the discussion about politics seemed to have come to an end, we asked the participants specifically if there were issues they were interested in / they felt strongly about / they would be willing to do something about. In some instances (especially in the case of the two focus groups with pupils participating in vocational training) it proved to be quite difficult to get answers to this question. In order to get more indirect information about interviewees’ involvement as well as their concepts about participation, we have used the projection technique of
The issues and causes the interviewees showed interest in differ significantly depending on their social background: those coming from a family with higher socio-economic status mentioned issues and causes that were based on apparently post-material values (such as the environment and human rights) while those coming from working-class families showed interest in causes and issues that can be categorized as materialist (such as the economic crisis, unemployment, prices etc.). To demonstrate the difference, we are presenting one excerpt from each type of focus group.

M: So what issues or causes are you interested in?
(silence)
M: Z, you said there were a lot of problems.
Z: Well yeah, that the country is in crisis. People are starving.
(silence)
M: What do you think about that?
J: Well it could be better, that’s for sure.
M: What?
J: Everything. Someone is always on strike, transportation is a mess, you have to wait a lot for the trains and the buses so in the morning I have to wake up really early to get to school... Tickets are expensive...
M: What time do you have to wake up?
J: Around four.
M: Ough.
(...)
Z: The future. My future. If I’ll have a job.’ (vocational school-1)

M: And is there a cause you feel strongly about? Issues that interest you? That you would be willing to do something about...
P: The environment, let's say...
M: That interests you?
P: Yeah, sure. I recycle... (...)
S: Well. The environment is important to me as well. Not that I do much about it besides recycling at home and at the office, not littering... What moves me more I guess is racism - anti-racism I mean. I do give people shit about that if they don’t agree with me. I am more sort of an activist of that if you want. (students)

Even though clearly there are issues and causes the interviewed young people relate to, when asked about what they do or can do about them, with few exceptions, they said they did not do anything about these causes. This was the case even when, as discussed above, they did in fact participate in civic activities. In general, with the exception of those selected on the basis of their civic/political engagement (party members, youth workers and cyclists), the only activity interviewees engaged in and interpreted as 'civic or political' is discussing certain issues (racism, global warming, gas prices, current affairs etc.) with their friends and families, or in the case of the young editors, writing about them.

The reason the interviewees gave for the lack of action on their part is that they cannot change the world around them, that there is nothing they can do about the issues they are unhappy with – so why bother? According to the interviews, the only strategy that appears viable to the majority of young people is to 'mind their own business': to try to find happiness under the given circumstances and look for individual solutions. This strategy may include close family members and friends, but certainly not the greater community. Their self-efficacy is limited to their individual welfare. This finding is in accordance with previous research on Hungary’s civil society: individualistic strategies of survival are in general preferred to community action (Nizák and Péterfi, 2005).

M: And you, what moves you?
T: Not much. It’s quite disappointing. Or rather, I don’t think it’s worthwhile getting into things. Sometimes I think of the general moral that surrounds us here and all over the world: the way people behave in certain situations. For example, with regards to the environment; until it...
becomes a business it won’t be dealt with effectively etc. etc. So I try to focus on my own environment so that I feel fine and so do those that are close to me. (students)

Participants in the Tata focus group argued that the situation is so hopeless that the only rational solution is leaving the country (arguably the most individualistic solution, and not of a community’s problems):

M: ... And do you all agree with her that it is better to stay out of it all? (nodding, agreement)
M: And how can you stay out of it?
K1: You don’t care, you acknowledge it, but there is nothing we can do. We did what we could about the school, but it had no impact whatsoever. This is my experience. [She is talking about the current affairs regarding the status of their school, see introduction]
N: We can’t do anything really. Politicians decide and then that’s the way it is.
K2: It’s sad that we have had this experience at 17.
M: Isn’t there a chance to change?
A: There is always a chance, but the conclusion is that it’s all in vain. Or maybe not in vain, but we can’t achieve what we want and at the end of the day that’s failure... And that's not good at all.
G: Maybe if we lived somewhere else, in the US for example...
(…)
N: I’m considering continuing my studies outside Hungary.
E: Since first grade I know I want to go to abroad. I don’t want to live here, I don’t want to start a family here. My dad works abroad and he says too that we should leave as soon as possible cause nothing is going on here.
A: I definitely want to leave. To study and to work and then maybe I can come back when things change. When the society gets a bit more developed... (tata)

The notion that young people only see Hungary and not the whole world as hopeless, came up in other interviews as well. The idea that it is possible to leave the country was only brought up in the groups with higher socio-economic status.

The young Roma people interviewed also felt completely powerless in the face of anti-Roma violence and discrimination:

Gy: I haven’t been to a decent club in three years. Why? Because I am Roma. I mean it.
M: And when you talk about these things, do you discuss if there is anything you could do?
J: What? Should we demonstrate?? Protest???
U: What can we do? How many are we? How many are they?
Gy: We can do house parties.
M: Do you talk about that? Protests and all?
M: No way.
J: What can we do here?
U: By the way, we have been having these problems since they started the Hungarian Guard [extreme right paramilitary group]. It wasn’t like this before.
Gy: I heard they wanna do a Roma Guard.
U: And then what? Go to war?
M: It doesn’t lead anywhere.
U: The Hungarians who has always hated the Roma always will.
Gy: It has always been like this and it always will.
U: We can’t change it. (roma)

Interviewed young people did not relate the feeling that they cannot make a difference to their age. It appears to be their general conception of the world around them: this is what they hear from their parents and other older family members and this is what they see in their environment. When they did emphasise their own inability to achieve changes in issues they care about, it was connected more to their lack of power than to their age. On the other hand, getting rich does seem like a possible way to make a difference: according to some of the interviewees, ‘if you have the money then you can make things happen’.

We find it interesting that the only social group interviewees all attribute consistent political or civic activity to is the extreme right. In all of the focus groups when
participants were shown the picture of two skinheads (Appendix 2) and were asked to talk about the people they see, interviewees agreed that the young men on the picture are politically active (namely go to political demonstrations, clash with the police and beat up minority groups). In the case of other pictures, answers tended to depend on the nature of the group: the non-engaged usually agreed that nobody was seen to be engaged in civic or political activities (young people are too busy with school and friends, the business man is too busy making money, the physical worker is interested in cigarettes and drinking with his friends, the middle-aged woman is busy with housework and children and the old lady is interested in her grandchildren, soap-operas and gossip to participate in any other way than voting). Those who were selected on the basis of their engagement (urban cyclists, kecskemét, party) assumed more activity when talking about the different people on the pictures.

Despite the previously expressed disbelief in the political establishment, most of the interviewees still expect the necessary changes to come from above (from the government, the politicians, the prime minister, the parties etc.). Even the European Union was brought up as a potential saviour in one of the Roma focus groups – this probably demonstrates the depth of mistrust in the Hungarian authorities by young Roma people.

Since interviewees felt they could not make a difference and changes had to come from the top, it does not come as a surprise that voting is the only form of participation that almost all the interviewed young people do or would engage in. There were a few participants in the vocational school-1 focus group who said that they would not vote because it did not make a difference. Most certainly did not express high hopes in the ability of the political elite to make things better, but still, voting is regarded as the ‘least we can do’.

Since the lack of almost all forms of activity is prevalent among most focus group participants, it is important to look at the groups that were selected on the basis of their engagement (urban cyclists, party, kecskemét). The first observation is that according to their account, they went through similar steps in the story of their engagement. In all the cases we came across, there is an initial interest in an issue or activity that comes from the family or friends (such as cycling or rightist ideology here). This interest draws the young person to a community which then takes involvement to another level. Once young people felt like they belonged to a community, friendships and social connections reinforced the identification with the cause and engaged young people even further. In addition to the power of social relationships, there seems to be another important factor at play: in the cases we have come across, having the experience of engaging in civic or political activities correlated with interviewees’ account of self-efficacy. Whether these young people had felt that they were able to make a difference before the actual engagement or whether (as literature suggests) successful experience increases self-efficacy is not clear from the interviews, but personal interest, belonging to a community, experience and self-efficacy certainly seem to be the ‘recipe’ for civic or political participation. The excerpts below illustrate this observation: in the first one urban cyclists are telling us the story of their engagement, and in the second one active members of the youth branch of a rightist political party do the same.

‘M: How did you get involved?
A2: I came to Budapest in September (…) and I got a bike whose back tyre was screwed and I started searching the internet to find out how to fix it. And that's how I ended up on criticalmass.hu. And people were really helpful there, I even got a tyre and I really liked the atmosphere and since then I have been active there.
(…)
M: And you?
Á: We started biking in the Buda hills, and if you are biking, you get in touch with things. We started going to these demonstrations.
P: Criticalmass was still small then.
Á: Sometime in 2005 I read that there would be a big one and I got completely hooked. I started watching out for these guys.
M: Where?
Á: There was this initial website.
P: We saw stickers…
Á: Yeah. We did spread stickers too. And we went to the demonstration and it was fucking good. We couldn’t believe such a thing was possible. Riding down the Andrássy [main boulevard in Budapest]… sunshine… It was spring, 10 000 bikers… We got in touch with the subculture and it was the final push. I biked everywhere then. I did whatever I could.
P: You designed stickers.
Á: Yeah. We were activisming (sic!).
M: What does that mean?
Á: That you brainstorm, you think, you do the propaganda. You become involved, you organise things etc.’ (urban cyclists)

‘M: So going back to how you got involved. You said that it was the 2002 campaign that you first volunteered in…
Á: Well, my family is a dedicated rightist family. My friends, my relatives… I got in touch with the organisation through friends. (…)
M: So you volunteered in 2002 because everyone around you did so. Then what happened?
Á: It wasn’t until 18 months ago that I got involved with this party really. My friends invited me to their events. Besides the party’s youth branch there is another association called St. Tamás Morus.
P: It’s a series of public discussions. A lot of young people are interested in certain topics but politics scare them away. So it is easier to engage them this way: we meet every third Tuesday and we invite famous political and public figures to talk about all kinds of things. And people who would never participate in a campaign come.
Á: I think everyone goes to the Morus events first. And then they get more and more into it. And people are really important. I started going because of the people. I had a great time at these coffeehouse-discussions, it kept me involved. (…) It was the time when our first MP got elected. And we helped: we gave out leaflets, posters. These events happened week by week and then you stay afterwards and talk and you become friends. We started partying together, talked a lot… And you do more and more. And now I am part of the team of Rétfalvi [their MP], responsible for the press…” (party)

As the above pieces indicate, experience plays a crucial role in participation. This is why we think it is important to highlight our observations regarding interviewed young people’s experience with the most obvious form of representation and participation: the student councils. The issue was brought up in four interviews and the general opinion is that the councils are useless and are not taken seriously neither by the teachers and administration of schools nor by students themselves. The reaction to the mentioning of student councils is ridicule and cynicism as the excerpt below demonstrates:

M: How about the student council?
Á: There used to be one, I don’t know if there still is…
E: Same members. They have secret meetings… (laughter)
Z: no-one ever wants to do it.
M: Do you vote for a representative?
Z: Nooo. They appoint them.
M: Who?
E: Teachers.
M: Do you mind?
E: No.
M: And could there be something here at school that you would want to stand up for?
Á: It doesn’t matter what we say, it’s never gonna happen.
J: Longer breaks.
Sz: Yeah, sure…
Á: 30 mins classes. So that I could go home at 1.
M: How would you achieve that?
Á: No way, talking to the principal is impossible. I am one of his favourites, so… (being ironic)
M: Do you agree that there is no point?
E: It’s impossible, that’s for sure.
Z: It’s almost over for me…” (vocational school-1)
Talking about the things they would like to change with regards to school: they have classes in the afternoon until late because the school does not have enough rooms to accommodate all the classes at the same time:

'L: We mentioned this to the formteacher that it's not good for us, we are supposed to be in normal training, dayshift and I nearly take the nightbus on my way home. He tried to talk with the principal, but they said it was not possible.
(…)
I: Once I went to the meeting of the student council and the discussion was about toilet paper and all, and about animals they want to bring to school so we feel more at home…’ (vocational school-2)

Role of the internet in civic/political participation

In the following section we highlight the observations emerging from the focus groups regarding the role the internet plays in the civic or political participation of the interviewed young people.

We have already addressed the results of the interviews concerning the general use of the internet and interviewees’ concept of the medium. Here we focus the ways in which the internet contributes to the participation of young people: what related practices the internet is embedded in and which features of the internet young people consider important when it comes to engagement. Since we have encountered few examples of civic or political activity, our most important observation with regards to the internet as a medium for engagement is that it did not seem to mobilise the disengaged interviewees in our sample. In the case of those who were engaged, the internet as a tool for civic engagement seems to be important in four ways.

First of all, the internet provides easy access to information about political and civic events and causes. According to our interviews, urban cyclists visit the website of Criticalmass on a daily basis partly for that reason: to not to miss out on anything important that may be going on from cycling related news to offline events.

Secondly, the internet plays the role of the intermediary in some of the cases: according to the interviews, the internet helps to channel the capacities of the already engaged. In the case of the urban cyclist movement Criticalmass, the portal played a role in every step of the ‘engagement process’ of the interviewees: they found the website looking for information about cycling related issues; then they learned about the community and its values and goals through the website; found like-minded people and eventually friends through the website; the website still serves as their main source of information on cycling related news and events; and finally, it is the interface for the organisation of offline events. Apart from the initial interest in cycling, the portal played a pivotal role in every step of the way:

M: How did you get involved?
A: I volunteered. I said I wanted to do something about the community.
M: And where did you find it?
A: I started this whole cycling issue from the criticalmass.hu. I liked this ideology so much, the one that 80 percent of the people on the site stand for… I said I wanted to try it too. So this sense of belonging to a community: I started going to Millenáris [bikers’ meeting point], the people were great…
M: And how did you find the portal?
A: I was searching for something bike-related. I don’t remember. And I loved the ideology: the advantages of cycling, how good it is, and realised that we all had the same mindset. And then you realise that you are not the only one, that there are others who see things the way you do, who are just as crazy as I am…” (urban cyclists)

The third way in which the internet proved to be important from this particular point of view (as a tool for civic and political engagement) was specific to minorities. Roma
participants of the focus groups appreciated the opportunity the internet provided to create a space they have control over: where they can be ‘amongst themselves’ if they want to without having to put up with anti-Roma sentiments and voices. (The producer of the Jewish community blog Judapest we interviewed for Work Package 7 had a similar concept of the advantages of the internet.) The following excerpt illustrates this ‘safe haven’ notion of the medium:

‘M: What’s the difference between iwiw [Hungarian social network site] and Zhoriben [social network site for the Roma]?
K: The important difference is that racists cannot register to Zhoriben. (…) There is less tension, we can talk about whatever we want (…) we don’t have to argue with stupid people. On iwiw there are some stupid people, you work yourself up… they are prejudiced. But they cannot post on Zhoriben cause they don’t get an invite.’ (zhoriben)

Some other Roma participants, on the other hand, expressed scepticism about the possibility of creating a truly safe haven. They argued that once the site grows, it will inevitably attract some racists, just like any ‘open’ site does, and they will be able to find a way in. Nevertheless, having a space dedicated to them alone seemed to be of importance for most of the Roma interviewees.

A further way the internet was seen as ‘safe’ by some of our ethnic interviewees recalls the early, ‘cyber-optimistic’ theories of the internet. ‘On the internet, nobody knows you’re a Roma’, some of the Roma focus group participants argued. This shows that although the idea of ‘cyberspace as a raceless utopia’ has long been refuted (see, for instance, Nakamura, 2002), some interviewees nonetheless experience the bodylessness of the internet as an element of safety when engaging in online discussions. Our sample did not include other minorities whose stigmatised difference is marked on their body; we can, thus, only speculate that disabled people, for instance, would also appreciate this feature of the internet.

The fourth observed way in which the internet contributed to interviewees’ civic or political activities is by providing a space for sharing, spreading and discussing ideas about the state of affairs: the group of student journalists interviewed finds their blog an important way to discuss current public issues and to get immediate feedback. The cheapness and the immediacy of the medium is highly appreciated by them, both in their ability to react to current issues right away and to be able to receive responses. Yet it would be somewhat of a stretch to call them internet activists: it seems that they do not only value their printed and locally distributed paper more than their blog, but the paper is the primary way they aim to make a difference.

With slight differences, the young party members shared the aforementioned view of the internet as a cheap and fast medium to spread information and ideas. This group considered the online presence of their organisation of crucial importance especially in reaching young people with their messages. This is because, according to them, it is the internet that young people get information from.

On the other hand, some cases were particularly interesting exactly because the internet played no role whatsoever. The focus group in the small town of Tata comprised young people all engaged in civic action: collecting signatures, organising demonstrations, posting fliers to save their school from becoming a Catholic all-boy institution. Some of the local activists set up a website for these purposes, which had lively discussions and did play a role in coordinating action and disseminating information about the related events. However, none of our participants used this site at all; apparently it did not seem an important way of communication to them. Lots of efforts were made to set up a comparable focus group of young people who did utilise the internet for the civic action in the town – this, however, never materialised due to the participants’ unwillingness to sit down for an interview.
In motivating young people to get involved with civic issues the internet was found to play a limited role. Only two activists in our sample claimed that their interest in the movement they are now active in was first raised through the internet – by the community they happened upon online. For the vast majority of cases, civic engagement was not triggered by the content found on the internet. Rather, young people already engaged were drawn to the websites dealing with the issues they were interested in.

### Intergenerational relations

Intergenerational relations scarcely came up during the interviews. There were three focus groups (győr, the vocational school-2 and the party) where the issue came up somewhat explicitly; in the rest of the focus groups participants may have mentioned older people throughout the focus groups, but these can hardly be interpreted as remarks on generational issues.

In the three cases where the issue did come up, we can observe three different relations to the older generations: In the case of the party members, the older generation were seen as exemplary in many ways. In fact (not surprisingly from members of a conservative party), interviewees of this focus group referred to their parents and families as well as to older members of the party as sources of inspiration. They did distinguish themselves from the older generation, but appreciated their views and ways of thinking.

In the vocational school-2 group, parents and even teachers were seen just as hopeless and dependent on 'the system' similar to the young people themselves. ‘There is nothing they can do either, not about this or not about anything else for that matter’ - they concluded when they were lamenting on what their parents or teachers could do about the unfortunate situation at school.

The third is the only case in which participants encountered confrontation with a group of older people (their teachers) and moreover, they did consider their conflict a generational one. The conflict concerned the official school journal that teachers wanted to control the editing of, and it almost got the chief editor kicked out of school. It was finally resolved with a compromise: the students decided to circulate the ‘unofficial’ version outside of school. In this conflict the older generation represented the past in that they were seen as narrow-minded, weak and afraid of new ideas and forms of freedom, which were explained by the interviewees with the fact that the older generation was brought up in the socialist regime. In contrast, the students represented courage, freedom, wit and freshness.

### Conclusions

In this report, we have presented the outcome of ten focus group interviews about young people’s internet use, civic practices, notions on politics and issues of interest. Even though the interviews differed in the interviewees’ background, in what topics have been brought up and in group dynamics, there are certain points worthy of highlighting.

As we have pointed out, the internet use of the young people in our sample is characterised by entertainment and communication – keeping in touch with friends or meeting new people mainly through social network sites and instant messaging were the most prevalent uses of the medium in all groups. Most of the interviewees
Web-based Civic Participation Among Young People in Europe

read/watch news online, however, the extent of this activity and what they mean by ‘news’ highly differ. With regards to the use of bottom-up applications, according to our findings the reading of blogs and forums is typically the activity of young people of middle-class background, while producing content and engaging in online discussions is limited to the groups that are engaged in some kind of civic or political activity. When it comes to the use of other media, there is a divide between the more educated (high school students, university students) who hardly watch television and occasionally read printed newspapers or dailies and the less educated (students in vocational training, technical school) whose major information source seems to be television and hearsay.

The issues and causes the interviewees showed interest in differed significantly depending on participants’ social background: those coming from a family with higher socio-economic status mentioned issues and causes that are supposedly based on post-material values (such as the environment and human rights) while those coming from working-class families showed interest in causes and issues that can be categorized as material (such as the economic crisis, unemployment, prices etc.)

In contrast to the aforementioned systematic differences, in all the focus groups and among all the interviewees in our sample, reaction to the word ‘politics’ was almost identical (even with regards to the words used). Answers to the question ‘what comes to mind when you hear the word ‘politics’ showed that interviewed young people see politics as a corrupt, chaotic, scandalous, distant world that they don’t want to have anything to do with. Interviewees identified politics with politicians and parties which they see in a deeply negative light regardless of class, age, ethnicity or education.

When asked about what they do or can do about the issues they feel strongly about, with few exceptions, the interviewed young people expressed the opinion that they cannot change the world around them, that there is nothing they can do to change the social issues they are unhappy with. The groups where this otherwise general lack of self-efficacy was not apparent are the ones where participants had previous experience with some forms of civic engagement (namely the urban cyclists and the members of a political party). These interviewees reacted to the hopelessness of the state of the political establishment (which they were just as grimly aware of as the others) with a willingness to change the situation.

Despite the previously outlined lack of trust in the political establishment, and with the exception of the aforementioned civically active groups, interviewees still expect the necessary changes to come from above (from the government, the politicians, the prime minister, the parties etc.) In general, with the exception of those selected on the basis of their civic/political engagement (party members, youth workers and cyclists). The only activity interviewees engage in and interpret as ‘civic or political’ is discussing certain issues (racism, global warming, gas prices, current affairs etc.) or in the case of bloggers, writing about them.

Since civic participation and engagement have been scarce among the interviewees, we consider the study of the few exceptions crucial. Those involved in civic or political activities first usually had a direct personal interest in an issue (i.e. urban cycling, rightist ideology) that they traced back to their families and friends and got involved in related civic activities step by step. (As opposed to feeling strongly about an abstract value or issue and finding the relevant organisation/activity to make a difference.) Also, the feeling of belonging to a community seems pivotal as a motivation for engagement. In addition to these factors, the experience of participation appeared crucial in interviewees’ account when it came to further engagement.

The role of the internet in engagement seemed to be important in four ways: 1. as the source of information on civic/political events and causes; 2. as the intermediary (the
medium) to channel the capacities of the already engaged (i.e. the website of the criticalmass movement in the case of cyclists) and to find similar minded people and a community to be a part of; 3. as the safe haven for minorities – a space members of a minority group control and where they can be ‘amongst themselves’ without being invaded by ‘enemies’. 4. and also as a cheap and fast medium to share, spread and discuss ideas about the state of affairs.

In motivating young people to get involved with civic issues the internet was found to play a minor role. Only two activists in our sample claimed that their interest in the movement they are now active in was first raised through the internet – by the community they happened upon online. For the vast majority of cases, civic engagement was not triggered by the content found on the internet. Rather, young people already engaged were drawn to the websites dealing with the issues they were interested in. The focus group interviews revealed that the uses of the internet for civic issues in Hungary are rather limited.

References


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Hungary - Appendix – 2
Pictures of people shown to focus group participants
1. Introduction

In this report, we discuss the results of focus group interviews with Dutch young people about their views on politics, political and civic participation, and the role of the internet. This analysis is conducted within the framework of CivicWeb deliverable 9, and contextualised within the existing framework of research about young people’s online and offline political and civic participation.

We did 9 focus group sessions with 52 people between December 2008 and February 2009. Each focus group session lasted about one hour. The selection of interviewees was primarily informed by CivicWeb deliverable 8—a survey-based analysis of how European youth participate online and offline. This analysis yielded four different modes of online and offline participation: Activism, Sharing, Shopping, and Lobby. An analysis of participation in the Dutch context in particular yielded, by and large, the same modes of participation:

- **Activism.** More traditional forms of social activism or community work, such as wearing or displaying a campaign badge or sticker, visiting a public meeting or local event, donating money to a political or charity organisation, doing voluntary work, and speaking at a student meeting.

- **Sharing.** The second mode is constituted by talking with friends, family or colleagues about social or political issues, and a series of online forms of participation: forwarding an e-mail about social or political problems, participating in online discussion platforms, signing online petitions, and visiting civic websites.

- **Shopping.** The third mode of participation is constituted by variables that measure ‘socially conscious consumption’: buying products that use recycled packaging, products that are not harmful to animals and the environment, and products from companies that support charity causes.

- **Politics.** Most activities within this mode fall within the realm of formal politics, such as sending a letter to a politician or government official, and working for a political party.

We selected interviewees that are active within the different modes of participation. We interviewed:

- Participants in the youth department of Amnesty International (focus group was conducted on 22 January 2009, in Amsterdam)
- Participants in a local community association in Marken aimed at organising activities for young people (Stichting Markse Jongeren; SMJ) (focus group was conducted on 22 January 2009, in Marken)
- Individual bloggers and twitters (focus group was conducted on 3 February 2009, in Amsterdam)
- Participants in Jongeren Milieu Actief (JMA), which is the youth department of the environmental movement called Milieudefensie (focus group was conducted on 12 January 2009, in Amsterdam)
- Participants in a youth-for-youth online consultation centre called Share in Trust (SHIT) (focus group was conducted on 3 February 2009, in Utrecht)
- Participants in the youth department of the Labour Party (Jonge Socialisten; JS) (focus group was conducted on 16 January 2009, in Amsterdam)

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Participants in the group blog called Jong in the City (focus group was conducted on 23 December 2008, in Leiden)
- Youth who travelled to the United States to support the Barack Obama presidential campaign in September and October 2008 (focus group was conducted on 5 February 2009, Amsterdam)

The interviewees were aged between 15 and 25 years, and about half of them were male (53%). Highly educated people are, in general, overrepresented in civic and political participation, and they are too in our sample. All but 4 of the participants were volunteers. They were not paid for their activities, nor was their involvement in activities a part of a formal educational curriculum.

Evidently, the results of our analysis cannot be considered 'representative' for Dutch youth in general. Generating representative results is, however, not the goal of any focus group analysis. Instead, our aim is to collect mainstream and divergent views on the issues of interest (see below) within our sample, and to assess whether and how particular views are typical for restricted groups of interviewees within our sample.

Using an open interview schedule, the participants were asked to share their experiences with and views on politics, civic participation, and the role of the internet. In the following sections, we will analyse how some issues were discussed, namely:

**Politics, participation and motivation**
A. Conceptualisations of political and civic participation
B. Conceptualisations of politics and politicians
C. Conceptualisations of differences between different forms of participation
D. Conceptualisations of consumption as a form of civic participation
E. Conceptualisations of issues that may motivate participation

**The internet**
A. Conceptualisations of general internet qualities
B. Conceptualisations of the internet's potential to mobilize people
C. Conceptualisations of the purpose of blogging

The focus groups generated a greater number and range of views than those on the issues mentioned above, but we will focus our assessment on some of the basic interests of the CivicWeb project. The moderator (M) aimed at having the participants discuss these issues with each other, and he allowed each discussion to follow its natural logic without intervention until the interviewees no longer discussed issues of relevance, or until a discussion was no longer as dynamic as desired by the moderator.

All interviews were recorded on audio and video tape, and subsequently transcribed with the permission of the interviewees. Transcriptions were analysed through an open coding or thematisation of transcripts, and analysis of the variations within different topics of conversation using a constant comparative method. After an initial coding scheme was set up, transcripts were coded using the CAQDAS programme MaxQDA to aid in the systematisation of the process of comparison. We will discuss the results of our analysis in the next sections. All quotations provided are translated from Dutch to English by the author.

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3 See also appendix.

2. Politics, participation and motivation

In this section, we outline and illustrate our main conclusions about how our interviewees Conceptualised the meaning of the terms ‘political’ and ‘civic’ participation (sub-section A); how politics and politicians are (sub-section B); the differences between politics and other forms of civic participation (sub-section C); consumption as a way to express social or political beliefs (sub-section D); and, issues that may motivate participation (sub-section E).

A. What is political and civic participation?

In traditional research, the notion of ‘politics’ has been limited to forms of participation in the formal political arena, such as voting. In recent years, researchers have argued that this focus is too narrow, and that ‘extra-parliamentary’ activities can be considered ‘political’ too. In part, this discussion is about terminology and definitions; for the better part, it is a discussion about which activities should be taken into account to assess (young) people’s participation in and engagement with democratic society.\(^5\)

We begin the assessment of our focus group discussions by outlining the views of our interviewees on these issues. The excerpt below shows a discussion between our interviewees about the question of whether ‘socially conscious consumption’ can be considered a form of politics. In the literature, socially conscious consumption is used to refer to the purchase of fairly traded products, products that are assumed to be not harmful to animals and the environment, and products that are produced by companies that support charity funds.\(^6\) In all of our interviews, there was clear resistance to the idea that consumption can be considered ‘political’. More fundamentally, how the issue of consumption was discussed in the following excerpt illustrates how the interviewees generally conceived the notion of ‘politics’.

Excerpt 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Why do you say that eating meat is political? Is everything political?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dick</td>
<td>No, I am just saying that you can make everything political. Look, if something is important to society, than it is political.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marleen</td>
<td>But eating bio-industrial meat is not a political choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick</td>
<td>But that choice leads to a change in thinking, and a change in the rules eventually.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>But, still, I think that politicians react to what happens in society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick</td>
<td>That’s exactly my point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marleen</td>
<td>But, well... I wonder if you think that a choice for a particular religion is also political?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick</td>
<td>No!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marleen</td>
<td>But that is also a choice that involves a lot of things in life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick</td>
<td>Yes, true, but I don’t say that everything is political.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this excerpt, Dick argues that the purchase of bio-industrial meat is ‘important to society’, and, therefore, a political matter. The other discussants seem to object to Dick’s line of reasoning and that people’s consumption of meat can ever be considered ‘political’. However, note that Dick confirms John’s remark that a ‘political matter’ is whatever politicians do. Also note that the other discussants seem not to deny that the purchase of meat can be socially important (‘change in thinking’; ‘change in rules’). So, none of the interviewees contested that people have a choice with regard to consumption, and that this choice is socially or politically important; yet, they agreed that consumption can only be called ‘political’ when dealt with by politicians.

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The same line of reasoning is illustrated by Marleen’s question as to whether ‘religion is also a political choice’. Dick responded with a firm ‘no’ without any further comments, which probably indicates that religion, in Dick’s view, ought never to be dealt with by politicians and, therefore, should not be called ‘political’. Dick’s response is fully understandable in the Dutch context, where, in the last few years, there has been a fierce public debate about the separation between ‘church and state’, in particular, whether there is such a separation ‘in Islam’. The politically correct attitude in this debate is that ‘separation of church and state is a fundamental pillar of any democratic society’, meaning that politicians ought never to interfere with people’s religious choices.

All of this illustrates how our interviewees in excerpt 1 and in other discussions generally associated the word ‘politics’ with formal politics, and not with grass root level civic activities such as socially conscious consumption. While the interviewees in excerpt 1 discussed the issues of bio-industrial meat and religion as if they have different opinions on what ‘politics’ is, they actually agree with each other that the word eventually refers to the formal political process and policy makers. So, when asked about their views on ‘politics’ (undefined), almost all of the participants in our focus groups immediately thought about parliamentary (and, to a lesser extent, municipal) politics only. The excerpt also illustrates how our interviewees generally agreed, if tacitly, that extra-parliamentary activities – such as consumption – can be socially and politically important.

B. Formal politics

The interviewees’ comments on formal politics are, in general, critical of both the political system (‘how politics works’) and political actors (‘politicians’). On different occasions, interviewees described politicians’ communications in terms such as ‘slow’, ‘unclear’, ‘tedious’, ‘difficult’ and, eventually, ‘uninteresting’. This is illustrated by the following excerpt, in which some interviewees supplement each other’s remarks about the performance of the present Dutch Prime Minister, Jan-Peter Balkenende (‘he’), and, subsequently, politicians in general (‘they’).

Excerpt 2

Cindy: He is well able to avoid the important things.
Marja: Yes, he talks a lot, but he doesn’t say a lot, you think... why don’t you just say how it is! He talks a lot, they all are able to talk a lot, that is why they are in politics, because they are so good in gabbling. But it’s not like... okay folks, this is it, and the book is open.
Jan: Or, this is what we do and this is it, no, they don’t say that. And a lot of what they say, they just begin with talking, they’ll tell a story of ten minutes, and after that we still don’t know anything. That’s politics in my view. That’s why politics is not interesting to me.
Marja: And they simply don’t tell the whole truth if bad things are happening. If something happens, well, perhaps they will open the book a little bit, but not totally.

Excerpt 2 also illustrates how our interviewees often depicted politicians as untrustworthy and not straightforward about what they think and know, especially in regard to ‘bad news’. In Marja’s words, ‘they do not completely open the book’. In other discussion parts, a lack of trust in politicians was expressed even more explicitly. Consider the following lamentations of one of the interviewees about Barack Obama’s popularity just before and after he was elected President of the US.7

Excerpt 3

Jan: It scares me a lot to see how Obama is so popular. It’s all based on empty words like ‘yes we can’ and ‘hope’. What does that mean? Where is the hope?

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7 Our interviewees often referred to Barack Obama. Logically, this is closely connected to the fact that we conducted our focus groups just after the American Presidential elections of 2008, which was covered extensively in the Dutch media.
You know I have read about Nazi Germany, and that looks a lot like what is happening now! I really mean that! This is so frightening. Look, if there really would be something, something that people really believe in, then it will come from below. Change never comes from above, it comes from below. I don’t say that everybody is dumb, but it looks as if everybody thinks that this man is going to change everything.

Susan: Yeah, but this is how it works, they always say things in their election campaigns, but whether they will do it or not... That’s the question.
Jan: So, should we accept that?
Susan: No, that’s not what I’m saying, but this is how politics works. Elections are not about contents, but about loose howls.
Jan: That’s what scares me, that 50,000 people were willing to participate in his campaign, but it’s all based on air.

Jan criticises the magnitude of the political trust in Obama, and argues vehemently that people should not be so enthusiastic about him. Susan then generalizes Jan’s comments (‘they always say things’), which is tacitly accepted by Jan. Their discussion amounts to the idea that political trust (like the trust in Obama) is not only unjustified, but also dangerous (see Jan’s comparison with Nazi Germany). Susan confirms this, and implies that it is only naive (‘yeah, but this is how it works’) to expect that politicians will do everything that they promise in their election campaigns.

Susan’s comment about election campaigns was also uttered by other interviewees who considered the untrustworthiness of politicians as the main reason for the persistence of a ‘divide’ between political elites and the people. In the Netherlands, this specific kind of framing and formulating has been used a lot in the last few years by oppositional political parties and by news media to problematise or denounce governmental politicians and parties.

It should be stressed, however, that it was not only political distrust or critique of how politicians communicate and how they are that were expressed in the discussions. For example, the interviewees who were involved in JS (a youth department of a political party) and those who participated in Barack Obama’s campaign mentioned, not surprisingly, Obama more than any other politician as their favourite politician. He was praised for being ‘positive about the future’ and for using ‘clear’ and ‘beautiful’ words to express his thoughts, and for having ‘so much charisma’. What the terms ‘clear’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘charisma’ mean in relation to policies or action cannot, however, be derived from our data.

C. Formal politics versus informal participation

In the literature, it is often suggested that young people’s perceptions of how politicians are and how they communicate may lead to their disengagement from formal politics and, subsequently, to their embracing of alternative, extra-parliamentary forms of civic or political participation, such as joining a neighbourhood initiative or doing voluntary work. In this sub-section, therefore, we will address how our interviewees conceived differences between formal politics and other kinds of politics. In sub-section E below, we will outline and illustrate some conclusions about our interviewees’ conceptions of more general motivators of political and civic participation.

First, in different discussions, the interviewees (especially those who were not involved in activities for political parties) talked about a ‘high threshold’ that one needs to step over to become active in formal politics. That is, it was generally believed that one needs to ‘work hard’ and be ‘very informed’ if someone is to be able to participate in formal political initiatives, such a joining a commission or a youth department of a political party. It was believed much less strongly that there is a similar investment that one should...

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make to participate in other kinds of (civic) initiatives. For example, in excerpt 4, a member (John) of JS argues that political parties are too ‘fanatical’ in the eyes of youth. In excerpt 5, different members of a local youth initiative (SMJ) that organises leisure activities for young people talk about the absence of what John calls ‘fanaticism’ (in excerpt 4) in organisations that are not focussed on ‘politics’ (i.e. formal politics). Also, in excerpt 5, Carla appears to lament the ‘need to share an opinion’ about a ‘specific subject matter’ in formal politics, by which she seems to assume that there is more freedom of thought at SMJ than there is in activities for political parties.

**Excerpt 4**

**John:** I notice so often that JS is so fanatical, really fanatical and that is how they are known among most youth, and it scares people away. People think: Oh god, they are so fanatic; so, if I want to be active too, then I will have to be as fanatical as they are. But most people don’t want to be very fanatical, and their political awareness is not that big.

**Excerpt 5**

**Marja:** Well, I don’t like politics because it is so deep, and you will need to be fully informed about everything. It is much nicer to work for our initiative.

**Jan:** Yeah, it’s so easy here, we don’t have really hard tasks to do.

**Cindy:** Well, look, there is always something to do, of course, (...) but nobody really interferes with your life, you could just walk around.

**Carla:** In politics, people expect so much from you, and here, well, of course, you are expected to do things, but I notice that everybody is just snooping around. (...) You could do anything you want, and politics is focussed on a specific subject matter, and you will need to share that opinion.

Other discussions involved the amount of (short-term) influence one has in different kinds of participation. On several occasions, the view was expressed (especially by those who were not involved in activities for political parties) that one can ‘make a difference’ in extra-parliamentary activities, and, as the following excerpt illustrates, that if one’s participation in formal politics is influential, then it is only during elections (Klaas: ‘each four years’).

**Excerpt 6**

**Klaas:** Well politics is... it seems like it gets out of your hands. Well, in the week of the elections you will find everybody interested in politics. But the rest of the four years, you will have no influence on politics at all. It feels a bit like you... as if you lose interest. But if you do something here, then you see results. That’s what gives a good feeling that makes you think... that makes our activities so nice to do.

**Ruben:** Here, you can really see your contribution. You can make a difference here. But the higher you go up in politics, the less difference you can make.

**D. Consumption**

Excerpt 1 already showed how some of the interviewees consider consumption and shopping to be a socially important activity. In other instances, however, our interviewees did not agree about how effective social consumption is as a civic tool. In excerpt 1, it is assumed to be effective (see Dick’s comments in particular); in most other instances, it is not. The following example is indicative for the mainstream of the interviewees’ views on the civic or political significance of socially conscious consumption. In these views, socially conscious consumption is conceived as a morally just activity, but it is also regarded more as a means for emotional self-gratification than an effective mode of alternative civic action.

**Excerpt 7**

**Ralf:** Well, it is about my own feeling, to be honest. If I buy fair trade rice, then, you know, I would know that it really does not help a lot. It is really not a big deal, but, well, I do it for my own feeling. I feel good when I buy it.
Although Ralf says that he ‘feels good’ when he buys fair trade rice, in other discussions our interviewees expressed critical views on the producers and distributors of fair trade goods. Consider the following excerpt in which the sale of fair trade products by a large Dutch supermarket (Albert Heijn) is depicted as a commercial choice, and not a social or political one.

**Excerpt 8**

Brenda: At the Albert Heijn, they see that so many people buy fair trade goods, so that’s why they put it in their shelves.

Ralf: Yeah, and then they think, let’s make this and that fair trade too. Look, managers just want to see money, they don’t care about what happens in Asia.

Further, in discussions about the purchase of goods with a ‘social trademark’, our interviewees mentioned three interrelated, practical factors that influence their choice to buy a fair trade product: money, time and availability. There was remarkably little variation in the interviewees’ views on the importance of these three kinds of ‘expenses’.

**Excerpt 9**

John: In the supermarket, you do have fair trade rice and mie and stuff, and I try to buy that, but I won’t go on my bike and take a detour of ten kilometres just to buy something fair trade if I could just buy the same thing at another supermarket, if you know what I mean.

Brenda: And it is simply very expensive. You could borrow money from the IB-Groep just to buy fair trade products. Well, if that’s possible. The other day there was a fair trade week or whatever, and at that time all the fair trade products were sold at a discount, and then you buy everything, but normally it costs so much money. Perhaps, if you have a salary, then you can buy it more.

In excerpt 9, John says that he finds it too much effort to ‘take a detour of ten kilometres’ to buy the ‘same thing’. He appears to express the ‘sameness’ between products that are and are not fair trade in terms of functionality: both fair trade rice and other kinds of rice, for example, can be used in a meal. This does not mean, obviously, that John fully equates both kinds of products, or that he does not understand the distinction between the products. Brenda adds that she finds fair trade products ‘very expensive’, and she mocks the possibility of borrowing money from the IB-Groep (which is the Dutch agency that supports students financially by a monthly donation and, optionally, an additional loan) just to buy fair trade products.

It is possible to relate the prominence of the practical considerations mentioned above to how ‘effective’ the consumption of social or political goods is deemed in the perspectives of our interviewees. That is, if consumption is deemed ineffective to achieve social or political goals, then why bother investments in terms of time, money, and detours?

In one discussion between environmental activists, financial considerations that lead people to leave aside ‘social’ or ‘political’ products were denounced and criticised as a societal problem. Excerpt 10 shows how Petra and Lara argued that people are socialised into buying the cheapest products available regardless of their social or political significance.

**Excerpt 10**

Petra: It’s just the way the system works now. You know, how the market works and people are taught that they should buy the cheapest things, because in the past we didn’t have any options, nobody had money. So it’s really just in our head.

Lara: Yeah, the cheapest is the best. As much as possible for as little money as possible.

Their remarks are comprehensible against the background of how Dutch people often define themselves in social and cultural terms, namely, as a people who are traditionally focussed on saving money and being economical with the organisation of their daily lives. This tradition is generally understood as a manifestation of, among other things,
the acceptance of the protestant teachings of Johannes Calvijn by many parents and grandparents of today’s youth, and the experience of severe economic hardship of former generations during World War II (Petra’s ‘past’).

E. Getting involved

In this sub-section, we discuss how our interviewees expressed some ideas about what motivates them to participate. When asked about how they got involved in a particular initiative, different interviewees said that they were initially approached face-to-face by an ‘insider’, that is, someone who was already involved in an initiative. In excerpt 11, for example, Carla talks about how a member of SMJ asked her to join SMJ to ‘do something for her community’.

Excerpt 11
Carla: Well, I was approached, and he asked me, well, he asked me whether I would like to do something for their club, as a way of doing something for our community. And I was interested, so both of us would benefit. So, that got me thinking about whether this is something that I like, and... after a while, I decided to go for it.

‘Doing something for the community’ was certainly not the only reason that the interviewees mentioned for doing their activities. Most of the time, interviewees remembered the beginning of their involvement as a response to a ‘feeling’ or an ‘awareness’ that urged them to ‘do something’. It is possible to relate this feeling to how some of the interviewees talked about their upbringing, in particular, the example set by parents who have been active in politics or in civic initiatives. In other interviews, discussants talked about school experiences as important thrusts behind their participation. In excerpt 12, for example, Petra mentions a film she saw on school that made her aware of the ‘meat industry’ and, subsequently, led to her decision to become a vegetarian (‘making a statement’).

Excerpt 12
Petra: You just see things on television, and that make you think, and you read about it sometimes. For example, at a certain point, we watched a film at school that was about the meat industry. And after that, we discussed it in class, but most people, well...
Lara: And you thought, ‘stop right there’.
Petra: Yeah, I thought, well, and now I will make a statement. Everybody thought I would quit within a week, but I didn’t.

The following excerpt illustrates another frequently mentioned reason for participation, namely, ‘gezelligheid’. This Dutch word does not have a proper equivalent in English; it means something like ‘having a nice time with each other’.

Excerpt 13
Sharelle: If I just wanted to protest, I would just spend three hours after my desk to write letters or something, you know. Well, that is possible too, of course, but I like to hang out with the others after a meeting you know, to go to a bar or something, you know, just for the gezelligheid. Of course, that’s part of the deal.

Thus, ‘gezelligheid’ refers to doing something together. Collectivity was, in fact, a more fundamental reason that was mentioned by the interviewees as something that is attractive of undertaking civic or political actions in a group. This is illustrated by excerpt 14, which shows how Lara talks about how she experienced a demonstration in Amsterdam against Israel’s attack on Gaza in operation ‘Cast Lead’ in December 2008 and January 2009.

Excerpt 14
Lara:

It was very cold, and I felt numb (...), but I really liked the feeling during that demonstration. Everybody was shouting so hard, and, you know, everybody was just standing there, and I thought: fuck, you know, nobody will mess with us, and we are the civilians, and we can determine what the politicians must do. People think so often that they can't do anything, but that's not true. That's what I really disliked, because we were walking and we saw these people just doing some lazy shopping and thinking 'oh Jesus, look at those idiots'.

The phrase ‘nobody will mess with us’ is telling. With this phrase, Lara de-identifies herself and the others at the demonstration (‘us’) with ‘the politicians’. At the end of this excerpt, she also sets herself aside from people in general (the people who ‘think so often that they can't do anything’), and the people who were ‘doing some lazy shopping’ in particular. Related to these us-versus-them divisions, Lara implies that ‘the politicians’ are ‘messing’ with them (‘us’). Although it can be argued that the Israeli onslaught is a case that is particularly able to induce this kind of reaction, it is interesting to see that Lara’s comments are in line with the more general feelings of political cynism and/or lack of trust in formal political institutions that were expressed by other interviewees (see sub-section B). Also note how Lara, as other interviewees did, seemingly connects collectivity and solidarity with political efficacy. That is, it appears that Lara felt empowered (‘we can determine what the politicians must do’), because she was with many others at the demonstration.

Thus, collectivity might be appealing for social reasons (‘gezelligheid’) and for its association with a sense of political efficacy. Some interviewees conceived the attractiveness of collectivity in generational terms. They said that collectivity is particularly attractive when enjoyed among generational peers. This is illustrated by the following excerpt, in which Rachid talks about why he and ‘this guy’ joined the youth department of Amnesty International.

**Excerpt 15**

Rachid:

There is this guy I know, and he wanted to do something, so he looked at what he could do at Oxfam Novib. But they did not have anything for young people. Well, he could do things, but only with people in their thirties and forties. (...) That's why I joined Amnesty International, because, here, it is possible to have a separate group and do things with other youth.

Next to the factor of collectivity, or hand in hand with it, the ‘subject matter’ or topic of concern also seems important in the appeal of civic or political participation to young people.

There was, however, much variety among our interviewees about how they talked about the importance of different issues. Some interviewees said that they are particularly interested in ‘next door’ issues, such as neighbourhood activities. Logically, these interviewees tend to be involved in local initiatives, such as SMJ. For other interviewees, however, it appeared that such issues are particularly uninteresting. These interviewees tended to join initiatives that are not focussed on neighbourhood issues but have an international remit, such as Amnesty International.

**Excerpt 16**

Rachid:

I think that, well, we have in common that we really have a global awareness, you know, we don’t just look at our own surroundings, but also to other parts of the world, you know. We look at what we have and what other people in other parts of the world don’t have.

**Excerpt 17**

As other interviewees did in other discussions, Lara did not specify who ‘them’ are. Instead, she referred to politicians in general. It is well possible that she referred to the Dutch government in particular, because the Dutch government traditionally supports Israel’s policy towards the Palestinian people.
Peter: I think that these congresses, well, they are focussed on national or international things. I think that young people are more appealed to by local issues, such as road thresholds, or...

John: Well, I remember well that we were very active with that Tibet campaign, I think it was in Groningen. Well, that's so nice, but Tibet, well, I don't want to be a prick, but that's very far away and we can't do anything about it. That's just like reflection you know. We cannot change anything in Tibet, you know, it has been the same way since 1948 or whatever.

Dick: But a lot of people joined us because of what we did in Groningen.

In excerpt 16, Rachid says that his activities for Amnesty International are based on an interest in global issues. Excerpt 17 shows how several members of JS discuss which issues are attractive to them and surmise about which ones are attractive to young people in general. Following Peter’s remark that youth are interested in ‘the road threshold’ and comparable local issues, John says that JS’ pro-Tibet campaign is uninteresting, because Tibet is ‘very far away’ and because, in John’s perception, he and other JS members will not be able to make a difference for the Tibetans. The latter part of John’s comment illustrates, again, how efficacy – a sense that one can make a difference by doing something – can be important in people’s participation.

3. The internet

In this section, we outline and illustrate the perspectives of our interviewees on the internet in general (sub-section A); on the potential of the internet to mobilise people into civic or political activities (sub-section B); and, the importance and purpose of blogging as a form of online discussion (sub-section C).

A. General views

Almost all of our interviewees said, as expected, that they use the internet intensively (‘each day’). They commonly mentioned e-mailing (to and from friends, or related to work or school), chatting on MSN (with friends), and reading news as their most frequent activities online. Only some of the interviewees said that they were busy most of the time with online discussion or blogging. In general, (and with the exception of interviewees who were actually active in formal politics) they had a low interest in websites belonging to political parties or websites about politics.

A minority of the interviewees showed concern for or discontent about the integration of the internet into the lives of young people. In excerpt 18, for example, Gisela says that she is ‘not a big fan’ of the internet. In her mind, internet use causes society to ‘individualise’, by which she seems to mean that online contact between people is not ‘real’ and not as valuable as offline interaction. Remco, in excerpt 19, makes the same point, but in more specific and personal terms. He says that he is not interested in ‘personal stories’ (from unknown people) when they are told online, but he would be interested in such stories when told face-to-face (‘in a bar’).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Excerpt 18</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gisela: I am not a big fan of the internet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>M: Why?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gisela: I don’t know, I just think… I don’t use the internet a lot, you know, I don’t know, I just don’t like it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M: But you don’t know why you don’t like it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gisela: Well, because it says something about society, it is individualising, you know, and that has only become worse with the internet, and I really don’t like that people don’t see each other any longer and only see each other on MSN to chat. I just don’t like that. People don’t value personal contact any longer.</td>
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<th>Excerpt 19</th>
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<tr>
<td>Remco: I seek personal stories in real life, you know, not behind the computer. I’m very interested in personal stories, but only face-to-face. (…)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M: So, there is a difference between online and face-to-face contact?</td>
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Remco: Yes, I would never read stories from somebody I don’t know about his holiday. But if I would meet him in a bar or wherever, then I would be really interested in his stories.

Further, the internet was, as the next excerpt illustrates, generally praised for the huge amount of information and communication flows it enables. Although some of the interviewees said that they only read printed newspapers, Jan talks about how the information on the internet helps him to make up his opinion. He eventually focuses his argument on voting, and how the internet has changed that. In the past, in Jan’s view, people voted ‘with their eyes shut, more or less’; with the advent of the internet, he suggests, people can make a more informed vote.

Excerpt 20
Jan: You have more an own opinion, I think. Yes... It has something to do with the internet, with all the communication you have nowadays, because you get so much information, much more than the information you used to get back in the old days. In the past, it was only newspapers (...) And that’s a good thing. In the past, you would only receive a leaflet or whatever, and that would say vote for this or that, so, you just voted with your eyes shut, more or less.

In other discussions, the vast amount of information and communication flows that the internet offers were also considered problematic. In excerpt 21, for example, Dirk says that he ‘gets really tired’ by all the information he can find on the internet. The excerpt also illustrates how some of the discussants said that their attention is drawn to particular websites via their ‘social network’, as Marie puts it.

Excerpt 21
Marie: I have a number of sites that I visit regularly. I think that social networks are very important, you know. That’s why I wonder why people visit certain websites, because I only visit sites that were recommended by a friend who says, hey, you’re interested in this or that, check out this website... Or, hey, look, you like art, well I found a website for you, totally your style.
Dirk: Yes, but I sometimes get really tired by all the information, so I just stick to my own things.
Marie: Of course, but you didn’t make up these things, somebody told you about them.
Dirk: Yes, of course.

Thus, on the one hand, some interviewees said that the internet’s flows of communication and information enable them to form their opinion (illustrated by excerpt 20); on the other hand, there were interviewees who said that the sheer amount of information and communication flows can also be troublesome (illustrated by excerpt 21; see also section C).

Another tense relationship can be discerned in how the interviewees conceptualised the kind of information and communication flows (‘negative’ versus ‘positive’) that are produced on the internet. On the one hand, there were interviewees who lamented the ‘flaming’ and ‘insults’ on forums and blogs (see section C). On the other hand, there were interviewees who stressed the ‘positivity’ of communication flows generated by users and bloggers. Excerpt 22, for example, shows how Jeroen thinks that the internet ‘enables positive initiatives’, more in particular, a friend’s online community called ‘Big Momma’. It appears that, in Jeroen’s view, traditional media platforms are much less enablers of the kinds of ‘positive initiatives’ (or ‘constructivist positivism’) he is talking about.

Excerpt 22
Jeroen: I think that the internet enables positive initiatives. A friend of mine is now developing a community that connects little people and... Well, it’s an initiative, called Big Momma, aimed at getting activist people between 15 and 30 years of age into touch with each other on a community. (...) These communities stimulate constructivist positivism. I think that the internet enables these things.

B. Online mobilisation
In several focus groups, the internet was considered a potent means to mobilise people into civic or political activities. The power of the internet was often expressed in terms of the ‘ease’ and ‘reach’ of ICTs. In excerpt 23, for example, Jeanette talks about how the internet can be used to organise a ‘digital march’ for young people who are depicted as heavy internet users and increasingly unwilling to participate in ‘street activities’. Lisanne compares the digital march idea of Jeanette to Second Life, which is a popular 3-dimensional virtual world (secondlife.com). Excerpt 24 too illustrates how discussants talked about the ease of use and reach of the internet. In this excerpt, Pieter refers to a civilian demonstration against the Russian government that was organised in ‘just five minutes’ via the internet and other ICTs (‘that kind of stuff’).

**Excerpt 23**  
Jeanette: Well, youth are on the internet all the time, and you can organise a digital march for them. That is something digital, you know, because it is getting more and more difficult to get people out of their homes, so you could just make your own figure, and that will be you, and then you could march along.

Lisanne: Like Second Life.

Jeanette: Yeah, and then you could chat with people or whatever.

**Excerpt 24**  
Pieter: In Russia, you can see that the new generation of resistance people... they resisted for a hundred percent via the internet and that kind of stuff (...). I really could see that they had thought it through, they didn't want the government to influence them. So, they... in just five minutes they could just organise this action, you just take some law books and read them together in front of the government building, so you could organise these things really easy. And the government, well they couldn't do anything about it, and they couldn't send so many police to the demonstration quickly. So these kinds of communication really work, and you also get a reaction, because the government sent a message and said that blood will be spilled or whatever.

Some other interviewees too mentioned the internet’s potential to organise anti-governmental actions and to facilitate governmental communication and propaganda. In these views, anti-governmental actions were commonly conceptualised as justified (good for the people), and governmental internet communication as an unjustified means to influence the people and to conquer power (see ‘a message that said that blood will be spilled’, excerpt 24). Such views might be explained on the basis of the more general feelings of political distrust or cynicism that were expressed by the majority of our interviewees.

Excerpt 25 further illustrates how several interviewees conceived the internet as a platform on which a digital battle is being waged between ‘the powers that be’ and the people as a digital ‘underground’ movement. Both Jan (excerpt 25) and Pieter (excerpt 24) expect the people to win this fight, because, in Jan’s words, ‘government people don’t know the way so well’ on the internet.

**Excerpt 25**  
Jan: The basic thing is that the powers that be are using the internet. I think that powerful people are using blogs and stuff. (...)

Dirk: But how do normal people use the internet? You are talking about governments.

Jan: I think they can, within the internet. When you have a kind of underground, I mean... The powers that be are waging a war for internet power, you know, like Twitter and Facebook. My point is that people will fight against the powers that be, it will be a kind of information fight. And the powers that be will lose that fight, because government people don’t know the way so well.

In regard to the reach of internet activism, the belief that ‘new target groups’ can be addressed via the internet was expressed in several discussions. In excerpt 26, for example, three interviewees discussed the potential of YouTube to reach new target groups.
Excerpt 26
Alex: YouTube can be used well to do video activism.
Javier: You can make movies.
Sophie: A lot of people watch YouTube.
Javier: Yes but those people are so bored that they just go watch movies on YouTube, doesn’t matter what kind of movies, they just want to watch movies. No offence, you know, but in this way you can reach people that you can’t reach offline.

However, in our interviews, sceptical views on the internet’s potential to mobilise people were also expressed. Excerpt 27 gives an example of how different interviewees expressed their doubts about the internet’s potential to actually ‘activate’ people. In the excerpt, Tom says that he considers the internet to be an ‘efficient’ means to send ‘a lot’ (information and ideas) ‘into the world’. This excerpt too is indicative of how our interviewees conceptualised the internet’s civic potential in terms of ease of use (‘doesn’t cost you a lot’; costs defined as no need to travel to ‘the other side of the country’) and big reach (see: ‘a lot of people’).

Excerpt 27
Tom: I think that the internet is an efficient means to… it doesn’t cost you a lot to use the internet to reach a lot of people, but then… It’s the question whether you will be able to activate people. It’s a rather passive means to activate people. I just think that the internet is a passive means. It’s an easy means, it doesn’t cost you a lot. I mean, if you want to give a presentation then you must go to the other side of the country or whatever, but you use the internet from behind your desk or whatever. And if you are effective and efficient you could send a lot into the world.

Excerpt 28 includes a comparable view on the costs of internet use. Joselien says that the internet doesn’t cost a lot (costs are here defined in financial terms), and that one can use it to collect digital signatures to protest (in this case, against Israel’s policies). This excerpt too shows how some of the interviewees doubted the effects of internet activism.

Excerpt 28
Joselien: You could use the internet to send a chain letter or whatever, and that wouldn’t cost you money at all actually, and then you could just add your signature on the internet, you know, you could do that, for example, with those things about Palestine and stuff, you will then have a list and say that you don’t agree with it. But the effect can be low, because if you receive a link, nine out of ten people wouldn’t even look at it, but if you give somebody a list to sign in the real world, if you rub it in his face, or whatever, then… well at the end of the day, I think you should use both online and offline things, I think that’s the best thing you can do. ¹⁰

Claudia: It is, perhaps, interesting to note that our experiences with inviting youth to our focus groups are very much in line with what Claudia says in excerpt 28. On the one hand, we had low success when we used e-mails and forums to find participants for our focus group discussions. Hardly anybody responded to our e-mails or messages on forums in which we called on youth to participate in our discussions. If people did respond, then it was with condescending remarks on how ‘stupid’ our request is. However, on the other hand, when we asked the same, specific groups of people to participate face-to-face, via somebody who personally knew other youth, or by calling them by phone, in almost each and every instance they responded with enormous enthusiasm and willingness to participate. Of course, participation in our focus group sessions is a specific case, and is by no means representative for other forms of participation. However, our interviewees might considered it a kind of civic participation.
It seems as if Claudia connects her view on effectiveness to the different exit strategies people have online and offline. It appears as if Claudia implies that when a signature is requested online, people could just give a click on a mouse and the request would disappear, and nobody would mind. On the other hand, people might, it seems Claudia is suggesting, find it less easy to ignore a request for a signature when they are approached face-to-face by someone who ‘rubs’ the request ‘in their face’. Indirectly, one could conclude that such a line of reasoning implicates a rather unattractive perspective in regard to activism in the form of collecting signatures, because, in this view, not genuine interest in the civic or political issue at hand, but social pressure and ease of exit determine people’s acceptance or declining of a request for a signature. In fact, in some of the discussions with youth who participated in signature collection activities (especially those who were active for Amnesty International), it was said that many people who give their signature do not even ask what their signature is for. There is much to think about in relation to both online and offline petitions in this context.

C. Blogging

When asked about ‘what the ideal blog’ is, our interviewees generally said that it has to be ‘provocative’, because provocation, it was often thought, can make a blog popular. Excerpt 29 demonstrates how Ben specifies provocation in terms of ‘making someone think’ (more in particular, making someone think ‘hello, I totally don’t agree with that!’) and getting someone to post a response.

Excerpt 29

M: What is the ideal blog?
Ben: A thousands hits per day... You have to provoke people. People must read it and think: hello, I totally don’t agree with that!
Tom: Yes, you have to provoke a little bit.
Sanne: I totally agree.
Ben: Me too, provocation makes a blog good, if you can make people think about something, or at least provoke a response.
Tom: Those blogs are the most popular, I think, that’s what the visiting rates say.

In regard to what a blog definitely should be about if it is to receive popular attention from young people, the interviewees generally agreed that the subject should not be (formal) politics. Different interviewees suggested that most young people may have an opinion about politics, but that they are not really interested in reading about it. Conversely, it was commonly thought that sex is a bestseller. In the next excerpt, for example, Ben asks Joost (both are bloggers for Young in the City) about a notorious blog about sex written by Marloes (who was not attending the discussion). This excerpt too illustrates how most of our interviewees (implicitly) considered provocation and getting responses important traits of a ‘good’ blog. At the end of the discussion, Willemijn and Jeroen suggest that it is accepted to ‘generalise’ for the fun of it. Generalisation (or exaggeration) thus might be considered a further explanation of what ‘provocation’ means in the view of these discussants.

Excerpt 30

Kees: Things about sex really attract people’s attention.
Jeroen: About your man, that he is evil and that he only wants to have sex.
Klaas: Marleen wrote that, didn’t she? What was that about?
Jeroen: Well it was about a message she received from a guy who wanted to have sex with her, but he didn’t want to have a relationship with her. (...) She thought that was bad, and she wrote that. That provokes a little bit, you know, men think that women are really strange, you know.
Willemijn: But women know that she is exaggerating, but is just fun to generalise things, you know.
Jeroen: Yeah, you will provoke reactions. People like that kind of stuff.
Although generalisation refers, per definition, to stark statements about a group of people, the interviewees who blogged generally suggested that their aim is to keep blogs ‘personal’, meaning, based on their own experiences in their daily lives.

Excerpt 31
Dirk: I keep everything close to myself. I haven’t written a blog that wasn’t about myself. If I write something that was in the news, then I would still end up in my own life.
Kim: Because it would be something that you noticed as something peculiar.
Dirk: Yes, you just give your own opinion about it. It’s really my thing and my idea.

The focus on personal issues might be related to whom our interviewees write. In several discussions, they said that they write ‘for themselves’, because they ‘like writing’. On other occasions, they said that, while writing, they keep their direct relatives, friends and/or colleagues in mind, because they are the ones that will definitely read their blogs.

Excerpt 32
Sanne: I don’t know who is my public. Well, I know that a lot of people I personally know read my stuff.
Alex: Yes, I know three people who always read my blogs. That will be my mother, and two women who look like my mother. (…) They are not the only ones who read my blogs, I guess, but I keep them in mind.
Kim: Me too, I work in a bar, and my colleagues there always have comments on my blogs. So, when I write, I always think about them.

In these views, blogging is an activity that is based on a rather narrow conception of who actually reads blogs. These views might give further specific meaning to ‘provocation’ and ‘popularity’ as goals of blogging (see above, excerpts 29 and 30). That is, provocation and popularity might be considered goals that are to be achieved among relatives, friends and colleagues.

Focusing blogs on a very specific target group might be related to other discussions in which our interviewees were quite sceptical about the civic or political importance of blogging. On the one hand, some interviewees said that blogs may induce social or political upheaval. One interviewee gave the example of the blogger Nathalie Lubbe Bakker, who caused quite some public discussion in Belgium and the Netherlands when she caught a tipsy Belgian minister (Pieter de Crem) on videotape. On the other hand, however, most of the interviewees thought that blogging is a very local exercise with low prominence.

In excerpt 33, for example, Ben says that his blogging is not born out of social interest, and that he feels that his blog is like a ‘needle in a huge haystack with many more needles’, indicating that, in his view, there are a huge number of bloggers, and that the sheer number of bloggers reduces the prominence (or importance) of an individual blogger to a minimum. Tom ‘admits’, as if it is socially undesirable to say, that he would never read a blog if he ‘would not be involved in a way’, for example, because he personally knows the blogger. Tom confirms Ben’s point by saying that, if he is not ‘involved in a way’, he would not be interested in other bloggers. Further, the writings of other bloggers are, in Tom’s view, portrayed as a kind of self-indulgence (‘do these people really think they are so important or smart?’).

Excerpt 33
Ben: It’s not that I write because I’m so interested in society, I think that you, as a blogger, are just a needle in a huge haystack with many more needles. There are so many bloggers. You are not so important.
Tom: I honestly admit that I would never read blogs if I wouldn’t be involved in a way. I simply don’t think it’s so important what others have to say. I find myself much more interesting. I ask myself about other bloggers, well, do these people really think they are so important or smart?

Lack of interest in unknown bloggers may, in part, be caused by the ‘personal’ focus of blogs. Several interviewees used the word ‘diary’ to describe their own blog, and, in general, the bloggers that participated in our focus groups were quite straightforward about their focus on their own personal experiences (see above, excerpt 31). However, in our interviews, the focus in blogs on personal issues was also conceptualised as something that is unappealing to the broader public, which might explain the focus on a target group limited to friends, family and colleagues (see above). In excerpt 34, for example, Jack expresses negative feelings about blogs about shopping. This excerpt too illustrates how our interviewees think that there are ‘too many’ bloggers; for blogging has become, in Jack’s words, a ‘thirteen in a dozen thing’.

Excerpt 34
Jack: It’s such a thirteen in a dozen thing, you know, everybody has a blog. Nobody reads that any longer, I think. But what you see nowadays... you will read about how someone did their shopping, and I really don’t care about that at all.
Peter: There are so many blogs cut and paste, and then it’s like they say: what do you think of me?
Jack: Yeah, disgusting...

4. Conclusions

In the previous sections, we have demonstrated how our interviewees talked about different issues related to politics, society, participation, and the use of the internet. In this section, we will summarise our main conclusions about the (mainstream) thoughts and views that were expressed in our focus group discussions.

Conceputalisations of the terms ‘political’ and ‘civic’ participation
1. Our interviewees generally associated the word ‘politics’ with formal politics only.
2. Activities other than formal political ones were not called ‘political’, but they were considered socially and politically important.

Conceputalisations of politics and politicians
4. Our interviewees often depicted politicians as untrustworthy and cunning.

Conceputalisations of differences between different forms of participation
5. It was generally believed that participation in activities for political parties is more difficult than participation in extra-parliamentary activities.
6. The interviewees generally expressed the view that one has a stronger influence in extra-parliamentary activities than one has in activities related to formal politics.

Conceputalisations of consumption as a form of civic participation
7. Socially conscious consumption was generally considered a morally good yet politically ineffective activity.
8. The interviewees mentioned three practical reasons that influence their consumption of products with a social or political trademark: money, time, and availability.

Conceputalisations of issues that might motivate participation
9. Different interviewees said that their involvement in an initiative began after they were approached face-to-face by an insider.

10. Experiences in school and family can be related to an urge to 'do something'.

11. From the interviews, it appears that 'gezelligheid', solidarity and a sense of efficacy are valued traits of collective action.

12. There was much variety in what our interviewees considered interesting topics, ranging from 'next door' initiatives to global issues.

Conceptualisations of general internet qualities

13. Almost all of our interviewees said that they use the internet intensively. They commonly mentioned e-mailing, chatting on MSN, and reading news as their most frequent activities online. Only some of the interviewees said that they were most of the time busy with online discussion or blogging.

14. On the one hand, some interviewees said that the internet's flows of communication and information enable them to form their opinion; on the other hand, there were interviewees who said that the sheer amount of information and communication flows can also be troublesome.

15. On the one hand, there were interviewees who lamented the 'nagging' and 'insults' on forums and blogs. On the other hand, there were interviewees who stressed the 'positivity' of communication flows generated by users and bloggers.

Conceptualisations of the internet's potential to mobilise people

16. The potency of the internet to mobilise people was often expressed in terms of 'ease of use' and 'reach'.

17. Several interviewees conceived of the internet as a platform on which a battle is being waged between 'the powers that be' and the people as a digital 'underground' movement.

18. Different interviewees expressed their doubts about the internet's potential to activate people.

Conceptualisations of the purpose of blogging

19. Our interviewees generally said that a good blog is 'provocative'.

20. Most of the interviewees agreed that blogging about (formal) politics will not receive popular attention. Conversely, it was commonly thought that sex is a bestseller.

21. The interviewees who blogged generally suggested that their aim is to keep blogs personal.

22. In several discussions, bloggers said that they blog 'for themselves'. On other occasions, they said that, while writing, they keep their relatives, friends and/or colleagues in mind.

23. On several occasions, it was said that the sheer number of bloggers reduces the prominence (or importance) of an individual blogger to a minimum.

Netherlands - Appendix 1

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<tr>
<th>Focus group number</th>
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<th>Main issues covered</th>
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Web-based Civic Participation Among Young People in Europe

Slovenian National Report

Maja Turnšek Hančič and Aleksander Sašo Slajček Brlek
University of Ljubljana

Introduction

Qualitative focus groups conducted for Deliverable 16 are one of the last research steps in the CivicWeb research. While in other work packages we analysed the production of civic websites, this work-package aims at analysing the young peoples’ reception of such sites, their perception of civic participation and their perception of internet.

Overall we conducted 10 focus groups in Slovenia with 56 participants. The age of participants ranged from 14 to 27 years of age. Five focus groups were conducted in Ljubljana and five in smaller towns from all over Slovenia: Maribor, Mežica, Nova Gorica, and Novo mesto.

The Focus Group Selection

Focus groups were selected on the basis of two different techniques. First, since we wanted to talk to young people who were not necessarily active in the civic arena we selected focus groups from amongst different schools and faculties. In the selection of focus groups we tried for as much variety as we could on the basis of geographical region, age, national background and type of schools.

The focus groups that were selected on the basis of schools or faculties were:

(a) 1st grade high school pupils of Economic and commercial high school in Nova Gorica (Srednja ekonomska in trgovska šola Nova Gorica): 6 participants, approx. 15-16 years of age;
(b) 3rd grade high school pupils of Novo mesto Grammar School (Gimnazija Novo mesto), who were also members of the school’s student union: 6 participants, approx. 16-17 years of age;
(c) 4th grade high school pupils of II. Grammar School Maribor (II. Gimnazija Maribor), who were visiting the faculty lessons European Studies: 6 participants, approx. 17-18 years of age,
(d) 3rd year students of Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana: 4 participants, approx. 21 – 22 years of age.

We also selected a focus group where we expected to find mostly non-engaged or even disengaged young people:

(e) Young people frequenting the social centre CONA, run by a centre for social work in Fužine, a part of Ljubljana with a high proportion of immigrants, mostly from ex-Yugoslav countries.

The second method of selection of focus groups was the selection of civic groups and organisations on the basis of recent history and/or specific civic issues that have appeared to generate civic participation in previous project work-packages.
Recent history and changes in civic/political participation (arising from Deliverable 4 results)

Several events and developments have influenced the political arena in Slovenia in the recent past. Some of these events have guided the selection of our focus groups others have become an important issue among the participants in the focus group interviewees themselves.

One of the most important events for Slovenia in the past years was its entrance into the European Union in 2004 and the acceptance of the Euro in 2007. The second important issue is the dispute between Slovenia and Croatia regarding borderlines which has been escalated in the last months before writing this report by the fact that Slovenia has blocked Croatia’s negotiations for EU membership. This dispute has been accompanied in Slovenia by nationalistic discourse both in political and mediated public discussion.

Other specific historical issues that have guided the selection of our focus groups were: religion as the main division among the left and right political poles, specific local funding and organisation of youth information centres (see WP7 and WP8) and specific organisation of student labour and student organisation.

Specific issues that generate civic/politic participation (Del 6 and Del 13 and Del 8 results).

The focus groups that were selected on the basis of the specific civic issues and organisations were:

(f) Young volunteers in the ‘Young to Young’ programme of MISSS Ljubljana: 8 participants, their age ranged from 14 to 22.

We have based our selection of focus groups also on the results obtained in previous workpackages. WP6 gave an overview of the existence of different Slovene civic websites for young people and their types. One of the most common types were websites of local youth information centres where they try to provide counselling and information for young people and sometimes call for youth volunteering. In WP8 (Deliverable 14) we conducted an analysis of website of MISSS with the good practice of peer-to-peer counselling: ‘Young for Young’ programme. While conducting an interview with the producer of this website (Deliverable 13) we learned that the online forum for counselling was produced and moderated by young volunteers in this programme. We thus decided to make a group interview with participants in this programme. These participants, however, were not the same that started the counselling forum anymore, but were the new cohort of volunteers.

(g) A group of local Catholic Girl Guides and Boy Scouts in Novo mesto: 8 participants, their age ranged from 15 to 23.

In Slovenia the main issue that divides the left and right political groups is the Catholic religion. Within WP6 we found several cases of religion-based civic websites that target young people. Catholic Girl Guides and Boy Scouts of Novo mesto is a youth organisation based in small town south of Slovenia. Its members meet regularly to discuss different local issues, both religious and other, broader issues.

(h) A group of young people involved in the cultural association Perkmandeljci in Mežica: 6 participants, aged from 19 to 25.
Mežica is a town of around 4000 inhabitants in the eastern part of Slovenia. Perkmandeljci (the word refers to a mischievous dwarf who in mines and plays pranks on miners) is an association that aims its activities mostly at children and young people. For some time it has faced problems with funding, causing it to curtail some of its activities and it has also been losing members. Having been faced with the problem of persuading young people to participate, we thought this focus group would have thought about ways to engage young people.

(i) A group of students involved in the national Students association of Slovenia (ŠOS): 6 participants, approx. 22 years of age.

ŠOS is the umbrella organisation of university student’s associations and the association of student clubs. Since students’ associations in Slovenia enjoy a high level of autonomy from the state due to their principal means of funding (the taxes from student work, which they coordinate), they are an important factor in civil society. ŠOS is actively involved in policy making in the field education. It is actively reacting to the implementation of the Bologna reform, where the possibility of tuition fees for the bachelor level has caused quite a degree of excitement among students, leading to protests in 2006, coordinated by ŠOS. The aim of this focus group was to interview very active young people, who are also in contact with the political system.

(j) Members of the youth branch of the Slovene liberal party (LDS) and Social Democrats Party (SD): 5 participants, aged approx. from 23 to 27 years of age.

LDS is a parliamentary party that was the leading party during the early stages of transition (from 1992 to 2004), while the Social democratic party is currently the leading party. We wanted to analyse the view on politics from young people active in conventional modes of politics, which is why we chose young people active in the youth branch.

The process of creating the focus groups:

When selecting focus groups we decided to adhere to as much variety in geographical region, gender, age and class of participants. We wanted to include both young people who are civically active and young people who are not. In reaching young people who are not necessarily civically active we decided to ask for help in high schools of faculties which turned out to be an effective way of selection since we did not have any refusals of participation. We had to change the original plan of selection of focus groups in two cases where we could not persuade the civic organisations to help us with reaching their young members. We decided to select two other civic groups instead.

In cases where young people were selected through a civic organisation, we talked about the website of their own organisation. In cases where young people were selected with the aid of schools, we showed different civic websites analysed in Deliverable 14 to these participants asked them to navigate thorough the websites and give us our feedback. The websites that we selected for such an analysis were:

11 MISSS: http://www.misss.org
Eurodesk Slovenia: http://www.eurodesk.si
Youth in Action Slovenia: http://www.mva.si
Autonomous Tribune: http://avtonomnatribuna.blogspot.com/
Volunteering.org: http://www.prostovoljstvo.org
 Besides some difficulties with the recruitment of participants, the sessions proved to be successful in most cases. The participants developed their own discussion after some initial questions and only some moderating comments were needed by the interviewer to keep the discussion on the intended course of topic. There were two focus groups, however, in which the participants were not highly open to discussion. One was with a group of younger high school pupils who seemed to be uneasy talking to researchers. The other were the most civically disengaged group in CONA who were also the least cooperative. We had difficulty getting them to talk, and even when they did contribute they did not open up, but remained hidden behind what we could call a degree of cynicism, offering mostly witty remarks. The social workers, who are involved with these young people, informed us afterwards that this is a common reaction to students and researchers. Even though, however, these two groups were less talkative as other groups, their answers proved to be a valuable asset in the research, since these are the young people who are perceived as unengaged and are left as unaddressed in civic action mobilisation attempts (see more on address of young people in reports of WP6, WP7, and WP8).

Social And/Or Cultural Interests Of The Respondents

The social and political issues that respondents deemed important were influenced by our selection of focus groups. Since we recruited part of the focus groups on a topical basis, we already anticipated the issues most salient to respondents (youth centres for example and the problem of cultural activities). Similarly the respondents we expected to be unengaged or minimally engaged were also expected to be uninterested in social and political matters. These anticipations were confirmed to an extent during the course of the focus groups. Additionally, differences between respondents in vocational schools and those in grammar schools – the latter were deemed more likely to be civically engaged, judging from their social background – became apparent.

Perceptions of civic and political issues among the non-active participants

The group from Fužine, when prompted about social issues important to them, named mostly private concerns like entertainment (the building of more nightclubs in Fužine) and legalization about Marijuana. When asked about their interest in political news, one of them answered: ‘Bah! That sport is not for us.’ When prompted about the reasons for their lack of engagement most of them named the corruption of the politicians, who are only interested in their own personal gain.
They claimed never to talk about politics with their peers or follow it via the media, although they do discuss it with their parents, when parents initiate the conversation. They felt politics to be almost an omnipotent force, which is the unitary locus of control in society. As one respondent put it:

M: You say you are not interested in politics, but just now you said that only politics can change the things you would like to change.
A: That is the main thing, politics is the main thing. (boy, approx. 20 years of age)
M: Is there no way to do something outside politics?
A: There is nothing you can do by yourself.

Similarly, the young people from a vocational school in Nova Gorica claimed they were not interested in politics, because they could neither influence it, nor does it have any bearing on their lives. This is reflected in their media use, which consists mostly of entertainment. News plays a part, only insofar it is ‘scandalous’. School was the issue that was of prime concern for them and they are not active in civic organisations, not even to gain information. When asked, whether they have ever visited the youth centre in Nova Gorica, they answered:

A: Well here in Gorica, I don’t know, a weird crowd hangs out there
M: What kind of weird crowd?
A: Like ...
B: Drugs and that.

Perception of civic and political issues among the active participants

The highly engaged young participants could name social and political issues of interest to them and also frame them as such.

They perceived social issues in more nuanced ways. Instead of relying on a binary reductionist scheme of ‘us’ and ‘evil politicians’, like the young people from Fužine, they saw social problems as much more complex – involving powerful interests, the political system and citizens organised in civil society. This stems partly from their media use, which is more strongly oriented towards political topics than that of the disengaged and partly from first hand experience some of them have had with the political system or civil society organisations. They also saw politics as a realm that impacted their daily lives and was at least to some degree amenable to their initiatives. That is not to say they hold an optimistic view about the responsiveness of the political system to citizen initiatives, but they do not see the realm of politics as inherently alienated from citizens. This enables them to frame the problem of non-responsiveness as a problem that is at least in principle solvable. Respondents from a grammar school in Novo Mesto argued:

A: Well the problem is that politics … when somebody says ‘this is political’ or ‘politics’, everybody turns away: ‘Ah, that is not for me.’ The problem is also, well, that the word itself has a negative connotation, right, but I think every citizen should be actively involved in it. (boy, approx. 16 years old)
B: But what can a single mortal do, when in the higher strata everything is [inaudible] (girl, approx. 17 years old)
A: But that is exactly why things have come to where they are, right, because everybody is thinking: ‘There is nothing I can do.’
In many cases, civically involved respondents also named the passivity of others as a problem and cause of the non-responsiveness of the political system. A respondent from the same focus group said:

Very few people are active in some area or interested in something. So, I don’t know, when we launch an initiative, to go broader, there is no … there is no élan among students. Nobody is interested to do anything. (girl, approx. 17 years old)

Perception of young people as civic actors

The most highly involved respondents complained most vigorously about the passivity of others. Young people active in the Student’s association of Slovenia even complained that when they became active in various student groups or associations, they faced negative reactions from other students:

A: […] when you become active and others find out that you are active they look at you sideways, because your are absent from school more than them and things like that, and you subject to the greater good, I mean you work for others, but you are the weird one. But it is interesting to see as years pass and they come back and need something and then they see that they were not behaving properly. And other people have the same problem – probably here also – if you are too exposed, because in Slovenia it is good to be average, just hardworking. (male, approx. 23 years old)

A respondent from Mežica argued that their association was facing hostility from uninformed members of the local community:

Well, then Perkmandeljc came along and then they started, that we founded the association, so that we might take drugs and get high and I don’t know what else, that we drink away all the money.’ (Young man, approx. 25 years old)

Students from the Faculty of social sciences complained that initiatives they got involved with or that they knew of had troubles, because they attracted people, who were not interested in the activities, but who just used the premises of the organisations to get drunk. Some of the engaged students used a binary scheme of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ to categorize young people. For one, active young people are always in search of new ways to fill their leisure time, to enable personal growth and development, while passive youth let their leisure time be determined by television and are unaware of what is happening around them.

On the other hand political engagement had a negative connotation for non-active participants. One participant in the focus group of Catholic scouts talked about those of their acquaintances, who regularly read and talk about politics, as being ‘weird’.

Motivations for participation

The factors the respondents from the student’s association named that got them involved were both altruistic and egoistic. Almost all of them began talking about how there were certain issues that bothered them and they wanted to change them, but
quickly they began talking about the personal gains they derived from their activity, like acquiring certain skills, most notably organisational skills and an ability to negotiate with others, and enlarging their social and professional network. That at least one of the respondents might have felt a certain incongruity between altruistic values and egoistic motivations was revealed in her lapsus lingue:

‘And in the end you discover that besides what we have already talked about, building your social network, you work on yourself, your competences, that actually by working for others you work mostly for yourself… I mean [laughter] indirectly, because you form yourself and acquire knowledge, a broader view, a social network.’ (female, approx. 23 years old)

Young Catholic scouts discussed the internal motivations that they gained through participating in the scouts organisation. They all put friendship and gathering with peers as the most important motivational impetus. Important on the list were also gains such as leadership and organisational skills, teamwork, and ascending one’s self-esteem.

A: Scouts have given me quite a lot. So, you meet people and you hang together. You develop such strong bonds so that you associate even when you are not at the meeting but also otherwise. We basically became friends. We have such strong contacts. (young man, approx. 23 years of age)
B: After a while you aren’t able to picture your life, how it would be, if you weren’t a scout anymore. (girl, approx. 22 years of age).
C: It becomes a part of you, a part of your life. After that you feel a certain obligation that you have to go. The scouts have given me so much when I was in the ‘Clan’ – this is the youngest group - that I said to my self that I have to continue’. (young woman. Approx. 20 years of age).

Their discussion furthermore started to revolve around values – whether one needs some specific values beforehand to participate, or she or he develops them within the participation. The final consensus seemed to be that one has to have a specific upbringing beforehand, one needs to value all these gains before, if she or he does not, then she or he would not feel like s/he belongs to the group. Even though they are Catholic scouts they did not talk about religion openly. Religion seemed to be an important issue only for one girl out of eight participants, who directly connected religion to the political activities and the left and right distinction among Slovene political parties.

A: ’They talk about politics a lot at my place. Even more so since my older sister has gone to study law school. I was at least that much to get her to explain about it and then I decided by my self. But they are all so ‘if you don’t vote like that, then you aren’t ours’. [laughter]. But we all have the same conviction, so that… I was raised in that direction.’ (girl, approx. 20 years of age)
B: ‘In what direction? How do they raise you in that direction? Pahor? Say it Pahor.’ (girl, approx. 20 years of age) [Pahor is the left-wing prime minister. The girl is obviously teasing the first girl]
A: ’So. It is soon clear that for example if we look at the left and the right, what values would each have. The religion is already important. Even this is clear enough.
B: ’No, I don’t see how you were raised with it’
A: ’It is not exactly in this sense. If you are religious it is already a lot’.
C: ’She for example, Jelinčič [far-right MP] he has burned the churches. She likes the church buildings. (girl, approx. 23 years of age).
A: ’In this sense thus’
B: ’They got you quite early all right’ [laughter]

We see thus that even among Catholic scouts religion and left- and rightwing political distinctions are not one-sidedly understood. On the one hand, we have a girl who openly admits that religion is the most important issue for her and her family while deciding upon political sides. On the other hand, we have a girl who opposes that vision and mocks her religious perception of politics even though they are both members of the Catholic scouts.
The respondents from Novo mesto Grammar School said that an outside initiative was needed for them to get involved. In this vein, they stressed the importance of extracurricular activities, which would enable a young person to take a broader perspective on social issues and not only focus on his or her career. One of them stressed mobilisation through peers as the decisive factor for her engagement:

I don’t know, I also didn’t know before. If a friend hadn’t said to me: ‘Come on, do this, you will like it,’ I would be the same as those [passive] students. Well, they are not given this option, it is not presented to them: ‘Look, here you will work on yourself, here you will help others, you will get to know many things and people. (female, approx. 17 years old)

Mobilisation through peer invitation seemed to be the most common way of how young participants became active in the selected civic organisations. Like the young woman who talked about her friend persuading her to participate, the young active participants mostly talked about their narrow social network as the prime factor determining mobilisation. Within this network, however, there were not only their peers, but also older family members, such as older brothers or sisters and parents.

Similarly, mobilisation through lectures and workshops prepared by youth volunteers at primary and grammar schools proved to be highly successful. Almost all young volunteers from the ‘Young to Young’ counselling programme said that they got involved because they were listening to such presentations in their schools and that the presenters were the ones who persuaded them to volunteer. Schools, it seems could have an important role in enabling learning about political issues according to some participants, but some of them perceive the current way of learning about the political system as extremely boring, since all they have to do is ‘learn those numbers by heart. I didn’t understand any of it!’ (girl, approx. 20 years of age).

The group of high school pupils who participate in the faculty lectures on European Studies explicitly stated that schools should be the place where young people would learn about political issues. Furthermore, the initiative in Slovene grammar schools on accepting civic engagement as part of the necessary outside curricula activities was positively greeted by one volunteer in the ‘Youth to Youth’ programme. She was interested to see whether the volunteering activities she was involved in would be recognised by her school as an outside curricula activity and was pleased to learn that it would. It was obvious from her case, however, that she first volunteered and then learned about this option and not vice versa (so that it was not her school’s activities which would persuade her to participate).

The respondents from the students’ association particularly stressed three important issues for young people. The first was the Bologna reform (this was the issue they began to talk of spontaneously), the second was universal availability of higher education (this was the issue they named when asked about the most important problem of students in Slovenia) and the third, the employability of graduates. They agreed with the basic idea of the reform (one respondent identified it as: ‘that education must become more interactive, more interdisciplinary, more dynamic.’ But they complained that the implementation in Slovenia was not making the goals of the reform attainable. They felt that the formal criteria of the reform were realised, but that because of the inertia of professors, who were used to the old ways, and their misunderstanding of the basic goals of the reform, it did not fulfil its actual goals.
When discussing the other two issues – the availability of higher education and the employability of graduates, respondents stressed the need for a systemic approach, where all the involved partners (students, universities and politicians) would come to an agreement. They identified the structural conditions of the political field as a factor inhibiting the development of such a compromise. One respondent argued:

The goal is to make them look like they granted so and so many new scholarships in their term, the goal is not actually to make a good law, that it would actually be good for the students, but that they would have a good political image, well, basically it is always just politics: 'We will address this and do some cosmetic fixes. Well, we proposed this law, we are the best, and we did this. (female, approx. 24 years old)

Therefore, even though politics as such was not necessarily regarded as negative, politicians usually received low levels trust. When one young high school participant talked about the action of the previous government – providing high school pupils with subsidised meals – he stressed that this was a very good thing, but that this was probably politically motivated or motivated by political ambition rather than justice. When queried on what he meant by the political in this context, he stated that the politicians have done it to ascend their popularity and votes.

Some respondents named the passivity of young people as the factor that enables politicians to disregard the interests of young people, and they talked about the activity of especially retired people, whose interests they felt to be pursued at the expense of young people. This view of an intergenerational conflict was also shared by a respondent from the cultural association Perkmandeljci:

Because, well, I don't know, we know that pensioners go on and on about the things they want, but does anybody ask about young people, young families, some benefits, cheap loans, I don't know, some apartments built only for a specific population. (male, approx. 25 years old)

Another related problem the respondents from the student’s union identified was that in Slovenia there is no strong civil society that would be able to hold its own against the political system. Their ideal model of the political process for them was deliberative: that a consensus is reached in the public sphere among all involved parties and then the state merely acts to implement this consensus.

Another issue that some respondents (notably those involved in the cultural association Perkmandeljci and those from a grammar school in Maribor) stressed was ‘culture’.

The respondents involved in the cultural association Perkmandeljci saw their association as central to the cultural life of the town. They believed that although there are associations that provide young people with productive ways of spending leisure time like sports clubs or music schools, they cater only to specific groups of young people (those with musical talents or talent for sport and since these activities are costly, mostly to upper and middle class youth) while their association is able to offer something for all young people. According to them this had the effect, apart from getting young people involved in something more productive than hanging around in bars, of building a sense of community among youth:

Because children that came to Perkmandeljci were at home here, they were all from Mežica, and it didn’t matter whether they came from a poor or rich family. Everybody stuck together, because they went to Perkmandeljci’s workshops and all knew each other. (male, approx. 25 years old)
National, international and European participation

When asked about citizen’s engagement (translation of civic participation in Slovene language) the group of young catholic scouts perceived it as strictly issues of national state affairs. A good citizen in their view should vote, raise flags, sign a hymn at national sports events, and celebrate national holidays. They revealed in the discussion that discussion on good citizenship was part of their programme and that they talked about the ‘dutiful citizen’ perception before. The leaders of the group, however, similar to the producers of civic websites (Deliverable 13) promptly added that scouts are a non-political organisation and that therefore they do not talk about politics in terms of political parties and sides, but only to educate young participants on the political system, so that they ‘would know who a prime minister is, or that we even have a prime minister’ (girl, approx. 23 years of age).

Nationalistic feelings were seen as important motivations for political participation of other young people by one concerned young individual:

We [in the class] have such national-aware-ones. If someone mentions something like that. One ex ‘skin’. It shows, I don’t know, if someone is being. If there are some disputes or something like that. Now they are all against the mosque, and none of them has a clue about politics. Just that it has to do something with the South [meaning ex-Yugoslavia] and they are all against it. (boy, 17 years of age)

Currently, the most prominent affair in Slovene media discourse is the Slovenian and Croatian border dispute – Slovenia has recently blocked Croatia’s European Union membership negotiations because of this border dispute. The dispute is fuelled by nationalistic political and media discourse, and was a prominent topic of conversation in one focus group.

The dynamics of discussion in this group were guided by one young boy, who openly showed the symbol of the nationalistic “Here is Slovenia” group and a girl, who proclaimed herself as ‘Croatian by blood and Slovene by birth’. A third girl joined the boy in his opinion, while others mostly did not want to participate in the discussion.

They had a disagreement regarding immigration from Ex-Yugoslav countries, where the boy claimed that there are too many immigrants in Slovenia and that they should not be proclaiming their presence – calling attention to the fact of their existence and raising their voices – what he termed as being ‘smart-asses’. He furthermore used the ‘we’ form of presenting his nationalist ideas, creating the impression that all Slovenes are disturbed by immigrants and thus ascribing an aura of legitimacy and the power of the majority opinion to his own nationalist ideas. He was backed by a young girl and the two even expressed their opinion on the European Union as being positive as long as “there are no Croatians there”.

The girl, on the other hand, stressed that the immigrants are present in Slovenia and that this should be acknowledged. She furthermore felt like she had to defend herself for being as she termed it ‘Croatian by blood’ - she explicitly stressed that ‘she was never a smart-ass’. Later she provided her own account of being a second generation immigrant in Slovenia and how painful it is for her to listen to hate speech from her acquaintances who are not aware that she feels partly Croatian herself.

The second girl in the group, who also expressed anti-Croatian sentiments, tried to convince her that it is not her that the boy is talking about but that the ‘Croats are making fun of Slovenes and the sea border dispute if they already have so much sea’. The first girl then replied that this is not an issue of Croatians as a people or as individuals, but an issue that was introduced by official politics. In her opinion the
Croatian and Slovene people would be more than willing to give up that small piece of sea just for the sake of peace and fear from another war. In her opinion it is the official politics that is stirring the border dispute and causing problems among the two nations.

A: “Isn’t it more logical that it says “Here is Slovenia” here in Slovenia than that it says Serbia on the parking sign?” (boy 14 years of age)
B: “You can’t change it. There are just so many of them here.” (girl, 17 years of age)
A: If you go on the internet, Google pictures, and you write up there “Here is Slovenia” you will first find such emblem, yes. But right next to it there is one like that which is crossed over and it says: “Yeah but we are also here” [he said it in Serbian: “Pa jebi ga, i mi smo ovdje”].
B: Well, yes, they are also here. A lot of them.
A: Too much.
B: If there weren’t for so many immigrants with foreign citizenship there would be only about a thousand or so of authoctonous Slovenes here in Slovenia.
A: We are not disturbed by the fact that there are all these “Čefurji” (a prerogative word of immigrants from ex-Yugoslavia). It bothers us that there are so many “smart-ass Čefurji”.
B: Yes, but I was never a smart-ass.

B: I am a full-blooded Croatian. And I hear a lot of times “Oh these Croats! These shit, insects you know. And I am only quiet.” (girl, 17 years of age)
C: But no-one called you that” (girl, 14 years of age).
B: But it starts then, you know., Croats and the see. Croats and I don’t know what, shit, manure, and I don’t know what else.”
C: I think they are making fun of us if they already have so much see”.
B: That is an issue of politicians”
A: No, that is not an issue of politicians. You who live here in Slovenia even though you are from Croatia. I have a friend from Croatia and even though I met him in Austria. They have just as local jokes. “Do you know how many see the Slovenes have got? As much as a Croatian spits in it”. Jokes like that.
B: But when I am at home there and when I talk to people, none of them cares. Everyone whom I know.
A: But you come from the central Croatia, right. But those who are from Dalmatia.”
B: I come from Dalmatia. All my friends that I know say “Let them have it! We’ll give them even 100 km more just for the sake of peace. Just that nothing will go wrong again”. While those up there, they keep on arguing. And I know a lot of Slovenes also who would say what do we need that one kilometre of see. Just to have peace. If people would negotiate it between themselves they would do it faster than those up there. They will never get to an agreement.

Fortunately for this group discussion the girl who identified herself as “Croatian by blood” was extremely talkative and knew how to stand up for herself and had enough courage to express openly that she was the member of the hated group. She knew how to contrast the opinions of other two participants, which gave her the position of a moral winner. Nevertheless, the opinions of the two other participants did not seem to change in the discussion. Nor did the discussion manage to involve other participants in the group. Even though some of them very quietly expressed their disagreement with the boy and the girl who expressed nationalistic feelings, they mostly left the three to discuss among themselves, and finally they wanted to change the subject since it became uncomfortable for them to be present in what seemed to be becoming a heated and emotionally burdened dispute.
This conversation continued also on the topic of the European Union where the two participants who expressed nationalistic stances were against Croatia’s entering in the EU.

M: ‘So what do you think of the European Union?’
C: ‘It’s OK as long as the Croatia is not in there’ (girl 14 years of age)
B: ‘And if it does, then we are out of there’ (boy 14 years of age)

We see thus, that contrary to the official language of Slovene politics on blocking Croatia until the dispute is settled, these two young participants express a worrying attitude that they would rather see that Croatia would never be a part of the European Union.

The European Union was perceived extremely positively among the high school pupils who take European Studies. Specifically, they could see the positive influence of European integration at their local city Maribor which will be the European capital of culture in the near future. They also mentioned the positive influence of European funded projects on the Slovene youth policy. When asked about European identity, however, they specifically stressed that they and others around them see themselves primarily as Slovenes. They connected this to the fact that EU is primarily an economic integration even though ‘the European Union is putting a lot of money into that we would feel Europeans’ (girl, 18 years of age). Others agreed that this creation of European identity was not very successful in Slovenia in general but that they, who come and listen to the European Studies, are different since they are interested in Europe and have ‘listened about Europe ever since they were kids’.

M: How much do you personally feel European?
A: It's different for us, since we listen about it so much. (girl, approx. 18 years of age)
B: We have been hearing about it ever since we were kids. ‘European Union this and that.’ I was still in primary school when we became members. (boy, 18 years of age).
A: We are the generation that listens to it also at the European Studies’.
M: Why did you decide to take European Studies?
C: I'm interested in it right’. (girl, approx. 18 years of age)
D: I didn’t do it because it is European but because it is different. (girl, approx. 18 years of age)
B: I did do it because it was European. Because it is directed to social sciences. And to get a bit more informed about politics. So that we will know at least some basic stuff that in my opinion we should know a bit.

Nevertheless, they showed anxiety regarding the fate of European Union in the face of the current economic crisis and were concerned regarding the fact that, firstly, there is not enough solidarity among member states, and that, secondly, each member is working only for its own benefits during the state of crisis.

These same participants, however, who obviously were interested and have above-average knowledge about European Union, did not talk about participating in European affairs or in European consultations – they focused much more on their local affairs such as the nearby youth centre and the local animal shelter.

**Sociocultural Significance of the Internet For Civic/Political Engagement And Participation**

**Conceptualisation and use of the internet**

Although in academic research young people are often perceived as a techno-savvy ‘digital generation’ whose everyday life is completely embedded in the internet, it seems that this is not a completely accurate picture of young participants in Slovene focus groups. All participants proclaimed themselves as users of the internet and on
average had used the internet for more than 5 years, some even for 10 years. Nevertheless, their perceptions of the internet were in some cases far from being techno-enthusiastic.

First, young people were very wary about the issue of privacy and safety on the internet, especially social networking tools, such as IRC in the past and increasingly Facebook in the present.

Facebook proved to be very commonly used – almost all participants in the focus groups stated that they had a Facebook profile. An exception was the youngest group of high school pupils from Nova Gorica whose members stated that they do not use Facebook or any other social networking site. Those who do have a profile sometimes specifically stressed that they were not enthusiastic about social networking sites at the beginning but that since their friends were inviting them, or because 'all of their friends were on Facebook', they decided to create a profile. Several participants stressed the potential problems with privacy and safety online, such as potential stalking, paedophilia, identity theft etc., but none of them reported on having personal experiences with such problems. It seemed that they were aware of potential threats online and sometimes even legal problems that surround the use of social networking sites. Participants in one group, for example, talked about the recent Facebook’s plans to archive data on users even though the users decided to delete their own profile; they reacted very negatively against such plans, suggesting some opposition to the corporate aspects of social networking on the current internet.

Second, there seemed to be a clear preference on offline versus online contacts – if the participants had a chance to choose among face-to-face interactions and online interactions, they would usually prefer face-to-face contacts. They recognized online interactions as a complementary and not as a substitute way of communication.

The Internet is good to keep in contact. But this should not prevail in such I mean friendly relationship so that only the virtual world prevails
(male, approx. 22 years of age)

This was shown also from the fact that they almost always reported having online contacts only with people whom they personally know and that their conversation with peers from other countries was almost non-existent, except in cases where these were their friends from the offline acquaintances. This was, for instance, expressed by young people that were second generation of migrants from other Yugoslav countries who keep in touch with young people from those countries.

Many participants expressed the lack of time and lack of opportunities to see the other person (such as geographical distance) as the main reasons for using the internet for personal communication. One group, however, discussed the potential advantages of online personal communication, and there seemed to be a disagreement among those who specifically stressed the positive aspects of online personal communication: possibility to express yourself in a safer social environment (for example to express emotional affection) and to take time and reflect thoughtfully before answering.

At the other pole of the argument were those who claimed that online communication seems impersonal and that there is a greater possibility for misunderstanding, since there are no additional social clues to know what exactly was meant by the sender of the message.

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12 Facebook seemed to be the most commonly used social networking site (SNS) among the participants, the second often used SNS was NetLog. No one, however, used MySpace although they were aware of its existence.
Similarly, the young volunteers in the MISSS consulting programme ‘Young for Young’ expressed a clear preference for consulting through telephone and not through online forums or other online textual forms. When asked about other possibilities of online consulting through voice transmission, such as Skype, the participants responded that there would probably be some technical problems and that not enough of people use this technology yet. They were familiar with the existence of forum on the MISSS webpage, but they had never used it and did not express much enthusiasm on reviving this forum. The reasons they expressed for preferring the telephone over online textual communication was the fact that online they could not know whether another person really has a problem or if s/he is only pretending.

“You can see better through telephone, then through [the internet], I don’t know, you for example hear by the voice whether a person is fooling around or is serious. There on the forum you can be just so for nothing, so that you are. Over telephone though you see quickly who has serious problems and who hasn’t.”

(Girl, 17 years of age)

The girl who expressed this opinion, however, was a regular user of online forums and even posted an appeal for new volunteers on the online forum community Vijavaja.com. Contrary to her stated opinion on online consulting, she was very satisfied with the response rate of people online, who were interested in joining the ‘Young for Young’ volunteering programme. Regular use of online forums and satisfaction with civic mobilisation online apparently, for this person, does not mean that she prefers online consulting over telephone conversations.

On the other hand, participants in our Slovene focus groups expressed their sense of the embededness of the internet into their everyday practical lives, since it is needed everywhere, from high schools and universities (either within their studies or in dealing with bureaucratic issues), to banks, photography and other services. Mostly, they could not envisage their lives without the internet anymore.

Use of the internet versus old media

The internet was the most common source of information for most participants in the Slovene focus group interviews. Most users, especially those that were part of some civic organisation, expressed quite high levels of interest in everyday information seeking through mainstream newspapers’ and television’s websites. These websites were the most common source of information, although some users stressed that they preferred television or even newspapers over online media. The most important advantages of online information provision were first the financial availability — they could have not afford to buy so many newspapers as they sometimes read online. The second advantage was the speed and currency of information and the fact that they were not forced to ‘sit behind the television at 7pm’ (girl 17 age), but could see the news on their own time. The lack of time and the abundance of obligations was among the most commonly acknowledged problems for these young interviewees, preventing them to be informed as they would like to be or to participate civically if they would want to. The lack of time and the over-occupation with school-related chores was expressed among almost all of the younger participants who are still visiting high school. This problem was, however, not expressed among the older participants.

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13 Vijavaja.com is an online community created for young people. Although it does not primarily hold civic issues, the participants themselves sometimes want to talk about such issues. The editor of the website Matija Hiti was one of the participants of the CIVICWEB meeting in London on January 2008.
Third, some participants expressed the possible and negative aspects of the hyperlinking characteristic of new media. It was positive for them since some additional information could catch their attention and they could get informed on a much broader extent than they previously intended. Furthermore, some information which they would not go and look for themselves could become interesting to them while browsing through online news websites. On the other hand, it was pointed out by some participants that this is also a negative side of online hyperlinking, since it means that you spend much more time online than you previously intended.

Some participants expressed the possibility of verifying mainstream mass media content by checking foreign sources and analysing how the Slovene media copy from them.

Lots of these Slovene media houses reference information from foreign ones. You can check on them. They do that a lot. For example if they report on something from BBC you can check how credibly our own media report on that.

(Boy, 16 years of age)

Getting information from foreign media was expressed by some young people as an important asset of online information gathering and some reported on reading foreign news houses, most notably BBC and CNN. Understanding English language was not expressed as a problem by any of the participants, neither while reporting on their own use nor while analysing the European websites (see bellow).

They, however, expressed quite the opposite attitude towards information gathering through so called citizen or alternative media, specifically blogs. This was an important issue of discussion among a group of high school pupils who were fond of one popular Slovene alternative media Vest.si which was created by a former editor of a weekly political magazine. They perceived this media as funny but important at the same time. Contrary, however, they specifically stressed some negative comments regarding media content provided by citizens:

A: 'I don’ read blogs much often to read on news or political events. More to read on some other, musical scenes. When there is an expert writing. When it comes to news, then not.' (boy 18 years of age).
B: 'I like Vest.si. It is great! And it’s funny!
M: Did you say before that blogs are less reliable?
A: 'They are still more subjective, it is not so objective, there is more of an opinion there.'
C: 'I don’t read blogs at all.' (girl, 17 years of age)
B: 'This is such an subjective opinion. I mostly don’t agree with what they write and they get on my nerves.'
C: 'These things are written by people who have too much time on their hands and such.'
A: 'This could be part of publicist work by some journalists and professors.'
B: 'But I will not go and read this.'
D: 'Me neither, this would be the last thing I would do.' (girl, 18 years of age)

Use of the internet was among the most frequent concepts referenced when talking about intergenerational differences. Some participants expressed no differences between themselves and their parents in terms of internet use, especially those who were younger sometimes perceived their parents as having the same level of internet skills as they. One girl (16 years of age) said that her mother’s friends are starting to use Facebook and that it is completely normal for her mother to do so also. This spurred a discussion in the group about how desirable it is for the young participants that their parents participate in their online social networking. Others were opposed to this idea and perceived online social networking as the space for their own generation.

The internet and civic action

The internet was seen by most participants as an information gathering tool or a tool for personal communication. Similar to the producers of civic websites (WP7), the
young participants saw civic participation as mostly offline activity. They did not talk about civic action online unless specifically provoked by the interviewer and even on these occasions the young civic activists such as the young volunteers in the ‘Young for Young’ programme were not, as mentioned above, particularly enthusiastic about online civic action. In several cases the metaphor for passiveness was employed when talking about online activities – this metaphor specifically envisions online activity as something passive: ‘you just sit at home behind the computer’, in some cases they added ‘playing videogames all day’. Sitting behind the computer was thus associated by some participants as an activity of having too much spare time and as passive in relation to offline activity such as sports or spending time with friends.

Most young people were unsatisfied with the offline promotion in the form of leaflets and billboards in schools since they were of opinion that there was not enough information provided on such material. There were others, however, who still preferred receiving information in the form of billboards posted on the school walls. It was very rare for them to see the internet as the solution for problems with civic mobilisation and the provision of information among the young people.

There seemed to be two opposing views on the internet and civic mobilisation among the participants. One favoured the internet in terms of civic mobilisation among young people. Here we can count the girl who has tried on her own initiative to spread the appeal for volunteers in an online community Vijavaja.com. Here we can count also participants who were of the opinion that mobilisation through social networking sites should reach young people since ‘everyone is up there’. On the other hand, some participants disagreed and stressed that creating a group on a social networking site for example was not a ‘commercial proper’ and that old traditional ways should be used, such as television advertisements and street billboards. Furthermore, they stressed the problem with the abundance of information on the internet saying that there is too much of information provided and that it is difficult to find quality information unless one ‘stumbles’ upon it. Respondents were generally sceptical about the internet and its potential for civic action and forming relationships. Friendships on the internet were regarded as second-rate, not comparable to ‘real’ relationships offline. Similarly, the respondents active in ŠOS were sceptical about the potential of the internet to mobilise people, although at the same time they perceived certain advantages, like the ability to quickly reach a large number of people.

Among those who were active in the selected civic groups the internet was talked about as a specifically helpful tool for internal organisation for informing and discussing among each other through the use of emails. Such was the case of the group of Catholic scouts. They, furthermore, expressed that the webpage of their local scout branch was one of the best among the scouts of Slovenia. They perceived their own website as having two functions. The first was to present themselves to the outside public, meaning mostly older generations and the media (this is consistent with the perception of some of the young producers interviewed in WP7). The second was to present their own work to other scouts across Slovenia – their website serves for them as an internal communication mechanism with other scout groups. They, however, did not perceive the website as serving their needs for the mobilisation of new members. When confronted with the idea they thought it would probably be a good idea and started to talk about how they could make it more appealing, for example with the use of videos, for younger generations. Nevertheless, doubt was expressed that younger children, who were their target group, go browsing through the internet to find websites like theirs. Children are seen as much more likely to be motivated by someone who they know: parents, friends or the local priest in their case, since they are a Catholic organisation.
View of the civic/political websites

We showed civic websites to four of the focus groups and asked the young participants to navigate through the websites either by themselves (when they each had their own computer) or by providing instructions for the interviewer to navigate through the websites. Most responses from young people appeared to accord with the findings of the WP6 and WP8 analyses of civic websites. The only exception was the more negative perception of youth created blog website Autonomous Tribune by young participants than was perceived in the WP8 analysis. We as researchers analysed the website created by young people in the blog format (Autonomous Tribune) as an example of content which is created by young people. We supposed that this format would be perceived by young people as interesting, and as a medium which is close to their ways of civic participation because of the fact that it was created by young people. The reactions against this specific blog and blogs overall, however, were much more negative than expected (see above).

Similar to the perception of the internet as a personal tool to communicate with people who are known to the participants, the idea of transnational activism did not come up among the participants. Even in cases when they talked about European identity and the European Union they did not talk about participating in European online consultancies or online forums with young people from other European states.

Students at the Faculty of Social Sciences were asked to provide their opinion on the websites of the European Youth Portal, Eurodesk Slovenia and Young in Action, Slovenia. Overall they were positive about the three websites, specifically the two Slovene counterparts due to their design and colours. At the Youth in Action Slovenia website there was a video representing the Youth in Action Programme\footnote{Title of the video: Youth in Action: Be Involved!, \url{http://www.mva.si}} at that time. The participants liked the video both because it was created using a youth friendly form of a rap music and even more because of the fact that the video presents various potential possibilities for young people to be active. When confronted with another video that was posted on the website – an invitation to participate in online consultancy regarding European budgetary reform\footnote{Title of the video: EU Budget Reform – have your say!, \url{http://www.youtube.com/profile?v=Sq_E4-IMowg&user=eutube}} - their reactions were quite different. This video, was not greeted positively by the students. While they judged its informative value to be fairly high – they stressed that they learned something new about EU and its budget - they thought that the invitational gesture (‘It’s YOU who makes a difference’) was inappropriate and extremely funny. Furthermore, when navigating further from the video, they judged the process of online consultation in this instance to be extremely complicated and said that they would probably never participate.

Similarly, when confronted with videos provided at EUTube, participants in the group of young high school pupils, who all said that they follow online videos on YouTube, the video sharing portalsaid explicitly that they never search for such information and that if they were to stumble upon such a video, they would most certainly skip it. They perceived the Budgetary reform video as too serious, having nothing to do with young people. The topic was too complicated in their opinion and they felt there was nothing they could say on this topic since they do not have enough knowledge.

The websites MISSS and Volunteering.org both got uncomplimentary evaluations from young participants. MISSS because of its design (they judged it as outdated), lack of informative articles and the need for ‘better links’. This opinion was expressed by both...
the young participants who had not encountered the website before and the young volunteers in the MISSS’s ‘Young to Young’ programme. Volunteering.org was problematic for participants mostly because of its navigational structure (specifically that of the homepage) and the fact that they had difficulties finding information within this navigational structure.

Students did not respond well to the students’ blog website Autonomous Tribune. First they judged it as not enough regularly updated and they judged its design not as credible as other websites since it was created by ‘an amateur’ as they stated it. This is in contrast with the WP8 report on this website, where the website was judged as young peoples’ own autonomous online participation. It seems that even if a website was created by young people with the free online tools, this is not necessarily judged positively by young people. Combined with the discussion on blogs (see above), it is shown that blogs were not positively greeted among the young interviewees.

**Conclusions**

Although all of the focus group participants were regular internet users, their vision of the internet seems to be far from ‘techno-optimistic’, at least in relation to its potential for engendering civic participation. Young people in Slovenia did report on the embeddeness of the internet in their everyday lives; nevertheless, they also reported on some negative aspects of internet use: problems of privacy and safety, of credibility and over-abundance of information on the internet. Almost all participants favoured offline personal contacts over online and none of them reported on having extensive contacts with people whom they do not also know in offline personal life. Similar to the civic web producer’s perception of civic action as being an offline activity, the Slovene young interviewees also see civic action as happening mostly offline, not online. When using the internet for civic purposes it is mostly to gather or disperse information, like inviting people to take part in an event via mailing lists or Facebook groups or coordinating some activities via messenger or e-mail.

Among the websites analysed, most participants’ opinions were in accordance with the WP6 and WP8 analyses. They liked the design and the content of the two Slovene websites on European participation: Eurodesk Slovenia and Youth in Action Slovenia the most. The exception was their perception of blogs and the website Autonomous Tribune which they judged as less credible and less attractive than it was judged by the researchers in the report on youth civic websites.

A negative view of the traditional political system was expressed by almost all respondents, even the members of the youth branch of a political party, although in different ways. The un-engaged respondents tended to perceive the political system as far removed from their lives, something of an alien force that is at once omnipotent and unreachable. The respondents who were engaged also shared the view that the political system functions according to its own autopoietic laws. The perpetual quest for the acquisition of votes was mostly identified as that factor which causes it to put appearance before substantive matter. Participants framed this as a problem that would need to be solved, although none of them believed this to be a realistic goal for the near future. Here, the passivity of people was sometimes mentioned as a factor that enables the political system to remain unresponsive and that also makes organising civic initiatives difficult.

Motives for becoming active among participants were along a binary continuum. At one end there were altruistic motives, like identifying a problem and wanting to solve it or to work for the greater good. At the other, there were individualist motives, like acquiring certain skills and a social network, which they could not do outside of civic and political
organisations. Several active respondents stressed that for them becoming active was the start of a path of self-improvement. Some of them mentioned that they first became active because of factors that were quite coincidental to the area they got involved in, like being recruited by a friend or just wanting to socialise and have fun.

### Slovenia - Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Number</th>
<th>Focus Group Theme</th>
<th>Main issue covered (among others)</th>
<th>Number of participants (gender), age, race, ethnic group</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Students of Faculty of social sciences</td>
<td>Internet use, social activism</td>
<td>4 participants 1 male, 3 female, aged approx. 22</td>
<td>Ljubljana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Young people frequenting social centre Cona</td>
<td>Official politics and everyday life of participants</td>
<td>8 participants 7 male, 1 female, mostly second generation immigrants from Ex-Yugoslavia countries</td>
<td>Ljubljana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Grammar school pupils</td>
<td>European identity, local youth centre and local authorities</td>
<td>6 participants, 1 male, 5 female, aged approx. 17-18</td>
<td>Maribor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Young people active in cultural association Perkmandeljci</td>
<td>Cultural activities for young people</td>
<td>6 participants, 5 male, 1 female, aged from 19 to 25</td>
<td>Mežica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Catholic scouts</td>
<td>Internet use in everyday life and for civic participation</td>
<td>8 participants, 3 male, 5 female, aged from 15 to 23.</td>
<td>Novo mesto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Grammar school pupils</td>
<td>Internet use, social activism</td>
<td>5 participants, 2 male, 3 female, aged from 15 to 16</td>
<td>Novo mesto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Vocational school pupils</td>
<td>Internet use, feedback on websites</td>
<td>5 participants, 3 male, 2 female, aged 15</td>
<td>Nova Gorica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Young volunteers in 'youth to Youth' programme of MISSS</td>
<td>Slovenia-Croatia border dispute</td>
<td>8 participants, 1 male, 5 female, aged from 14 to 22</td>
<td>Ljubljana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Activists of the national student's union</td>
<td>Student politics</td>
<td>6 participants, 5 male, 1 female, aged from 19 to 23</td>
<td>Ljubljana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Members of two youth branches of political parties</td>
<td>Official party politics</td>
<td>5 participants, all male, aged approx. from 23 to 27 years of age</td>
<td>Ljubljana</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The aim of this report is to analyse and illustrate the ideas and views that different socio-cultural groups of young people have about the internet as a means for communication, learning and social participation. This report specifically tries to explore the reasons young people have for political/civic engagement and how the internet is helping them to pursue their interest in this field. The analysis also explores the degree of civic/political education of the participants and their response to civic content online. The analysis presented in this report draws from the findings of the previous stages of the Civicweb research project, and from Spanish data about young people and civic/political participation, young people and the use of the internet, and the recently reported changes in the use of the internet in Spain.

Focus group Selection

The group selection for this work package took into account the historical changes that have occurred in Spain, the results of national research on young people and civic participation, and the findings of the previous parts of the Civicweb study.

a. Recent history and changes in civic/political participation

The 13 focus groups that form the Spanish sample took place between April 2008 and February 2009. We must mention here that people in the 15-25 year old group are not a large group in Spain, due to a decrease of the birth rate that began in 1976. Analysis of the data collected in the online survey for WP9, and other studies, show that the present generation of young people is characterised by considerably better access to education than in previous generations, a growing tendency to get emancipated later from the parents, and an everyday use of the internet, by those who have access to this technology. The difficulties young people encounter when trying to find a job related to their training, and the impossibility of paying sky high prices for housing (both to rent and to buy), has many young people in their late twenties living at their parent’s house, and pursuing higher education studies.

For the young people who participated in the focus groups, the global world economic crisis is in the background, but these youngsters have grown up during years of economic euphoria that have, in general, provided them with more material facilities and expectations of social success than their parents had when at their age. The data

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17 Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación (AIMC) (2009). Navegantes en la Red. Madrid. The survey reports that everyday access to internet is related to the availability of broadband internet connection. This access, although increasing, is still far from being general.
from qualitative research done in 2004 on the views and uses of the internet\textsuperscript{18} pointed at communication and entertainment as the main ways in which young people use the web. These orientations were confirmed in the results from WP9, and in a recent national study\textsuperscript{19}. Recent data also shows that, although the economic digital divide is narrower now than five years ago, it still persists. Therefore, young people who use the internet on an everyday basis belong mainly to the middle class or upper middle class groups of population. The role played by social class and educational background in developing an interest in being political/civic active was found relevant in the results from WP 9 and in the I. González (2008) study. Since we have recent national data on the use of the internet among young people, but not on the possible use of the internet for civic/political participation, we decided to form most of our focus groups with people that were already civic/politically active. Nevertheless, these young people also gave us their visions on the internet in general, which seem to coincide with the communication and entertainment orientations mentioned above.

In very recent years, a constant flow of immigrants from Latin America, North Africa and Eastern Europe has created a more multicultural multiracial reality in Spain. However, since immigration is a very new phenomenon, it has not been possible to find groups of young people who are civic/political active, maintaining their immigrant identity, in the Spanish society. Since we could not have access to this new part of Spanish society—it’s still too early- the type of groups we found that are civic/politically active represent somehow the civic and political concerns that can be found in an important part of Spanish society, and that are the result of the significant events that shaped the country during the second half of the Twentieth century. These events are three years civil war (1936-1939), followed by a forty years dictatorship (1939-1975), and a fast change into a modern and stable democracy, while the country was being rebuilt and a competitive economy emerged.

After the Constitution of 1978, the country re-organised itself in a system close to federalism, and every former Spanish region became an autonomous government. During the first period under the rule of the Socialist party (PSOE) (1982-1993), Spain became more known internationally, and also accepted as a stable democracy. Significant events of that period include the entering of Spain as a member of the European Union in 1985, and the celebration of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona. During the government of José Maria Aznar (1996-2004), right wing ideology -that had been somehow hidden during the previous years- and the concept of Spain as a centralised country, returned. This tendency towards centralisation provoked a new wave of Spanish nationalism that, in turn, generated a new wave of non-Spanish nationalism in Catalunya and in the Basc country. In the Spain of President Zapatero, several problems remain to be solved: a) the arrival of new immigrants and the lack of a good plan on how to organise this new reality, b) a large gap between the low salary levels and the high cost of basic needs such as housing, and c) the negative side effects of an economic growth that has been based on tourism (mainly mass tourism) and on the massive building of new housing projects. Buying real estate has been seen by many as an investment, and therefore subject of speculation, with prices on the constant rise. This, in turn, has generated great difficulties for young people to have access to a place to live.

b. Specific issues that generate civic/political participation


\textsuperscript{19} Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación (2009) op.cit.
The analysis of the websites, the interviews with the producers, and the result of the survey among the 15-25 year old group that were done as previous part of the Civicweb research, pointed out that the Spanish websites and the Spanish producers represent both the tradition and the changes that have occurred in the Spanish political and civic scene. Therefore, from analysing websites and interviewing producers we had identified political ideologies with long lasting tradition such as Catalan nationalism versus Spanish nationalism, but also global civic movements, institutional efforts to reach young people, non profit local and international organisations, and single issue activism that mobilize people both online and offline. Also, data from recent studies (Gonzalez 2008, Megias 2006) shows that young people seem to care more about politics now than a few years ago, but that their links with political parties have decreased. According to that study, the new form of political involvement has a growing tendency to change from militant activism to extraordinary activism aimed at getting attention and generating impact.

In Spain, the issues that generate political/civic activity are both new and specific to this generation, but also long term issues. Among the new issues we have, for example, complaints about the high prices of housing, or the short term and low paid jobs, or the integration of Spain in the European Education System (Bolonia process). These are new political concerns among young people. However, these concerns do not substitute long term ones such as the traditional left wing/right wing approach to civic/political themes, or the conflict between nationalist identities: Spanish identity versus Catalan identity, or Basque identity. Traditional forms of civic participation, such as volunteer work are also part of young people’s activities. There are also the civic activities of people whose voice was not heard before, because they belong to some of the many traditionally considered as minority groups in the Spanish society.

According to the above, we searched for focus groups that could somehow fall into the following categories:

**Traditional political parties.** We have three groups under this category: 1) Members of the Partido Popular (PP), a national right wing political party, 2) Members of Partido Socialista de Catalunya, (PSC), the Catalan branch of the Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE), a left wing party, and 3) members of the Joventut Socialista de Catalunya (JSC), the youth branch of the Catalan Socialist Party.

**Volunteer work.** We have two groups under this category: 1) Members of youth associations, and 2) Members of a local branch of the international NGO Red Cross.

**New generational issues.** We have three groups under this category. 1) Members of the organisers of the students’ movement against the European Education System (Bolonia agreements). This group has been very active since November, when students in many Spanish universities locked themselves in the buildings, lived there, stopped academic activities, and used the internet to circulate information on the Bolonia process from their point of view. 2) Internet users who have never participated in any offline or online political/civic action, and 3) Bloggers.

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6 This is the first generation in post civil war Spain that cannot afford to buy a place to live. The combination of easy access to jobs, (that became permanent positions in most of the cases) and the low cost of housing in previous generations, makes this new generation very conscious that they are going downwards in the socio-economic ladder.

22 See appendix 1 for information on the focus groups themes, number of participants, gender, age and location.
Minority issues. We have three groups under this category. 1) Blind youngsters that help and get helped in the ONCE (National Organisation for the Spanish Blind People) 2) Gay men that help people in a gay and lesbian organisation, named Casal Lambda and located in Barcelona. And 3) Unió de Joves Pagesos (Young Farmers Union), a group created to defend the interests of the farmers. The youngsters that participate in this focus group come from small villages of the Penedés area, a place well known for the production of wine and cava.

Identity issues. Here we have two groups: 1) The JERC group (Joventut d’Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya), members of a youth organisation linked to the Catalan political party that claims for the independence of Catalunya from Spain. 2) The Devil Women group of the town of Mataró. This last group represents cultural traditions. In this case the festive activities using pyrotechnics. This group, and other similar ones, have got together and use the internet to complain against the recently approved EU directive that forbids the use of pyrotechnics if people are less than 15 meters away from the fire. Traditional festivals in many areas of Spain use fire. Examples of this are Las Fallas in Valencia and the dragons and devils that throw fire during traditional festivities in almost all the towns of the Catalan area. This tradition is over 800 years old.

c. The process of creating the focus groups

Although the development of the focus groups went well, we should mention some of the difficulties we encountered in the process of creating the groups. Besides the usual difficulties in this type of research, (fewer people than expected attending the sessions, for example), we should mention here that there were also interesting groups whose activities were relevant to this research and that we could not put together because all of their members were older than 25. This was the case of the group claiming the preservation of green paths around cities and towns, and also of the producers of www.Mileuristas.com (an online effort to complain about the low salaries that young people are receiving from their work), and www.VdeVivienda.com (an online effort to complain about the high prices young people can not afford to pay for a place to live on their own). We also found the age problem when trying to access to groups that were active fighting the violence against women. These women’s groups were important because, besides illustrating different forms of civic action, they also represent an issue that has become important in the political agenda. A recently created Ministry of Gender Equality – that has the issue of violence against women as a top priority– confirms this view. Unfortunately, the women active in the three groups we contacted, were all older than 25 years old.

Social and Cultural Interests of the Respondents

A general access to education with independence of the family’s economic background, the relevance of Facebook and messenger as generational communication tools, the family’s political/civic background as the basis for civic/political interests, the different conceptualisations of the word politics, and the direct involvement in local, and in short term civic/political specific issues, are some of the patterns that could be found at the basis of the social and cultural interests of the young people that participated in the focus groups discussions.

a. Gender, identity, and sociopolitical issues

Even though, the results of WP9 reported that the gender digital divide in the use of the
internet still persists, in our focus groups we found that there do not seem to be important gender differences in the way young people use the web. The use of Facebook, both to chat with friends and to organise all sorts of meetings, offers a picture of the internet as a very valuable information and communication tool that a whole generation has integrated into their daily routines. This seems to prove correct the idea that many of the producers we interviewed for WP7 have of young people as being all time and competent internet users. However, while producers basically refer to young people as potential receivers of information, demanding that to be updated, all the participants in the focus groups gave more emphasis to the social uses of the internet. The value of the internet as a way to communicate with their peers is something that is highly regarded by all the participants in our sample. While the parent’s generation still believes that the internet can hamper communication, young people explain how the social use of the internet can increase every day contact with others, without losing any of the positive aspects of face to face communication. An extract from the JSC group could illustrate this point:

Moderator: Some people think that the intense use of the internet leads to no communication among people. Have you heard this opinion?
A: Nooo
M: Nooo
C: Well, face to face communication, yes, but…
M: It's the opposite
A: With the webcam you can also see each other
C: You can use the webcam and the microphone and you can talk to someone that is very far away. I mean, I think the internet is a tool that does not encourage face to face communication but encourages communication. You are working at your computer and the same time you can be talking with a lot of people.
A: Besides, it's cheaper
...
C: It's a very useful tool. Sometimes you're told that the messenger is not good for you. But it is not true. Sometimes, for example in the weekends, when you're doing your school homework and you don’t understand something...well, there’s always someone online...and you can ask them if you have a doubt...it's a very useful tool
A: Yes, perhaps you wouldn't use the telephone, but since the other person is there, online...

It is important to mention here that the use of social networks, especially Facebook, is also referred as a way to circulate information on civic/politics activities, such as meetings that will take place offline. This use was mentioned in several groups, for example, the JSC, the Bolonia students, the JERC, the young farmers, and Devil Women groups.

With the exception of one group that was chosen because they declared themselves the internet users with no interest in political/civic participation, the rest of the groups of our sample had different degrees of civic/politic involvement. However, according to recent data, these youngsters represent a minority in the Spanish society. A survey conducted by the Instituto Nacional de la Juventud in 2006,23 reported that, for most young people from 15 to 29 years old, political participation means basically to go to vote on election days. Very few people join the youth branches of the main political parties. A 7,1% (located mainly in the older group) have a lot of interest in politics, 31,8% has no interest or very little, a 20,8% get irritated by politics, 31,1% are indifferent, and for a 29% politics are boring. Similar data was reported in the results of the online survey for WP9. Besides, in the case of Spain, citizenship education was outside of the school curriculum since after Franco’s death, due basically to the fact citizenship education was linked to a specific way of seeing politics and society –the one favoured during the dictatorship. Nevertheless, the need for a compulsory and necessary civic education is often claimed. The studies of Megias (2006) and González

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(2008) mentioned before, also found that people with higher education and/or that come from families with a good education level are, in general, more prone to political/civic participation.

Our experience with the focus groups seems to confirm some kind of link between civic action and educational level. For example, none of the participants in the focus groups was a school drop-out. Most of them were students, from high school, to professional training, to university. Some also worked part-time, and very few had completed a degree and had a full time job. The families’ backgrounds were different though, and most of them did not have a higher education background. But the influence of families that have been political/civic active could be seen in many of the groups. For example, the family tradition of membership in the Socialist party was important in the case of the JSC group. But the tradition of families active in civic/political issues, whose activities were not related to political parties played also an important role in other groups, such as the young farmers group.

Besides family background, the stimuli to engage in civil action could also come from what young people were studying. For example, we spoke to bloggers that are studying Communication or Political Sciences, to young farmers that are studying gardening or how to rule a winery, or to one of the members of the gay-lesbian group who is studying social integration. In this last case, his civic action combines both his identity as a homosexual person, and his awareness of the importance of helping other people, with the professional training he’s receiving:

K: In December I organised a meeting here in Casal Lambda24 because I belong to the group of teachers that teach the deaf, and then I continued here, helping out, as a practice.

Moderator: What is that of the group of deaf people in Casal Lambda?

K: The group of deaf people is a group inside the gay-lesbian group, that want to encourage activities and proposals to achieve better communication, to live well all together...Because there is a lot of discrimination of deaf people in society. Because of that there are activities and things that the deaf don’t have access to, because they don’t hear. So, we organise our little activities to help them. We do things with them that they could not do otherwise.

Moderator: Why did you join in?

K: Because my teacher is...the teacher of...social integration of this place, he’s been teacher here for many years already. And he said that he needed someone to work as social integrator. Someone who knows sign language, and that he wanted a man. And then he asked me. And here I’m, I told him yes...,.

The 2008 Gonzalez study mentioned that young people seem to be more inclined to participate in a NGO than in a political party, but often the young people that get involved in civic action do so in more than one place. In contrast, other young people show no interest at all in civic or political participation. Youth organisations, generally joined during the childhood years, are often the first contact that young people have with civic participation. Most of these organisations encourage young people’s participation in their communities’ activities. Some of the members of these organisations do stay and work as voluntary counsellors during their teenage years and until they are in their twenties. This background was quite common among the participants in our focus groups. And it sometimes seems to be at the basis of their interest in social issues. One of the participants in the Bolonia students’ focus group referred to his background this way:

Moderator: Besides being in this student organisation, do you participate in any other civic/political activity?

B: Yes, well. I’m counsellor in a youth organisation. Well, now I’m working intensively with the Bolonia issue, but here all of us belong to some movement or other. We want to do things for society.

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24 An organisation and civic centre located in Barcelona that gives information and organizes activities for gay and lesbian people.
In our in-depth interviews with the producers for WP7 we found that some producers argued that young people are not less interested in politics than the rest of the population. These producers believe that the lack of interest is general, global, but that people who demonstrate in the streets are mostly young. However, in the focus groups discussions we found that, in general, people that belong to a political party seem to think that other people are not like them, that the others are not interested in politics. This type of opinion was found in the PP group. The participants in this group showed a tendency to think that young people are not interested in history or in who is governing the country at the moment, although they do have interest in solving the problems that affect them. And these problems –housing, education, etc. - ask for political solutions.

C: It is not that political websites are boring… I believe… Of course, I speak thinking of my classmates as an example, they… well. If you talk to them about politics they’re just not interested. They have no interest in politics. They don’t care who is in charge of the government, and one day, while we were watching a TV program – it was called El Método Gonzo- there were questions addressed to young people about politics, and there were people who didn’t know who was the president of our government, neither which was the leader party in the government.

H: Who is that? (Joking)

C: And the Spanish Civil War…, which one? The first, or the second one? (joking)

X: This is like that… and these types of answers were the best ones...

C: There were… Of course, young people, I think that …, I don’t know because I’ve not lived in other generations, but I think that my generation doesn’t care. Politically they don’t care one way or another.

X: … There are things that people don’t have interest in… but housing, having a job, education, are and should be more of a priority.

C: Of course, because, for example, in the election programs, they talk about raising the pensions for our seniors, but this, of course, I understand that, what interest would have a 15 year old on this issue?

X: I care about this.

C: Well, because you’re interested in politics. But 15 year olds don’t care if pensions rise 10%, of course. This doesn’t concern them. But if they would talk about universal themes, they would like it. It would concern them because, of course, scholarships, this is an example of something that interests the young.

The above example could perhaps illustrate a tendency among members of political parties to understand politics as party politics. However, a different concept of politics was referred by many of the participants in other focus groups. A good example of the two basic conceptualisations of the word politics – a) party politics and politicians, and b) how to make society work- could be found in this extract from the gay and lesbian group discussion:

Moderator: What do you think when you hear the word politics?
Everybody: LOL (Laughing out loud)
K: The thing is that I, about politics, I’m very limited but, I don’t know, I suppose that it is who is in charge, no? Politics… politicians that tell us what to do, tell me… I don’t know, this is how I see it. Politicians are the ones who tell what a society has to do.

Moderator: And what would you say, G?
G: The thing is that politics is everything… I don’t know, to me politics is, I mean, to make society function, and it is the engine that makes society to function, for good and for bad, but this is how it is. All societies need politics. Inside each society there is politics, it is what makes societies function.

Moderator: Do you think that what Casal Lambda do is politics?
G: Yes, yes

Moderator: Why?
G: Because Casal Lambda interacts with society, thus it is trying to change society also in some way, making homosexuality something normal in society and letting political institutions see that they need to change the way they see homosexuality.

Moderator: What do you think of political parties?
K: The thing is that all that is very complicated. I, I don’t belong to any, because I don’t care. I vote for what I want to achieve, but I think that what is going on now at the political parties is not
to try to make things better. They only fight with each other. I think that what political parties and politicians should do is to get themselves concerned about what is going on...This is my opinion.

G: (LOL). I, political party, I won't say which one, but I was in one..., I'm still there, this means that the opinion could be, well..., that my opinion has been changing also. Their first priority (of the political parties) is their interests, and they look too much at their asses among themselves. We could say that they do not work enough to make society better, and I agree...this, I agree with him, totally...LOL

And the Bolonia students group provided a good example of politics in the way they see what they were doing with their students protests:

A: If we understand politics as what politicians do nowadays, and what the media do about it, then it is bullshit...eeeh corruption, demagogy, nothing, nothing in a positive sense. However, if we understand that what we're doing here is politics, then politics are fantastic, are a wonderful thing.

Moderator: Is this real politics?
A: To me, yes. This is direct politics, I mean authentic politics. We take a stand, reason it, and learn and give training to others, and we don't care about demagogy, about listening to the speeches of politicians that have no sense, no basis. Here we make things happen, no? All the political process is more authentic.

In general, many of the members of our focus groups accused politicians of concentrating in defending their ideologies against the ideologies of the other parties, and, therefore, not making enough efforts to think about what the real problems are and in what ways they could be solved. However, there seems to be a strong ideological identity (party discipline) in the groups of youngsters that belong to a political party. For example, the issue of nationalism (Spanish nationalism and Catalan nationalism), and the right/left wing ideologies can be found in the comments of the PP group. This political party represents Spanish nationalism all over Spain. In Catalunya, the group is especially active in this sense because its ideology clashes with that of Catalan Nationalism. One group feeds the other and makes them stronger in their position. An example of the nationalism issue, from the Spanish nationalism point of view, was found in the comments about the institutional website www.cnjc.cat that we showed to this group:

X: Well. Is this...is this official, and is part of the government of the Generalitat? Or it is an official thing?
Moderator: I believe so
X: For this reason there should be a plural approach
C: But it is not there, it is not there
X: I go down in the page, but, for example, you can only read in the two official languages of Catalunya.
H: Catalan or Catalan
X: That this..., besides, that if it is from the government, then, if there is a plurality of people in Catalunya, that there are people who speak Catalan and people who speak Spanish and there are people...

The above quote illustrates the existing debate in Catalunya between those who defend that Catalan should be the only official language in Catalunya, and those who feel that Spanish should be used more.

Specific political identity was seen as an important issue among the PP group. This group tends to identify and value as a good source of information only what comes from their own political party. They also tend to visit only the website of their political party. Perhaps, in this case, this attitude responds, again, to the fact that Partido Popular does not have many sympathizers in Catalunya. Therefore, these who belong to the party feel perhaps strongly about it, always defending the ideology that they feel constantly challenged. Therefore, the members of this specific party reject to even get in contact with the arguments that come from other ideologies.
The distinction between politics understood as party politics, or as social issues, was clear among the young people that had civic activity but were not in political parties. While most of them found politics boring and not interesting, they were concerned and active about trying to bring about changes in the things that affect their everyday lives. They also showed concern about more universal problems such as wars and violence. However, some of them, the members of the ONCE\textsuperscript{25} group, for example, were only interested in changing things that affect them directly as blind people:

\begin{quote}
Moderator: And you, F, what would you like to change?
F: Nothing comes to my mind
Moderator: Well, think of something
F: Besides making the street that goes to my school a little wider…it's too narrow…and two street lights are on the way, …nothing else
A: In front of the school there is a street light that is not in the right place. I don't know if you've noticed F
F: Yes, well…there are so many things in that area..
Moderator: You, F, what would you say?
F: …Let's see…things that aren't right. There are subway lines where nobody says the name of the stations. We have to count the stops…
A: Traffic lights with sound
Moderator: What else, F?
F: …there are many, but now…now I don't know
\end{quote}

However, and in spite of the above comment, we found that, in general, the participants in our focus groups showed a wider range of concerns. We also found that the main sources for social consciousness seem to be the family, the news about specific events, friends, and the things that affect people in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, having the knowledge, being conscious of, and even being affected by a problem that could have a political solution do not necessarily prompt civic action, or maintain it. How, when and why people become interested in civic/political issues varies a great deal among the groups and individuals in our sample.

\subsection*{b. View of offline engagement}

The 2006 survey conducted by the Instituto Nacional de la Juventud\textsuperscript{26} mentioned that politics are basically discussed at home, and that television is the main source of information on politics. The same source reports that about 70\% of young people participate in demonstrations, but only 22\% attends meetings where a political discussion is going on, and 20\% actively participate in raising funds or giving money to help in a social or political activity. Nevertheless, when there is a natural or man made catastrophe, young people volunteer to go to help. For example, when the boat Prestige, loaded with petrol, sank off the coast of Galicia in 2003, many young people travelled there and spent days cleaning up the beaches. Also, the day after the March 11\textsuperscript{th} 2004 Al-Qaeda bombing in Madrid young people participated actively in the organisation of the nationwide demonstration and in the demonstration itself. People were informed about the demonstration through messages on their mobile phones.

The above cases perhaps illustrate a tendency of young Spanish people to participate in specific events that affect society as a whole. In cases such as the demonstrations after the Al-Qaeda bombing, people that do not consider themselves interested in politics did participate. However, from what we hear in the focus groups, the tendency to get politically/civic engaged in a more regular basis does not come from this type of specific events. Offline engagement seems to be, more often than not, linked to family background in civic/political activities. This appears to play an important role in the decision of some people to be politically active. The following extract from the JSC group could be a good example of this tendency.

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{25}ONCE. Organización Nacional de Ciegos. National Organization to help the visual handicapped
\textsuperscript{26}Magías, Eusebio (coordinador) (2006) Jóvenes y política (FAD). INJUVE, Madrid
\end{quote}
Moderator: Why did you join the party?
A: I decided to join the Party when I was in high school...Well, my family has always been socialist...but I started to feel like I could do something to create a better world while I was studying history in high school...I don't know, when I learned what happened in the past...In this world...
Moderator: Do you have the intention to work towards creating a better world?
A: I joined a political party in order to do this, to try to change the world.
Moderator: And you?
M: (20 years old). I joined the Party almost 8 years ago.
Moderator: Some years already
M: At home we've always related to politics, because my father was appointed to work for the Party and me...since I was a little girl. I could not join the party because I was too young...but I always went with my father and helped him to organise things...And then, through him, I met people from the Youth branch, and they told me to join them, if I wanted to...I liked politics, so I joined the JSC when I was 14 ...
(M continues talking about how she became more involved)
Moderator: And your political activity gives you personal satisfaction?
M: Yes...it all began because I lived politics at home, but little by little I became more and more involved in politics. And I enjoy it very much.
Moderator: And you?
C: I joined the Party one year ago...I say the same as M. I come from a family with a strong socialist tradition...almost all my family is socialist...In the area of Andalusia, in the little towns of the Jaen province where my family comes from, there is a strong socialist tradition...my mother started to get involved in the party, she worked organising the city council elections...I wanted to join the party ...My way of thinking was very similar to my mother's, this is to say, I wanted to fight in order to change the world...in order not to sell ourselves for things.

Similar opinions were also expressed in the youth associations group that mentioned that what they hear at home is at the base of their political ideology, and that it's very difficult to learn about other political options. Family tradition in political involvement seems to influence not only in the case of parents involved in politics, but also in other members of the family, such as uncles or siblings. When talking about their families' involvement in politics, the subject led to different types of civic involvements. This was found in some groups, such as the Young farmers, and the Bolonia students. Here is an extract from the Bolonia students' focus group that could illustrate this tendency:

Moderator: Do you have family members that are politically involved?
A: Yes, some, yes.... and in the past, more. Yes, many of them are. My father was militant in political parties...not now, though. Also, I have an uncle and, well...a good part of my family.
Moderator: And you, do you also have family members that are politically involved?
B: No, my parents are not. They have political ideas but they have never mobilised themselves. But my brother is involved. Not in political issues, but in cultural issues.
Moderator: Does he participate in a civic type of activity?
B: Yes, it's, that. Well...he does juggling. And he organises workshops to teach juggling to the kids at the youth center. And he's organising a group that will go all over Europe, and they have sponsorship to do that...

The type of studies that young people were pursuing, and the influence of the group of friends acted also as an stimuli for political participation in some cases. For example, the participants of the JERC—the Catalan separatist group- were all students of Sociology and of Political Sciences. Only one of the three members of that group had a family tradition of political involvement. And another member of this group had hidden from his family his militancy in the party, for many months.

Many of the participants in the focus groups claimed that they were willing to associate with other people in order to change things. However, some of them also mentioned that they do not have confidence that the politicians will listen to them or pay them any attention. The members of the ONCE group expressed their lack of confidence in politicians this way:
Moderator: Do you think that when people get together to ask for something to change, the change takes place?
F: Sometimes
A: Most of the times, no
F: 98% of the times, no
Moderator: Have you ever tried?
A: No. I said that because I see many things, how people complain about something but the politicians don’t listen. They don’t care if ten thousand people complain or a million people complain
Moderator: Do you think politicians don’t listen?
F: They’re very busy, eh?
Everybody: LOL

And the Bolonia students group talked about the big gap that exists between politicians and people, and of the tendency that politicians have to show interest in what people ask, only when they need to save face, to appear that they care, and only when the public opinion demands a public answer about a specific issue:

A: Yes, we’ve contacted politicians…what happens is that, well, I mean…It seems that we live in two different worlds. They are inside their own world, with bureaucracy, big offices, official cars…while we live the daily reality of the university, the classes, and then we have our jobs, and then we come back here and live together, and fight for a future…
B: But also politicians decide to talk to you only when they want to have their picture taken…well to appear in the photo if it interest them…You’re talking to them and you know that they’re not going to do anything, this means that…probably they won’t even talk to someone in a higher rank about us. And everything will turn out into nothing…

The opinions expressed above were not shared by other groups, especially those that have political representatives more at hand and that have had the experience of personal political involvement, or that have a family member active in local politics and working in the same issues that they are working on. The following example from the ONCE group could illustrate this other way or understanding the relationship between politicians and people:

Moderator: I see that you have many family members involved in politics
F: Yes, but I don’t feel that I’m better informed in politics just because I’ve family involved in politics.
Moderator: But you have family tradition
F: Yes, I think so
Moderator: And do you see political activity as negative as your friends here?
F: No, no, because I’m used to…well to listen to, I don’t know…At home we talk, and since we talk about the things that take place in Torelló. For example, Torelló is a town with many people that criticises many things, but I can also see the positive sides in many things. Although I think that there are many negative things, as well. There is a little of everything.

Being involved in local politics, and having politicians at hand seems to modify the general perception of politicians as being far removed from people’s real problems. At the same time, involvement in local politics seem to be more satisfying in the sense that it is easier to see the direct results of their work. To see a street that gets fixed, to obtain the authorisation to create a youth center, are examples of achievements that some participants mentioned. The farmers group, for example, had positive feelings about participating in local politics because the results were there, easy to see. However, the members of this group also expressed concern that civic/political involvement is something that interests only to very few people. And these people are always the same individuals. Thus, they end up working too much and getting burnt out.

Moderator: What would you like to be different in what surrounds you?
M: Things that one could see. Things that could have an everyday application, you know? That were not so general…like, I don’t know there is a lot of talking but nothing changes at the everyday level, you know?…I don’t know…We’re going to do this, and we do it, you know? And not “I’ll do this some day” and ufff! That day never arrives, you know?
...  
M: Well, I think that local politics are not as bad as general politics  
A: Because it’s more…sometimes the person and not the party, no?  
M: Of course, maybe, I feel more represented at the local level  
A: The other one is very…  
J: For example, they built a new place for us –young people- not too long ago and all that…In this sense they behaved quite well.  
**Moderator:** Would you like to participate to do things?  
A: Me, yes  
J: I, to a certain degree, I mean…it depends…if it’s for a long time or for a short time  
M: Yes, everybody gets involved. I get involved, but when you’re the one that have to push for things to happen, I, I know what it’s like and no…no, because you get burnt out.

The idea of feeling burnt out by maintaining a constant political/civic activity, or finding out that there are always the same people doing all the work while others just take advantage of what is being done, is nothing new. Probably in the families with a political/civic tradition this must have been a common complaint. However, by the way the participants in our focus groups refer to their parents, there seems to be a generational change not only in the way they can be politically active, besides party politics and volunteering, but also in making their beliefs public or not. This situation is perhaps the result of a time lived by the older generations – civil war, dictatorship – in which voicing their ideology could send them to prison, or get them killed. The gay and lesbian group referred to this change of perspective and to the resilient fear of fascist dictatorship amongst the older generation:

**Moderator:** Do you think that your parents see politics and political activity in a different way?  
K: Perhaps no, I think that they see it the same way, what happens is that our generation feels more inclined to say things, to express what they feel. But our families are a little afraid. They’ve always been afraid of what is being said, because of what they lived.  
**Moderator:** Do you think there’s still a problem?  
G: Yes, more or less what you all have been saying. When I began studying Political Sciences, I have a grand aunt who is over 80 years old and she said: “Don’t get involved in politics…someday everything could change and what happened before could happen again.”

An important difference between the way young people and their parents’ generation are involved in civic/politic activities is the existence of generational issues, along with the more general ones. From what we heard in our focus groups sessions, it seems that nowadays young people get involved to ask for changes that they perceive affect them directly as young people – education, housing, access to the job market The civic/political activities of young people in their parents’ generation were directed only towards the change of the society as a whole. We need to remember here that the parents of the participants in our focus group were young during the last years of the dictatorship, and had political priorities that ranged from eliminating censorship from newspapers and movies, to legalising trade unions, or to gaining the right to demonstrate in the streets. Now, some of the parents that were active in the early 70’s, are not active anymore, but those who are, have important limitations with regards to the amount of time that they can dedicate to this type of activities. Spanish working and meals schedules force most people to get back home after 8:00 pm. So, groups involved in civic/politic activities (as well as in any leisure activity for that matter) can only meet after 10:00 pm, when everybody has finally had dinner. Thus, the older people are, the harder it is for them to get involved in any out off-work activity that will bring them back home after midnight during the working days of the week.
The Sociocultural Significance of the Internet for Civic/Political Engagement and Participation

Within the relevant themes of this section –concept and use of the internet versus old media, the internet and political education, and view of civic/political websites, some patterns emerge. The most important ones are perhaps the uses and limitations on the information that appears in the internet, the role of the internet to increase social consciousness but not to create it, the questioning of the potential of the internet to teach people to think critically, the influence of previous and ongoing offline action in order to feel confident in the use of the internet, the rapidly increasing importance of Facebook as a way to circulate information and organise offline activities, and the limitations of institutional websites in terms of access, content, design and interactivity.

a. Use of the internet versus use of old media

The participants in the focus groups have, in general, mentioned television and newspapers as their main source of information on politics. To read the internet version of newspapers was also an option mentioned by many of the participants. These argue that the online press is convenient because that way it is possible to read the newspaper for free. To follow up in the internet a piece of news was also referred as a common way to learn about something that interests them. Participants also mentioned to read local press – both in paper and in the internet - and the newspapers that are distributed for free. Interestingly, television was not put into question about the trustfulness of its information, but the internet was. The potential of the internet to find anything you're looking for was mentioned in several occasions, but so were the possible limitations of the type of information you can find there. These limitations included not only reliability but also issues such as information not being updated, and also finding too much information. The Red Cross volunteers, among others, mentioned some of the above limitations.

J: Every time I've tried to look for something on the internet, I've found it
I: It depends
B: What I see is that the pages need to be updated or discarded if necessary. We go to Google and click Red Cross Mataro and each time we visit the website we find things that are too old...Sometimes there are just too many pages of something, for example page 1 of 215, and then there are things that don't exist anymore. Or you find the same thing in many pages

The issue of manipulation, and concern about the credibility of the information in the internet was an important topic of discussion in the PP group. These youngsters considered that not only the paper press has more credibility than the internet, but also that printed books can be trusted more than the information on the internet. The members of this group did not seem to consider that the information of the books might not be up to date. The editorial controls a book is subjected to, in contrast with the lack of control and the anonymity of authorship in the internet, seem to be the basis of their credibility, when the participants of this focus groups compared books with the information in the internet.

H: Generally, in the internet you don't have the same information as in a book
X: Besides, a book is more reliable
H: Because...the author knows about this, about what is written there, or the author must have known the issue he is writing about, and then this would be much better than in the internet. One writes...about anything.
C: Anyone, of course. This is what happens with wikipedia. There are articles where people complain about, but you have a mark telling you that this might be manipulated, of course. For example, if you look for Rodriguez Zapatero, if the article is written by someone with the Socialist ideology is not going to be the same as if the article is written by...

In contrast with the opinion expressed by the members of the PP group, the participants of the PSC group were very much in favour of the internet as a reliable
source of information. They seem to agree that the internet is very valuable because it gives the option to learn not only about the mainstream political parties but also about other groups that would not have a voice otherwise. Even though the participants of this group recognised that there are many lies in the internet, they believe that the possibility of having access to such a large amount of information can help people to learn about society from different angles, and not only from the sides taken by newspapers that represent a given ideology. And this, in turn, gives the possibility of contrasting information.

D: …but the good thing of the internet is that, so far, it’s a territory with no control. Then, if you go to the internet and you want to find something…then you can go to the mainstream parties, but you can also find a lot of information, about civic political movements, or parties that have not been recognized as such. The internet is such a vast space that everybody has space to leave there their opinions. Then it’s easier to find information there than in the old media. The newspapers are, some in one ideological side, some in another ideological side. But in the internet there is all type of information. Many of them are lies, because since the texts are anonymous… but I think that the diversity in the internet can help people to get information, no? And they could say, well: “You and I are thinking this…” And I’ve heard of cases of websites that have started in the internet and they’ve became super famous, and of course they’ve found a place in the professional, and I think that in this sense…

M: There are so many things in the internet that you wonder what is true or not. I think that each person has to think about how to look for information and how to contrast it to see if it’s true or wrong, no? Because if you go to the website of a political party, and it explains you the ideology of a political party, I would think that one should go to another website to contrast if the first one is true or not, and here no… in order to know how to find information… no?

The internet’s potential to help people to learn about so many different topics and to contrast the different opinions they receive was questioned by the group that showed no civic/political participation. Some of the members of that group argued that you have to have a previous interest in something in order to learn more about it through the internet. However, other members of the group mentioned that, sometimes, the way news are portrayed in the internet open up an interest that you might not have before. However, the participants in this group were also of the opinion that people’s ideologies do not change, even if they read news and opinions written from a different ideological standpoint.

D: I believe that you’ve to have more interest in the issues. Otherwise you don’t think about going to the internet.

G: But sometimes, the way the news appears in the internet, there are like very attractive to read, there are news, for example, about political issues that… you wouldn’t look at them, but by reading the headlines, or the way in which it is presented you say to yourself: “Ok! I’m going to read it”. And perhaps the news don’t have anything to do with politics and are of no interest, because the internet is also very free when it comes to expose things, and it always tries to make things attractive. Besides finding a specific piece of news, in the internet you find it with comments and opinions…

D: What you can do with the internet is that if you see the news in one place, you can immediately go to see this news from a different point of view somewhere else.

G: Of course

D: Besides, if you want to compare different points of view. But I think that… at least in political issues, I don’t think that the opinion of someone would change because this person reads the blog of someone that has the opposite ideas. I don’t think it would change his mind at all, this is what I think.

G: No

The Bolonia students group praised the role of the internet in providing a way to contrast information. The participants in this focus group argue that, thanks to the internet, people could have access to different ways of understanding a specific event or situation. And this variety of angle could arrive to many people because — contrary to what happens with the old media — it’s very difficult to censorship what appears in the internet.
The group of blind youngsters provided us with a new perspective of the use of the internet. While they also generally access to news through television, they defined themselves as regular users of the internet and gave very complete information on all the programmes that the ONCE organisation uses to turn literary texts into audio texts. Being blind is not a problem for them if they want to join groups online that share the same interests. All the members of this group mentioned that the internet gives them access to any type of information they want.

F: I think that all the doubts I have, I could find information to solve them… I think
Moderator: But, what about social and political issues in Europe?
F: I don’t know, Every time I want to look for something, I write it there… everything is there
Moderator: There are more and more things, right?
F: Yes, there’s everything

Most of the participants in our sample of focus groups use both old media and the internet to get information on political issues. However, some of them also mentioned that to get a deeper understanding of the political news, they like to follow them up in the newspaper. This was specially the case of the JSC group.

Moderator: How do you learn about what happens in the world?
C: Television
M: Newspapers
A: Newspapers, but through the internet
Moderator: The online version of the newspapers?
A: Always
M: Me… me… let’s see, during the day I can’t. Only Saturday and Sunday, during the week I can’t buy the newspaper because… because… I can’t. Why to buy it if I can’t read it…?
A: paper
M: Then I read the papers through the internet
...
C: Me, through television. Basically through television, or in messenger… sometimes I miss something… but usually TV. Yes.
Moderator: Do you also read the online version of newspapers?
C: It depends… let’s see, if it’s a piece of news that is very important, that I feel I need to go deeper, besides what is being said in TV. If you want to know more you need to buy the newspapers

A different reason to use the newspapers instead of the internet was given by the PP group, arguing that the internet can manipulate and mislead people. The members of this group seem to believe that digital newspapers are more prone to being manipulated than regular newspapers. Other arguments in favour of paper press come from the PSC group. They claim that with so much information in the internet it is hard to maintain your focus on what you were looking for: “Sometimes you find so many things that you end up getting somewhere you didn’t want to go, that you don’t find interesting. This is the only problem.”(A). The members of this group also mentioned that they sometimes get confused in the websites with so many links, ads, banners, colours, and long pieces of text. They were especially critical of advertisements on the internet.

G: There are pages were you put the mouse and don’t click it, but the texts get open anyway, and then another one. In the end you don’t see what is behind, and you don’t know how to do it.
A: It’s a messy system
D: Yes, to me these type of pages and the ones with ads, in which 7 or 8 pages open themselves without you wanting to. Those are the ones I hate the most.
R: I agree with him. These type of pages make me feel very nervous. You close them and each 5 minutes they open up again, but it’s advertisements, and has nothing to do with what you were looking for. All of this is tiring.

Visiting political blogs was sometimes referred as a way to access to information on politics. And some of the members of the group of bloggers mentioned that politicians did read their blogs and use some of the information that was there and could interest them. The PSC group brought up a discussion about bloggs written by politicians. The
members of this group were, in general, of the opinion that bloggs were interesting but that public speeches are more effective and generate a greater level of trust.

**M:** A blog. All the politicians have a blog, because they know that many young people..., those that are interested in politics, they could know what this politicians has done, what is doing, and so. And this, well, it's used more and more because the politicians know that in the future...I mean, this is the way...because it's very important that the politician can be found there everyday saying: “I'm here”, I mean, the internet is a tool to get information...but you will not have a meeting through the internet, even though you post a video showing all the people there, it's difficult, no? that...that the internet could substitute the meeting.

**A:** Yes. This is what we were talking about before. In the meeting you can see the person, the politician, and you believe in him/her or not, but using the media, you can see what the person has written and that, of course, you don't know well if you can believe this person or not. In a meeting, the politician is closer to you. There is also this... people that write in the websites of the political parties, you don't know if they're of the same party.

The above comment is interesting because it seems to question the authorship of what is written in the internet, but not the authorship of the speech the politician is giving. The comment also illustrates the importance that the image of the politician, his or her body language, and the empathy that the person who gives the speech could generate, does more to convince people than what is written in the internet. The way the USA president Barack Obama uses the web was referred by some participants as a good example of the combination of written text in the internet and public speeches recorded in video.

From what we heard in the focus groups it seems that young people have not substituted old media with new media, nor do they consider one always better or more accurate than the other. Their decision on using old media or the internet is based on their own motivations that range from the importance a piece of information has for them, to easy or free access, to ideological inclinations. However, the participants in our focus groups identified important points about the use of the internet to access to information such as credibility, manipulation, possibility to contrast information, or to eliminate censorship. Participants also introduced different visions on the role of the internet and newspapers to get in depth information, the degree of credibility of the information associated to knowing who was the author of it, the need to have a previous interest in order to benefit from the information that appears both in the internet and in the newspapers, and the general agreement that the potential to access to more information does not change the ideology of the person who is seeking it. These findings somehow seem to go in the direction of working down the high expectations many researchers tend to place on the importance that technologies have to change the way people think, or to improve societies, without looking first at the needs of the individuals that are using them, and how these needs are shaping the use they make of the technology.

b. The internet and civic action: local, regional, national and transnational

In general, all participants in the focus groups agree that the internet is an excellent tool to organise offline activities, although it is not the only one. Therefore, they use the internet in combination with other means to inform people and to get organised. These other means are basically SMS messages and phone calls. However, while the internet is regarded as a good tool to circulate information among people in the organisations, the use of this tool to reach politicians was often not seen as a real possibility. Besides, using the internet to establish contact with politicians showed different context related realities. The bigger the place – a city like Barcelona – the less they seem to believe that they could actually contact a politician and, specially, get an answer to their demands. The smaller the town or village, the more confident participants felt about it. However, experience in talking to politicians was only shown in one of the groups, in
the young farmers':

**Moderator**: Have you ever sent a message to a politician?
**M**: How? Directly?
**Moderator**: Yes, directly
**A**: Yes, once to the Mayor of Piera. He came to give a speech in the village and then I told him a few things and …
**Moderator**: So, you felt you could talk to him?
**A**: Yes, yes, well, I think that even though he’s a politician he’s also a person like we’re and then you address him and…being polite, obviously, and that’s it, normal, the same way I’m talking to you, I also talk to the Mayor…
**Moderator**: And you?
**J**: Well, no, but what he said, to talk with the Mayor, that yes, to try to fix things talking to him, but to send messages, no.

And about getting in touch with politicians regarding a local problem, one member of the young farmers group mentioned his experience:

**Moderator**: So, you’ve sent a message to a politician
**A**: Yes, a few times I’ve had to get in touch with them and well…
**Moderator**: And you’ve used the internet to do so?
**A**: Through the internet because I’ve not the pleasure to know her and then tell her, well…that…
**Moderator**: And did she answer or not?
**A**: Yes. One time she answered and she came here and everything, the first time, and well, she was quite competent, and then we are still in touch.

However, and in spite of having had successful experiences in contacting with politicians, the same person that has achieved contact commented that it’s not easy to get an answer from them due to the many messages that they probably receive everyday. She felt that, in most cases, politicians do not get to read the messages.

The Bolonia students mentioned a way to arrive to politicians by reaching the old media first. In the months that they have been mobilising against the Bolonia agreements, they’ve been keeping active blogs, websites and even a radio transmission to give information on what the Bolonia agreements mean to students. These arguments have often corrected information that had previously appeared in the old media. In turn, the information posted on the internet has been used by the mass media to get updated information on what was going on with the students protest, and the reasons for it.

In spite of the above cases, in general, a very limited number of young people would consider to contact politicians, the media, or the political forums in The internet. Nevertheless, some of the participants did mention that they would have a better choice of being listened to by politicians, if they contacted them in a big pressure group. This opinion was found among the members of the Devil Women, who have organised a series of offline and online actions to complain against the recently approved European Union directive to regulate the use of pyrotechnics. This group has made an effort to get together with all the similar groups before writing a manifesto that was sent to the local and national politicians, and was also posted in the internet.

Even though the limitations that the members of our sample feel when they want to reach politicians, it was curious to observe that the internet presidential campaign and
permanent online activity of the USA president Barak Obama became a point of interest to some of the people that participated in the focus groups. This point was raised in two of the groups, but in two different ways. In the farmers' group, the reference to Obama came after they've explained that they have been able to reach politicians, and was used as an example of a possible way to be heard by politicians. However, some of the members of the PP group argued that the internet has been the reason why Obama received so much attention in the old media, but not a way to learn about people's needs.

Local politics and local civic action seem to cause offline action that uses the internet as a means to inform about offline activities and as a follow up. Facebook is often referred as a way to circulate information, more efficiently than the official website. The gay and lesbian group, the Bolonia students, the JERC, and the Devil Women groups were, perhaps, the ones that used Facebook the most. But the focus groups participants that reported the highest degree of success were perhaps the from JERC (the group that claims for the independence of Catalunya), who talked about how they have been using Facebook to organise a demonstration in Brussels, in order to ask for the independence of Catalunya at the European Parliament. They claimed that, thanks to Facebook, they could probably be able to reach the 10,000 participants attending the demonstration in Brussels.

The group of young farmers was very active in their communities and showed a very good knowledge of the place where they live. They mobilise to complain about different things that range from the difficulties in the internet access, to the condition of the streets of their village, and in what places these need maintenance. The group was gaining some recognition and people were already aware of their existence. However, when the issue was raised about how people learn about the needs and actions of the different civic groups, many participants in different groups mentioned that you need to have other means to let people know that your group exists. The farmers’ group became noticeable when they appeared in the news due to a demonstration, the youth associations group, for example, announced the existence of one of their associations with t-shirts. And in the case of the Bolonia students and of the Devil Women, the television reports of their demonstrations did a lot to let people know about the existence of the group and of what they were fighting for.

Although some of the participants in our focus groups said that they were not interested in politics, even in local politics, and that they don't even seem to know how to get involved, the interpretation of this affirmation could be that people are not aware that what they’re doing is also politics. As we have already mentioned above, the tendency to think of politics as only party politics still remains. However, when the same focus groups participants that said that they were not interested in politics were asked what things they would like to change, they showed a different understanding of the word politics. And when they were asked about what they would be willing to do towards making things better, then they focused on local issues. For example, the members of the youth associations’ group would be willing to get active offline asking to have more parks and green areas in the city. The members of this group also mentioned to have participated in activities geared towards raising money to help people in need in their city. Concerns about things that need improvement in their city were also mentioned by the JSC group. In this case these were things that affect young people. And the members of this group explained that, in order to start some action towards making things better they use the internet to circulate information, and to coordinate activities.
C: Our city is a sleep town\textsuperscript{27}. If we, young people, want to have fun doing things besides going to a disco, we have to go to Barcelona or to Sabadell… We’re forced to leave our city in order to entertain ourselves.
A: And it’s a university town.
C: Specially being a university town, one should expect a youth city, with many things for young people…

\textsuperscript{27} The term ‘sleep town’ means a suburb near the big city were people work. In this case, the big city is Barcelona. People spend all day in the city and return home at the end of the day. The town of Cerdanyola del Vallés has a mixed identity. On the one hand it is a working class town, located in the industrial ring of Barcelona. On the other hand it hosts the campus of the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona. And it also hosts an affluent neighbourhood of people who have turned previous summer residences into permanent ones.
M: We lack many things, many things
A: The internet is a very important tool. We couldn’t live without it
C: That is right. We constantly send messages to each other
A: Everything through e-mail…
Moderator: You don’t use paper anymore to circulate information
M: No
A: No
C: …The internet
A: For everything
C: Besides, you can attach programs, any document. It’s very practical

Using the internet to learn about political issues outside the local level seems to raise interest only amongst youngsters that are members of a political party. For example, the members of the independents group Joventut d’Esquerra Republicana (JERC) showed interest in learning about European countries that have more than one language, and also in countries that have achieved independence, or are in the process of becoming so. And the JSC group mentioned interest in some European issues that they’ve been following through the internet. For example, they were following what was being said about the European agreement of the 65 work hours week.

Moderator: Do you visit European websites?
M: No, I don’t
A: Well…I visit the website of the European Socialist Party
M: Oh yes
A: We go to that one, yes
Moderator: So, you go some times
A: We also go to COSE
M: Ah yes, COSE
A: Which is the website of the Youth European Socialists…I mean, that this is political activism at the European level
M: And we get together. Every two years…The next one will be not far from here, in France
A: We also meet in Brussels.

In spite of the above example, the participants in our focus groups were, in general, not using the internet to visit international websites. Nevertheless, the JERC group reported to visit European Parliament websites, and also to consult international news agencies such as Reuters. However, people that did not visit international websites were nevertheless aware that through the internet they could get information about things that were going on at the international level. This type of information came often from forums written in Spanish or Catalan. Due probably to a bad policy in the way foreign languages are being taught at school, many young people don’t feel comfortable reading in English. Therefore, they will only visit a website written in English if they are very interested in a given issue. But since it is possible now to find many websites in Spanish written outside of Spain, young people can have access to a great variety of international news that have a reflection in the internet. For example, the PP group commented on how the internet, and its ability to circulate a great deal of information, can somehow make people that come from different ideologies stand together with respect to some specific issues, such as forums in favour of giving strong penalties to people that have raped or killed.

A similar comment was made by the PSC group. The participants in that group agreed that the information that can be found in the internet could be a starting point to make people conscious about things that are happening that are not right. This opinion was also shared by other groups. The PSC group added, though, that the internet brings new information, but that we also have already in our minds the information that could help us to interpret the new one, because social values are formed in childhood. In this sense, the members of this group were of the opinion that the internet could increase social consciousness, but not create it.
D: …I don’t know how the internet could help to create these ideals (referring to social consciousness). So far the theory is that we already have the combination of the information we’ve been receiving, and this we combine with new information, and then we say that something is happening with these ducks in France that…they gave them too much food….Then you combine this with that and then you mobilize yourself….But, how the internet could help to have a group consciousness? In order to have people feel bad about these things, or to make them understand that these things are not right, you need the other information, and that I don’t know how.

A: Perhaps to be socially conscious is something that you have to learn when you’re a child. Education is something like that…, it’s about what orientation you’ve received when you were small…If you’ve been told that you need to be gentle with animals, if you’ve received explanations about these things, then the internet could increase this consciousness, but to create it is more difficult.

M: It’s what we’ve been talking about. This about being conscious about….about what is right or wrong, this is something that you’re learning during your life, no? I mean since you’re a child and in adulthood too, no? But if you don’t have it, then, evidently, if you see that something is happening in the world, you remain the same. If you see that the war in Irak made the whole of Spain react against it…You can circulate information among people, but people are already conscious that wars are bad things. That’s way so many people mobilised then and went to demonstrations and so on, no?

While, in general, the internet was not considered important to create social consciousness if people did not have it already, the contrary was said about the potential of the internet to help people that were looking for groups and organisations that could provide some help to them. In this sense, the role played by the internet to let people know about a specific group was specially valued by the gay and lesbian group who learned about the Casal Lambda thanks to the website they found on the internet. Once there, these young people felt that they could engage in situations in where face-to-face communication becomes important to help young people to feel comfortable with their homosexuality.

Moderator: Here, at Casal Lambda, what do you do?

G: Well, I’m in charge of helping people who needs to talk. I’m showing them the place, but I go beyond getting their approval on this place. If someone needs to talk, then I talk, as long as the person needs to , I don’t know….I share my own experience with them, not much experience yet because I’m only 19, but since I, let’s say, left the closet quite early, this is easy for me. Many people have not left the closet yet….and it’s very hard.

According to what we heard in the focus groups, making people aware that they can get help or that they can help others through civic active groups is not something that comes as a consequence of having a tool like the internet available. And even though certain individuals have the initiative to learn and participate in civic issues, in most cases this does not seem to take place without some degree of civic education.

\textbf{c. Political education and the internet}

For some of the producers we interviewed in the previous part of this study, the internet is only a tool to spread information, and they believe that real activity takes place offline. Therefore, these producers argue that offline activity needs to be there before launching the site, but that the internet helps to keep young people compromised to the cause. The comments we heard in the focus group somehow confirmed that civic participation starts offline. The young farmers group, for example, referred to their activities in the organisation of the yearly town festivities as part of offline civic action. Just in the same way as they referred to their participation in offline actions that were related to winery problems – such as the low price they get paid for the grapes – but also in other offline actions that are not related to rural problems. However, this consciousness, this level of participation has something to do with the families they come from. The members of the young farmers group are not working in the wineries, but their parents are. Therefore, these young people seem to be very aware of what the problems are and of the type of solutions they should be asking for. And they’ve
probably learned in their families that they need to speak up, to circulate information. Otherwise, people outside the rural areas will not know about their problems.

As we mentioned above, civic/political activities in the family seem to be at the base of the interest of young people in these activities. And perhaps due to their family background, many of the participants in our focus groups mentioned that interest in politics could not be achieved through the internet. This opinion was found especially among the participants that belong to a political party. They argue that if people want to initiate themselves in politics, or feel sympathy for a specific party, then the internet can help them to get more interested. However, for those who are not interested in politics, the internet will not have any influence. Consequently, only people who are interested in politics can do many things with the internet that are related to politics. They could have a blog, visit other people’s blogs, and write comments. The same mistrust in the ability of the internet to make people interested in politics or engaged in civic activities was expressed by the members of the group of non political/civic activity. Also, the language used in the websites – probably addressed to the usual suspects – and offering an overload of information -- was pointed as a possible reason for this situation. However, not all the members of the group agreed on that, and some mentioned that the internet could help people to think critically, just by giving you the experience of having to digest so much information.

G: But I think that the internet is not geared towards education or to get people interested in civic participation, because they use a language to which not everybody can have access...it's another type if language the one used in the internet. Nobody uses this language in the streets.
D: There is a bit of everything, no?
A: What do you mean by “nobody uses it in the street”?
G: …the way you interact, ok? The norms for the internet are not the same as the norms outside the internet. The behaviour is different. I mean…no…your civic attitude does not come from...from using the internet.
D: I don’t know. If we consider...if we consider only the political issues, you can go to sites of your own ideology... and different forms...and you go with what you already believe, you look there and it can help you or it can change your way of thinking about civic issues.

G: The internet allows us to compare many things. You are over informed from all the news about politics and this allows you to think about what is going on. You can be more critical because you have many different points of view.

The above -- perhaps overoptimistic opinion -- about the automatic development of critical skills that the access to information will provide, was not shared by the members of other focus groups. Again, political awareness and critical skills were referred as something that one learns at home, and not through the internet or at school. However, the youth organisations group added a school experience to their comments. Even if this experience is perhaps something isolated --none of the other groups mentioned anything on this line in the regular school setting- the experience is worth mentioning here because it was geared towards giving young people some sort of political education, or at least education on how politicians work and how to listen to them with a critical attitude. This group explained a class practice in which the teacher, while talking about economics, asked his students to watch election debates posted in the internet and to try to figure out what was true or not in the information that each of the candidates were giving.

J: ... We had to point out at the number of lies each of the candidates was saying. Rajoy was the winner...well..., he was telling too many lies.

Everybody: LOL

J: We watched first what Rajoy was saying and the teacher asked us how many lies he said, and then we watched Zapatero, and then you realise that there are many things that are a lie, that are different and that politicians tell many lies because...because they want votes.
Moderator: Politicians are liars?
A: Well, more than liars, they only tell part of the truth

The youth organisations group also talked at some point about the potential of the internet to educate young people in politics. This group seems to consider that making information available in the internet is a way to educate people. One of the members of that group, expressed a positive opinion in the following way: “Well, I think that the internet could play a very good role because the problem with many people is that, some of them choose to say that—since politics are very complicated, I don’t do a thing; others choose to talk without knowing what they’re talking about. And I think that the internet could be a good tool for young people to get some information… and, well, the fact is that politics is something that is ours. We’re in a democracy and…” (A)

Perhaps one of the issues that got the most comments in all the groups was the word ‘politics’. As we mentioned above, the concept of politics was often mixed with the one of politicians. And the way the participants of the focus groups talked, changed accordingly. The groups that did not belong to political parties have a similar view of politicians as liars, as people that were not doing anything to defend their interests. The following fragment from the farmers group—one whose members are politically and civic active—discussion is quite illustrative:

Moderator: What comes to your mind when you hear the word politics?
M: I don’t like this word. I’m not interested
Moderator: What do you say?
M: That I don’t like this word. It doesn’t interest me. They go on discussing and, I don’t know. There is no interest in that.
Moderator: Why are you not interested?
M: Because you see someone saying silly things, and another one says something else, and then both of them start a discussion and…I don’t know
Moderator: But who are these politicians? Who are they, the ones that appear on TV or the one in your home town?
M: The ones on TV
Moderator: And what do you think about that?
P: Well, when I think about politics what comes to my mind are the images of the politicians during election campaigns, and all that, and, well, I think that there are many things that could be done and sometimes, for silly things, projects don’t get going, and I always think about education..., that we could have a good education system, or, I don’t know, different and…and that each time that we have a new government, it changes the education system. Things like that. I believe that politicians should put aside different political ideologies and agree on an education system because we are the future and I think…and that.

Both the rural group and the youth organisations group were involved in civic activities in their hometowns, but when they were asked what they felt about politics, they showed a very negative opinion. Again, this is probably because they only identify politics with party politics and politicians. The participants in these groups—along with others, such as the Bolonia students and the JSC group—seem to agree that politicians do not care about the problems that young people have, such as finding a job, being able to buy a house, or have access to a good public education. However, the young farmers group seems to have a very clear idea of what politics ought to be.

Moderator: What comes to your mind when you hear the word politics?
J: Oh man!
All: LOL
Moderator: What do you think?
M: And what do I know?
A: I don’t know. Lately no…I don’t really connect, because with the working class, with young people, I mean, no…there is a lot of distance, no? Perhaps it’s because of the language they use of...
Moderator: You don’t feel represented?
A: Man, no…well, I mean, less and less...Well, many things are said and then, well, other things are done, or said... the ones help the others and this makes that no..., at least I...
Moderator: And you, M, what comes to your mind?
M: Lots of things..., I don’t know, let’s see...I, I don’t feel the least represented by the political class, because I don’t find any political party that works for...well, that represents my interests, you know? ...And young people’s interests, even less. Politicians talk a lot about …many general things that, perhaps, are very important for the adults, but for us, for young people, I no…I mean,
While most of the participants in the focus groups referred to politicians in a similar way, the discussion with the JSC group brought about interesting points about getting political education inside the political parties. All the members of that group have joined the JSC because they had an interest in politics. Through courses organised by their political party, they were learning how Spanish politics work, and the historical reasons behind the way they are. But they were also learning the dynamics of the relationships between different political parties. These youngsters were also acquiring political skills such as giving speeches, lobbying, and organising offline actions.

C: I took courses where we created a parliament and we divided ourselves into different groups that represent the different political parties.
M: Is this the last one?
A: Yes
C: And we have to work together the different groups, to reach agreements...And then, there are right wing parties, and left wing parties, and centre-oriented political parties...I was assigned to be part of a right wing party and I had to..
M: Yes, we try to reproduce as much as we can the reality during our training courses. That is to say, if we’re in elections time, we learn how to develop an election campaign. Then, we have different groups and each one has to design its own campaign, needs to choose a candidate, has to write an electoral speech...

The members of the JSC group mentioned that education in politics –party politics– was a very important part of the activities they were doing as members of the party. They also commented on the importance of the skills they were acquiring. Through the courses that the party organised these youngsters were learning oratory skills, history and the fundamental differences between right wing and left wing ideologies. This group showed a great confidence in their possibilities to change things, to better society, to make a difference, from their involvement in a political party. The members of this group were confident in that through their activities in the party were acquiring the necessary tools that they need to work towards making society better, at least at the local level.

Although specific political training could be important, the degree of confidence in the possibilities that young people as individuals could have to make things better seem to be directly related to their experience in having participated in the organisation of offline activities. This was very clear in the farmers group and also in the PSC group. This was also the case with the Bolonia students that referred to previous actions in which they’ve participated before getting together in the Bolonia issue. The members of this group were confident in their role to facilitate information to the students and to the mass media on the Bolonia process. The information that --they said-- the universities have not yet given to the people that would be affected by the changes that will arrive with the Bolonia agreement.

In other groups, where the institution was doing everything, people did not seem too confident that they could actually have ideas to make things better. One of the members of the visual handicapped group put it this way: "...I think that if I have an idea, probably someone has had it before and is already working on it." (F) The members of this group did not seem to feel that they could be actively involved in an association that is helping them. However, the gay and lesbian group did see their role as that of helping other people by working with the organisation that is already helping them. Perhaps one of the reasons for this different approach could be somehow related to their professional interests. In the gay and lesbian group, the participants were studying careers that are orientated towards helping other people. However, it could also be that these youngsters could have decided to study these careers because they had a previous interest in helping others.
c. View of the civic/political websites

In all of the focus groups, participants commented on the website of their own organisation. Some of them also gave us their comments on institutional websites addressed specifically to young people. The lack of user-generated content in most of the pages we visited with the groups was a general complaint. Some participants showed first an attraction towards the forums in political parties' websites. However, their interest drastically decreased as they became aware that politicians did not answer the comments written in the forums, and when they noticed that the participants in the forums were party members. Other complaints about the official websites came from the PP group when they referred to their own website. The members of that group commented that the website is full of information of what needs to be done, and reports on different things. However, they feel that there is a lack of coordination among the different PP associations and that this is a handicap in order to get things to happen.

In general, the view that most of the focus groups participants have of the website of the organisation that they belong to is that these websites have still a lot of room for improvement. For example, the members of the JSC group found that the general website of the youth branch of the Socialist party was not very interesting or appealing, and they also felt that the page does not give enough information on what is going on. Besides, this group found that the website should show the ideological position of the party in different social issues, and that they could not find this commitment in the JSC official website.

Moderator: What do you think of the JSC website? Do you think it’s well organised?
M: Well, I think …Only to look at it, there are too many things
C: We don’t need it
A: Too many things. It’s not attractive…
Moderator: Is like this how you see it?
A: Yes, it’s not attractive
C: There is too much information everywhere
M: There is too much text, and people get scared of it
A: It’s not attractive
Moderator: Design is important
A: I think that what this page needs…I thought about it many times…is a place where you could read a clear statement about a given issue. Something people can read
M: (looks at the page) Well…
A: For example, what is the opinion of the Socialist Party on the Bolonia agreements for Higher Education?
Moderator: A clearer stand point
A: Yes, there is news and events that we organise…This is ok, that people see that we’re active. But I think the page should also have our opinion about things.

Some of the participants in the JSC group have been working in the design of a new party website, at the local level. They had someone in charge to update the website. The group values the site they’ve designed not only because it uses more images than the official one, but also because there is less text, with bigger characters than in the general website. Another plus of their local website is that it explains very well the activities that the group organises; it has an updated agenda, many interesting links, and a video that explains who they are and what they do.

Websites that offer the possibility of user generated content are the ones that all the members of the focus groups prefer, value, and are interested in using. However, they are also aware that these websites are rare. One of the websites that offers this interaction is www.racocatala.cat, whose producer we interviewed in WP7. The website was praised by all the participants in the JERC group. The members of that group did
write their opinions there in a regular basis and were satisfied with the feedback they receive from other users.

Although it seems that, according to the comments of most of the participants in the focus groups, the design of the site is less important than its contents, they all valued the use of images and easy navigation. The participants in our focus groups tend to leave pages that have too much information, arguing that they get lost and bored when visiting that type of pages. The use of YouTube is one of the first things that claim their attention when they visit a website. However, in general, websites do not seem to attract people that do not have a previous interest in the content of the page, or a need for specific information. On the other hand, having Information addressed to many of the young people’s interests: entertainment, housing, education, jobs, music, etc. seem to be the reason why the www.jove.cat website that we showed in most of the groups was, in general, well accepted by the participants. However, most of the members of the focus groups have never heard of the website before, in spite of the fact that it was launched over one year ago. This somehow illustrates the fear that was mentioned by some of the producers we interviewed for WP7. The web is over saturated and you need to develop an important information campaign offline to let people know about the existence of the website. Otherwise, it will be hard that the page reaches the internet audiences. The lack of a launching campaign proved to be a handicap in the case of the www.jove.cat website, because when we let our focus groups participants access to it, they were, in general, pleased to have discovered the website and they seemed to be interested in its contents and design.

According to what we heard from the participants in our focus groups the internet seems to serve two roles as a civic tool. On the one hand, it is being used to make communication and organisation of offline activities, faster, better, and with the possibility to reach a larger number of people. Here we have observed a tendency towards favouring user-generated content using tools such as Facebook, over official websites, that, in the majority of the cases do not offer the possibility of interaction. The second role of the internet for civic action is the possibility that it brings for people to get in touch with others that have similar needs or interests. We have also found a tendency of using the internet as a tool to allow people to gain in political/civic education and confidence in the actions they organise. However, this seems to take place only among people that have received some previous education in civic issues – generally from their families- and thus are already engaged at some level. On the other hand we found that, as some of the producers mentioned during the WP7 stage of this research, civic action in the internet needs offline action first, in order to be heard, to be present. Civic action could continue then through the internet.

**Conclusion**

The reasons for young people getting involved in politics vary from specific situations and events that could be global (global warming, the war in Iraq), national (the Al Quaeda bombing in Madrid in 2004), local (the participation in a demonstration in Brussels in March 2009 to ask for the independence of Catalunya, or generational (to voice the disagreements about the high prices for a place to live, or the low salaries and instability of the job market, or the changes that the Bolonia process will bring to the way university studies and degrees will be organised). This type of involvement can only happen at a specific time and finish when the problem is solved, or forgotten, or substituted by a bigger one. However, it can also turn into the beginning of a social consciousness that could generate new interests and participation.

To come from an educated family seems to be important in the sense that these families are, in general, more aware of the importance of engaging children in youth
associations that are doing something for the community. However, not only the educated families can provide a background for people to become interested in politics. In Spain there is not a long tradition of universal education, but our history has different moments in which people from rural areas or workers from the city’s factories have organised themselves to fight for their rights. And this tradition could be passed from generation to generation of children coming from working class families.

The closer the civic actions in which people are involved to their immediate contexts, the more they feel encouraged and engaged, and not discouraged. Examples to illustrate this are the Young farmers group, and also the Gay and Lesbian group. In both cases people have a very clear idea of what is needed and they also know that they can help because they are part of the situation that they are trying to make better. The contrary happens with militants in national branches of political parties that have, in general, no connection to the everyday realities of the context where they live.

Politics is considered as something bad and politicians as liars, corrupt, only working for their own interests and totally unconcerned about young people’s problems. Nevertheless, the idea of democracy and that politics should be a way to work towards allowing societies to make the best out of their possibilities, is in the mind of all the participants in the focus groups. However, many of the participants in the focus groups feel that this idea is not represented by party politics, and they are concerned about this situation. Nevertheless, the young people from our sample that belong to political parties feel, in general, optimistic that they could make things better with their work within the party.

Television is still the main information source, although reading press publications on the internet is something many of the participants do, either because they want to follow up on a specific information or because they have not had the time to read the news that interest them anywhere else. Mainstream media is often put into question because it presents the view of specific political parties. The internet is considered to be a good source to learn about something from different points of view that will not have a place in the old media. However, the internet is also questioned in the sense that not all the information there could be reliable. Nevertheless, all the participants seemed to agree that anybody could find anything in the internet, providing they know what they’re looking for. The problem is that not everybody has the interest and motivation to look for information in political/social issues. The internet is, for many of the members of the groups, a place where political/civic participation could be encouraged, but not created. Values, and specially values received in childhood are the basis for interest in social issues.

The use of old media is seen as a necessity in order to be noticeable, to be heard. Television, newspapers and radio seem to play an important role in giving information on what the groups are doing offline, and also about the existence of online activities. Also, the lack of well developed promotion campaign using old media was seen as the basis for the non-knowledge that the participants of our focus groups had about the institutional website addressed to young people www.Jove.Cat. A website that, in general, our participants found interesting because of the type of information it provides.

During the time in which the focus groups took place Facebook changed from being something that only the few people who had lived and studied abroad knew about, to something that has become immensely popular in the last 7 months. The discussions in the focus groups reflect this situation. Facebook moved out other national social networks such as Photolog, and created new ones such as Tuenti. However, Facebook, along with messenger are the absolute top of the social networks. But, according to what we heard in the focus groups Facebook is not only a means to chat
with friends and to see pictures, but a powerful tool to circulate information and to organise offline activities of any kind. The use of Facebook for civic/political action is well represented in the Spanish sample. This was mentioned by many of the groups, specially the JSC and the JERC. Also, the Bolonia students have created a Facebook group where they keep circulating information with the members of this protest in all the universities in Spain, and also with some of the universities in Greece, where a similar anti-Bolonia process took place. It is also important to note that young men and young women in the 15-25 age group in our sample tend to use social networks in the same ways.

Institutional civic websites are, in general, considered boring, too text oriented and with too many different contents. A couple of groups feel more confident creating their own websites, such as the JSC group and the Bolonia group that had just launched their own website. The Bolonia group also used the internet to broadcast radio programs explaining what their demands were and giving interviews to the media and institutional representatives. The websites that generated more interest among the participants were those that had content that interest them, and they were not fancy or colorful. Most of them kept a blog style, but they were easy to read and not overloaded with information. Some of the young people that participated in the focus groups have sent messages to politicians, although many of them doubt that these would read them. Young people find that in order to contact politicians, face-to-face communication or a message sent by a large group of people so that they can’t ignore it, are more effective.

In general, the participants in our focus groups recognised that they received their values, and the ways they see the world from their parents, but also from other members of the family. Many of our respondents have parents, uncles, mothers, or siblings that are, or have been, engaged in some sort of civic/political activity. Other adults mentioned as having played a role in the development of politic/civic awareness were the youth organisation leaders and counselors. Teachers were mentioned only in one of the groups. There still seems to be a digital divide between young people and their parents, but it does not seem to be important. Also, according to the participants comments, the way parents use the internet presents different situations: from those that only use the internet at work, to others that are constantly downloading movies, writing e-mails, banking, shopping, planning trips, buying airline tickets, to some who still need help from their children to use some of the possibilities of the internet. There seems to be not much difference between parents and mothers in the use they make of the internet. However, fathers, in general, tend to be more time online than mothers. One of the possible causes for this is that –while mothers and fathers are working outside the home- mothers are in general in charge of the house after work. Therefore, fathers tend to have more free time to browse the web. The gender digital divide that does not seem so evident among the members in our sample, is nonetheless, present in their parents’ generation.

Blogging is an activity that could be linked to personal interests and the individual need to voice feelings, social and individual concerns and information about movies seen or books read. But it could also be part of an activity that youth branches of political parties encourage their members to do. In the first case, bloggers are writing for themselves and for their friends. In the second case, bloggers are reproducing the ideology of the party, but not saying anything personal about themselves. In the first case, they seem to be aware that the blog sphere is far too wide for people that are not their friends to learn about their blog. In the second case, they’re aware that politicians and people interested in politics would probably have access to their blog because it will be easier to find it through party links. In both cases the young bloggers who participated in our focus group are happy with the type of audience they are aiming at. In the case of non-party linked bloggers, the posts are irregular in time, since young
people seem to write when they feel about it. In the case of party linked bloggers, the regularity and quantity of the post depends on the importance of the news they're commenting on.

Even though we work with different groups of young people, we found that for most of our participants, the internet is a tool that is shaped by the individual, generational, and cultural needs and backgrounds of the respondents. The too often supposed power of the internet to generate a change in the way young people feel about civic/political issues has not been found in our sample. However, social networks, and the chances of new forms of user-generated content that the internet could provide, emerge as an important aspect. Following the evolution of social networks and the different ways in which young people will be shaping them in the future, could, perhaps, be a good way to learn about generational concerns, but also about all time ones, and how these relate to specific cultural, civic, and political contexts, and to individual situations and family backgrounds. These concerns will probably not match with the traditional definition of politics with which politicians and some researchers still work. From the data collected for this report, we feel that the important issue here is not the potential of the internet to encourage and increase civic/political involvement, but the need to continue working towards the understanding of what politics and the internet are for young people, what role they play in their everyday lives and why. We should do so with the understanding that civic/political issues and the internet are parts of young people's everyday lives and that these parts are interrelated with the different social, cultural and affective contexts, and also with the individual characteristics of each person. Thus, we should pay attention to what is new, but also to what remains the same in the ways people become politically/civically conscious and active, but also in the way young people communicate, and in how they use the web to do so. Learning about young people’s concerns and the ways they use to express them would probably allow us to gain more conscience of how far these concern still are—in many cases—from what politicians and social scientists talk about.

References


### APPENDIX 1: THE SPANISH FOCUS GROUPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Number</th>
<th>Focus Group Theme</th>
<th>Main issue covered</th>
<th>Number of participants, gender, age</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Members of youth associations</td>
<td>Gaining consciousness of civic needs by being civic active from childhood</td>
<td>6 participants. 3 men and 3 women. Ages: 15-19</td>
<td>Small-mid size town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>NGO volunteers. (Red Cross volunteers)</td>
<td>Volunteer work as part of social life</td>
<td>6 participants. 4 women and 2 men. Ages 17-25</td>
<td>Small mid-size town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>University students mobilized against the Bolonia agreements for university education in Europe</td>
<td>Use of internet to inform people of what the institution has not. Use of internet to contact mass media and institutional representatives</td>
<td>3 participants. Men aged 19-25. Students of the Universitat de Barcelona</td>
<td>Big city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Internet users with neither civic/political activity nor interest in it</td>
<td>The need to have an interest offline before looking for information in internet.</td>
<td>4 participants. 3 women and 1 man. Ages 20-25</td>
<td>Small-mid size city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Blind and heavy internet users, members of the ONCE, an organization to help the blind</td>
<td>Being blind is not a handicap to use internet. Demands to adapt cities to blind people</td>
<td>3 participants. Men aged 17-22</td>
<td>Big city, although people came from small towns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Members of Casal Lambda, a gay and lesbian organization</td>
<td>Helping people, reaching others through the internet, and face to face communication</td>
<td>2 participants. Men aged 19</td>
<td>Big city, although one of the boys came from a small town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Members of the Rural Youth Union</td>
<td>Engagement in local issues and offline action. Internet to circulate information</td>
<td>3 participants. 2 men and 1 woman. Ages 17-19</td>
<td>Members came from different villages in a wineries area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Members of the youth association linked to the political party JERC, demanding the independence for Catalunya</td>
<td>Internet to mobilize people from different groups to participate in offline action</td>
<td>3 participants. 2 men, 1 woman. Ages 20-24</td>
<td>Participants came from different towns in Catalunya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Devil Women. Members of a group that dances with fire during traditional festivals</td>
<td>Internet to mobilize people against a European Union directive.</td>
<td>2 participants. Women aged 24 and 25</td>
<td>Small-mid size town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Members of Partido Popular (PP) A national right wing political party</td>
<td>Mistrust of the information that appears in internet</td>
<td>4 participants. 3 men and 1 woman. Ages 16-23</td>
<td>Small-mid size town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Members of the Catalan branch of the Socialist party (PSOE)</td>
<td>The use of internet by politicians</td>
<td>4 participants. 3 men, 1 woman. Ages 17-25</td>
<td>Small-mid size town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bloggers that write about civic/political issues</td>
<td>Differences between being member of a political party or not, being man or woman</td>
<td>6 participants. 4 men and 2 women. Ages 19-24</td>
<td>Barcelona, but some participants came from other cities or towns</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Members of the youth branch of the Socialist Party (JSC)</td>
<td>Family tradition in party membership, learning about politics inside the party, local action, online initiatives</td>
<td>3 participants. 2 women and 1 man. Ages 16-20</td>
<td>Mid size town in the industrial ring of Barcelona. Working class tradition, and host of a university campus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Swedish National Report

A resource for, a reason to, and an Escape from: how the internet interplays with young people’s civic engagement and participation

Tobias Olsson, Fredrik Miegel

Introduction

Aims, research questions, background

The overall aim of this report is to analyse and illustrate various ways in which the internet interplays with young people’s civic and/or political engagement and participation. The aim can also be phrased as a research question: In what ways does the internet interplay with various social and cultural groups of young people’s roles and identities as citizens?

The results and analyses presented in the report are brought from the Swedish share of the focus groups conducted during Work Package 10 (Deliverable 16) within the project “Young People, the Internet, and Civic Participation”. The analyses presented within the report also draw on previous knowledge from the same research project. That is, the selection of focus groups, the themes covered within the focus groups as well as the analyses of these data have been inspired by: a) a conceptual analysis of the field of research conducted within Work Package 5 (Deliverable 4), b) a survey of some 80 Swedish websites aiming at engaging young people conducted within Work Package 6 (Deliverable 6), c) interviews with strategically selected website producers carried through as a part of Work Package 7, d) content analyses of a number strategically selected websites conducted within Work Package 8 (Deliverable 14), and – finally – the results from a survey of young, Swedish web users conducted within Work Package 9 (Deliverable 8). Other than this the analyses have also been able to make use of some additional material and analyses from a recent research project, “Young Citizens, ICTs and Learning”, in which various groups of young activists within political parties’ youth organisations as well as activists within different kinds of alternative political organisations were studied through altogether some 40 in-depth interviews (see for instance Dahlgren & Olsson 2007; Olsson 2007; Olsson 2008). These previous studies have above all inspired our selection of focus groups. They have, for instance, provided us with useful knowledge about the points in including respondents from various, significant parts of Swedish civil society, and they have also suggested that issues concerning file sharing are specifically important to pay heed to in a study aiming at understanding civic engagement and participation among young, Swedish people at this time in history (see below, the section on “The selection of focus groups”).

The overall aim of this report (above) and the research question affiliated with that aim have been operationalised into a number of overarching discussion themes which have been covered during the discussions within the focus groups. These themes have, however, varied to some extent between the different groups, due to their different compositions and due to our specific interest in the group as researchers. The general themes that we have aimed to cover are:

a) the self-presentation of the respondents,
b) the respondents’ views on the social/political/cultural issue/s of specific interest to the researchers with respect to the specific group,
c) the groups’ internet practises and their views of the internet in general,
d) the groups’ views of the internet as a resource for civic engagement and participation,
e) the groups’ views of the media in general.

These overarching themes have been introduced to and discussed within all of the focus groups. All focus groups were conducted at various venues in Sweden between April 2008 and February 2009.

**Some theoretical reflections**

In theoretical terms, we need to say something – necessarily briefly though – about two different theoretical threads inspiring the work presented in this report. Our theoretical perspective on the internet (as well as other media) is informed by the overarching paradigm often and very broadly referred to as Social Shaping of Technologies (SST), and more specifically studies focusing on the media in general and the internet in particular within this tradition (Silverstone 1994; Sleven 2000; Miller & Slater 2001). The label social shaping of technologies subsumes several different strands of social science research of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The research tradition includes Brian Winston’s (Winston 1998), and Partice Flichy’s (Flichy 1995) studies of the dynamics of technological development, as well as ethnographic, close readings of the appropriation of new media among various social and cultural groups of users (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992; Olsson 2006). Other strands of research within this tradition analyse the social shaping at the producer stage, which seek to answer what ideas and ideologies that gets encoded into specific applications of new media. Still other studies analyse the shaping of new ICTs through political regulation, and centre on the ideological battles surrounding them (Goodwin & Spittle 2002), or how the politics of market regulation shape the emergence of ICTs in society (Sussman 1997).

These seemingly very different studies do however share an important assumption: That it is both possible and useful to “open up technologies” and analyse their social dimensions, quite often as an explicit criticism of technologically-deterministic propositions about ICTs’ societal “effects” (Williams 1974). In this case this perspective informs our view of the relationship between young citizens and the internet. By studying various social and cultural groups of young citizens, in focus group settings, we are able to grasp parts of their active appropriation of (Silverstone 1994) and their negotiation with the civic possibilities brought about by the new ICT. Hence, we can also claim that we are able to get a sense of their ways of shaping (or even re-shaping) the internet into a tool corresponding to their civic and/or political identities.

On the other hand we also start our analyses from a theoretical point of departure that informs our notion of citizenship and related concepts, such as civic, political, participation, engagement. Traditionally – especially within general debates – the concept citizenship is most often used in order to refer to a person's formal or even legal status as a citizen; he or she is understood as a citizen of a nation or any other administrative entity, for instance the European Union. Inspired by this formal take on citizenship social theory has traditionally developed a view of the citizen as a person holding certain rights and obligations connected to his/her citizenship. Mainly through T.H. Marshall’s 1950s (Marshall 1950) writing these rights and obligations been conceptualised in terms of civil, political, and social rights and responsibilities. Lately, especially since the 1990s and the increasing research focus on various notions of cultural identity, the dimension of cultural rights (and obligations) have been added to the list of dimensions of citizenship (Isin & Turner 2002).

Since the 1990s, however, a number of scholars have started to pay attention to the notion of citizenship from a different, much less formal point of view, rooted in cultural theory (Dahlgren 2009), and inspired by theories of the public sphere (Dewey
1927/1991; Habermas 1962/1998; Sennett 1974) and civil society (Cohen & Arato 1995). These discussions have stimulated a reorientation in the view of the citizens, and concerning this report and the analyses within it two of them are especially important to pay some attention to.

1) As a part of this theoretical reorientation a lot of additional attention has been paid to the subjective dimensions of citizenship in terms of people’s identities as citizens. The abovementioned, formal view of citizenship tended to neglect the fact that citizenship also is rooted in people’s life worlds, values, and everyday practises. Hence, citizenship cannot only be connected to how people act as a citizens – i.e., by voting, participating in public spheres, attending meetings, etc. – but that it also has to be related to a view of oneself as an at least potential participant in society at large. From this position follows also an analytical split between engagement and participation – you can be engaged (in terms of identity) without actually participating (in terms of acting).

2) As a consequence of the fact that people’s identities as citizens are being paid further attention, there is also an increase in the number of spheres considered relevant to the citizens. That is, the role as citizens is played out and the identity is called upon (or even cultivated) in various, untypical contexts. The traditional view of citizenship would consider the citizens’ relations to the formal political system, state and formal public spheres as relevant for their citizenship. By paying attention to people’s identities as citizens, it also becomes important to pay attention to additional spheres, spheres within which people’s views of themselves as citizens are being cultivated, despite the fact that these spheres are not in any formal ways related to their citizenship. These spheres are of course numerous but include, for instance, associations within civil society and spheres for communicative participation on the internet.

Finally, we also need to at least very briefly touch upon two more concepts, civic and political. The concept civic – as in civic engagement and civic participation – refers to people’s interests and activities within/towards state and politics as well as within civil society, whereas the concept political more narrowly refers people’s interests and activities within/towards politics in its various modes (formal, informal, collective, personal etc.). In order to compare the two concepts one could say that the political is almost always civic, but everything civic is not political. In essence, by using the concept “civic” we expand the terrain considered to be relevant for people’s roles and identities as citizens.

In terms of analysis of the empirical material the abovementioned perspectives make up broad theoretical horizons inspiring our interpretations and re-interpretations of the focus group data. Through this interpretive practice we have aimed at reaching overarching and theoretically informed themes that describe and analyse the various ways in which the internet interplays with civic engagement and participation among young people.

**Report outline**

Section two of this report presents and discusses the methodological design of this study. Section three presents our data and the analyses of these data. The analytical part is built up around three analytical themes that summarise important parts of our observations and analytical points – the internet as a resource for, a reason to, and a Escape from civic engagement and participation. The forth section contains a short concluding discussion.

**The selection of focus groups**
The selection of focus groups has been informed by the ambition to include focus groups from significant and interesting parts of Swedish “civic society”. The selection of groups thus includes, firstly, two very much established groups within Swedish civic society: one group from what is often referred to as traditional people’s movements and one group selected from within the political parties’ youth organisations. In both cases we are dealing with organisations with a long history and that have been deemed important for the establishment and cultivation of Swedish democracy ever since the late 19th century. More specifically, these focus groups have been recruited from UNF [Ungdomens nykterhetsförbund], which is a youth organisation within the Swedish temperance movement, and from LUF [Liberala ungdomsförbundet], which is the youth association affiliated with the Swedish liberal party [Folkpartiet].

Moving forward in Swedish civic history, we have also aimed at including focus groups from alternative political organisations, such as the animal rights movement or the alter-globalisation movement. In the Swedish context such alternative groups started to gain in importance in the 1960s, but they have ever since changed form and focus, from for instance FNL-groups in the 1970s to radical neo-liberal criticism starting in the late 1990s. These groups were, however, difficult to get in touch with, not to mention the difficulties that were connected to collecting them into a single room at one specific occasion. Hence, in order to account for these groups and their internet practices we use data and analyses from individual interviews with such activists instead of focus group data.

A third kind of focus group included in our selection has been brought from the sphere of formal and traditional municipal politics. The people involved in the project Young in Lund [Ung i Lund] make use of the internet in their ambition to make young people more involved in municipal politics. The project has so far been successful and has even inspired similar projects in other parts of Sweden. The project has been covered through two different focus groups, one with young people that are engaged practically in the project, and one interview covering various users of the website.

Together these groups cover fairly traditional areas of civic engagement and civic participation, and our interest here has of course been to explore how the internet interplays with these traditional forms.

Most of our efforts, however, have been concerned with finding out how the internet interplays with newer forms of civic engagement and participation, and specifically forms of civic engagement and participation that are closely connected to the internet itself. In order to account for how the internet interplays with these more recent forms of engagement and participation among young people we have mainly been looking in three directions, towards blogging, towards Facebook practices, and into issues concerning file sharing.

In the first case, blogging, we have selected a focus group of bloggers. These bloggers are not explicitly “political” or “civic” bloggers, but the idea with the focus group has been to discuss blogging as form of expression and the potential civic dimensions inherited in such practices. The focus group covering Facebook practices has had a similar design. It has not aimed at catching explicitly civic or political dimensions of Facebook practices, but has rather strived to catch the potentially civic in everyday practices around Facebook. The third group grouped under this latter heading has dealt with file sharing issues. During the last couple of years file sharing has become an important issue to many young people in Sweden. It has even provoked youth participation in traditional politics through the establishment of a political party, the Piracy Party [Piratpartiet] (Miegel & Olsson 2008). In order to really account for this specifically interesting interconnection between internet related practices and civic
engagement our selection of focus groups has included three groups focusing specifically on this issue.

Finally, the selection of focus groups has also included one group of young people that are explicitly uninterested in civic and political issues. For a full account of the Swedish focus groups, see Appendix 1.

In general, the selection and the creation of the focus groups have been fairly successful. We have been able to include most of the groups we had planned for, and as a consequence we have also been able to make good use of the analyses conducted within previous work packages. These previous analyses pointed, among other things, towards the usefulness in including both older and newer forms of civic engagement and participation in our selection. Above all they pointed to the importance of analysing the file sharing issue and how it interplays with young people’s civic engagement.

Still, the selection of focus groups has had its problems, and they can basically be divided into two sub-themes: 1) problems in getting hold of and scheduling some people to attend a focus groups (this has for instance been the case with the abovementioned alternative political organisations), and 2) problems with people not showing up for the scheduled interviews (this has been the case in the interviews with very few people participating). These problems are, however, not at all unique. They are, instead, an almost inevitable part of the chosen research methodology.

The focus groups that we have conducted have all been successful in that they have given us enough empirical material to make use of ideas and analyses from previous work packages. In all cases the outcomes of the sessions have been very good, and the respondents have provided us with plenty of ideas and sometimes even material that appears almost spontaneously analytically relevant.

How the Internet Interplays with Civic/Political Engagement and Participation

A few general remarks

In these analyses of the internet’s significance for civic/political engagement and participation we will mainly be looking for and analysing the significance of various differences between the various social and cultural groups represented in the selection of focus groups. But before doing that it is also necessary to comment at least briefly on what seem to be very general and important observations that are valid to all focus groups.

First and foremost it is important to note that all of our respondents, in all of the focus groups, must be considered to be very frequent internet users. No matter whether we have been talking to politically active young people, or to young people with a specific interest in file sharing issues etc., they all use the internet very frequently and on an everyday basis at home, in schools, and at work. It is not an exaggeration to state that basically all of our respondents are connected to the internet around four hours a day or more. Furthermore, they all appear to be fairly competent internet users. That is, none of our respondents report any problems in using the internet according to their own aims and ambitions. This can be compared to recent statistical data on unemployed people’s use and perception of the internet, data which clearly shows how the capability to use the internet varies between different social groups (Abalo & Danielsson 2008) in terms of for instance age (younger people have better skills than older) and education (educated people are better at using the internet than less educated people). In our groups of young people these problems do not seem to appear at all, despite varying educational backgrounds. Related to this, we have also
been able to notice a great deal of self-confidence when it comes to internet use among the respondents. Basically, we are not dealing with average internet users here, but rather with people from the right generation in terms of having been able to get used to the internet over time and to become skilled in using the internet for various purposes.

**The Internet as a Resource for Civic Engagement and Participation**

*Young People from Two Established Organisations within Civil Society: UNF and LUF*

As we have already seen, both UNF and LUF are traditional movements within Swedish civil society, with a long history of having been deemed important to Swedish democracy. In the light of the focus group interviews, how do these organisations’ contemporary members make use of and understand the internet as a resource for their civic engagement and participation?

Starting with UNF (FG1), a part of the Swedish temperance movement, we can see that various internet applications have been shaped into intra organisational resources. The focus group conducted with members of one local unit reveals that they make use of applications such as Google groups, e-mail lists and Facebook-groups in order to keep the members informed about what is happening within the organisation and what activities are upcoming. The focus group participants also stress the fact that these applications are especially suitable to UNF as they help the organisation maintain its flat and non-hierarchical organisational structure.

The focus group also connects their use of their blog – which they have – to this logic of avoiding the creation of a hierarchical organisation; the fact that many members can contribute to the blog helps in keeping the organisation’s flat structure. In essence, the focus group participants agree on the fact that most of the co-ordination within the organisation is conducted through these various internet applications, and they even find it hard to imagine what it would be like to co-ordinate their efforts without the internet:

> JESSICA: [...] And all these groups, I mean like... mailing lists.
> THE OTHER RESPONDENTS: Mm.
> ISABELLA: Yes, it’s [the internet] very convenient.
> JESSICA: It’s really convenient.
> JENNY: [...] I can’t understand how one managed before... [Laughter]
> [...] ISABELLA: No, I mean to be engaged in various groups if you can’t get an e-mail, I check my e-mail like, well, 30-40 times a day.
> THE OTHER RESPONDENTS: Yes, yes...
> ISABELLA: Yes, absolutely.
> JESSICA: And if I don’t have my computer available I use my mobile phone [laughter].
> JENNY: Mm.
> JESSICA: Yes, no, but I think it is really important.

The internet is also an important resource when it comes to UNF’s external relations. Through the website the organisation informs the general public about its goals, ambitions and organisation. Furthermore, it advertises its campaigns on the website. The respondents also talk a lot about their use of the internet in pursuing the civic and political aims, for instance when it comes to such practical details as collecting lists of signatures:

> JESSICA: But also the simple thing that you can read before you sign, I mean, if you are into collecting signatures on the internet, then “here you can read what it is all about, and here you can sign” [...]. But if you walk around in town asking people to sign you have to stop and listen, and I think that it’s [...]. I really think that it’s many people that, well, that can not make it... And quite often I also think that you can look for a collection of names on the internet, I
mean if I just, “oh, I think this or that is really bad” then I don’t run around downtown looking for a list.

JENNY: But there are such, well, there are collection of signatures, exactly, there is this site namninsamling.se [collectionofsignatures.se] where you really can... anything that you want to sign, collection of signatures for everything.

JESSICA: Yes, but we used that before, for another thing, then we used it, and we could really easily create a list.

THE OTHER RESPONDENTS: Mm.

JESSICA: And you can reach everywhere in all cities. And countries. If you feel like it.

Even though the respondents within the group are very actively engaged within UNF on the local level, they also use the internet as individual members of the national organisation. In this respect they talk about how they use the internet and the organisation’s website to stay updated about what is going on within the organisation – a way of keeping in touch and stay updated within the dispersed organisation. Furthermore, they are also – as individual members – into discussing their temperance issues on various internet based public spheres.

During the focus groups involving active members of LUF, the Liberal Party’s youth organisation [Liberala ungdomsförbundet], their blog as well as their blogging practices were brought into focus (FG2). This was mainly due to the fact that all four respondents were active contributors to their local level blog. One of the things that were touched upon was their view of the blog’s capability to actually engage young people to become members of the youth organisation.

MODERATOR: But do you think [...], do you recruit members through your blog, do you know anything about that?

PETER: Yes, a couple of people have said that they have got in touch with us through the blog. So... and in general I think it's very good. Because, even if people do not join us, they are still being affected and we get more attention and so on.

AMANDA: I guess that's the way it's, if you are interested in joining a youth organisation, then you look for the organisation that you are interested in, you go to their website, look around a bit, in your local area, the local clubs. And then you see the link to [our local] blog. And as you get there you read, you read for a while before you make up your mind to – for instance – go to one of our café evenings and then eventually become a member. You follow that path.

JULIA: Well of course, you get insights into the organisation before getting there. I think it feels safer somehow.

This is a specifically interesting extract. First of all it makes it quite obvious that the respondents, who do contribute to the blog on a fairly regular basis, have very little knowledge of the effects of the blog – in the extract they are basically guessing about its potential effects. More interestingly, though, the extract also makes it quite clear that the youth organisation – despite the general hype around the web in general and its Web 2.0-applications in particular (among which the blog stands out as one of the most talked about features) as new tools for doing more internet based politics – is still mostly into extremely traditional ways of doing politics. The blog is mainly understood as a (shop)window for presenting opinions to young public, and it is primarily looked upon as a tool for getting people into the organisation. Basically, LUF does not ask people to actually participate through their internet interface (the blog). Instead, they ask people to read the blog and then to get involved in the organisation’s regular activities.

These regular activities all seem strikingly familiar: here they mention their café evenings, and in other parts of the focus groups they talk about how they go to nearby schools in order to meet and recruit young members, and about how they try to mould opinion through various local area campaigns. To anyone at least vaguely familiar with the traditional people’s movements and their ways of acting, these practices seem very well rehearsed. To be sure, LUF is very present on the web and they even use Web
This point, the fact that the internet appears to have been shaped into a tool that helps LUF following a long and well established people’s movement logic, gets even more obvious in other parts of the focus group discussion. The discussion reveals that within the organisation most of the coordination and practical information work get carried through via the internet – they call for meetings, publish minutes, inform about current campaigns etc. through the internet. Most of these practices get carried through by help of the organisation’s first class server, which the respondents refer to as NUBBS. NUBBS also has forums for discussions. On NUBBS all sorts of political discussions take place between potentially all LUF-members and all the members of the mother party, Folkpartiet. The respondents state that they are somewhat addicted to NUBBS, that they also spend a lot of time following its political discussions, and that they sometimes also contribute to its internal discussions themselves. But in terms of actual politics, however, these discussions do not seem to matter at all for what directions the party or the youth organisation is taking:

MODERATOR 1: Do you have the sense that an issue that has been discussed there [on NUBBS] also reach the agenda at congress meetings and things like that?
JULIA: No, I guess it is more the other way around, if we have had a congress and there has been a debate about something it is also quite often discussed on the Intranet afterwards. But I do not have the feeling, anyway, that an issue that has been discussed there reaches the agenda. […]
MODERATOR 2: Does that have anything to do with the fact that it is mostly younger people who are able to make use of the technology and that older people are not as good at it? Or what to you think?
JULIA: Well, I do not know, but it [a discussion on NUBBS] does not really reach our own [within the youth organisation specifically] agendas either. It is more like the other way around, as I said, that issues that have been put on the agenda also appear there [within the discussions on NUBBS] and are being discussed.

It is certainly an interesting fact that the discussions on NUBBS do not at all seem to matter for the political directions taken by either the youth organisation or the mother party. The many and rather frequent internet discussions are instead merely reflections of “the real discussions” taking place at congresses and other venues. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with that logic, it probably has its benefits. However, it is also significant for the fact that the application of various internet resource into the organisation does not seem to actually transform its established organisational logic that much.

This is, arguably, a very general theme that is valid for both of these organisations that are parts of the established people’s movements, UNF and LUF. In both cases the internet seems utterly important to the organisation as well as to its individual members; in several respects it is obviously an indispensable resource to them at this stage in history. Still, however, it is also obvious that the internet is employed in ways that shapes it according to the logic of traditional people’s movements. Hence, despite their application of the internet as a resource for their political and/or civic aims and activities, they still remain very much traditional people’s movements even in the so called Web 2.0-era.

Young People Connected to Young in Lund [Ung i Lund]: The Internet as a Resource for Bringing Young People into Local Politics

www.ungilund.se is a website for young people living in the southern Swedish town, Lund (‘Ung i Lund’ means literally ‘young in Lund’). It is financed by the municipality but initiated and managed entirely by young people themselves. The site is closely related to another youth initiative, called Lunds ungdomsting (Lund’s Youth Council), which briefly put is a forum (offline, not net based) for youth between 12 and 24 years of age.
through which they can influence municipal politics. In principle it is a communication link between the young and the power holders of the municipality (FG4 and FG5).

To Young in Lund as an organisation the website is not an end in itself. It is rather a means to an end and that end is to get young people involved in Lunds ungdomsting [Lund’s Youth Council] and – as a further consequence – to bring their voices into local, municipal politics. The people working around the website perceive it as a resource for engaging young people.

MODERATOR: What do you want to accomplish with the site?
MARIA: A lot [laughter] … First of all we want to have a great webpage for young people in Lund, with a focus on influence issues, where you can participate and have an impact and understand that you can have an impact, to find these direct channels, find support for your ideas, support on how to solve a problem or do a project you want to start. And then it seems very important as an information channel for other actors in the city of Lund, and also for the Youth Council … and then also that you as a young person are to be able to […] like write articles, publish your pictures, be able to interact on the page yourself. The idea is that […] as many as possible […] write articles and publish and that kind of thing.

This view of the website also resounds in the focus group with its users. The focus group makes it clear that the website per se is a secondary tool, a resource for the main thing, which is to participate in the Youth Council and – thereby – influence municipal politics:

MODERATOR: If we move over to the website then … Young in Lund, that has evolved somewhat and is expected … what does it have […] for you, and how do you use it and work with it? Well, you do work with it. You others?
SARAH: You mean … from home, or?
MODERATOR: Yes, in general. What do you use it for and what do you look at and …
SARAH: Well … […] Like … that’s kind of hard to say, because like, if you check meeting schedules and that kind of thing, I know that anyway, so like …
MODERATOR: How do you get information about … Is it used by young people a lot? What do you think?
ERIK: I guess it’s starting to be used. I’ve tried to keep statistics of it, but we have like 20 unique visitors per day. If I remember it correctly. […] And it think it’s a lot about that we can publish articles and we can publish like what happens at the meetings, we can like reach a bigger audience, then just the ones who […] I think that’s a lot of the purpose, like a lot of what it coming out right now. I think it has a great future ahead of itself, it could be a lot better, and I think it will.
MODERATOR: You mentioned something about that there isn’t a discussion board yet […].
ERIK: Well, if, it has to come from the bottom. There has to be people who are, like really like, “We want a discussion board”. There has to be a commitment to it. […] MODERATOR: Isn’t there?
ERIK: It’s not very articulated yet […]. I don’t know, to create a discussion board you need very much, like, you have to have a strong audience and there has to be many who want to get involved for you to be able to create a discussion board. There are a lot of discussion boards that just are started and then they get like two people who sit and discuss a bit and then it dies, because there has to be a lot of people involved at the beginning, at the same time.

In the extract two of the participators in the focus group comment on the website as a resource for Ung i Lund, and their comments make it clear that the website per se is not the focus of the organisation. Furthermore, they also go into detail in terms of what kind of a resource they understand the website to be: it is good for presenting schedules for the actual activities that take place in meetings, and it is good for reaching out to a wider audience. It is also interesting to note their view of having a web forum, that such an application is not an end in itself, but has to be asked for by the people participating and once set up, used regularly.

The ways in which the youth council makes use of the internet has rather striking similarities to how it is used within the political parties (in this case LUF above) and in traditional people’s movements (in this case UNF); websites and other internet
applications are applied as means to an end, they are never ends in themselves. In one way this is not a surprising outcome. All three organisations are inspired by and aim at (at least implicitly) organising themselves according to well established norms for how organisations within Swedish civil society should organise themselves in order to be considered democratic. As such, they are shaping the internet according to a logic inspired by traditional people’s movements. Still, it is also somewhat surprising, not least when looking at how the internet often gets depictured – within general debates as well as within research – as a killer application for new forms for civic and political participation and engagement. By looking at these civic and or political organisations it is really difficult to substantiate such claims. In many ways they are instead surprisingly true to established traditions and logics. That is not to say that the internet has not made any impact on these organisations, or the people within them, but rather to say that the internet gets actively appropriated by and strategically incorporated into very longstanding traditions of civic and political engagement.

Young People within Alternative Political Organisations

For the purpose of this report, the concept of alternative movements refers to contemporary extra-parliamentarian group; they often focus on single issues. Four different alternative organisations were included in the study upon which this section is based (FG3). Green Globalization is an alter-globalization movement with a green slant. The organisation is organised on a national level, but has international connections. Three members from Green Globalization participated in the study. The study also includes three members from the organisation Friends of the Animal. This organisation is part of the animal rights movement. Although the organisation has a large disperse member base, most of the organisation’s activities are initialised and carried through within small groups at the local level. The Young Feminists do not belong to one and the same organisation. This organisation is instead an amalgamation of various groups with feminist interests. The study has twelve participants from this group, ten women and two men. The forth organisation, Just Say No, is a very small group of activists who support antiracism. The organisation is somewhat new; at the time of the study they had only been active for about six months. The group is loosely connected to a bigger organisation. From this a small group of three respondents were recruited.

When it comes to the question how the internet interplays with their civic engagement and participation analyses centred around two concepts summarise this connection better than others: civic identity and networking.

In order to grasp the ways in which the internet contributes to the alternative activists’ civic identity it is first necessary to understand their mistrust in traditional, mainstream media in this respect. The alternative activists’ problems with traditional media are in essence twofold: 1) The media hardly pay any attention to their political issues or to their organisations. 2) Once they actually do pay attention, every now and then, they misrepresent the political issues and misrepresent the alternative political organisations in a way that makes them feel like deviant voices.

To the young respondents within the alternative political organisations the internet, however, represents something completely different. Anna, for instance, who is a member of Friends of the Animal has shaped the internet into an important part of her construction of alternative identity in several different ways: it functions as a resource for instant monitoring of their surrounding political landscape, she also uses it to disseminate animal rights news to other members, it is furthermore a source of alternative information (where she can both search and find information of relevance to her political interests), and it is also a space where she finds various internet communities that functions as resources for her everyday lifestyles as a vegetarian.
Basically, the internet provides space for her construction of alternative civic identity in a way that is very different from traditional media. This is also a very general experience among the alternative activists (Dahlgren & Olsson 2007).

Vital parts of the ways in which the internet gets used within the alternative political organisations can be understood through the notion of networking. The internet is, basically, used as a resource that makes the alternative movements’ network-like characters possible (Olsson 2008). This networking character is most obvious in two different respects. Firstly, the internet is used as a resource for outsourcing the knowledge production within small groups of alternative activists. These organisations are usually too small and too loose to manage to produce and store knowledge useful for their areas of political interest themselves. Instead, they have to ask its members to become independent information seekers, consulting other sources. Hence, they very much need to rely on knowledge being produced by other nodes in the networks of similar activist groups. Secondly, the internet also plays an important role as an infrastructure holding the loosely organised groups of activists together. They do not have a formal organisation, they do not have a list of members, and they do not have formal meetings. Instead, mailing lists and other kinds of internet applications function as the glue that holds these disparate groups of activists together.

In general then, also the alternative political organisations have managed to shape the new ICT into a useful resource for their political and civic aims; our studies of these organisations indicate that they seem to have been able to shape the internet into a useful resource, or even an infrastructure, for their political and civic projects.

**When the Internet Becomes the Very Reason for Civic Engagement – File Sharing and Surveillance**

Since at least 2003, when the Swedish bittorrent tracker the Pirate Bay was launched, issues concerning file sharing has been somewhere close to the top of the Swedish political agenda (see Miegel & Olsson 2008 for a schematic account). The file sharing and copyright controversy culminated in 2006 when the Swedish police made a raid against the web hotel hosting Pirate Bay and brought three persons connected to The Pirate Bay in for interrogation. The outcome of the trial resulting from the police raid is yet to be seen; at the moment of writing this report the trial takes place in Stockholm.

What we do know is that the – the pirates versus the music industry/the legal system/the police – controversies have inspired the formation of a political party attracting especially young Swedes, Piratpartiet [The Pirate Party]. In the general election in Sweden in September 2006 Piratpartiet gained 34 918 votes. The result made them number three among the parties not qualifying for Riksdagen (the Swedish parliament) with 0,68 % of the total votes, a turn out that might not seem too impressive. However, the party has been growing in terms of members ever since and will also be running for the election to the European Parliament in June 2009. In terms of young people the Pirate Party’s youth organisation is now Sweden’s biggest political party youth organisation.

Hence, it was a rather obvious choice for us to pay this issue some extra attention in our selection of focus groups. However, what was even more surprising was the fact that this issue kept reappearing in close to all focus groups – it is truly an issue engaging young people. For instance, in the focus group that was selected in order to cover for explicitly uninterested young people (FG11), the issue still brought both a great deal of attention and interest:

MODERATOR: This thing with downloading, it has become a bit of a political issue lately. Have you got any thoughts about that?
TINA: I guess I also think it’s wrong, really. Since the artists [...] do not get, when you download music for free, they do not get paid. So really... I think it’s wrong. But I still do it, so ...
RICHARD: But it’s cheaper in other countries, so it does not feel... that Sweden should have those prices compared to the U.S. for example. At least when it comes to movies.
[
MODERATOR: It’s quite interesting that you think it’s wrong, but you still do it ... what do you say about that?
TINA: I do not know.
HANNA: What can you say?
TINA: It’s how it is, you have done it for a long time, and I have not thought about it that much before. I have downloaded for so long. And... now when it’s become like illegal and that, I do not know, you still keep doing it, you think that “it won’t happen to me, I won’t be charged”, [...] although at the same I do think that it’s wrong, so maybe you should not do it.

At first sight this conversation about file sharing might not seem to impressive – the participants mainly reflect on their own practices and the fact that what they are doing is illegal. Still, however, the discussion also holds moments of ethical reflections concerning one’s own practices (“I guess I also think it’s wrong, really”) and whether or not it is a fair practice with respect to the artists to download movies and music. These considered reflections can be compared to the fact that within this group it was really hard to have them reflect on any issues apart from issues concerning local, municipal politics. File sharing issues brought at least some attention and engagement from the respondents, and they even developed that thread somewhat further:

MODERATOR: Hannah?
HANNAH: Even if you think it’s wrong, it’s so easy. It has to do with that too ...
LINDA: [...] go onto a website and just click twice and the you have like a movie a moment later. So that's a big part of it too, you do not have to go to the store and buy a movie and that [...]?
RICHARD: There are more urgent things that politicians can get engaged in than people who download movies and music, I think.
SEVERAL: Yes.
RICHARD: I think it’s kind of ridiculous when they whine about that. It’s not like everyone does it either.
TINA: But really, [...] it’s still a lot of money.
RICHARD: Yes, it is.
TINA: Compared to if you went and bought a CD or a movie, [...]?
SOFIA: But I agree with [refers to RICHARD] a bit. That it’s more important that they address like... There has been a lot of robberies and things like that here, what we talked about before, and it’s more important that they address that, do something about it, than downloading and that stuff.

In this extract the group makes the file sharing issue an explicitly political issue. They seem to share the opinion that there has to be more important political issues for politicians to take care of than legislating about the entertainment industry’s right to go hunting for young people’s downloading of music and movies for their own private use. Since the focus groups was recruited from and carried through within a city which lately has been the subject to a long range of armed robberies, this becomes their measure for putting the file sharing issue into perspective; to the focus group it is obvious which of the two problems that they find it most urgent for politicians to solve.

If the group of “unengaged” young people seems to become at least somewhat engaged by issues concerning file sharing, some participants within other focus groups also present a great deal of knowledge of these issues and present specifically elaborated points of view. This was for instance the case in the focus group conducted with five university students (students within engineering (three) and social sciences (two)):

MODERATOR: [Is it an important issue to you, all] this about downloading and access?
MARTIN: Yes, I still think it is.
DANIEL: It should not have to be such an issue, if the record companies had followed the development, this situation would never have presented itself.
CARL: They had the chance of a lifetime, but they did not take it.
DANIEL: Yeah, they tried, but it's like... All the companies are trying to keep earning as much money as possible for as long as possible instead of maybe developing.
CARL: They introduced copy protection so that you could not play their CDs on older CD-players. I mean, that makes you get so tired, you want to download just to screw with them.
DANIEL: It's like they were digging themselves into a hole. [...] MARTIN: In the long run I think this has led to a good thing, about who actually owns all these things, the music and the movies and everything ... it feels like the musician, the artist or whoever it is, may have been a bit unnoticed before and now have a bit more power over their own creating. There is a lot of, like smaller bands and such, who no longer are interested in the record companies or their service anymore. In that perspective I think it's good. It may be a byproduct, that is not what it's really about, but just, issues of ownership [...].
ANNA: They are not as dependent now.
MARTIN: No.
ANNA: And you do not make the money off, as I have understood it, selling records, but it's at the gigs you make the money. And smaller bands who come up get gigs, and start to make their own money. It's the big artists and record companies who, as we said, make money off this, and that is why you may not want to ... that is why you think that this is a bit okay, like, even if you do not care, because to take money from someone who is already really rich ...
MARTIN: It’s not like you are hugely embarrassed by it.
ANNA: No, you are not.

Once again we are seeing a group of young people with no explicit civic and/or political interests and engagements. Still, when it comes to issues concerning file sharing they certainly become engaged in the discussion and also have very well elaborated points of view. Within this rather long extract they firstly manage to touch upon critique of the entertainment industry’s inability to deal with the new, digital media landscape: “They had the chance of a lifetime, but they didn’t take it.” Furthermore they also, secondly, reflect on the fact that the new media situation brings new possibilities to smaller bands and artists. They are, the group states, no longer as dependent on the big companies within the record industry for reaching out to its audience in the way they used to be: “There’s a lot of, like smaller bands and such, who no longer are interested in the record companies or their service anymore. In that perspective I think it’s good.” (Martin).

Arguably, the file sharing issue has created a situation in which the internet inspires civic engagement but perhaps not participation. However, this does not happen in terms of a specific website inspiring young people to become engaged. What we are seeing is instead how young people’s everyday practices around the internet, and the fact that these practices are threatened by legislation, make them go from rather uninterested and unengaged to both interested and engaged. The file sharing issue obviously touches upon their everyday experiences and practices in ways that other issues do not. As such, the internet – or more precisely their internet practices – have become their very reason for civic engagement.

It is also worth mentioning that there is a flip side to this coin. In a number of focus groups the interest in file sharing issues (connected to everyday life practices of file downloading) is paralleled by an interest in surveillance issues; surveillance is in this respect a concrete threat towards the file sharing practices. Also when it comes to surveillance issues – as with issues concerning file sharing – some of the groups present a high degree of engagement and also a great deal of knowledge (especially in FG8, 9, 10). This also makes up another connection between the internet and civic engagement, the fact that issues concerning surveillance, or at least the threat of surveillance, seems to become a reason for young people’s civic engagement.

_When the Internet becomes an Escape from Civic Engagement – Bloggers and Facebookers_
So far we have seen how the internet has been shaped into a resource for already established modes of civic engagement and participation. We have also seen how the internet – or rather everyday internet practices – under specific circumstances becomes the very reason for civic engagement, as in issues concerning file sharing and surveillance. From the point of view of our focus groups there is however at least another mode in which the internet is shaped to interplay with civic engagement: at times it seems to be shaped into a *Escape* from it, a sphere within which one rests from such issues.

It is somewhat surprising (and thought provoking) that the empirical material that substantiates the notion of the internet as a Escape from civic engagement and participation mainly can be brought from the interviews conducted in order to cover for typical so called Web 2.0-applications, blogging and the use of Facebook (FG6, 7). It is surprising (and ironic) in that respect that the general debate on the second generation of the internet has been very eager to point to the more participatory and interactive nature of the new, improved internet, and that this technological advance potentially could foster further civic engagement and participation (see Olsson & Dahlgren 2009 for a discussion).

During the focus group with bloggers we were specifically looking for inherently civic dimensions in their practices around their blog and in their ways of thinking about their blogging activities. Among other things we asked them about their reasons for starting their blogs:

MATILDA: I was really unhappily in love once during high school and I felt very [?] and with the small city doctrine with all its repressive norms and so on. It [the blog] became kind of a way to a world that I longed for, for instance the academic world, and […] the media and things like that. It became a breathing-space.

GABRIELLA: I used to keep diary on other internet communities before, and I mostly found it pleasurable because it was rather anonymous and you could choose how personal you wanted to be in such a rather public diary. And then I grew tired of communities and wanted everyone to read, those who wanted to. Hence, I started blogging.

HELENA: […] In the beginning I had a personal blog. I broke up with my boyfriend and felt rather low, […] then I thought that – I used to keep diary – I’ll write on the internet. […]

There is an obvious similarity between Matilda’s, Gabriella’s and Helena’s decisions to start blogging – their reasons are very personal. For Matilda blogging was a matter of creating a breathing-space during a period when she did not feel too good. For Gabriella going into blogging was just a short step away from her previous diary keeping on internet communities. For Helena her blogging started as a way of dealing with her feeling low after breaking up with her boyfriend. It is telling that all three point to a very specific point in time, perhaps even a turning point, as their reasons to start blogging.

But what is most interesting with these reasons for starting a blog is, in this context at least, the lack of obvious civic dimensions in their motives to start blogging. It is hard to claim anything else than that the start ups have very little, if anything, to do with outlooks towards society at large, or with a wish to become involved in specific issues, or with the ambition to participate in a public sphere etc. Instead, in all three cases it was personal and individual circumstances that inspired the start up. But what about the blogging as it proceeds, do civic dimensions perhaps emerge over time?

MODERATOR: Is it about visibility?
HELENA: Yes.
MATILDA: Yes, absolutely. […] You get addicted to it. […] it was like a drug in the beginning, as you started to get comments and things like that, and you knew that perhaps someone that you admire would comment.

HELENA: One kind of wanted to update five times a day.
Neither when it comes to their current blogging practices the bloggers’ ways of talking about their blogs indicate that blogging is a civic practice in their intent. This extract is part of a rather long passage in the focus group discussion during which the interviewer and the respondents try to get into what the point in blogging really is. When the interviewer tries to summarise the discussion by asking “Is it about visibility?”, the group immediately responds with positive answers: Yes, this is what it is all about, to be visible and not least to also have that visibility confirmed by others through comments and visitor statistics. One of the respondents even refers to this as an “addiction”.

All three bloggers also pay a lot of interest in the blogosphere in general. They read a lot of other blogs and are also quite frequently contributing with comments on various blogs. What are their general views of these practices, what is the point in reading and participating on other blogs?

GABRIELLA: I think it is really great to have, just log in [...] and have 300 unread [updates] and have a cup of coffee and just sit and read blogs, it is relaxation for me.
MATILDA: Yes, it can really be relaxing.
HELENA: If you have got the time it is really nice and cosy.
GABRIELLA: I know [laughter].
MATILDA: Yes, but it is a good way, in a way, kind of escapism, that you kind of...
GABRIELLA: It is like reading a magazine.
MATILDA: Absolutely.
HELENA: Or watch TV.
GABRIELLA: Yes.
HELENA: It is pretty much the same thing.

The short extract makes it quite clear what reading other blogs in the blogosphere means to the participants within this focus group – it has to do with having fun and it is also a matter of relaxation, like “reading a magazine” or “watching TV”.

To be sure, what we see in the focus group composed of bloggers are people making great use of a significant and interesting part of the internet – the so called blogosphere. The respondents within the group all have very valid ideas about what blogging should be, and they obviously also make good use of the blog in ways that make sense within their everyday lives and life biographies. In terms of civic practices, however, they certainly seem to play them out somewhere elsewhere. It is difficult to interpret our focus groups data in any other way. They started blogging for various reasons having to do with their private lives, for instance as a way of negotiating personal problems, they keep blogging mainly in order to have visibility, and they take interest in other bloggers as a way of relaxing. Once again, these are all very valid practices, but perhaps not practices that immediately seem to have that much to do with what would be more typical civic practices.

Staying in the Web 2.0-sphere we can look into another internet practice that is often associated with the new and improved web – social networking in general and through the use of Facebook in particular. How does the use of Facebook interplay with young people’s civic engagement and participation?

On a direct question about these matters the participants in the Facebook focus group hesitate. They are indeed very interested in civic matters and have a great deal of
opinions about most issues in contemporary societal debates, but they do not instinctively connect their frequent use of Facebook to such matters:

ERICA: It is a very elucidated kind of information about oneself that one shares there [on Facebook], it is a bit like one is a brand, it is a similar way of thinking, that one has a very well thought through… what you write about your status, that… it is a kind of… to tell about your identity, in a very special way. One can really introduce an image of oneself, and one can quite exactly manage what one wants, how people should interpret you, or no, you can not really do that, but one can introduce oneself in a very elaborated way. What groups one is in. What pictures one uses. […] So it is really… as my friend said […]: “Facebook is about communicating with others through one’s own narcissism.”

[Laughter]
ERICA: But it is quite telling...

In Erica’s interpretation of what Facebook is about she uses concepts such as “branding” and “narcissism” to describe how it is used for elaborated self-presentation. For Erica, using Facebook has very little to do with her great interest in politics and general societal issues. That is her spontaneous reflection. During the course of the focus group discussion, however, as the moderators start to ask more specifically about possible connections between the use of Facebook and civic engagement, both Erica and Felix try to find examples of such connections:

MODERATOR: But isn’t it a kind of engagement to just show up and say…
ERICA: Yes, one does sign up for something, sure.
FELIX: Yes. That’s how it works […]. It’s like signing a list of names or something. Then [on Facebook] you also have a chance to ask other people to sign, because every time you enter into a group, […] it appears automatically: “Do you want to invite your friends to this group?”
[…]
ERICA: Yes, it is usually from the mass media… if it has been like, the man who killed Engla [a young Swedish girl that was murdered in spring 2008], then there was a group that popped up around that saying: “He [the man who murdered Engla] should die.” And that group got really big, many people signed up – I never joined it, but… But then I don’t know what happens with these groups, it feels as if they fade away as the issue leaves the news agenda.

As the moderator brings the discussion to the areas of engagement, Erica says that it is possible to sign lists on Facebook, which is further emphasised by Felix who also point to the fact that it is very easy to also ask your friends to sign up once you are on Facebook. The respondents also hand out an example of their encounter with such a list on Facebook, concerning a specific murder case in Sweden. But what the extract also makes obvious, however, is the fact that neither Erica nor Felix are very enthusiastic about these activities on Facebook. They are civically engaged in general, but do not seem to shape their use of Facebook into a resource in this respect. They are – furthermore – rather sceptical when it comes to Facebook’s potential, at least by this time in history:

ERICA: It might eventually become that [important], but I don’t think it is… I still think that radio and TV have the biggest pervasive force within these areas. But it might become…

In this section we have seen how two groups of users effectively shape the internet into something that can be interpreted as a Escape from civic engagement and participation. The focus group of bloggers made it very obvious that their blogging had little, if anything, to do with civic engagement and/or participation. Instead, they describe and understand their blogging activities as important parts of their individual life biographies rather than as parts of wider discussions concerning the world around them. The focus group composed of Facebook users is specifically interesting in terms of the Escape theme. The group was composed of already civically engaged young people, with great interest in various societal issues. Nevertheless, they did not seem to interpret Facebook to be the site for such activities. To them, Facebook seem to be more related to personal branding than to civic engagement and/or participation.
Conclusion: A Resource, a Reason, and an Escape

The descriptions and analyses above have suggested that the internet – as a medium, an infrastructure, a public sphere, a file sharing device etc. etc. – can interplay with civic engagement and participation in many different ways. Or to put in words more obviously inspired by the SST-approach informing the report: the internet can be (or may not be) shaped into a resource for civic engagement and participation in many different ways by its users. This may sound like a truism, but should not be interpreted that way. It is instead a sentence that points to the fact that the internet is an especially open media technology. Comparing it with other media technologies, like newspapers, radio, or TV, the internet opens up a huge number of possibilities for various groups of users. Whereas, for example, TV is a media technology that basically broadcasts content to its users, the internet offers a whole set of different “media technology-user-relations”. Hence, just as well as the TV the internet can build broadcasting relations with some users, at some occasions, but it can also function as an infrastructure inviting the users to other kinds of social relations at various societal levels, from the micro via the meso to the macro levels of society.

In this report we have described and slightly elaborated on three general modes of how the internet gets (and does not get) shaped into a resource for civic engagement and participation. Based on our focus groups we have analysed how the internet, within various social and cultural contexts of young users, can be shaped into a resource for, a reason for as well as a Escape from civic engagement and participation. The remainder of this concluding section will shortly comment on these three notions. In these reflections we also draw on material from the previous work packages within the project in some cases.

The fact that the internet has been shaped into a resource for organisations such as LUF, UNF, Ung i Lund, and various alternative political organisations, has been made obvious through the focus groups data presented here. For a lot of reasons this is not very surprising, but instead a very much expected outcome. The ways in which these organisations make use of the internet do not really add up to a revolution for civic engagement and/or participation, but it definitely adds up to significant evolutions. What is of further interest with the user practices presented in this report is the fact that they are also – to a large extent at least – “planned effects”. Through previous interviews with the website producers affiliated with these specific organisations, or at least very similar organisations, we know that the uses to which the internet is put among these users are basically both expected and hoped for by the producers of these internet resources (mainly websites in this case). If these internet resources were to be evaluated through our focus groups, it seems as if the producers, and their organisations, have succeeded to a large extent in shaping the internet into a resource (for the organisation as well as for the users) in exactly the ways that they want it to be.

The views of and the practices around the internet presented in some of the focus group can best be understood as examples of the fact the internet can very well be a Escape from civic engagement and participation. The focus groups with bloggers and Facebook users particularly called for such an analysis. In essence, both practices (blogging and use of Facebook) provide great opportunities for online civic engagement and participation. Interestingly, therefore, the possibilities of these applications are hardly taken advantage of for such purposes by the people we have discussed with. Beside the group of bloggers, we collected the focus group of Facebook users to discuss how such Web 2.0 applications could be used for civic engagement and participation. Even though the participants of the latter group, unlike the bloggers, expressed political interest as well as their political colour, they downplayed the relevance of Facebook for at least more serious civic engagement than what they
regarded as rather insignificant symbolic acts like signing petitions and joining groups supporting or opposing a particular phenomenon.

Still, even the group of bloggers, whose interest in traditional civic and/or political issues was meagre to say the least, inspires a couple of analytical reflections. The very self-centeredness of the blogger-group can be seen as an almost ideal-typical expression of an individualistic attitude. It can, however, also be interpreted as an extreme manifestation of a more general facet of how the civic and political is conceived of by the focus group participants. What we have in mind here is an inclination among the interviewees to stress certain kinds of issues as particularly politically significant. The matters identified as especially important regarded for instance sexual identities, ethnicity, gender equality, or what could broadly be defined as identity - or lifestyle-political questions. The importance of personal relevance for an issue to be politically engaging was stressed throughout the interviews, while more traditional political questions such as social politics and welfare systems, economy and finance, defence, foreign affairs and the like were considered less engaging (except for within the more traditional types of civic organisations). Hardly surprising perhaps, but it nevertheless further underscores Rosanvallon’s (2006) thesis about the increasing connection between collective recognition and individual differentiation in modern politics, or in our terms between the civic and the personal.

Finally, our focus groups also suggest that the internet at times also can become a reason for civic engagement and participation. Or to be more precise: young people’s everyday internet practices sometimes become their point of departure for civic engagement. Our focus groups indicate that young people’s file sharing practices together with the fact that these practices are threatened by legislation and surveillance make them engaged; it becomes an issue that they pay interest in as well as dig deeper into.

Apart from the fact that the issues touch upon young people’s everyday life experiences we can also see a couple of additional factors explaining the great interest in the issues. One factor is of course the extensive news coverage of the issue and events related to it has contributed to keep the debate constantly current and vital. The issue is all over the news agenda. Another part of the explanation can probably be found in that the debate contains a generational aspect. The younger generation that has grown up with computers and are used to taking advantage of the possibilities of the internet stand in conflict with a generation defending an established, and according to the young, dated system of immaterial property rights and copyright. Finally, the establishment of increasingly influential lobby groups and a political party advocating the right of file sharing on the internet is also an important factor. The rhetoric of these groups is particularly interesting because they make skilful use of classical political values and arguments, situating the file sharing debate within a discourse of classical democratic rights and values, such as the freedom of speech and expression, the equal rights of everyone to information and culture, and the protection of privacy.

Basically, the ways in which issues concerning file sharing seem to inspire and civically engage young Swedes is a question well worthy of further analysis. The area promises to give vital answers to questions about civic mobilisation in general and – not least – its contemporary interconnection with the internet in particular.

References


### Appendix 1: The Swedish Focus Groups

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<td>Members of LUF (The liberal party's youth organisation)</td>
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<td>10</td>
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Turkish National Report

Asli Telli Aydemir, Istanbul Bilgi University

Introduction

This report relates to Work Package 10 of the CivicWeb project, which focuses on the young users of the websites as well as more contemporary web-based content sharing platforms sites such as MSN, YouTube and popular social network sites, such as Facebook. We conducted focus group interviews with 15-25 year olds in Turkey to understand why and how young people use the internet, their views on the online environment, how the websites and the above-mentioned web-based communication and content sharing channels might support or work against political and civic participation in other aspects of their lives. We find this work package extremely significant in terms of its relations with the previous ones (especially 6, 7 and 9) and the implications it has for European policy. The report covers a thematic analysis of 7 focus groups conducted on May 2008-February 2009 in Turkey28.

Focus Group Selection

Recent history and changes in civic/political participation

Similar to what is stated in the previous reports covering web content and producers, we have tried to include a wide spectrum of users in our focus groups. By a wide spectrum of users, we mean the following. As stated in the previous reports submitted for the CivicWeb project, the concerns of young people in such a youthful densely populated country are really significant. However, in a country like Turkey where rapid socio-economic development has taken place during the last few decades, the policies concerning young people are completely insufficient. As this is accompanied by a political climate with ongoing reforms as well as frequent parliamentary crises, freedom of speech while using the Internet has become a contested issue. Turkey has a long way to go in terms regulations. The new media bill (RTÜK Law), as a subsection of the country’s restrictive press law, treats anything posted on or sent over the internet, the same as if it were published in a newspaper or broadcast over the airwaves. The judges that decide on the visibility of web content are over 60 years of age with little internet experience or expertise.

Furthermore, there is a major ICT-related challenge before the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey – bridging the digital divide between urban and rural populations, men and women, and young and old. This requires innovative approaches to increasing computer and information literacy, facilitating access to the Internet, and demonstrating to citizens and businesses the value of using the Internet.

Rural areas in Turkey are disadvantaged in terms of Internet access, both as a result of the lack of broadband technologies and because of high connection prices. This has initiated the establishment of internet cafes in Turkey. Since 1994, Internet Cafes (net cafes, bistros, cyber cafes) provide access to the internet; serve both hot and cold drinks as well as snacks and have an hourly charge. All over the world, in order to give an opportunity for individuals with lower socio-economic backgrounds to connect to the internet, the opening of Internet Cafes was encouraged at the end of the 1990s (Laegran, 2000: 6). Internet cafes in Turkey were first opened in metropolitan areas and afterwards in smaller cities of Anatolia. When the Internet cafe’ made its debut in

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28 See appendix.
1997, it was embraced by the authorities within the rhetoric of the information age. Moreover, it was considered a safe hangout for young people because it was different from the coffeehouse or the ‘beerhouse’, where patrons allegedly killed time by playing cards, gambling, or drinking (Yesil, 2003). Initially, internet cafes were frequented by young people belonging to the middle classes since the connection fees were high. Now that they are more widespread and prices are lower, especially those in the suburbs are popular hang-outs for working class users. Recently, however, there have been complaints about Internet cafes, claiming that they play porn movies to kids or make available terrorist websites. Generally speaking, however, two of the most common activities in these cafes are online multi-player games and chatting. This issue was dominant in the Sirinevler high school focus group and brought up several times in the other interviews.

**Specific issues that generate civic/political participation**

One of the most striking recent issues related to civic and democratic participation in Turkey is the issue of ‘internet restrictions’. About a year ago, the AKP government initiated the censorship process by preventing Turkish citizens from accessing YouTube from anywhere inside Turkey, based on the claim that the constitution was breached with videos displaying Ataturk. This has been followed by the banning of Wordpress, Blogger.com, Googlegroups, Geocities and Alibaba.com. Since most discussions by activists and internet-savvy groups in Turkey are carried out via these platforms, we consider this censorship to be a serious obstacle in the path of civic and democratic engagement. Thus, we have specifically touched upon this issue during most of our focus groups as it is an act that aims to prevent civic and political participation over the net, but might also generate opposing discourse from the activists online.

**The process of creating the focus groups: constraints and challenges**

We arranged two pilot groups: The first one with the volunteers of Community Volunteers Foundation in Diyarbakir and the second one with Istanbul Aydin University students. The first focus group in Diyarbakir turned out interesting, but we were unable to use it since the participants were really serious about not having the interview recorded. Our initial plan was including young and politicised Kurdish views into the sample, but we had to change plans. Since the ethnic identity issue is strongly contested in Turkey’s recent political agenda, we aimed for getting views of Kurdish young people about their participatory problems, but had to change plans. The time was limited, so we could not arrange a second interview during which we would make sure recording would be possible. In the case of Istanbul Aydin University students, since the students that responded to the interview call sheet turned out to be forum administrators, moderators and website editors. Thus, we had the privilege of getting expert feedback at pilot interview stage.

One major difficulty faced while contacting the focus groups was putting together a focus group of disabled young people. We contacted Basak Art and Culture Foundation that coordinates art and culture focused projects for the empowerment of disabled young people. Even though they seemed as if they would like to help out, in the end it was impossible to gather a group. Our intention in conducting that interview was to ascertain whether access to the internet creates any impact on civic and political engagement of disabled young people and whether it served as a facilitator for those already involved in socio-cultural activities in spite of their physical disadvantages.

Another difficulty faced was with the bloggers. Even though we double-checked the participation of each individual by phone-calls several times, only three people turned
out for the first interview. Thus we scheduled a second appointment with the same group.

The Youth Unions are also recently active in Turkey in terms of students’ rights and young worker movements. However, our interview request was turned down by the leader of the Istanbul group who pointed out that they would not speak since the Civicweb project is funded by the EU. During the phone conversation we had with the Istanbul group leader, he mentioned that he would ask his friends if they would be interested in participating in a focus group related to Civicweb, but that he doubted they would accept the invitation. When we insisted and wanted to know why they would be unlikely to participate, he stated that he was an Orthodox Marxist; he proudly added that such ideologies did not wear out and that it would be against their philosophy to speak for the EU. Thus we could not include the voice of the youth workers, their problems or concerns regarding participation in this report.

In terms of social settings where the focus groups are held, we faced a slight challenge during the Sirinevler High School interview. It was hard to gather the participants in a café or house setting after school, so we had to conduct the interview in one of the available rooms at school. We were interrupted several times by the administrators during the interview. The participants were also uneasy about not attending the flag ceremony even though permissions were arranged in advance. This incident also suggests the pressure high school kids feel at school.

Because of the time constraints and since our attempts of reaching activist groups in different cities were turned down several times, we chose to plan out all the interviews in Istanbul. As mentioned above, we did try to include ethnically diverse views from Diyarbakir, but we are not able to put this interview into light since we were not allowed to record it. However, we do not regard this as a weakness in terms of the sample since the young people that took part in the focus groups interviews came from diverse family backgrounds—some of their families moved to Istanbul after they were born, others came to Istanbul on their own for study reasons while only a few are originally Istanbulites.

All focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed before proceeding on to the analysis. The approximate duration of each focus group is 90 minutes.

Below you will see a thematic description of the seven Turkish focus groups conducted between May 2008-February 2009 in Turkey. The focus groups were carried out in a conversational setting with a number of specific issues in mind that helped draw out themes while writing the report. We also used discourse analysis techniques in order to highlight the frequently repeated concepts and terms in various statements of the 53 young people interviewed in these focus groups. We planned out 6 of the focus groups below in order to map the concerns of young people in Turkey through two axes: One axe includes young people already belonging to civic groups and/or organizations; that is young members of non-governmental organizations, social movement supporters and activists; in general young people involved in collective action. The other axis includes individual activists and experienced internet users. In these two axes, we aim to investigate why some people get involved and the patterns of their involvement (offline/online, collective/single, passive/active etc.).

It is certainly as significant to see why some young people do not get involved. Thus, the rest of the focus groups we conducted serve this aim. The interview conducted with the high school students in Sirinevler, a disadvantaged socio-economic setting is a good example of that. We looked for country-specific disadvantages during this interview regarding household internet access, family pressure and digital literacy. This also enabled us to double-check the related results of the longitudinal user survey of
the Civicweb project (Deliverable 8); our comments are in the concluding part of this report. We also tried to conduct 2 more focus groups in disadvantaged settings, but could not carry the results of these interviews to the report for the reasons stated in the section covering the process of conducting the focus groups.

Here is a list and short description of the focus groups conducted:

**Collective Action**

1. **Global Action Coalition activists (aged 19-25):** A group of mostly young people involved in a trans-national network, aiming to draw public attention towards climate change by awareness campaigns and street action.

2. **Youth for Habitat volunteers (aged 23-25):** International youth network working in partnership with the United Nations, established in 1995 with the participation of 300 youth organizations with diverse religious, racial, cultural and national backgrounds.

3. **AKP Youth branch members (aged 23-25):** The Youth Branch of the leading party in the Turkish parliament, Justice and Development Party (AKP); those interviewed belonged to the Art and Culture Committee.

**Individual action**

4. **Istanbul Aydin University forum moderators / writers / file sharers (aged 19-22):** An internet-savvy group who also plan to base their careers in the ICT field.

5. **Istanbul Bilgi University activists (aged 19-22):** Middle-class young people who study social sciences in a private university where civic action is the foundational slogan.

6. **Bloggers (aged 17-21):** Younger bloggers who are fewer in number in Turkey and have diverse demographic indicators.

**Disadvantaged**

7. **High school students in Sirinevler (aged 15-18):** Popular urban setting for lower middle class migrants, known for street violence and drugs.

**Ideas and Views about the Internet**

Most of the young people interviewed in all age groups state that the internet is an important part of their everyday lives and that they cannot imagine a life without it. Not only that, but some have also pointed out that the internet is a means for opening up to the outside world. ‘A’ from the AKP Youth branch states:

A: It is almost the same with going out for me. When you go out you share something, you see different things and enjoy yourself. This is the place where you can do all together. Like a world. I am joining the world by joining internet. I like it like this. Where there is regret as much as joy. And there is also news and information. There is boredom also. It is same as the world. It is the same as opening to the outside world.

Most of the young people interviewed have also mentioned that they spend 3-6 hours online. They also believe that you have to spend time on the internet in order to be critical about it. However, once you build contacts, there is almost no way you would feel isolated online. Here is how ‘B’ from AKP Youth Branch who wrote a book on the internet takes it:

B: I had written much about the internet in my last book. I wrote about the advantages and disadvantages of internet. What do you have to do if you want to write about the advantages and disadvantages of internet? You have to spend time on the internet. I had spent 5 or 6 hours in internet and I was amazed that even a serious conversation may lead to many different things. As my friend said all conversations go that way.

M (Moderator): Which way?

B: Matchmaking way. (Laughing)
The young people at the lower end of the age range (15-18) as well as those at the upper end (23-25) have stated that there are times they feel ‘addicted’ to the internet. Three boys among the high school students feel addicted to online games, at least when they are first released and are in fashion. Those in the older groups mentioned an addiction to checking e-mails, Facebook and MSN. In the case of special events, social movement activists seem to have no other option than the internet as stated below by the group leader of the Global Action Coalition:

G: I really felt like I was addicted to the internet on May 1st this year. Those joining the protests transmitted the events to me every minute. Last minute news came and I collected them into short news articles to be uploaded to news channels in the net.

As for internet content, about 2 to 3 of the young people interviewed indicated concern about the amount of pornography available on the web and think that children should not be exposed to it. An opposing comment came from a student of Istanbul Bilgi University who mentioned that pornographic content should remain as it is since Turkish society is a closed one and that we would risk creating issues such as rape if we tried blocking such content. Two users agreed with her during the interview.

**Online Communication**

Patterns of internet use vary according to education level, socio-economic status and gender. However, groups at the upper end of the age range (19-22 and 23-25) have similar usage patterns. Other than reading news, emailing and searching data for doing homework and other personal research, interesting comments were made. Even though we might expect the opposite, MSN messaging is not one of their popular activities. However, we must add that social movement activists and volunteers use MSN often for announcements and networking. Nevertheless around half of the users in our sample claimed that they would rather watch TV than chat online. Most users play online games to improve their English skills, strategic games as well as chess, backgammon and the like to increase their thinking capacity. Both English-speaking and non-speaking users commented that the English-dominant content in the web creates problems of access for many users. They also complained that the amount of Turkish content is not enough. Almost all of the young people interviewed mentioned that they often download music via the web. They also use Skpe for communicating with their international peers.

The most frequent online communication for Youth for Habitat (YFH) volunteers and Global Action Coalition activists is discussion portals, e-groups and forums. YFH volunteers have even initiated a special portal of the youth parliament for online group discussions. It may be inferred from our focus groups with volunteers and social movement activists that discussion platforms are their easy way out with their international, national and local contacts.

AKP Youth Branch focus group participants, on the other hand, have stated that for serious political discussion, they do not use online communication tools since they see each other often and spend enough time together offline. Anyway it seems like that is what they prefer:

M: Consequently, we use mobile messages to inform people about events. There is a group. Sometimes people send messages which they think are important. But we don’t use it for serious topics unfortunately.

O: One reason why we don’t use online communication tools is that we meet very frequently. Anyhow there is a social environment in the party. When you come to the party you become a part of it. Then this becomes your social circle apart from your other environment. For example, we met here for a discussion. But if we weren’t here this evening, I would be with my friends from the party drinking tea or coffee or going to the cinema. We are always together. So, this makes our communication easy. We take it as unnecessary. But if we didn’t meet often, we would need applications such as forums, discussion portals etc.
This casual intermingling of online and offline social relations were clearly reflected in some of the focus group discussions interviews. The young people interviewed expressed worry mixed with sarcasm in how the Facebook penetrates their privacy before they know it. Here is an exemplary comment from a Youth for Habitat volunteer:

Y: People started taking Facebook too seriously. [Even though] I clicked the ‘in a relationship’ tab, I received tons of phone calls. As if I made a really significant move?! (laughs).

First encounter with the internet in Turkey
When the users in our focus groups were asked about their first encounter with the internet in Turkey, they had many interesting stories to tell. Those at the upper end of the age range (23-25), indicated that their first encounter was at an internet café. Two AKP Youth branch members referred to their internet experience in Turkey as a disadvantage:

M: uhm...To me, there are more disadvantages then advantages...we always meet things disadvantageously in Turkey. How did I encounter the internet? It was important for me. There is an internet café that just opened in an outskirts area. It was many years ago. People were looking in from the window and talking to each other saying that 'what is this?, or ohh internet is here!' etc. (all laugh) the seniors or the bravest get into it. We sit in the café but we don’t know how to use the computer or what is internet. We were not able to do anything. This was a direct touch. You are addressed with what they put in front of you. If you like it or not. It is going to attract you even though you don’t accept it. So what’s up? ... You write your name as flying butterfly. Then you start writing “hi, hi hi” to people. This was how I, my generation, first encountered the internet. So, this wasn’t a good start for me.

A's views on the internet are much more critical in that he regards the transformation that was accelerated by modernisation in Turkey as coercive. Furthermore, he thinks people in Turkey were not ready for such imposed ideals and a technological breakthrough like the internet. He also compares Turkish culture with that of the West:

A: About being prepared for things, when we go back, the transformation caused by modernisation in Turkey was very coercive. People were not ready for an imposed ideal life, and their life standards, and the most important by their financial conditions. It was like a pressure. And the process of internet is almost similar to the process of modernisation. Actually, the internet couched people when they were not ready for the bombardments of a new culture. Naturally they were confused and defenseless...In the west, in other countries, and in some parts of our society, people use it in a better way and maybe usefully but especially deep down, they can reach anything they like if they get connected. There is no mechanism that balances it. So, for us, for the majority it was a serious mistake because we were not ready.

This view comes from a background that criticises the imposed Western life style and standards which pro-Kemalist groups in Turkey are proud of. Ataturk’s revolutions are accepted as a turning point for pro-Kemalist groups and the descendants of those groups pay a lot of respect to the modernisation project which is based upon the principles of Ataturk. The view of A, quoted above, also sees the arrival of the internet in Turkey as part of this modernisation project and claims further that the internet is part of a new culture for which people in Turkey were not ready.

Freedom of using the Internet
When asked about the freedom of using the internet, responses varied according to age. This question was asked separately to know about how free the participants felt while using the internet in general. The censorship issue was dealt with separately during the interviews and will be reflected towards the end of this report in the section, entitled, ‘Open themes of relevance to the specific group of respondents’.

Aside from their parents’ pressure while using the internet, high school children are concerned that they are not ‘free’ to do much in public places, even in the internet cafes. Overall, they do not feel free and uncensored using the internet.

M: How free are you when you are using the internet?
A: We are not free.  
Z: Then, how is it when you are connecting from a café?  
A: Actually we are not free in internet cafes, either. Because other people can step into your private life. They have a main computer and if they want they can see your monitor. They can see what you are doing.

As for older participants, either living separately from their parents or far from their control in a more personalised environment, there are other concerns. At an age when one’s social circle is very important (19-25), young people need to watch out for those clicks. Here is how a youth leader in Youth for Habitat summarises this:

I: There are times when I had to ignore invitations to social events or protests in facebook. I had to because of my personal contacts. I’m not that free using the internet!

The Social and/or Cultural Interests of the Respondents

Social capital
Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called ‘civic virtue’. The difference is that ‘social capital’ calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital (Putnam 2000: 19).

When asked about their general view about the internet and the impact it creates in their political lives, one of the AKP youth branch participants had a challenging comment in that he described the internet as a tool for depoliticisation which arrived right at the time when socio-cultural bonds were no longer strong and social capital was in great decline in Turkey. For him, the new fashion is culture and art and no one yearns for politics:

‘A’: …In this environment young people experience depoliticisation. The internet is an anti-cure in this aspect. It is depoliticising young people. The politicisation of the young people is related with the love of homeland. It is related with education. I am not talking about nationalism or Turkism. If you don’t have any bond with your home, your street, then you become estranged from it. In this manner, you are not concerned about concepts such as politics etc because they are related to this land. Politics is a very complicated field. The new fashion is culture and art. This is simple and easy…

Gender
We have not conducted any gender-specific interviews, i.e. interviews with men and women only, based on the assumption that participants in all age groups would comment on equal grounds when civic participation via the internet is at stake. However, we have found out that gender may be an important factor for the 15-18 age range as parents are over-concerned about internet content, especially when they are not internet users themselves.

Girls participating in the Sirinevler high school focus group were much more constrained and silent than boys all through the interview. We have also observed that girls almost think it is ‘natural’ that parents exert more pressure on them; it seems like the traditional Turkish culture plays its role in this respect. On the other hand, boys in the same focus group claimed that they are repressed as much as girls are, especially
if the internet is at stake. They are always forced to do their homework and blamed for negligence if they spend too much time on MSN and the like:

F (girl): It is very natural when the internet is in question. As you know in our society women and men are not considered equal. That's why they force girls more than boys. All the time they are controlling what the girls do. That's why we are repressed a lot.

B (boy): Actually boys are also repressed as much as girls. If the boy is going to school, he may face same trouble with his parents. For example, anytime I am on my MSN, my mother always forces me to close it and deal with my homework. Anyway I don't care. Go on my way on MSN.

How young people become engaged
In this part, it would be rational to reflect views of the Global Action Coalition (GAC) activists. We have observed, during the interview, that they greatly value street action just like the street activists of the 1960s generation. Interestingly enough, they think it would be unnecessary time consumption if they tried mobilising online. Moreover, they have experienced that going onto the streets might be more effective some of the time. The rationale behind that is they are not structured top-down like most civil society organisations are and that gives them the flexibility to raise their voice out in the streets:

E: In the climate change campaign, we say 'there is a street action, join us!'
Q: Is that sufficient for recruiting new members or gaining supporters? Don't you need a more effective message?
E: This is also a budgetary question. It might be expensive to come join street actions from outside of Istanbul or even from a far away neighborhood in Istanbul. It is also the case, sometimes, that the nuclear energy opposers join the GAC campaigns. I don't know if this is a productive cooperation.
C: As for the net, it is sometimes too hard to moderate a forum. Instead of spending that time, going off to streets is sometimes much more effective. Mail groups are much better than forums. They are always active. You can convince in the net... announce your plans. Two years ago, there was a peace fait right before actions against the war. I received their mails. I went to both of the events even though that was not what was on my mind in the beginning.
E: If GAC was an NGO, it would be different. Our campaigns are in the streets and that's how they are supposed to be.

Generally speaking, one of the overarching themes in the focus groups we conducted is why young become involved online in Turkey. For one thing, it is easier and less time-consuming. Another practicality is that it is possible to get in touch with groups of people with diverse interests and backgrounds at once. Another significant reason refers to a national specificity. We gathered in a few of the focus groups that young people try to avoid political action in the streets since they are afraid the police might attack or catch them. We also witnessed in the Global Action Coalition focus group that they try not to oppose the Constitutional articles in their offline actions since they feel responsible to their families. In that case, online discussion and information sharing become an alternative channel for civic and political action.

Intergenerational issues
As for intergenerational issues, one must differentiate between the upper (23-25) and lower (15-18) end of the age range interviewed since the kind of disputes that come up between parents and children vary according to age. For instance, the Youth For Habitat volunteers complained about their mothers stealing their lap-tops for searching for food recipes online while the Sirinevler high school students’ group told us that they had a hard time convincing their parents about safe internet content.

One specific intergenerational dispute between high school children and their parents is about internet usage habits.
Three of the participants stated that their parents cut off the internet either because they were exposed to the internet for too long or because they supposedly logged on to ‘harmful’ sites. Two of the participants clearly stated that their internet usage was limited by their parents and that they felt the same pressure at their backs all the time. Thus, going to the internet café both for socialising and for various reasons of using the internet such as surfing, gaming and chatting is an important part of their daily routine. However, this does not seem to put an end to their parents’ concern. In the more remote areas of their neighbourhood, they can get cheaper prices of access in the internet cafes, but they are faced with threats of drug abuse and street gangs when they visit those areas.

Another theme that came up during our focus group with bloggers was relations with older and more experienced internet users. The younger bloggers interviewed (17-21) certainly had a contrasting profile to that of their peers; more specifically speaking, they did not fit the 17-21 year olds’ portrait envisioned by website producers in our sample. At this point, we must be attentive not to place bloggers in the category of internet users only, but also consider them as content developers, thus independent web editors. It is quite striking that three of these young bloggers pay great respect to their elder bloggers and fancy them as their role-models. We also sensed a blogger superiority in that they try not to be uninformed and ignorant like their peers and act mature:

Y: I’m blogging in order to become known. I know I have to strive long years before I reach the knowledge level of elder bloggers, but it’s worth it.
D: My interest is in China because that’s where the whole world turns to. People think I grew interest at an early age (17) for China, but sometimes I even feel like I’m late and try to catch up with things.
...
Y: You wonder about my opinion about participation. I try to explore things rather than go vote for the party my parents vote for.
...
K: If elder bloggers in our circle say so, we would accept it as fact immediately.

The socio-political legacy that dates back to the military coup d’etat in Turkey is also reflected in some of the discourse of young people in our interviews. We would like to draw your attention to what has been said by the Global Action Coalition activists about article 301 and how the family pressure plays a role in their protest culture:

M: How about article 301? It’s risky for more popular names.
E: How could young people risk it? Your job, parents… We are the kind of people who do not sign under any statement.
D: Kyoto for example. We did not sign it. (Turkey had not signed the Kyoto agreement at the time of the interview)

Privacy and personal life is certainly an important factor for all the young people interviewed. There were a few respondents who claimed they were not totally free using the internet since they could not help thinking about their parents’ presence in the net. Here is a short statement from one of the Youth for Habitat volunteers that summarises all:

S: I’m not using Facebook since my Dad is there!!!

Socio-cultural Significance of The Internet for Civic Participation

29 Article 301 is a controversial article of the Turkish Penal Code making it illegal to insult Turkey, the Turkish ethnicity, or Turkish government institutions. It took effect on June 1, 2005, and was introduced as part of a package of penal-law reform in the process preceding the opening of negotiations for Turkish membership of the European Union (EU), in order to bring Turkey up to the Union standards. Petition protesting Article 301 has been around for a while now.
Concept and use of the Internet versus old media

Television is still a very dominant communication tool for young people in Turkey. All watch TV; newspapers and radio have a recent advantage since they can also be accessed online. Most of the young people interviewed were not only aware of the significance of old media, but also the fact that a significant number of the social movements are promoted using methods that would attract the attention of old media channels, e.g. newspapers, TV, radio and the like. The Global Action Coalition activists think there must be other ways to gain public attention:

E: I think there is no point in doing something just for the sake of attracting the attention of the media.
C: Is there any bad intention in this? I wonder…
E: In my opinion, what Lambda (The gay and lesbian community) is trying to do is much more logical. They organized a protest with rotten tomatoes since the Municipality tried to ban their actions because of the rotten tomatoes used in their last street event. They use the dominant language already used by the opposing forces and already take public attention.

We also felt that at times young people in Turkey know better how to philosophise about the internet since it is their domain. There were radical comments coming from well-informed individuals about how the internet consumption needs to follow the consumption of old media and not be simultaneous. In other words, a few young people thought children need to be educated about old media first, and then about the internet in media education courses. Ahmet from AKP Youth Branch seems to have spent a lot of time on such reflections:

A: …Anyway, I also let my cousins use the computer. We talk, but our actions do not support our talk. This is a good thing, let children play games. Not, at all. People must go to libraries like in the past. We heard of these kinds of stories. They were going to school libraries. It was hard for them but the knowledge was important. That knowledge lasts. Nowadays, when the teacher gives homework, s/he knows that the student will check it out from the internet. They will not even make an attempt to do it on their own. Students get their homework done by pushing a button. You didn’t do it. You didn’t experience the process. You didn’t synthesize. This is a foreign knowledge. I mean to say that youth has to be prepared before they use the internet.

Internet security, virtual identity

The fact that the internet is a relatively new medium brings with it disadvantages as well as advantages. One pertinent disadvantage in this respect is internet security and how troublesome virtual identity can be at times. Internet-savvy students from Istanbul Bilgi University also pinpointed that virtual identity can create positive impact on freedom of speech and, to a certain extent, put an end to conspiracy theories:

E:… My deal is not to write in forums anonymously, but I would like to speak freely in places that they know I am me.
C: It is not easy for humans to take off their mask to communicate with each other. Because we have many faces that we don’t want to show. You easily show yourself in such places. Sometimes you are even surprised about what you say. So you feel comfortable and your self esteem increases. You would like to do more and more. Because you are not under the pressure of the learned ideas as soon as you get out of them. You are free to think as you like.
…
M: When anonymously talking in these places we are hiding ourselves. Someone beyond us is talking and arguing. But who is talking? How is he thinking? Unknown. It looks like this is not me when I hide myself. I would like to mention the internet security also. As for electronic petitions, I used to stop there before writing my name or mentioning that I am a student. When I google my name, a few things could appear on the screen because of some events. I don’t really trust the phone lines, either. Everything may happen. Internet is easiest way to access. We receive many mails from irrelevant people and we don’t know how these mails disperse.
…
E:…similar things are relevant for YouTube or blogger.com bans… the easiest way is to take a nick name and mention your ideas about fascism or communism…as human beings, we are not that frank to express ourselves like that. Therefore, at least until we pass that stage, internet could be useful.
The internet and civic action: local, regional, national, transnational

Grassroots action is generally known to rise from schools, especially university clubs. However, this seems to be a fantasy of the older generation for young people. Social movement activists like those of the Global Action Coalition also think that youth branches of parties are as dysfunctional as university clubs:

E: For me, university clubs are, as in youth branches of parties, like an accessory. The public thinks ‘ahhh, they are young. Let them have fun!’ However, we opposed the war in Iraq; do we look like we are having fun? I never heard of a university club doing something serious.

As a sidenote, the principle of relativity plays a role here: What this respondent refers to as ‘doing something serious’ may differ according to age, sex, education, interest and the like of a young person. That being said, this is clearly also a statement of complaint about not being heard or taken seriously by the older public.

Ever since the beginning of the literature review stage of the CivicWeb project, we have been reading academic studies about how the volunteering culture has been developed ‘naturally’ in Turkey and that this creates appropriate conditions for building civic competence and project management skills. This volunteering culture is not covered in the school programs intentionally, but the National Agency is in close contact with K-12 schools in Turkey and promotes many international volunteering programs for several years, so this seems to have created a certain level of awareness among young people. We asked Youth for Habitat volunteers this specific question since their basic aim is the empowerment of youth in their local areas for national and transnational civic action:

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Moderator: Why do you think the volunteering culture is high in Turkey?
Y: Probably because of the way we are raised. Young people are not dumb, they know volunteering adds to their competence.
B: To the newcomers, we say this: Being a volunteer does not mean working as you please. It also provides discipline. Even for school. I go to school twice a week now, before I always skipped school.

The Global Action Coalition activists naturally use the internet for applying issues of transnational significance to a national and local level. We may infer from their statements that issue-based campaigns and mass protests are widely disseminated by MSN features and Facebook and it is not only young people, but also state institutions and the police forces that have come to realise the potential of these tools.

G: News kept flowing from mail groups of campaigns organised by other social movement groups. When you write something, it goes to 100 people with only one click; MSN gives a priority in that sense.
D: When Hrant Dink was shot, the same thing happened. Those hearing of the silent protest walk via the net, joined in spontaneously. It is really useful if you know how to use it. Facebook is also efficient.
B: Even the police use it. I use it, too. It’s always active on my monitor. I’m not before the computer screen all the time, but it is my connection with the outside world. When the internet is broken, I’m not in the mood. It’s sort of an addiction. Even if you don’t use it, you want to have it by your side. Like I said, it’s your connection with the outside world.

Political education and the Internet
We met a number of young bloggers who were against standard school education and added that going to university was what their parents expected them to do. The same young people also claimed that they would not vote for the party their family votes for and that they would decide on their own about who to vote for after reading and following political news from alternative channels on the internet.

Y: I did not choose to go to university, did not do what my parents expected me to do. Instead I’m educating myself on more important stuff via different sources in the net.

When they were asked what these ‘different sources’ would refer to, they contested that most of the stuff in the net was not even true, but that they had great trust in a few former journalists/recently popular bloggers and only a few news portals such as Indymedia, Wired.com. They also added that once you get news feeds from plenty of sources, you start making your own judgments about the news. They simply claim that they become politically educated as they go on blogging, reading other blogs with political views and as their level of digital and political literacy increases.

Before conducting the interview with AKP Youth Branch, we were sceptical about the function of youth branches of political parties in the 21st century. In our minds, this was an outdated concept that had somehow continued unchallenged. So we asked:

Moderator: …I am really concerned why parties still have youth branches. I think this is a very old notion. Why do parties still use the notion that remained from the 50s?
O: uhhmm there is one thing. If young people work only in the youth branches and women work in only women branches, so the main group would be formed with only middle aged men, then you would be right. …but if I wanted now, I could get a place in the main branch. Any branches I can work at except for women branches. Many women come to help us in the youth branches while they are working in the women branches. Or people from both branches may start working in the main branch. For example, our friend who is under 30 is working in the main branch as President of the Province. I said under 30 because the upper age level in the youth branches is 30. There are many people aged between 18-30. Even people aged 20-25 have a position in the main branch.

Instead of a straight answer, we heard a long explanation about how it does not really matter whether these youth branches are still there or not and went into a polemic about women branches. Not only that, but it was also completely unexpected of a youth
branch leader to provide a living example of age 25 becoming the coordinator of the city organization in Istanbul. Here we see how young political leaders can progress up the party hierarchy by way of traditional rules of party politics once they are part of a youth branch.

We also surmised that political discussions and announcements on the net are important parts of the political action for the youth branch of a political party. However, they were quite sceptical in terms of social network sites, where most of the online exchange takes place recently:

T: Things got more complex when Facebook came up. People have their own social life. They now have shared friends. There are some friends that sometimes you meet but don’t have daily contact with. For example, you find out that your primary school friend has been living in the same neighborhood for years….

….  
O: …But in these kinds of websites, like Facebook, the people there are not even our supporter. If there is a group, it is any group that is created by anybody. They may be a member of AKP, but what they are doing in these websites is not related with their position at all. I checked all naturally. Not only in Istanbul, I checked Izmir, Bursa, Ankara etc. there are groups that are called AKP Izmir, AKP Ankara in the Facebook. Ummm…. most of them are unrelated. I know their branch officer. I know many of them. I ask them. Same goes for Istanbul. There is one named AKP like the general representative. A person formally opened a facebook group named AKP. I checked. No one knows him. We don’t know who he is. Someone unrelated.

B: (interrupts) someone looking for adventure.

A significant portion of civic and political educational content comes from bloggers or technologically experienced and internet literate young people in Turkey. Therefore, we thought we should start from the point where blogging starts out for a young person in order to pursue the later stages:

M: I think blogging starts out with the aim of sharing, sharing anything, your life, your daily routine, your views. Then, as you have more visitors, you realize that what ever you write has value. You feel responsible about making an entry everyday since you are regularly read.

We have heard in most of the interviews that once your blog starts being regularly read, you feel responsible for sharing your knowledge. However, for young people of 15-25, the rationale behind sharing knowledge on the internet may vary. The Youth for Habitat volunteers have a consistent approach to sharing content; they archive for the upcoming generations. They, too are aware that the purpose of blogging may be diverse – from artistic passion to leader ego, from earning money to community outreach:

Moderator: When do you think the internet user becomes the content provider? Why web 2.0, why blogging, why networking? Is it for the money?
V: Writers and poems want to share. They want to be seen. The starting point of those blogs may be this. Of course, if you also earn money, that is even better, you get to pay your bills.
I: We may start out from our target groups. If you are aware, you want to share the skills and knowledge you acquire via the courses here. Some open forums to share experience. We want to archive for the upcoming generations….Our youth parliament portal (www.ulusalgenclikparlamentosu.net) has the same aim. People also want to be noticed by what they do. They open blogs for discussions and contributions. Except for diary blogs, those are different. Users are more aware than in the past, I think.
S: Writing in the net might be for describing your thoughts or emotions. There is no such platform offline. If you get to find such a platform offline, you get to become leaders. One explains him/herself via blogs.
I: Sometimes people open blogs for reaching others.

**Digital literacy / internet competence**

For a concise view of any website, civic/political websites in particular, a certain level of internet competence may be required. Having that in mind, we asked Youth for Habitat volunteers whether they think the young people in Turkey need a lot of training skills before they acquire such competence:
B: It is important to tell right from wrong. One must tell if a website is updated regularly, fun or serious. If it has harmful content, with that awareness noone would visit that particular website. The 14-15 year olds who join our training courses know the difference between right and wrong. They have such capacity. We must try to deliver such courses. Personally I check the forums before I go on to buy a product or service.

V: If someone means to curse, he would do that anywhere- online or somewhere else. Awareness while using the internet is important. We gradually learn concepts like illegal stuff or piracy.

The AKP Youth Branch members had an interesting perspective on political websites, websites of political parties in particular. When they were asked whether there is any impact of religious belief on political behavior of young people online, they gave a very general answer, escaping from specificity: They all indicated that one could not discuss topics such as religion openly on a web platform provided by a certain political party. They added that the website of their youth branch only serves for information and has no aim to attract potential members. They boastfully stated that they already had more than enough members in the district of Istanbul and the internet would not be the appropriate platform for member recruitment.

**Showing and discussing specific websites**

Generally speaking, except for the few very common websites used among young people in Turkey, the sites in our sample for the CivicWeb project were not visited often by the interviewees. They had heard and visited most of the websites mentioned during the interviews, but they did not seem to use all their functions such as writing in forums or making comments. Uploading sources and looking for specific information were the two main reasons for logging on to these civic/political websites.

Sirinevler High School students were an exception since they stated that they had only heard of two Turkish-generic social network sites in our sample. They may, however, be more in tune with the mainstream of young people across the country in this respect than the highly engaged or internet-savvy young people in other focus groups we chose.

We included a short account of the site monitoring of the Global Action Coalition activists since the sites shown were to their interest and they had actually collaborated with the groups whose sites were selected (Young Civilians and 52 Percent) in the past:

The group was exposed to a few sites already in our sample for WP6 and 8. Since Young Civilians ([www.gencsiviller.net](http://www.gencsiviller.net)) came up during the interview, their site was shown. Overall, they thought the site was simple and to the point. They especially commented on the sneaker used as the symbol of the movement. They claimed that this was an important cue for the youth appeal of the movement. However, they added that the site lacked interactivity and was too text dominated. They were fond of the style of language as well as the content since the site had an alternative and critical discourse, but they stil thought some more visuals would help. They claimed that the Aliye Ozturk campaign site (the virtual presidential campaign; closed down now) also established by the Young Civilians was much more attractive. They thought that the English version was important since there are many Turks living abroad and it might also have an impact on the European candidacy of Turkey. They consider this site to be popular among politically aware young and middle aged people in Turkey.
52 percent site (www.yuzde52.org) was also shown to the group since it was a part of the interview discussion as well. Consistent with their remarks before they were exposed to the site, four of them who heard of this group beforehand, did not even want to explore the site since they found it to be too dark with no appeal. One of them had not heard of this group before and he was surprised to see such a dark site initiated by his age group. He first thought it was sort of a racist hate site, but after spending some time, he was surprised to see they were actually against discrimination between the young population and the older population in Turkey. He thought it was an odd way of opposition and fighting for your rights and that their style would not be tolerated or understood in Turkey.

The group was finally exposed to the National Agency site (www.ua.gov.tr; the EU directorate of Education and Youth programs in Turkey). They all knew the site and used it for project fund applications before. They found out that the design of the site had changed, but they did not think it was more efficient. The orienting chart on the homepage which reads “Where do I start?” aims for redirecting the user according to his/her need. They thought this might be useful. Their overall impression of the site was that it was dull, but they were also aware that such governmental sites aimed for disseminating information and receiving as many applications as possible from young people, so they had to be dull and text based to a certain extent. However, they thought it would not be too hard for the Agency to work a little more on their design.

Open theme of relevance to the specific group of respondents

As stated in the first sections of this report, the censorship issue plays an important role in the recent political agenda of Turkey. Therefore, we spent around one fourth of the time during each interview discussing this issue specifically; the focus group with high school students was the only exception since they did not want to discuss anything to do with censorship. There were differing opinions, but most participants who commented agreed that it is a nonsensical act to ban the whole website or media sharing web platform such as in the case of YouTube, Blogger.com, Geocities and Wordpress. The fact that some can access all these sites with an anonymous IP and subvert the ban also adds to the absurdity.

The youth branch of AKP had a politicised view of censorship in that they thought the judges that issued the restrictions actually wanted people to blame the government for the bans. They also added that since the judges are not internet users themselves, they do not see how important these bans are for young people in Turkey:

O: Abdullah Gül said, ‘I access if I want’ when they asked him about it. (all laughs) people who are responsible of this application are over 60. They don’t use the internet. They said that we don’t use internet if young people also don’t, it wouldn’t be a big problem. People ask us that why we had banned internet. They were about to close the party. What could we do? They want people to blame the government about this.

D: technically these kinds of prohibitions are really nonsense. There are many ways. You can access anyway.

O: When they ask, we answer that we are not the one who did this, bureaucrats made the decisions.

There were also conspiracy theories hanging in the air during the interview with the Istanbul Bilgi University students. Moreover, they could not stand the idea that internet users outside of Turkey could actually log onto YouTube and see the very videos of Ataturk that caused the ban. They stated that they could not understand why these videos are not restricted and instead the whole web platform is banned.

E: I think that YouTube was blocked because the government wants to take advantage of its inaccessibility. Turkish folks are very sensitive about Ataturk. So they used it as an excuse to
block YouTube but the main reason was the criticism and videos against government...at the same time, people from other countries are able to watch the videos that precisely attack the government, so I justify that they had used Ataturk as a pawn.

...C: ...Actually, if you directly blocked a website this may attract people’s attention, they get curious...so, Sourtimes dictionary or YouTube’s contents are not constructed by a correctness principle or ethical concern. But they are serving a base for sharing the knowledge. Banning this web site actually motivated people for breaking down the rules...

We gathered, from the same interview, that young people not only take the banning of particular websites as an act against democracy, but they also consider it unacceptable while real offences such as child abuse, smuggling remain and nothing is done about it.

Ç: … if you ask people not to access a web site, don’t look at it, you say ‘don’t think’. ‘yes, sure you are allowed to think and behave in our ways but apart from this, no! Sorry, but you are not allowed’. This is not just free access embargo it is also embargo on behavior, freedom, everything.

K: …these possibilities include both real offences and ideological offences. The real offences such as child abuse, smuggling etc. these are real offences. An expert committee can block a web site about these offences. Because these are constitutionally foul. But website about suicide for example, it is nonsensical to block it because it is not constitutionally prohibited.

D: ...after listening to all the arguments, I see that we couldn’t digest democracy. Because we talked about costume reform, it had been 80 years but today we are still talking about prohibitions...what happened if they had put a video on Youtube that insults Ataturk? Youtube is a knowledge pool and any time I see the thing when I want to access Youtube I become frustrated. Do I have to find other gateways to access You Tube? This is just legitimation of mentality of prohibitors. In addition to this, they said that Ataturk was an alcoholic. At the beginning he wasn’t! he was drinking. Why does drinking look bad? He was drinking so, don’t we?

In the statement above, one can notice an inferiority complex of a young person about not being able to digest democracy even though democracy was brought to Turkey by Ataturk more than 80 years ago. We find it quite interesting that the internet bans have forced young people to reflect about democracy and how it fails. They also have a critical view of the educational system:

E: … our education system is the main reason for this chaos. Until now, they let us think of Ataturk as a perfect man without any faults.

The resistance against Turkey’s democratic failure is noteworthy in the remarks of an Global Action Coalition activist who compares Turkey with Malaysia and China:

E: I really can not accept restrictions against YouTube in Turkey. We are as bad as China and Malaysia in that sense. I use an anonymous IP to find the links. I send the link to people abroad and they can access it.

The only contradicting remark came from two of the Istanbul Aydin University students who thought that the ban against YouTube was correct. ‘Reasons for such an opinion usually lie in conservative family backgrounds and outlooks.

Furthermore, all the participants were asked whether they knew, had heard of or supported any collective action against the internet bans, only 3 of the participants stated that they heard of the Coalition of the ICT-related civil society associations. All 3 heard of this coalition through forwarded e-mails and they were not sure what they were up to. The campaign website this coalition put together was shown to the participants. Most did not comment at all, but the few that commented thought the campaign was not effective and that the online petitions in Turkey mostly turned out unsuccessful. Thus, it seems as if the young people in Turkey complain about censorship and the banning of internet sites, but are not proactive in protesting against or solving this problem.
Conclusion

We would like to point out the fact that there is a gap between the way producers perceive the role of the internet and the way users perceive it. Especially internet savvy young people and young bloggers think the second most important feature of the internet – the primary one being open dissemination of information - is knowledge/media sharing. What we found most striking is that most of the young people interviewed think that the internet may not provide the most trustable or valid sources, but they prefer to use it anyhow since it is the easy and practical way out. If we turn the point of discussion to websites in particular, it seems like the content is more crucial than design for all the participants. However, the design creates a long-term memory and if good content is complemented by right design, the site becomes an efficient one in the minds of young people.

In terms of the internet providing an open platform for civic participation, the opinions were diverse. However, when specifically asked during the interviews, young people of all age ranges (15-25), responded that the internet cannot be the only platform where civic action arises and continues. According to their views, in order to talk about sustainable civic participation, offline events and activities need to have a reinforcing impact on whatever is happening online, be it discussion in forums, online petition, online donation campaign or member recruitment.

It seems like some of the well-educated young people with a high level of civic awareness, also active in transnational social movements, as in the case of Global Action Coalition (GAC) activists, are critical about the traditional political participation behavior of their peers. They think that young people vote for the party their families vote for since their personalities are not yet defined. Thus, they have a hard time convincing potential activists for joining in their campaigns via the internet only and argue that issue-specific campaigns should take place on the streets.

In our focus group interviews, there were also a significant number of participants who pointed out that the internet came as part of the western modernity project before we were prepared for it. They also added that even though it seems like older people are disadvantaged since they do not have sharp internet skills, most young people have a very limited sense of what is out there and do not use the internet to their advantage.

In terms of previous study within the scope of the CivicWeb project, we encountered a country-specific reality in a disadvantaged setting. During our focus group with high-school kids, all the participants stated that they did not have much freedom using the internet because of family and/or public pressure. This lies in contrast with the user-survey findings of the Civicweb project: in all countries, more than 92.2% of respondents say that they are completely free to use the internet or free to use it most of the time. In the same survey, 93.3% of the respondents in Turkey say they are ‘free’ to use the internet either completely or most of the time. Of course one of the issues with survey results is that the question can, to some extent, influence the response. However, it would still be interesting to compare the statements of the participants in other partner countries’ focus groups to assess the levels of freedom reported in using the internet.
REFERENCES


Turkey – APPENDIX 1

CIVICWEB FOCUS GROUPS IN TURKEY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Number</th>
<th>Focus Group Theme</th>
<th>Main issue covered (among others)</th>
<th>Number of participants (gender), age, race, ethnic group</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Global Action Coalition</td>
<td>Alternative modes of civic and political engagement</td>
<td>Offline-online action, trans-national networks</td>
<td>Age group: 19-25 / 3 men, 4 women</td>
<td>At a public café in Istanbul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Youth for Habitat</td>
<td>Digital literacy, civic competence</td>
<td>Volunteering and civic involvement</td>
<td>Age group: 23-25 / 4 men, 4 women</td>
<td>Youth for Habitat Office in Istanbul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Justice and Development Party (AKP) youth branch members</td>
<td>Active mainstream political involvement</td>
<td>The arrival of the internet in Turkey and its impact on the political environment</td>
<td>Age group: 23-25 / 5 men, 2 women</td>
<td>AKP head office in Istanbul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Istanbul Aydin University forum moderators, web admins</td>
<td>More complex usage patterns of the internet such as file sharing and user generated content</td>
<td>Lack of freedom of the internet in Turkey, censorship and its impact on democracy</td>
<td>Age group: 19-22 / 4 men, 4 women</td>
<td>In a classroom in Istanbul Aydin University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Istanbul Bilgi University individual activists</td>
<td>Individual action vs collective action</td>
<td>Lack of freedom of the internet in Turkey, censorship and its impact on democracy</td>
<td>Age group: 19-22 / 2 men, 6 women</td>
<td>In a classroom in Istanbul Bilgi University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Bloggers</td>
<td>Social capital and internet content</td>
<td>Blogging as initiator for civic and political action</td>
<td>Age group: 17-21 / 4 men, 4 women</td>
<td>At a public café in Istanbul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 High school kids in Intergenerational relations</td>
<td>Family pressure, internet cafes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Age group: 15-18 / 4 boys, 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sirinevler</td>
<td></td>
<td>girls Lower class migrant settlement</td>
<td>In a facility room of the same high-school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

Work package 10, the focus groups with young people about politics, civic action and the internet, offered an opportunity to explore and elucidate concerns about young people and the civic sphere both on and offline. It looked at their civic and political literacy, their sense of efficacy and life experience as well as their social capital, motivations, rationale and activities in relation to political and civic engagement and active or dutiful citizenship. It also examined their responses to both familiar and unfamiliar civic content online. Building on the findings from this data, this report works towards a user-led model of best practice for civic websites.

Undertaken between April 2008 and February 2009, the 11 focus groups in the UK take place against a backdrop of steep price rises and falling employment.

The national context includes increasing fears of a recession, fuelled by constant newspaper and television speculation about interest rates, mortgages, the viability of banks and the reasons for job losses; the failure of the current Labour Government and Prime Minister to reassure people or to guarantee the livelihoods of those on low incomes and an increasing fixation of the national media on ‘youth knife crime’ and anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) against young people.

Internationally, the context includes a continued occupation of Iraq by UK and US forces; the November 2008 election of Barack Obama and the on and offline campaign which preceded it; elections and protests in Zimbabwe; and the bombing of the Gaza Strip and ground incursion by Israeli troops from December 2008 to February 2008 and the resulting devastation and loss of Palestinian civilian life as well as the wave of protests taking place across the UK. Reflecting these events or processes and their media coverage, these issues became the focus in several UK focus groups. Additionally, local issues were raised in some of the focus groups that do not get any attention from the National Media and do not appear on this list.

2. Focus Group Selection: Theoretical underpinnings

The focus group selection, which began the work package, was underpinned by clear theoretical and methodological concerns.

The review of literature on youth civic engagement and the internet for WP5 (Deliverable 4) explored fears about youth apathy in relation to government and voting and suggested that the internet provides civic potential mainly to ‘the usual suspects’, namely those young people already active and engaged offline and might be replacing offline activism for some of these young people. It also explored optimistic perspectives that specifically posited the internet as a realm that could revitalise failing interest in...
politics and civic issues on the part of young people. Analyses of data collected during WP9 (Deliverable 8) – our online quantitative survey of young people’s civic activities online – further suggested the endurance of a digital divide among the respondents in all countries including the UK along the lines of gender, education and living situation. Given that the survey was placed mainly on the website of a large music entertainment corporation (MTV) and answered presumably by those visiting this site for pleasure, respondents to the online survey presented an unsurprising picture of being interested primarily in entertainment and lifestyle websites. Yet, there was, amongst a group in the 21-25 year age range, and in which girls and young women and religious youth happened to be prominent, a clear interest in civic and political websites, especially when these covered social justice, spiritual and/or new social movement issues. The results of these findings had twofold implications for the selection of focus groups in the UK.

First, gaps in the sample available to answer the online survey pointed to certain groups that needed to be canvassed via in-depth qualitative focus groups in Work Package 10 (Deliverable 16) – in particular, young people not interested in online entertainment but involved in civic action offline and excluded young people with little or no access to or interest in the internet. In line with these contrasting criteria, four groups were set up – Students’ Union Activists campaigning for democracy in their Union; Rural young people active in offline civic groups such as Young Farmers and The Hunt Ball committee; Fifteen year olds in a free youth library in Moss Side (an ethnically non-white and highly deprived inner city area of Manchester); and Young men just out of prison living in highly deprived circumstances, men’s hostels, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Second, there was a need to delve further into the issues related to the use by avowedly religious youth of the internet for civic purposes and the suggestion that young women might be showing a greater interest in social justice, new social movement and lifestyle websites. To elaborate and clarify this finding, two groups were set up – Young volunteers for an online Muslim Youth Charity and Girl Rangers affiliated to Girl Guiding UK. Unfortunately, due to a variety of circumstances including parents’ failing to return permission slips, the Girl Rangers group did not take place and thus the notion of specific girls’ and women’s interests in the online civic sphere is an area left relatively unexplored by this phase of the project.

Further, during WP9 it was found that an activity termed ‘Civic sharing’ connected ‘best to the core interests of the CivicWeb project’. This activity covers ‘talking with family and friends about political and civic issues, sending them emails about such issues, participating in online discussion forums, signing online petitions, and visiting civic websites’. While almost half of the survey’s respondents reported that they had undertaken one or more of these activities, apparently, ‘[e]ngagement in civic sharing turned out to be dependent on age and the amount of time respondents spent reading, watching and listening to news about political and social issues’ (Deliverable 8). A group of high-income, highly educated medical students in the 21-25 age range, from families traditionally associated with social power through a long history of education and professional employment were used to expand on this finding from the WP9 survey.

Additionally, in composing and conducting the focus groups, findings from the survey and qualitative analysis of civic websites (Deliverables 6 and 14) and from the in-depth

32 The Girl Guides themselves fortuitously happened to have conducted recent research about active citizenship amongst their membership using similar methodologies of focus group and interview activity. Some of the findings from their report (Girlguiding UK, Girls Shout Out, December 2008) shed interesting light on issues to do with gendered patterns of civic engagement, albeit offline.
interviews with producers of civic websites (Deliverable 13) proved valuable. Producers’ diverse beliefs about youth audiences’ attitudes and behaviours were used to constitute several of the focus groups as well as to inform the questions asked during focus groups. From the supposition of young people’s penchant for ‘fun’, ‘entertainment’ and ‘shopping’ to assumptions about the role of interactive applications and user generated content in the lives of ‘the internet generation’ and ‘the Social Network generation’ much was said by producers about what a ‘young person’ is like. It seemed important to find out whether ‘an average young person’ does exist in the UK and if they do, whether they fit the profile being used by many civic organisations online to promote their socially and/or politically conscious ideas and causes. Basically, the question arose: does a keen interest in Social Networking and/or in the internet for entertainment and academic purposes increase the likelihood of its use by such young people for civic purposes? To assist in answering this question, three groups were constituted: a pilot group of 21-25 year old Facebook users with large networks of ‘friends’ and two ‘net generation’ groups composed respectively of young men and young women in the 16-18 age-range in a small town in middle England, who were, additionally, students of Media Studies and hence might be considered to be more interested in the interactive and social aspects of the internet.

Finally, questions about the relationship between offline and online civic participation, intergenerational political trends and the affordances of the internet for the promotion of alternative social identities motivated the formation of three further groups: a young musicians collective organising in opposition to the established music industry both offline and online; Student Activists in a Students’ Union, and a group of 15 year olds advising the Young Mayor of Lewisham, an inner city local government youth scheme examined both via an analysis of their website in WPs6 and 8, and via a producer interview in WP7. Details of all the focus groups that are included in this report can be found on a chart in Appendix 1 of this report.

3. Methodological issues

3.1 Groups that did take place

Since all the focus groups were set up with a rationale that encompassed both demographic and specific research-related criteria pertaining to civic action, the internet or young people, the possibility that some might and did not take place was reduced by the invitation to other groups with similar profiles in several cases. Thus groups that did not occur but that might have taken place were – 15 year old school students in a local school involved in running a ‘digital peace room’ and a school civic radio initiative; socially disadvantaged young people with no formal education now enrolled in a weekend arts scheme including digital media; young people from faith groups (Buddhist and Christian, primarily) participating on and offline in a consultation about democracy for the organisation and website London Citizens; Young Green bloggers and party members; Activists for the Facebook group Solidarity for Palestine; Youth in a school in Derry, Northern Ireland who volunteer for a charity; Young people who work on a rural online civic magazine for youth: InSite, run by the Rural Media Company; Students at Edinburgh University active in the local theatre and arts scene, Young Women against Violence in Belfast Northern Ireland, and so on. Some of these groups did not occur for logistical or contextual reasons such as lack of space/place to conduct the focus group; problematic timings and inability of interested participants to coordinate a time for the group; distance of participants who did not all reside in the same parts of the UK and could not agree a city to rendezvous; reluctance of parents to return permission slips; the weather or some other factor; in other cases, after initial interest, the contact person failed to respond or there was no response to repeated
enquiries. In all cases except that of the Young Rangers mentioned above, a replacement group kept the methodological rationale of the work package intact.

3.2 The Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boys/Young Men</th>
<th>Girls/Young Women</th>
<th>Ethnic Minority</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Identifying overtly as religious</th>
<th>Migrant: not born in the UK</th>
<th>15-19</th>
<th>20-25</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: details of CivicWeb focus group sample UK: Total Sample: 46

Two points should be noted. While factors like religion and ethnicity can be accounted for by the deliberate construction of certain focus groups in particular regions or from specific demographic groups for this qualitative research, the disparity in gender needs some explanation. Had the Girl Guide/Rangers group taken place, there would have been a roughly a 2:3 imbalance in the sample in favour of young men, due mainly to the fact that in several cases where the groups were open to both men and women or girls and boys equally (Young Mayor advisors; Young Muslim Volunteers; Medics), the invited girls/women failed to turn up because of childcare issues; studies; and voluntary work commitments. A further group with young women, looking particularly at issues relating to women’s experiences of citizenship and the public sphere on and offline would provide welcome insights and is therefore being considered.

Several of the groups that did run, as well as some that did not were re/arranged not just once but on up-to four different occasions in order to ensure that everyone who wanted to could participate, and to ease logistical difficulties such as a lack of space or internet access. If the Rangers group had run and if everyone invited had turned up to each other focus group, the sample size would be 55-60, rather than the current 43. In the instances where the researcher turned up and participants did not, the group was rescheduled. In instances where three, or in one case two, out of five invited participants turned up, and they had taken considerable trouble to be there, the group went ahead.

3.3 Conducting the groups: presentation, strategies, questions and difficulties

Focus groups lasted between 90 minutes and three hours with most of them tending to be around two hours; they alternated between locations, which were sometimes more or less private and sometimes involved the use of computers. All have been recorded and transcribed verbatim. As there was only one researcher present at most groups, she has been named as ‘moderator’ in transcripts. The researcher’s background as a school-teacher, teacher educator and political and civic activist was revealed where relevant, and proved invaluable in understanding the contexts described by the young people and in maintaining rapport. The researcher’s overt belonging to an ethnic minority proved an interesting issue during several of the focus groups, where young people either wanted to make or actually did make comments about race, ethnicity or immigration and the political processes attached to some of these issues. The researcher invited and received their trust in that most of the comments made, though sometimes sheepish, appeared to reflect their views, prejudices and perceptions, however negative, about these issues. This was suggested particularly by the ways in
which they responded to overt challenges by fellow participants who happened to know
their views over a long period of time.

**Permission** to record the interviews on digital voice recorders and to transcribe and
use parts of the interviews in reports and publications was sought from the young
people themselves both before and during the focus groups. Parental permission was
sought via letter for under-18s. For the sake of the young people’s safety, a decision
was made by the UK team to give all the participants pseudonyms, despite a few
requests to be named. Confidentiality and trust were key issues in all groups. Video-
data is not easy to get permission for and can increase the unease of participants
significantly, and was hence neither requested nor used. This did, however, make
voice recognition an issue in the transcription of some of the larger groups.

In addition to a brief initial **demographic questionnaire**, and direct open questions
about participants’ backgrounds, their uses of the internet for all purposes,
understandings of politics and the civic sphere and particular relationships to online
and offline civic action, specific follow-up questions were asked. Responses were used
to clarify and refine the researcher’s understanding of particular answers, to open up
areas of disagreement within the group initially noted through body-language or brief
asides and to alert participants to contradictions or confusions taking place between
themselves over particular issues or uses of language. In particular this happened in
relation to the notions of ‘class’, ‘protest’, ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’ that were raised
by participants in several of the groups.

Each group appeared to follow a very **distinct logic** in terms of the issues that were of
most interest to participants and those that the researcher needed to cover. A very
open and flexible schedule with occasional prompt questions in all the groups to move
the discussion forward were better at generating responses and discussion between
participants than a tightly controlled series of questions to each participant in turn.
Analysis of pilot groups helped to iron out potentially leading phrases and awkward or
misunderstood terminology as well as to establish the optimum number for a focus
group of this type – 3 or 4 people. **Cues** were provided in most groups after the first
hour of discussion. These consisted of lists of interactive applications, types of
websites, topics of civic or political interest, spider-grams or word associations for
politics and politicians, which participants had to order in importance and then discuss;
screen grabs and/or time spent looking at civic websites from the Work Package 6
(Deliverable 6) and Work Package8 (Deliverable 14) samples online, navigating,
browsing and commenting; looking at and navigating around the websites that the
young people mentioned going to most frequently. While there were occasional
instances where one participant tried to dominate a group, in general, the young
people listened respectfully to each other even when they frequently disagreed deeply
with each other about both factual and ideological issues.

### 3.4 Analysis

Ten of the focus groups have been transcribed in full, resulting in some five hundred
pages of data. While a few voices are difficult to distinguish, in the main each of the
transcripts has been coded using two different sets of criteria – one which relates to an
individual participant and connects them to similar participants in other groups (and this
covers: life experiences, class, ethnicity, gender as well as key moments in
political or social trajectory) and another which relates to the identity of the group and
the rationale for its choice and thus suggests some coherence or otherwise in this
rationale. Several hundred pages of notes have also been generated by the interviews,
in addition to the various reports and papers given to the researcher as background by
some of the contact organisations involved. Presenting all of this in a 30-page report
means inevitably that both the detail and passion of many of the young people’s testimonies will be sacrificed. However, the report is based on a thorough thematic coding and in-depth analysis of the transcripts and the notes in the light of the major concerns of the project (described above as the second set of criteria), and on a triangulation of these concerns with the findings of other reports on civic producers and websites.

Disagreements or conversational exchanges between participants made for more lively and interesting discussions of issues like social class, who or what is a ‘chav’\(^\text{33}\), why it matters or does not matter to be patriotic, whether religious, ethnic, national or European identity is more important, whether violent resistance to oppression is justified or not, whether particular communities are stereotyped by the media, whether social networking sites are boring, useful or oppressive and much more. The various discourses and ideological frameworks referenced by the participants – for instance in relation to broad themes such as politics, education or personal identity – cannot be ascribed numerical values and discussed or discarded in relation to these. All of these have thus been considered, in relation to the research questions and the findings of other project reports, and those that do not shed light on the research questions have, in the main, been left out. Much of the discussion of particular educational experiences, friendships and leisure or of parenting and entertainment media consumption fits into this category.\(^\text{34}\)

Within the relevant themes, clear patterns do emerge with regard to UK Young people’s Sense of Efficacy, the Internet as a Medium for Entertainment, Social Networks, the Internet as a Political Tool, Interactivity, Generational patterns; Intergenerational relationships and knowledge transfer, Political Parties and Government, Citizenship and Belonging, Television, Entertainment and News, Popular Culture, Nationalism and Patriotism, British and European and Local Identity, Ethnic and Religious Identity, Civic Action, Political Activism, Traditional Politics, Politicians, Capitalism and Consumerism, Online shopping and Ethical Shopping, Voting, Violent Action and Motivations for Civic Participation. These will be clustered under two main headings for this report: 1) The Social, Cultural and Political Experiences and Interests of the Participants and 2) The Sociocultural significance of the Internet for Civic/Political Engagement and Action.

4. The Social, Cultural and Political Experiences and Interests of the Participants

4.1 ‘The Digital Generation’ groups based on avowed Internet or Media interest: *Facebook users* (pilot) 21-24 year olds; 16-18 year old Male and Female *Media Students*’ groups

The *Facebook users group* was a pilot group made up of 3 White English women all doing a balance of voluntary and paid work; 2 white men working with new media and digital technologies for their jobs and 1 British-Asian woman also in part-time paid employment. They were all recruited through Facebook, were known previously to the researcher as she had taught them when they were children, and the group took place in a noisy crowded venue with little privacy, making the transcription of the group discussion untenable. In some senses logistical issues arising from this pilot guided

\(^{33}\) ‘Chav’ is a derogatory term for a particularly White working-class youth subculture in the UK associated, for young men, with things such as hanging around in public places, drinking or swearing in public and particular types of clothing or accessories.

\(^{34}\) This does not mean that these topics are not interesting in themselves and the researcher hopes to dwell on them further in other contexts.
future groups in so far as such things can be foreseen. All the young women in this
group were from working-class or lower-middleclass backgrounds, with their parents
engaged in occupations like taxi-driving, factory work, housework and caring. The two
young men were from professional families and cited their parents as sources of
ideological support and political ambition to a much greater extent than the four young
women, who rarely referred to their parents. Following this group, specific questions
about parents and family ethos were included for the other groups.

The social and cultural interests of the Facebook users group of young people was
widely varying from Bollywood and Hollywood popular films and other forms of popular
culture (all except two had been Media studies students at school), digital culture,
photography, video production, the design and production of websites and films to the
Environment, Animal protection, Mental Health and the Creative Arts. None of this
group were involved in traditional political parties or in any overtly political groups or
causes, and, apart from agreeing that perhaps they would like to have a more
sympathetic party to vote for, none showed any interest in becoming so. Only one was
even marginally religious.

In terms of political and civic involvement a clear distinction emerged between the two
young men – both from university educated families and working in the fields of new
digital communications – who said that they followed politics on the news, read and
listened to political debates and would vote, despite an avowed cynicism about the ‘so-
called differences between the parties’. When pushed, both admitted that they
could not abandon the traditions of their parents, particularly their fathers, and would vote for
the party that their parents’ supported. They justified this as being the ‘least bad
choice’. Both had voted in previous local elections.

The young women, also university educated, were more diverse. Two of them had
never voted and said they would not vote because ‘voting changed nothing’. They said
they were indifferent to traditional politics and became silent when the discussion
hovered in this area. Both of these young women, however, were also passionate
about Bird and Animal Protection (as opposed to rights) and members of various civic
organisations for the protection of the environment. It emerged that they volunteered
regularly and wanted to do paid work in environmental protection or bird sanctuaries,
although they had been searching for jobs with little success. They cited ‘the vicious
circle of never having enough experience to get employed for advertised posts but
never having enough money to volunteer for long enough to get the experience’. The
other two young women were also highly involved in voluntary work: one at her
parents’ temple; the other in a mental health charity. She stated:

A: I knew as soon as I volunteered there that it was using more of my skills and satisfying me more than
the jobs just in media relations, which my degree suited me to. I was being socially useful to people with
mental health problems in the area, and creative, and also unexpected at the same time. I answered an
advertisement in a local newspaper and only discovered that they had a website after I started working
there. But I still have the H and M [local clothing chain store] job to pay the bills, and that is not so good.

Both were graduates but struggling to make their degrees count for anything in the
workplace.

All four young women were living at home and supporting themselves via jobs in retail,
which they found profoundly unsatisfying and frustrating. While none of the women
kept abreast of political news like the men did or were half as knowledgeable about
party political gossip, during the discussion it emerged that they were more involved
with their local communities (having lived there since childhood) and less with
ambitious career development and socialising than the young men were. All six worked
extremely long hours and, as will be discussed in section 5, used the internet in
general and Facebook in particular as a kind of social compensation mechanism.
Though some five years younger, the two groups of young people interviewed in a small town in Gloucestershire in the middle of England, shared many of the demographic characteristics of the Kent Facebook focus group. With the exception of one boy who was clearly from a more middle-class home, they were all from working-class or lower-middle-class families. Their parents worked long hours. They generally lived in council housing and were insecure about their own futures, especially in relation to their ability to go to university, get jobs and own homes. They described their spare time activities as primarily ‘hanging around’ with friends or girl/boy friends both on and offline, going on the internet, playing sport, ‘drinking’, going bowling or to the movies, and looking for or doing poorly paid part-time jobs. Of key interest in this group was the sense of anxiety evinced by almost all of the boys and all of the girls about the transition to adulthood and the financial responsibility entailed. The boys spoke nostalgically about their childhood – being eleven or twelve with loads of free time and fewer worries.

Most of them spent between one and three hours online every day, either on social network sites, checking football results, downloading music, uploading photographs or ‘shopping’ online. Both these groups were knowledgeable and well-informed about issues to do with new media, although they differentiated themselves openly from the internet ‘other’: ‘nerds’ who ‘hang around in corners with laptops playing online games’ and ‘don’t take part in common-room life’. They had all heard of debates around internet safety and thought about the issues. They were critical of their school’s policies in relation to the internet and of the tight control over sites, suggesting it limited their scholarship and cast doubt on their ‘adult’ status. None had ever really visited a civic or political website without prompting, and they looked at the websites shown to them with numerous design preconceptions that they aired freely. Their discussions of some of the civic websites are included in section 5.

Political issues that came up repeatedly in both male and female media students’ groups were to do with security, voluntary work, forms of protest and representation. Security was often seen as being personal (in relation to economics) and physical (in relation to being attacked when outside the home, by other groups of young people or by random strangers) for both groups or in the case of the girls, of sexual attack on them or their younger siblings. They discussed hanging around in groups because of the lack of facilities for youth to do in-door activities cheaply in the town but also hating to pass other groups of young people when alone. They wanted places to ‘hang-out’ together in safety but then the economic issue came up – most of them were worried about finances, jobs were a real issue and their parents seemed to be financially stretched and insecure. This issue of class and financial anxiety arose repeatedly even when an initial question had steered them in a different direction:

**Moderator:** So do you ever go on any news websites on the internet?

**Paula:** The BBC sometimes, when I go onto my internet sometimes it will pop up like a latest story so I’ll go onto there and then I’ll just look through and see some stories and I’m just reading and sometimes I get quite annoyed about it and sometimes I agree with things and then other times I just go off of the website and go onto something else to check if it was true and maybe to see if I can do something about it.

**Moderator:** What kind of thing might get you quite annoyed if you were to read it on a website?

**Paula:** Probably if it was saying about wages being cut or something like that because obviously all of my family work and if the wages were to be cut and the taxes were to go up and the prescriptions and the University fees are imposed I think I would definitely email the government and say something about it because I don’t think there’s any need for it. [...] And we catch the bus in the morning like when it’s cold weather but it’s getting more and more expensive because every time the petrol goes up a couple of pence so does the bus fare and the train fares but they go up even more.
Diane: What I find quite annoying...it’s like the bus fares and like the cinema, we have to pay adult prices and I always thought technically we weren’t adults until we were 18, I mean we can’t vote either and there are other things we can’t do.

Tamsin: We’re not adults until we’re 18 I don’t think – until we’re allowed to vote legally, they don’t perceive us as adults, we’re just ‘teens’.

Paula: Obviously we may go onto University but ... we also need to earn and work and live. Not all of us have parents who can pay for everything.

Adults’ selective use of the categories ‘adult’ and of the notion of responsibility in relation to them, as well as the rising prices are clearly a key concern for them. Paying fees seemed a difficult thing to take on in terms of debt and living in the future.

Most of them were of the opinion that if they were to vote there would have to be a substantially different party or candidate that thought more about poorer economic groups in society, (amongst whom most of them unselfconsciously placed themselves and their parents, young people in general), and the environment. All were anti-Conservative but critical of New Labour, about which the boys were more confident in their opinions: a couple said that they would vote green and the environment was an issue that they had thought long and hard about. Their differentiated view of politicians was expressed through an extended discussion:

C: A lot of the time it’s like no matter what the politician in power has done the other candidates even though they would have made the same decision would still go oh why did you do that; even if they were going to do it themselves, like why did you go to war? When clearly the Conservatives would have done it as well.

Moderator: So they’re hypocrites basically?

T: So that’s why I can’t be bothered because you don’t know who to believe anyway.

C: They’re happy to like send all our soldiers out into like Iraq and stuff but you wouldn’t see them on the frontline would you?

T: Just the way they act really, they’re just arrogant.

M: They’re always trying to please everyone; they’re not honest to what they believe.

Moderator: In what they do or what they say?

M: Yeah they’re always trying to make everyone happy in what they say and what they do so they never really get much done.

A: I think it’s a hard job to do though – everyone always goes on and has a go at them and my dad the same, but I think if he was in the same position he’s going to be doing exactly what they’re doing because if you do something one way someone’s always going to be bustling your balls for it – no matter what you do and you can’t – you know changing the school system or whatever, they were talking about getting rid of grammar schools and that’s what my dad always goes on about, but if you do that then you’re going to get all the people who go to grammar schools just as angry.

Most of them talked about the anti-war protests of 2003, when older children in their state-funded school had left their classes and gathered on the field at the back chanting anti-war slogans. All the young women said that they themselves were against the war and the continuing occupation, but had been too scared of the school authorities to take part in the protests. They said that some of the older children who were ‘more brave’ took part in protests. Some of the boys, also sympathetic to the anti-war position, were keen to emphasise that ‘back then’ they had joined the protests but being twelve, had thought it was ‘a bit of a laugh’ and ‘a good way to get out of lessons’. One of them said he thought the protests were ‘disrespectful’ towards British troops and a brief argument ensued about whether domestic civil protest was still allowable at times of war. This argument was repeated in the medics focus group (see 4.5 in the UK report) and referenced during other interviews (with activist students, musicians’ collective and with young Muslim volunteers) suggesting that arguments about domestic protest when British troops are engaged abroad, and anti-war feelings, are debated by young people and are not merely of academic interest.
4.2 The most economically deprived groups: 19-25 year old Young Men out of Prison, Northern Ireland; 15 year olds using free internet at Youth Library Manchester.

All the young men in the Belfast group were aged between 19 and 25. Five were Catholics and one was a Protestant although this fact only emerged contextually from the discussion. In relation to efficacy and trust, their comments and discussion showed an encompassing distrust of politicians, both local and national, verging on intense dislike, particularly in the case of Northern Irish and British politicians. This was expressed repeatedly. Traditional political activities including writing letters to government or the papers, voting and campaigning were said to be 'useless' and 'a waste of breath'. Politicians, in their view, are corrupt and use veiled violence as well as paramilitary threats, police harassment and the media to keep people divided and passive.

The political realities on the ground for this group were complex, perhaps more so than for most of the other groups of young people and, in their estimation, included:

- The endurance of a deep-seated Catholic-Protestant divide – they mentioned ‘Peace walls on every street’\(^{35}\) in the neighbourhoods inhabited by the young men.

- The enduring influence of sectarian paramilitaries – although less in evidence than a decade ago, aggression towards dissenters is still rife, people are still being ‘knee-capped’ for apparently talking to the police and the police ‘squeeze’ young people by arresting them on any excuse. Militias influence the media, intimidating local youth and peace activists alike via threatening radio broadcasts, leaflets under doors and mid-night telephone calls.

- Alongside class, Catholicness and Protestantness are still seen as key factors in determining people’s life trajectories. Different places of worship, different dress, segregated schools, intimidation, violence and historical knowledge. A longing for a United Ireland, was expressed repeatedly, spontaneously and in a variety of ways by several of the group.

- History is a living thing: every Catholic family has lost someone to ‘the troubles’; stories are told in every family of those killed in bombings, by the British army; this is passed down from generation to generation.

- Extreme poverty and lack of prospects, theft, drugs, alcohol, fear of paramilitaries, fear and distrust of the police, harassment by the police and boredom when out of prison.

- Youth crime: there is nothing to do, no parks, under-funded youth schemes, few part-time jobs and none with any prospects, little of interest at school, particularly for less academic boys from struggling families.

- Repeat offending – once arrested, it is difficult to get out of the cycle of crime and re-arrest. You are always under suspicion, equally, more likely to be

\(^{35}\) Also referred to as ‘peace lines’, peace walls are barricades dividing off Catholic neighbourhoods from Protestant ones.
picked up or to re-offend and apart from a few youth workers and charitable organisations there is little to do other than get involved with paramilitaries. The consensus in this group was that while everyone in these circumstances re-offends, Protestant youth have tended to take the paramilitary path more than Catholic youth in the last five years, mainly because of the disillusionment of the younger Catholics with Sinn Fein and the IRA.

They also talked about how, in prison, where they had each spent time, the youngest and most vulnerable young offenders were the ones who suffered the most both at the hands of guards and other prisoners. Young men learned the rules, and after that, some become institutionalised so that it was harder to be integrated back into society than to stay inside.

**Violence** is an everyday reality. All the young men in this group had participated in and been the victims of violence at one time or another. There are different kinds and degrees of violence that they are willing to talk about:

- **brawls** – after football matches, about football, fuelled by alcohol
- **bricks across the road** into the homes of the opposition community, often leading to street fights, knife-fights or riots, often started out of boredom or after alcohol.
- **against women**, over women/girls, between women/girls, in ‘protection’ of self/girlfriend.
- ‘rioting’ – because of boredom, because of political outrage on particular events, against curfew, against police. This can involve arson and ‘resisting’ arrest
- **by the police** against the young men – this kind of violence is routine and expected, no sense was expressed of the police as a protective force. The association of the police with the UDA and protestant paramilitaries was seen as being endemic.
- **by paramilitaries** against them and their communities – ‘knee-capping’, and other social control.

All the young men in this group were from working-class or unemployed families and their view of the world was coloured by their class in both subtle and overt ways: as one said, ‘Let’s admit it, fucking credit-crunch hasn’t affected us at all; we never had anything, got nothing now’. They mentioned that people in the streets in ‘regenerated’ Central Belfast treat them with suspicion and snobbery: ‘They can tell who we are’: offenders, under-class, Catholics – by things like dress and demeanour:

**Connor:** Over here, see if I moved to England, I’d probably sit there going ‘Jesus!’, looking at me, they wouldn’t be able to tell any difference. But it’s just because I grew up in Belfast, do you know what I mean? It’s not even that, you know, it’s because I live in a Catholic community, I never knew any Protestants, so in a way it’s just the way we all got on, know what I mean? (Voices together)

**Peter:** See Catholics they say ‘hache’ and Protestants say ‘ache’ – you’re in the same communities most of the time, but not mixing.

According to them, rich people live in different areas, gated communities. Arising specifically from these circumstances of disenfranchisement in almost every conceivable way, the need for training is of paramount importance. None of them had
finished school; few had more than rudimentary qualifications and all lacked confidence although not the will to learn. Youth charities working in and with young people are evidently a significant influence in raising confidence and providing space to gain skills. The desire to break out of the cycle of drugs/violence is clearly there for some, but aspirations appeared to be lacking because horizons had been so low for so long and because political realities made aspirations seem pointless and disappointing. Nevertheless, several of the young men in this group clearly wished for tools to make decisions for themselves.

In relation to citizenship, however, the young men had plenty to say. They evinced no sense of British identity – this was disavowed even by the one Protestant in the group (though this may have been in deference to his new identity as a member of a majority Catholic young men’s hostel). Deep disgust, distrust and even hatred of the British army, the police, the British state and media make British identity untenable. Pride in Irish identity was obvious and open. When asked what it consists of, they said ‘the Irish never give up’, ‘we fight and fight and fight for what we know is right’.

These young men were all at a key transitional point in their lives. They could become active /engaged citizens via potential careers in youth work or other areas if given training and job opportunities – the youth worker’s path was fairly similar and his experiences of political reality almost identical – or they could become ‘dutiful citizens’, having a house, job and family but not voting for the reasons listed; or they could go back into prison for repeat offences or bad luck/bad timing and begin the prison cycle over again. While their comments about the internet will be mentioned in Section 5, the overall impression from this group was that sustained offline interventions by committed organisations on the ground such as Youth Action Northern Ireland would be key to the success of their civic and social [re]integration.

At a different stage in their lives – their final year of school – and hailing from one of the most deprived (and notorious) Black ghettos in the UK, the 15 year olds in Moss Side, Manchester were selected because they voluntarily come after school to use the computers at another youth organisation site, this one funded primarily by the local government: the Moss Side [Millennium] Powerhouse Library, which provides free internet access and some youth work support for 8-25 year olds. They generally do homework for school, but also go online there for leisure purposes. The young people quoted in this group are described here in detail to give a sense of the kinds of demographic details described by them at the beginning of the interview:

Pink’s mother is a cleaner; her sister is a cleaner. She lives on a local public housing estate with eight family members and arrived from Jamaica when she was eight years old, so is one of the three recent migrants in the sample. She still has a large family living in Jamaica. She has no computer or internet access at home. She is a Jamaican national with British residence; she does not intend to vote as she doesn’t know ‘what good ever comes of voting’. Benjamin, who is also 15, jokes that his father has ‘always been retired’; his mother is a nurse; and he has grown-up brothers and sisters who have left home. Benjamin’s family appear to set high stock by education. The y also live on a local public housing estate. He used to have a computer at home, left by an older sibling, but it broke and has not been replaced. He comes to the Moss Side Powerhouse Library for internet access. He thinks that ‘politicians basically only shout at each other instead of running the country’ but ‘some of them are trying their best’. He thinks he will vote at the next General election for which he is eligible. He wants to be a pilot, preferably for the RAF. Cassie, who is also fifteen but seems younger, lives on a local housing estate alone with her mother (a nursing assistant) and her 18-year-old sister. She herself wants to be a midwife when she grows up. She comes to the library because of the social aspects of accessing the net with other people and to talk to the youth workers. In amongst her many spontaneous interventions, there are a
number of sophisticated and humane political ideas about society, social relations, class, race and history. The other two either went quiet because of her garrulous approach or Pink asked her to stop interrupting, and they spoke much more freely after Cassie left the group because it was time for her to go home. Just after she left, her mother came looking for her, emphasising her testimony about a strongly caring home-life.

**Several key themes** emerge from this group. Like the group in Northern Ireland, these themes arise in relation to ethnic, religious, economic and social backgrounds as well as to issues specific to the locality in which the young participants reside and the history of that place. For instance, while a few of the other individual young people mentioned Barack Obama and Black issues in other groups, notably the Lewisham Young Mayor group and the Young Muslim volunteers group – the Moss Side young people talked passionately and consistently about issues relating to race, racism, local policing, and media coverage of their locality, youth crime and black fatalities. Additionally, money worries were clear with all of them. Family survival pressures seemed to be felt on a day-to-day basis, especially in relation to extended family in Jamaica.

They all watch the news a lot with parents or carers. Television news is almost always on, and there is some understanding of international political situations, such as the recent bombing of Gaza by Israel and Hamas’ role in this. News viewing was also accompanied by generalisations that reflected the viewpoints of dominant media channels on such topics: they each explained the violence in Palestine similar to how it is discussed on some mainstream British news programmes – as an *irrational* conflict between *equal* parties who are violently killing each other for *no reason* – they’re ‘*mad in the middle east*’ as one of them said. However, closer to home and in relation to the way the news covers their neighbourhood Moss Side, they were more alert to and critical of stereotyping and various kinds of (mis)representation. They mentioned several times how Black deaths are not investigated by the police, and how the media somehow always make out that such deaths were ‘caused’, inevitably, by involvement in crime, immigrant criminal gangs and drugs framing these as self-destructive deaths that the community itself are responsible for:

*Cassie:* I think Moss Side ain’t bad. I think some people and how them people carry themselves make Moss Side look bad but if you actually move in Moss Side and actually live in Moss Side and see what Moss Side is like, you would have a totally different opinion but you can’t actually walk through somewhere and think for one day you see something and you make up a big opinion about it. Like them tv people…[they should] Just shut up. The television and newspapers, is my example. They think they can drive by in their cars and understand what’s going on. No, oh.

*Moderator:* What do you think, Pink?

*Cassie:* [interrupting] And there’s one thing else, when a black person gets shot or something on the news they say …it’s always got to do with drugs or something with guns or drugs or something … and not all black people do drugs or stuff like that…

*Pink:* My area is peaceful and I love it. It’s not what they [the media] say.

*Ben:* It’s not like that; how they [the media] say. Something may happen outside, just near us and they’ll still go ‘It’s Moss Side’, as if that explains why it happened.

This analysis of the media’s perceived racism on a day-to-day basis in relation to their community and locality was something spoken repeatedly and built on by all three of them. In relation to political **efficacy**, they each talked about things that were wrong with communities and the world, and about their desire to make changes, but they were not at all sure what anyone could do to change things. They had a strong sense that only decisions made by people in government or powerful positions actually changed society, and for this reason the Obama victory (by a politician they saw as having personal integrity) was all the more significant.
They all spoke repeatedly about being against violence and gangs – seeing these as being dangers in the neighbourhood but also as hyped beyond need by the media – but also referencing civic debates at school, personal beliefs and learnt rhetorical positions. Demonstrating publicly about any aspect of their community life was an idea that had not really occurred to them. They found it appealing when it was mentioned by a youth worker.

There was no sense arising from this group that political and social issues would have to be ‘dressed up’ as fun or entertaining, or promoted alongside entertainment, to grab their attention. After two hours of talking, some of them were still willing to talk and were openly passionate about the subject of their community and their experiences of school and small ‘p’ politics. Like the other school-aged groups, this group also mentioned schools councils as being highly disappointing experiences. Having raised their hopes about participation the councils only presented them with another situation in which they spoke, their views were noted, but ‘nothing changed’.

4.3 Focus groups based on offline civic activity: Young Farmers and Hunt Supporters, Young Muslim Volunteers, Alternative Musicians Collective

The area of the Young Farmers focus group is rural, with villages and small towns nearby, with a large forested area leading off from the village, that has now been designated a National Park. There local community consists of a mixture of small farms, stud farms, cottages owned by locals and some larger more ostentatious properties owned by out-of-towners (usually Londoners) who come to the area for horse riding and weekends or holidays and by commuters to London or other large towns. In the village traditional arts and crafts are being kept alive in the building and making of roofs (traditional thatch), and in various other efforts. There is high tourist traffic as the surroundings are very beautiful. On the day we conducted the focus group, one of the members, Tom, had been showing a camera crew from the National TV programme ‘Autumn Watch’ how the pigs are let out to eat the acorns that have fallen from the trees in this season. He explained that acorns are a constant danger to horses, who can die after eating them and indicated that fencing and land boundaries were thus significant civic and political issues in rural areas such as this. Internet access here is patchy and intermittent at the best of times, even at the focus group venue where there is broadband access.

The focus group was put together for two reasons: first, on the basis that there are quite vast rural areas in the UK that are often missed out in discussions of young people as the digital generation and we wanted to see what role the internet plays in all aspects of the lives of these young people. The second rationale was that we knew from an older contact in the village that there was strong interest in two particular civic traditions/organisations in this area – the first being hunting and the second being farming, through a national organisation called Young Farmers. We wanted to see how these two identities – as hunters, and as farmers – played out online and offline and what kinds of issues connected to politics might be of interest to the group. The group were not all known to each other, although three of them were members of the Young Farmers (Tom, Freddie and Neil) and two had learnt to ride at the same stables and were interested in the young Hunt Supporters’ Ball (Elizabeth and Tom). All are White British; Tom and Elizabeth clearly have middleclass parents and have aspirations to go to university, while the others, who have both decided not to go to university have parents in traditionally working class occupations, and work two jobs each.

Although talkative on every other topic, Elizabeth was reluctant to converse about politics, although she was openly critical of the Labour Party. This seemed to be a learnt rhetoric from her parents and other adult familiars who support the
Conservatives, the Countryside Alliance\textsuperscript{36} and are extremely pro-Hunting. She maintains that her sister is a much better debater than she is. The three young men, Tom, Neil and Freddie have been and remain members of a national organisation for rural youth, National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs. They belong to their local Young Farmers Club, which meets socially every week and organises activities, meetings, lobbying, as well as keeps people informed and connected to each other. It is both a social and a civic space for these young people. They joined when they were ten years old, and they say it is both a local and a national network, which meets nationally for an annual general meeting once a year, usually in a small seaside town but sometimes in other venues. They are all extremely positive about the benefits for them personally of belonging to this organisation, mentioning that it contains both men and women and that without it, they would have no social network and little social life because of the unsociable hours of their jobs and work on the farms – 4am starts which mean they are usually asleep by 9 in the evening.

For leisure, in addition to riding and doing some civic voluntary work on the Young Hunt Ball committee, Elizabeth mentioned that she shops online and goes on Facebook. Tom categorically said that he does not. Elizabeth explicitly said she likes to keep in touch on Facebook with friends and likes the site a lot for its gossipy potential. The local Young Hunt ball has a Facebook page. Tom mentioned that social network sites are generally a waste of time, there is so much to do offline. So do Steve and Neil, who occasionally visit a page on there through friends or girlfriends, but do not have profiles of their own:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Neil}: I haven't got internet at home. I've got word processing facilities at home and stuff like that. I use databases and things at work for parts and stores and things like that. My girlfriend is on Facebook and I use it through her thing, I post messages and my friends will find funny messages from her and think who is that and it's me – yeah I'm interested in it but I don't have time for it so I just use my girlfriend's...

\textbf{Moderator}: What would you say about a person who wasn't on the internet, a young person?

\textbf{Neil}: I'm fully for people that haven't got the internet. It depends what you do, some people think that they can't live without it which I think is sad really because it's just something to aid you it's not something you have to do and everybody thinks if you haven't got a computer you must be crackers!

\textbf{Moderator}: Do you know many other people like you who just use the internet for work?

\textbf{Neil}: A handful, it's not many, is it Steve?

\textbf{Steve}: No.

\textbf{Moderator}: Are they also young farmers or are they other friends of yours from school?

\textbf{Neil}: I would say also young farmers, everyone else that I would know through school would be on it.

\textbf{Elizabeth}: (Sheepish) I think it's something that I use because I've got it and I've got the facilities in my house but it's nothing that if I didn't have it I wouldn't worry about it.

\textbf{Neil}: If I had it at home for free with someone else paying for it then I'd use it, but I don't see the need for me to go out and buy a laptop and get connected to the internet at my cost. It wouldn't aid me.

The statement ‘It wouldn’t aid me’ is in stark contrast to young people in most of the urban groups except the Belfast one. All of these young men are passionate about farming and farmers’ issues and difficulties. They note that it is a dying and sometimes despised way of life; that teachers had tried to discourage them from continuing on the land and to steer them away from manual occupations such as forestry towards others such as computers. They are sceptical of politicians, and in particular of Europe, where they feel farming subsidies are handed out as bribes. Neil, in particular, repeats the phrase that they do not want to be ‘dictated to’ in stressing that Britain needs to steer clear of Europe. His sense of the key things in their lives – employment, housing,

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{36} The Countryside Alliance is a rural civic organisation and Ltd company, lobbying and campaigning to maintain rural pursuits, traditions and ways of life, whose site was surveyed in Deliverable 6.
wages and legislations on the countryside – not being under their control was echoed by Steve.

The Young Muslim Volunteers focus group took place at the head quarters of a local online Muslim Youth charity, which provides advice and support online and by telephone for young Muslims across the UK and was used as a case study in other work packages (see Deliverables 13 and 14). The Young volunteers who joined the focus group happened to be off-shift at the time and to have agreed to giving up their free time, while there were some young women staffing the helpline’s phones. Mujid is 19, Imran is 22, Hameed is 22 and Patrick, a convert, is 24. As the group progresses, it is possible to map out their different trajectories but also to pick up on similarities in their use of the internet to those in some of the other activist and digital generation groups.

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The three British-Asians obviously share some social and cultural experiences of family and migration from their backgrounds; but social class, educational aspirations and beliefs in civic action, justice and equality seem to tie them together closely with Patrick, who was brought up by an Irish Nationalist single mother. Religion is, for all of them, a key structuring and guiding force in their lives. They pray five times a day, know the Koran well, and in some cases study theology, and state overtly that they identify strongly as Muslims. Having said this, they are all extremely different in terms of their ways of integrating religion into their everyday lives and in their expressions of politics and about civic action. Imran’s commitment to justice and an egalitarian society, as well as his clear-sighted acknowledgement of cultural challenges is evident in the stances he takes up on issues as diverse as international wars and occupations, local drug-taking by Bengali youth in the East End of London and racism both inside and towards the community:

Imran: In terms of volunteering or intake projects I used to – me and a few friends of mine – we used to set up volunteering projects or our own a few years back in our local community and I was involved with that for about four years or so. […] It was originally it was a project targeted at local Muslim youth because the high concentration of Muslims in the area and afterwards we expanded…it was mainly dealing with social issues and they might have[…]Drug taking, sexual abuse and those kind of issues and then afterwards we expanded it and I went on and I started doing something slightly different which was we looked at it and we thought we’re targeting Muslim youth but in terms of the whole area itself it’s quite ethnically divided to the extent that people don’t know each other purely and simply based on ethnic boundaries; so we worked on the Sporting Project, and what we used to do with that is we’d organise weekly football matches, swimming sessions and various sporting activities and stuff; it wasn’t necessarily to make them best friends with each other but we tried to break down boundaries that exist between them so that the next time they see each other they at least know something – they’d at least say ‘hello’ to each other rather than holding antagonisms towards each other.

In addition to the various voluntary civic and political activities, Imran is an ethical shopper, by his own admission had ‘anarchist leanings’ when he was seventeen, and thinks outside the box in relation to political action.

Hameed and Mujid come across as more ironic and individualist in a number of responses. Although neither of them hide their views on humanitarian causes and in relation to British Asian culture, immigration, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the war in Iraq and other issues, Mujid points out that Hameed is ‘into’ fashion and popular (Pakistani) culture and does not believe in ethical shopping. He explains that he himself has all kinds of friends offline and online who may not support his views. Being, in addition to a medical student also a volunteer police officer, he has a range of social personae to maintain in relation to his different colleagues. Patrick meanwhile positions himself as a keen scholar of Islam, which he clearly is, an Irish nationalist by upbringing, and somewhat on the fringes of popular culture both by choice and because he is busy with a job.
Volunteering within their communities and attempting to construct a world with better social relations is something that inspires all of them, and they describe how their parents are not as enthusiastic about voluntary work as they are, viewing its unpaid nature with some scepticism. They have all taken part in protests, particularly demonstrations and pickets, and though they question whether these have had any effect on the political establishment, they value them for their ability to create a sense of community, to display solidarity and to dispel feelings of gloom and ineffectiveness, albeit momentarily. It is in relation to the politics of civic action, however, in relation to Israel and Palestine, national identity and the concept of democracy that the discussion between the four of them becomes the most impassioned:

Imran: I think ‘democracy’ is when ... when an individual has a right to choose their destiny, although as cheesy a line as it probably sounds, but I don’ t know how it comes across but the versions of democracy out there aren’t to me what my version of democracy is in my mind. [...] I don’t think an ideal society exists. I think with the democracy we have it's a case of the majority just get to elect the minority who then get to decide instead of letting us decide. That's just my viewpoint of it.

Moderator: Is democracy your favoured form of government?

Hameed: I don't really have a clear definition of what kind of democracy I guess there was like maybe about fairness really, but I don' know if that's actually the case in anything and as you say, there is no ideal out there, that has democracy, that is fair. I don't know if that answers. [...] Imran: I think on a local level you have much greater chances... I saw people around me who weren’t achieving to the best of their potential and it's a case of showing these people just because of what is happening around the world it doesn't mean that you can't still achieve. So it's about giving you the chance actually to make the most of the opportunities that are available to you because as much as people might moan, if you live in a country like Britain you do have access to free education system and the opportunities you have are immense.

Patrick: But they’re not mutually exclusive so you don’t have to do one or the other, you can do both…

Imran: You can do both…

Patrick: And so the thing is that watching those videos on the BBC and seeing that throughout the world, there are protests against what's happening in Palestine, is something which is different to the way it was 4, 5, 6 years ago and particularly within the Muslim community there is now far more movement towards protest after the war then there was before that.

A complex and elaborated conception of democracy as being both about individual self-determination and fairness, access to opportunities and the opportunity to use that access to benefit yourself and the community emerged. This suggests that even without formal political education in schools, some young people in the UK are knowledgeable about and interested in democracy as a concept. These young men are aware enough and critical enough to point out that while aspects of life in the UK such as free education contribute to a ‘democratic ideal’, there are numerous ‘versions’ of democracy. Moving from theory to practice, a tension also appears briefly between civic action within local communities and that which is motivated by international situations and causes. In one case community issues are a motivation for action, in the other injustices happening in another part of the globe is an equally strong motivator for action.

The Alternative Musicians’ Collective. Woe, Dan and Rita who took part in this group had all in different ways been civically active since their early teens. Rita has participated in numerous civic organisations, including spending time as a students union officer, and been involved with music and local Gypsy Roma communities through her background. She is from a deprived and isolated rural area in Scotland, left home at fourteen and has worked her way through university and all around Europe. She has a huge and vibrant offline social network, an enormous civic, historical and social knowledge that is highly valued by other members of the group and a commitment to voluntary work that, she jokes, is getting in the way of paid employment. Dan grew up in a single-parent family, with his Scottish (social worker)
mother, who moved to Manchester when he was a boy. He has experienced poverty as part of his daily life and, like some of the other participants in other groups from deprived areas, he mentions that ‘growing up poor is sort of different from growing up rich’. Woe, the only one of the group from a middle-class background, has parents involved in local communities and especially in the community arts movement. They have inspired and supported his endeavours through university and in the formation of a band. He and Dan met when they were at the same secondary school and have been close friends since they were fourteen.

Salient events that they mention brought them into politics and also then disillusioned them in some measure were the War against Iraq and the War against Afghanistan; ‘One million in the streets and the government did not listen’ as they say. These events were also discussed repeatedly in other focus groups, such as that with Young Muslim Volunteers, Students’ Union Activists and the Net Generation groups. For Rita, hearing politicians and big companies lie blatantly on TV and seeing the media not question this was something that turned her off politics with a big P:

Rita: There was loads of campaigns and loads of groups in our area that were leukaemia this or there was the Freier Kay Foundation, there were lots of different groups and then when I was 13 I think, a couple of years after that when she died, I was watching the news and they were talking about nuclear power and John Major directly lied, he was asked a direct comment by the press if there was any association to leukaemia and cancer and cancer scares and whether there were actually heat spots in the Dunree area. All of this he must have been given, you know like there was one public one in the 80’s, they actually opened a massive ditch into the side of the cliffs in Dunree and got actually Dunree workers to fill it with waste, a barrel each, that’s all they were allowed to be exposed to. They all got paid off and retired at the end of it. They had to bring in Eastern European workers because none of them could ever work in the plants ever again because they were exposed to that much radiation.

Unprovoked police aggression and a feeling of the impossibility of citizens changing either the political reality or of complaining successfully about police harassment and violence against demonstrators was key to Dan’s feeling of anxiety and reticence about participating in big civic protests:

Dan: Going back to what you were saying before about things that dissuade you from trying to make a lot of social changes and that, I’d have to say police brutality. It is used, it does happen. I was sixteen and it happened and that did stop me from going to any marches after that.

Moderator: Really?

Dan: Yeah, I thought it’s my health or…

Woe: That was really horrible that, he got trampled by a horse and then hit.

Dan: No. After that. There was a van of police guys, you know the wrestlers in police uniforms, they decided to set up a barricade across where a load of us kids – this is when the kids walk out from school thing happened – they decided they were going to set up a barricade across a group of kids moving down the street so they virtually just flung whoever was in the way and then set up this barricade but during that there was a bit of a scuffle, I was trying to stand up and got kicked down a couple of times. So then when I actually got back to my feet I was face to face with the guy who was hitting me and I was like ‘do you know how old I am?’ I was like 16 or something and he was, ‘I don’t care mate, I don’t care’. And I was, like, ‘look what you’ve done!’ and I showed him bruises and stuff, and he’d ripped my shirt and I was like ‘are you going to sleep tonight?’ and he was like ‘shut up, mate I don’t care how old you are’. Then I saw him on another march a couple of months later. I saw his TAU van and I recognised him as he was going passed and I was like ‘excuse me can I get your badge number?’ and then all the rest of his mates in this TAU in this van were like ‘fuck off, fuck off, get the fuck out of the way, we’re not giving you his fucking number’. They got him in to the back of the van and had like four or five guys and this woman screaming at me to get the fuck out of the way or be arrested for asking for a badge number. And things like that do seriously-

Woe: Dissuade you from taking action.

This account of an encounter with police violence that became off-putting in terms of further active dissent was echoed in other focus groups.
Like some of the young people in the students’ union activist group, there was a sense in the musicians’ collective that television rots the mind and ‘forces’ you to watch someone else’s agenda, while the internet gives you more control over what you learn about:

**Dan:** As soon as the ability to download tv shows and play computer games and stuff or just read Wikipedia came along, television became less interesting because rather than having what someone wanted you to watch forced down your throat or down your eyeballs, you can choose what you want to learn and what you want to hear and see and I’d much rather do it that way through the internet.

**Moderator:** Is that something that you feel your peers share with you, that feeling about that, or do you think there are still a lot of people who watch television?

**Dan:** A lot of people still watch television purely for the sit down switch your brain off aspect of it, but I like to hoard knowledge so I can literally go into Wikipedia, click on a random article and go on for hours and hours, just learning about things which I didn’t know anything about.

**Moderator:** Is there anything in particular that interests you?

**Dan:** Everything.

As will be seen in section 5, although other groups do use the internet for civic action, this group was consistently the most positive about the civic and social potentials of the internet.

### 4.4 Focus groups based on offline political activity: Advisors to the Young Mayor of Lewisham, Students’ Union Activists

The fact that there were only two people at the **Young Mayor’s Advisors** group allowed for a more vibrant discussion at some points, and for a deeper exploration of their views, ideas and motivations. Methodologically while this might not conform to the notion of a typical focus group, it adds substantially to understandings of the topic at hand. One of the boys, Nathaniel Williams, is 15. His family on his father’s side are ‘**Baptist ministers for four generations**’. His mother is a housewife. He has broadband internet and a computer in his own bedroom, attends a local community state-funded secondary school. He has voted in the recent local elections for the young mayor of Lewisham in which 9000 young people voted. His immediate view of politicians is that they are ‘**rich liars**’. He says he intends to vote in the national elections when he is of age. The other, Bruno Gerrard, also 15, lives with his parents, who are both doctors and have migrated to the UK from mainland Europe. He was a candidate in the 2008 young mayoral election. He has access to broadband internet at home, but not in his bedroom, and attends a local Private secondary school. His dream job would be to be an architect. He takes a keen interest in issues of urban regeneration, talks knowledgably and passionately about street lighting, the design of crowded neighbourhoods and the safety of inhabitants. This was the main platform on which he had stood for young mayor. He also voted in the local young mayoral election for the under-18s. He intends to vote in the national elections when he is of age. His immediate view of politicians was that they are ‘**bloody rich liars**’ but this did not mean that he was unhappy with democracy in the UK and, in fact, expressed his satisfaction with his current life on several occasions.

The breadth and depth of these two young people’s aspirations was something that set them apart from the groups interviewed in Gloucestershire and in Hampshire. Both of them held cynical views of what happens in mainstream politics but were, nonetheless, determined that they would be able to play a role in the shaping of the public sphere, both as young people and in later life. Their intention to vote in national elections, unlike the more contingent fact that they happened to hear about and vote in the young mayoral election, is evidence of their sense that all participation is not futile. Their views on politics and democracy are highly individual and based strongly on family histories – in one case originating in slavery and the US in the other on mainland Europe – and proclivities.
While their opinions are strongly individual, their attitude towards and ‘ownership’ of the public sphere can be directly related to parental values as in the case of some of the medical students. Saliently, a discourse of individual merit and intelligence versus stupidity, corruption, malleability and passivity (as an aspect of all age-groups’ participation) developed during this focus group and was echoed in several of the other groups. Other key discussions related to their disenchantment with their school councils, which appeared to be talking shops and in which they participated but which never seemed to achieve anything because ‘the people with the real power didn’t like our ideas’ or ‘they said, “not now, we don’t have the money for that”’. The inability of schools’ councils to get things changed even when students did participate was raised in the school groups in Stroud and by Benjamin in Moss Side, suggesting that civicly interested students turn to these avenues for action but are quickly disillusioned by the lack of power. One of them said he would still be on the school council because, ‘it was good experience of hearing people’s views and debating’. The boys’ understandings of democracy were sophisticated and complex, confirming their point that adults treat children as if ‘one size fits all’ but that they thus underestimate them hugely. Both boys were in favour of a lowering of the voting age to 16 and in one case to 14, and argued passionately for this.

The Students’ Union Activists, Katie, Mark and Aneesa, are all in their early twenties and two of them have family histories of involvement in local or international communities, moral commitment to working-class struggles as well as liberal political frameworks. Katie, who describes her family as completely politically ignorant, says she held some conservative and politically authoritarian beliefs when at school. She describes how her political transformation took place entirely at university, by coming into contact with other students’ groups, leftwing lecturers and activists passionate about issues and causes from democratic participation and students’ rights to Palestine, the war in Iraq and feminism. Mark is hugely involved in the support campaign for Palestine and in particular in campaigning to get Palestinian students scholarships at their university; he works as well as studies and is in a small British left party, having been in several other groups. He, however, does not toe an orthodox line, but shows through discussion that he is open to a wide range of viewpoints on social action. Aneesa’s Iraqi father left the family when she was a young child; but her English mother continued to work with refugees and political prisoners, thus setting the scene for Aneesa’s anti-authoritarian and generally alternative politics. She does not watch television and lives in a co-operative house where there is no television. She and Katie are active in Gay and Lesbian and Feminist circles at university, and she herself is attracted to aspects of anarchist politics, although her careful testimony during our discussion emphasises that this is a more theoretical than practical attraction.

I contacted these students because they are activists in a students’ union in one of the colleges with the most activist and historically left-leaning student and staff cohort in London. In this sense, they are not ‘typical’ students, nor typical of students’ union members nationwide. They are, however, the ones who keep alive even the notional challenge remaining in students’ groups and they are the ones who seem most concerned about the erosion of students’ rights and the turning of the National Union of Students into a ‘finishing school for those who wish to enter party politics’. Their local students’ union has just been the scene of a particularly fierce and close referendum over the issue of whether student rights and issues should be put to a vote at open meetings attended by student members or simply handled by a 12 person executive committee, a measure which was brought in a couple of years ago by a reigning executive and is opposed by the current one but supported by the incoming post-holders in their union. The issues at stake appear to be whether the union follows a direct or representative model of democracy, how active students are willing to be on a day-to-day basis, how much power the executive members would like to have and so
on. This focus group describes how, initially, they did not expect anyone to oppose their proposal for increased democracy but how at the last minute a hugely organised and technically-savvy ‘no’ campaign was waged, and ultimately won by a few votes.

4.5 Highly educated urban medical students from professional families

The CivicWeb project found via both discussions with producers in WP7 and the reviewing of literature for WP5 that there is a group of young people, usually from more highly educated backgrounds, or where families have a tradition of being involved in politics, who do commonly get involved in civic and political issues, who vote, follow the news and political party events and participate in the off-line public sphere in a variety of ways. The findings of WP6 (Deliverable 6) and WP8 (Deliverable 14), the broader and more in-depth analyses of civic websites, suggest that some young people do contribute regularly to the discussions and forums on websites such as those of Oxfam-Generation Why, The UK Youth Parliament, Young Labour and Conservative Future. The research findings of WP9, the survey of young users (Deliverable 8), indicated that those young people taking part in civic actions and the civic sphere offline, might also be the ones most likely to be taking part in civic ‘sharing’ and civic debate online. This group was selected and conducted in an effort to discover which if any of these findings are true when it comes to young UK citizens from high socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, some of whom are commonly described as ‘the usual suspects’ in the youth civic sphere.

As the young men in this group were all highly individualised in terms of their beliefs, values and attitudes but strikingly similar in their backgrounds, social habitus and upbringing, it is useful to discuss them in terms of their individual similarities and differences: Richard Finch, 21, attended a Roman Catholic comprehensive school, and holds fairly strong religious views. His parents are both doctors. His family have broadband internet but he does not have this in his room at home. He has never voted to date but intends to vote at the next election. In his view, politicians are associated with elections, spin and arguments but he displays no such cynicism about them as has been evident in other focus groups, especially with economically underprivileged youth. His dream job is to be a doctor for Medicine Sans Frontiers (MSF) the global charity. Civic and social issues of interest to him are: religion, sport (he is an avid player and rugby fan); health, terrorism and military conflict. He talked passionately and knowledgeably about some of these topics during the course of the focus group.

Clive Warren, 21, comes from a university town in the North of England. His father is a doctor. He was educated at private school and has both a computer and broadband internet in his bedroom. He has voted Conservative in a local election and intends to vote at the next election. In his view, politicians are associated with elections, spin and arguments but he displays no such cynicism about them as has been evident in other focus groups, especially with economically underprivileged youth. His dream job is to be a doctor for Medicine Sans Frontiers (MSF) the global charity. Civic and social issues of interest to him are: religion, sport (he is an avid player and rugby fan); health, terrorism and military conflict. He talked passionately and knowledgeably about some of these topics during the course of the focus group.

Akram Sharif, 20, comes from an Iraqi family settled in Britain. Both his parents are doctors. He was educated at a private preparatory school during his primary years and a Grammar school at secondary level. He now resides in a flat with his sister, and has internet broadband at home and a computer with a connection in his bedroom. He has not yet voted in a general election because he was not of age last time but fully intends to do so at the coming election. The other two rib him about being a hippy, and a fringe left person or soft Labour. He associates politicians with ‘bureaucracy and a lack of
broader vision’, saying they ‘do not look at the bigger picture when they make decisions’. His dream job is to work for the World Health Organisation. Issues that most interest him are Health and Human Rights, the Environment, Immigration, Social Inequalities and the Arts. These are the topics for which he would go searching for information both on and off-line. He is a regular volunteer for a medical student group called Medicin - www.medicin.org - and spends between five and eight hours a day both on the local medicin website and working for the organisation.

Debate between these three tended to cluster Richard and Clive against Akram on issues related to traditionally rightwing and leftwing political beliefs and opinions: health and economic policy, immigration and citizenship, as well as party politics placed the two former as solidly conservative and the latter as a left-leaning liberal. Both of the former were strongly in favour of British National identity, the British armed forces and patriotism, while Akram argued against patriotism. At several points they called him a ‘hippie leftie’ and ‘leftwinger’ and there was a sense of positions being rehearsed from previous arguments and consolidated in response to direct questions about identity:

Richard: I very strongly feel we shouldn’t join the Common Market; we shouldn’t join the euro zone.
Clive: I was totally against it but then I was turned around I read a book by Robin Cook and I sort of was persuaded by his arguments that perhaps it might be in our [Britain’s] best interest and bearing in mind what happened...we have to side with someone because we’d end up with the US or Europe and ....
Moderator: And you would prefer the UK to side with Europe?
Clive: I think we need more power over Europe and I think the only way we’re going to do that is if we take a more active role...we’re starting to become rather irrelevant and we need to perhaps side with Europe.
Akram: For me again it’s a pure political point until it really influences my particular aspect of global health and human rights....I know it does a lot in the long term, but until it directly does I don’t have enough time to think about it.
Moderator: So do you feel like a European citizen?
Akram: No.
Moderator: Do you?
Richard: No absolutely not. [...] I just think it's awful to lose that tradition of independence and like all our history.
Clive: Yeah.
Moderator: You feel that that's very strongly a British thing, that position of independence?
Richard: I think it's very important.
Clive: Yeah. That's what that was my sort of...
Moderator: You all feel quite British then?
Akram: Not at all!
Moderator: You don't?
Akram: I don’t have any patriotism to either England/UK/Britain or Iraq or anywhere.
Richard: Dangerous. That’s dangerous.
Moderator: You think that having no patriotism or nationalism is dangerous?
Richard: Yes, I think it undermines society.
Akram: I think it's dangerous to have patriotism, because I think you lose objectivity and a sense of humanity.
Clive: It’s part of citizenship to feel patriotic about your country!
Richard: Yes, okay, I'd expand that to being a patriot is equivalent to being a good citizen. [Emphatic].
Akram: Obviously I would disagree strongly with that definition of citizenship.

There is no doubt that the opinions of each of these young men is highly informed, based on reading and news as well as ideology and values. They are aware of micro-political debates as well as of theoretical rationales for various political decisions. As will be seen in the following section, all members of this group all use the internet heavily for studies, civic purposes, information gathering and leisure.
5. The Socio-cultural Significance of the Internet for Civic/Political Engagement and Action.

5.1 Irrelevant/unused at a civic and political level

For the young men just out of prison in Northern Ireland, the internet plays little part in most of their opinions and lives. They have no access in their hostel and had none in prison. Only one, Connor, talks about the fact that he had access before he left home and used it for downloading music, sending emails and other communication. He now uses the internet at local libraries for looking at sports results and information that might help with a course he is on but not at the youth centre, presumably for privacy reasons. The others still find the internet profoundly irrelevant:

**Moderator:** Can you tell me a little bit about whether any of you use the internet?

**B:** Nope. Not me.

**Connor:** Do the odd thing but not as much nowadays.

**Moderator:** What would you use it for?

**Connor:** Just talking to my mates, ?? new released dvd's and stuff like that, definitely.

**Moderator:** Do you use things like MSN Messenger?

**Connor:** Aye and You Tube

**V:** You’s looking up stuff on Canada (laughter off)

**Moderator:** Do you have access to the internet here?

**Connor:** Yes

**Moderator:** Do you use it here when you have access?

**V:** Nope.

**Connor:** I go to the libraries around the town

**P:** I don’t…it’s not that you don’t get the choice do you too much but you got to pay. It’s…I’ve got something…nothing to do when I log on…. And if you pay for it […] its sad.

**Moderator:** How about you, do you use the internet at all?

**H:** No.

**Moderator:** Not for anything? Have you ever used it?

**H:** I never have. Never will.

**Moderator:** Do you think it’s just rubbish?

**H:** Boring. Aye.

**Connor:** It can be a good thing, as long as you know…you find what you’re looking for. If you don’t find what you’re looking for it’s going to be useless and if you don’t know what to look for that’s even worse.

Literacy and lack of free access combine with social realities to make them think it boring and/or irrelevant. However, as Connor points out, for him, who knows what he is looking for, it is a rewarding social tool that might, in the future, be used for civic knowledge.

The **Young Farmers** and **Hunt Supporters** were the other group who evinced little interest at least in the civic potential of the internet and even in its social possibilities. Their local Young Farmers has a website. For Steve and Neil, this is the only website on the World Wide Web [http://www.hampshireyfc.org/](http://www.hampshireyfc.org/) that they trust fully and spend any time on, and that too is brief. They follow brief items of news, find out what is going...
on and occasionally visit links from this site. If they do visit other websites, these are ones connected to the young Farmers site, or occasionally to the NFU, the National Farmers’ Union. When looking at websites together, it becomes evident that Elizabeth and Tom have never heard of Unicef or of YouthVoice. They do not know what it does. They have heard of Oxfam and say that it sells old clothes to make money for charity. But they would not want to buy old clothes. Both of them have very occasionally bought something online, have never looked for news online, and have occasionally used the internet for school work, but do not like reading and writing.

Tom is also a member of the Commoners Association and the Young Commoners, groups which meet to discuss the maintenance, use and upkeep of common or non-private land. They have campaigned to resist the fencing off of land that used to belong to everyone as part of a national park. Like the others, he is not convinced that the internet would in anyway advance the campaign, which is about local people (with connections to each other and the land) trying to keep something that has been free for their use for generations. All these participants find an excess of interactive applications on websites off-putting. They do not want to upload content or even to leave comments, but would rather read information and news from a trusted source. They have never podcast or uploaded video material; they find forums discussing issues ‘even more intimidating’ than face-to-face debate.

Roughly half the young people in the two net generation and in the Facebook users groups view the internet as irrelevant when it comes to civic or political mobilisation and action. They have never signed an online petition, or joined a political group nor are they interested in voting or campaigning online and are somewhat dismissive of youth civic websites as being ‘do-gooders’ or ‘patronising’ and ‘telling us what we should be doing’. They do use the internet heavily for entertainment and socialising but see no connection between these activities and civic or political ones.

5.2 Useful for civic information and academic knowledge as a background to opinion formation

The other half of the two net generation and the Facebook users groups, however, use the internet fairly heavily as a source of news, in addition to and alongside television, visiting websites like the Guardian online, BBC news and Al-Jazeera. Some of this group, having joined voluntary or charitable organisations and found that these organisations have websites, now also keep abreast of their organisations’ concerns and of job opportunities via the internet. Though not doing this in any concerted way, have begun to do civic things on the internet – looking for information about local issues and voluntary organisations, joining (slightly) political face-book groups or causes, occasionally looking up news, posting the odd comment on a forum or on You Tube and generally using the internet to suggest possible new ideas on topics they are interested in. They certainly use file-sharing websites and upload photos to Flikr. One or two of them have experimented with their own video or podcast content, mainly as a joke but they can see the civic potential.

The Manchester Moss Side group talked about the Internet as being really good for finding information for school; listening to music videos on You Tube; catching up with offline friends on Facebook. Cassie emphasised that she felt that the internet and Wikipedia in particular helped her hugely to find out about the history of black people like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks:

**Cassie:** You get to do research and plus if you didn’t have an internet and you wanted to find something like massive like about Nelson Mandela on the computer and I could go far out – not far out but different places to get information and if you have the internet you can just type in ‘Nelson Mandela’
and it brings up loads of information and you don’t have to worry about it, it’s just there and you could just type it in and it’s just really easy.

Ben: Wikipedia.

Cassie: Yeah. […]

Ben: …but you know you can’t always trust it. Because people use it themselves.

Moderator: How did you find that out?

Ben: Mr Clark told me.

Moderator: Who is Mr Clark?

Ben: My geography teacher.

Cassie: Today we went on the computer and I went to do a presentation on someone that’s proper famous and I found out a lot of information about Barack Obama, really lots of information like when he was born and what he did before he became the president of America and what he used to do and what school he went to and that’s very good.

From their comments, their schools seem to be the ones initiating the projects and scaffolding their internet literacy in an ad hoc manner, but they themselves take things away and then look things up on the library computers. Pink too said that almost as Obama decided to run, she looked him up on a computer and found out everything she could about him. The Obama victory was a huge meaningful milestone for each of them personally, for their families and for their school friends.

In the Medical Students focus group civic aspects of the internet were used regularly and naturally, with no constraint or artificial differentiation from other reasons for internet use: Richard has visited a wide range and number of civic and social websites over the past year, including those of an activist group Aegis, (a British based trust which campaigns against genocide - http://www.aegistrust.org - an international charity – Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF); a UN website; the site of the Sudanese ‘Rebels’ and political party groups and the local Medicin site, which he categorises as a youth volunteer site. Things that would keep him motivated on a website are: The content (if under user control and not forced upon one); issues that tie in with his personal interest in religion, genocide prevention; health; pictures and Images; The news section; test (of knowledge); the promotion of offline events to attend; online polls and the other organisations’ websites to which a site links. Clive explained that he has visited several major news websites on a regular basis and recently the UN website as well as a Government website for information purposes. His ‘civic’ use of the internet is primarily for information purposes and he has an interest in international governmental relationships and realpolitik. He also reads history – from books – out of interest and the desire to be well-informed about particular political situations. The things that keep him motivated on a website are: the content: articles and papers by users; audio content if under user control; the news section; games and tests; online polls; the possibility of commenting on specific content; the possibility of emailing the site and the offline events promoted that he may attend. Akram has visited a wide range of civic websites in the past year, including those of an international medical campaign network, a global medical charity, a government website and a political party site (in search of details of global health policy). The things that motivate him on a website are: images, but only secondarily and primarily – the option to e-mail or contact the site with views and opinions; the content of the site – articles and papers by the site producers (if under user control) as well as other users and the chance to volunteer offline for the organisation.

It may be seen from this evidence that in many ways these young people use the internet both for information gathering, and for finding out about opposing view points and that they then use these modes to inform the judgements and actions they take in relation to traditional politics, in this case voting and/or supporting or challenging particular government or opposition policies. Additionally, they use the internet for furthering voluntary civic and political activities in relation to the causes and charities
they support. In many ways predictions about this demographic group from other work packages hold good and, given that they are indeed one of the groups most likely to be using the internet for civic purposes but that they have varied and unpredictable politics, their views on design and content arising from the session looking at websites is instructive. They resent any sites with ‘childlike’ or ‘childish’ colours or iconography, are far more inclined to keep reading on sites with a serious and academic mode of address than on ones with ‘sound bite’ statistics and political messages at the fore. They enjoy user control, want to have a database of academic articles and are attracted to what they consider information.

Both boys in the Young Mayor of Lewisham Candidates and Advisors group are highly experienced on the internet. They visit websites, social networks, think about buying things, play games, and sometimes even post comments or start threads on forums about issues to do with architecture or their local communities. They have occasionally used the internet for civic purposes, but it is mostly for information gathering, news or leisure. However, it is clear that in at least one instance, the internet is used to search for civic information and for offline civic groups that are of interest.

5.3 Used for shopping (sometimes ethical), voluntary work and implicated in the expression or concealment of political identity in wider social networks

Young Muslim Volunteers: The internet enables all of these young men to search for and retrieve information and ideas in relation to religious teachings in one case and politics and social issues in the others. They also use it as part of their voluntary work for the organisation they are with, to pursue fandoms, particularly transnational ones and, consistently, as a place to shop:

Imran: I think the websites I probably visit the most... is going to make me sound really boring, have you seen the Guardian? [Moderator: nods] I’m probably going on those websites the most, then probably Facebook to keep in touch with everyone I know. MSN and just checking my email and stuff and a lot of shopping.

Moderator: Are you an ethical shopper when you shop online – you mentioned that before?

Imran: I try to be... [some scornful noises from other members of the group] ...In terms of ‘ethical’, I think it goes more into politically ethical rather than economically ethical. I’m trying the whole boycotting thing in terms of like various different products that might be supporting other things and stuff like that.

Moderator: What role does the internet play in that would you say?

Imran: The internet does help a lot because you can get access to websites where they will actually have information as to not just boycott this product but WHY you should be boycotting this product, and like proof of what effect your boycott will have and everything you need to go with your decision or your action.

Moderator: Can you give me an example of something you might be…?

Imran: There’s the website In-Mind which you guys all know about. […] It’s about boycotting goods that are helping the Israeli economy so that kind of stuff because everything that’s happening in the world at the moment [nods all round – reference to the Israeli bombing and invasion of Gaza in December 2008-January 2009]. And you’ve also got the Fairtrade websites about boycotting all the sweatshop labels and stuff like that.

While both normal and ethical consumption is enabled by the internet for this group, Social Networking has taken over in terms of its time-share from e-mail, games and Messenger, which they grew up with:

Patrick: Actually that’s true, I would use it...I use a number of websites for I don’t know...how would you classify it, as in religious websites but not community issues so more so like theology and things like that, this must sound really boring...[.]

Mujid: That’s better than Facebook, mate!

Patrick: That’s the other half of my time...[(laughter all round) so I use it for that, yes I do, yeah, I must admit I do.
None of them claim to be producers or up-loaders, although one of them has uploaded an article about identity, and another has contributed to various civic and technical forums, usually to take apart what he considers to be mistaken viewpoints or information. They all use Wikipedia, and have some understanding of its drawbacks as well as uses.

*Facebook* is clearly perceived as a must-have aspect of all their social lives. In addition to the fifty or so ‘friends’ who are also Muslim youth volunteers, all of them have fairly extensive circles of online friends who are also offline friends, and of online friends who are offline acquaintances. The varying degrees to which they use and join political groups, sign petitions online or use political and religious iconography on Facebook depends on the nature of their beliefs about themselves in relation to others – Hameed is ‘I’ll tell everyone what I think, they’ll have to take it or if they don’t like it, tough’ and Mujid is ‘I’m circumspect about which causes I support online and I tend not to pass on petitions because my friends are all different and might get offended by some of the things, it might get sticky’. This feeling that one has to ‘manage’ one’s profile in a circumspect manner is more evident in this than in many of the other groups, and might reflect anxieties about other people’s perceptions of their ambivalent position vis-à-vis British identity. Friendship groups online tend not to be as ethnically or religiously homogeneous for this group as they are for some of the other focus groups, and this means that, for instance, some of them might balk at passing on certain petitions to ‘all friends’ or at posting certain kinds of political information to their profiles.

Nevertheless, it is in this group that I hear most about how useful – or even ‘hip’ – politics has become on Facebook in some circles. All the recent protests against the latest Israeli incursion in Gaza have been mobilised more effectively via Facebook, with young people changing their profile picture to a Palestinian flag or putting messages about protests in their status message, thus encouraging others to do the same. As soon as it becomes ‘acceptable’ to be for or against a political or civic cause or to show passionate engagement online, the number of young people doing so rises dramatically. There is some debate in this group about whether this reflects a) actual greater levels of engagement, b) merely a fad, which will die away as soon as TV news interest in Palestine lessens, or c) is the expression in online form of already existing engagement in issues of social justice.

5.4 Used for right and leftwing political campaigning and mobilisation, checking out the opposition and finding alternative news to mass media

**Students’ Union Activists:** Their comments about how the social network site Facebook was used by rightwing student activists to orchestrate support for the ‘no’ campaign in relation to students’ union democracy are highly instructive.

**Katie:** The [referendum over students democracy] was brought in to the union …because they’ve got this concept called open meetings where if someone comes and talks to me and says ‘please can you bring this up for me on the assembly’ then I go and bring it up, as if I’m an MP, it’s meaningless and it’s just so authoritarian…[they say] that students who have jobs or students that have children or postgraduates or people that are busy can’t attend student meetings so its not fair to have them but you have more likelihood of walking past a referendum and ticking a box…[But] I want someone to think ‘actually I’m not going to go to my lecture because there’s a really, really important student meeting that I need to attend’ … when you do have a referendum you just become like another passive voter, you’re just a ticker of boxes rather than someone who actively goes to a meeting, actively looks around them, sees all these people and goes ‘wow this is what my Union’s about; look at all these other people and look at what we can decide together and collectively decide to take action on anything we want’….and also it kind of just channels people into the idea that democracy is just one kind of thing and that you’re going to go on and vote for your MP and then you forget about it, you’re not interested because they’ll do whatever in your name.
Aneesa: But this is an example of where Facebook was a bit of a bizarre phenomenon….I was like ‘look just ignore it it’s just Facebook’ but actually I really regret saying that because they absolutely used it against the pro-democracy voters.

Katie: …shit video…

Aneesa: They tagged people…you know you can tag photos, they tagged all of their mates in these photos they came up on everyone’s profile and all these things…[…]

Katie: Anything that is a cynical argument is so much easier to get over on the internet, because you don’t have to explain the nuances or subtleties of why something doesn’t work, you can just say a really reactionary statement and that’s it….

Aneesa: […] They do understand once you talk [face-to-face] but it’s like you have to get the nuances through and you just can’t do it on Facebook very clearly.

Katie: […] So Facebook is dangerous almost.

This group express the opinion that that young people with anti-authoritarian politics have more elaborated and extended arguments to make about democratic processes and hence do not come off well online in the quick ‘sound-bite’ world of social network sites. However, it was their feeling, and there was some debate between the three of them about this, that ultimately they would have to engage with social networking in their campaigning. They would need to campaign online, despite their preference for face-to-face contact, leafleting, meetings and debates, which they feel reaches people – particularly working class people – that the internet cannot.

Mark: This referendum has been a really good eye opener for me about how the internet works because yeah, their ‘No’ campaign was based on the internet, they mobilised from the internet and have a look, there were people making comments at 4 in the morning to debate. As a person who’s busy out campaigning doing … a job, I’ve got things to do…you can’t keep [doing that]…we’re going to have to discuss … how we’re going to deal with [the internet] because we can’t be sitting on a computer all night, constantly debating all these people online, you know what I mean. […]

Moderator: What would your strategy be then?

Mark: Because I always feel like blogs sometimes are not real in a sense because they’re not accountable and … you need to define social relations a bit in the real world, so it’s very easy to sit in front of a computer, get a screen come up with an argument and you can look at it, try and debate it, try and skewer it, quickly go online, check a couple of facts, whereas I always feel like real democracy in real life is based on being up there debating like what a student meeting was, you have to combat an argument quickly, face-to-face.

Katie: Yeah but we know there’s so many people that would like go to the ballot box and they’d be like ‘oh, do you know how you’re voting?’ and they’d be like ‘yeah I’m voting ‘no’ to student rights, I saw it on Facebook’. Because we’re [left wing and rightwing activists] the only ones who engage with the Union, this is what this system does, only we know how it works and get anything out of it, everyone else does just sit and the way they relate to their union is through the shitty Facebook page and so when they see these things …so we can’t just rely on the corridor because no longer is that the playing field, it’s been pushed away and marginalised.

Moderator: And yet you’re saying that people like to have the real community, people like to have the real communication, but they obviously…

Aneesa: I think the reality is people want both…having the internet at home, having a computer at home, having the facilities and the experience and the knowledge to be able to make videos and stuff like they did, you have to be quite middle class.

It becomes evident that these young people’s motivation for using the internet for political purposes is related to the ways in which it is being used by others who oppose their ideals rather than by their own feeling that it is a hugely useful and democratic medium.

Again, speaking about the opposition rather than their own cause, the Young Farmers were immediately interested by the Hunt Saboteurs website which we surveyed for WP6 and showed them, and agreed that checking out the ostensible opposition is a valuable possibility allowed by the internet. Both pairs looking at websites talked about how serviceable the not very attractive websites of hunt supporters and hunt saboteurs were for putting across ideological points of view, and all the young farmers said that many websites would simply turn them off by having gimmicks or ‘silliness’ on them like...
a picture of a famous footballer (football was despised in this group, whose sports were generally angling, hunting or none at all due to time) or a government minister (whom they despised). One implication of the things said in this group is that most civic websites' default target appear to be urban youth and organisations draw their iconography from the concerns of a specific subsection of (middleclass) urban young people.

5.5 Used for civic sharing, the promotion of alternative lifestyles and anti-capitalist politics

All the young people in the Alternative Musicians’ Collective group are active both online and offline and both for sociable and civic purposes. Websites and social networks (both commercial and alternative), both online and offline, are used by them for mobilising support for civic and political action and this is acknowledged repeatedly by all of them. My Space was the initial place used for promoting their collective and for gaining support for their civic initiatives in the music scene. They now use the internet for the alternative economy of music – young alternative bands – even those younger than fifteen, records burned by them of this music to get out of the loop of the big production companies and A and R people, cheap available venues and free promotion would not be possible without My Space, email, Facebook, messenger, texting, and now their newly (and altruistically) designed website; self promotion, DIY music culture, uploading, sampling and the consumption of alternative music are also made possible for the network of youth who use their website. However, the offline and online actions of their group are intimately related, and offline does appear to precede online:

Dan: We were only 14 when we first started the band. When we first started actually putting our own gigs on was about a year or two after because the first couple of gigs we played were like pay to play things where you get a certain amount of tickets and if you sold enough of them then you might get some money back at the end of the day. Whereas we didn’t really like that so we just thought that we’d get bands and […]

Woe: When we actually decided that we were going to become a collective and try and start a label and all these other crazy ideas that we once had and never really came into fruition, I think that was when we were about 17/18. And then Lowell who’s not here and me and him both did the same degree so that kind of helped it develop. And then it’s always been kind of an open thing where it’s not really a set number of people involved so whoever wants to get involved can and so there’s been different people through the years who’ve been involved in it, but always like the core of four or five.

Moderator: Keeping the collective together, what does that require of you now in terms of work and resources?

Dan: Just making sure we’ve always got another event to work towards and make sure there’s always another thing that’s going to keep Mind On Fire in people’s heads, which people don’t forget.

Rita: And lose direction.

Woe: I think the website will really help because we put on such diverse types of music and we never really had any sort of proper branding or logo, all that artwork has been totally different for every single event that we’ve done. Which has always been part of the point…

Dan: Getting people’s artwork out as well as the music.

Woe: But it meant that we were always starting from scratch with each event whereas now with the website at least with each event we’ve got somewhere to direct people so they can find out about the next thing we’re doing …

Rita: It’s all changed now isn’t it, like there is an idea of a brand, there is an idea …the website is the branding…

Having just helped to build their own, this group have a lot to offer in terms of advice when looking at civic websites, coining the terms – ‘Fit to purpose’ or ‘Try too Hard’ – which suggest firstly that even a small site, which is constructed with less money, can suit a particular organisation or campaign because it does what they need it to; but that some attempt to reach the youth audience too obviously and thus end up
compromising – style over content – and look like they are straining to communicate ideas, hence ‘try too hard’.

6. Conclusions

Politics
Young participants frequently reference big events that brought them personally into ‘politics’ with a small ‘p’ and also then either retained their interest or disillusioned them in some measure – The War against Iraq and the war against Afghanistan: ‘One million in the streets and the government did not listen’. The Anti-Hunting legislation and Tony Blair’s response to the countryside march: ‘we wear badges with his face on it and a line through his face’; Hearing politicians and big companies lie blatantly on TV and seeing the media not question this: ‘recent banking scandals’. Police brutality and impossibility of citizens changing either the political reality or complaining about police harassment and violence against demonstrators and against young people in specific demographic groups – anti war marches, pro-Palestine rallies, Northern Irish Catholic youth defying curfew. The lack of change in social realities of segregation and violence even after the Good Friday Agreement was cited by the Northern Irish participants. More traditionally political students of both left and right dispositions also showed an aversion to the hypocrisy of the state: ‘We (sic) went into Iraq, why don’t we go into Zimbabwe? Or Syria?’; while some leftwing youth talked in terms of disavowing the traditions of their state: ‘why would I want to identify as British – is there anywhere we haven’t attacked, colonised or harmed?’ In a small number of the groups, the need to maintain the definition of politics as being about the despised or elite realms of voting, politicians, political parties and government meant that all other group activities were characterised as ‘civic’ or ‘local’ or social.

Class and Social Capital
The importance of particular family experiences – eviction, police raids, single parent families and poverty, parental support, educated-professional parents, watching and reading news and discussing with parents – in forming current trajectories is absolutely paramount. The importance of school and university education in either confirming or counteracting disillusionment with government and police because of class-related experiences of discrimination is also clear. Changing voting patterns between generations are most distinct in relation to class. Key teachers/youth workers have an exceptionally strong impact on the horizons and aspirations of economically and socially deprived youth.

Efficacy
There emerges a clear sense of the need to stay engaged with historical and political events and with local communities and online networks, despite the frequently expressed lack of belief in their ability to change/challenge big business and the corrupt state. The sense of efficacy is lowest in the poorest/ most disadvantaged communities and highest amongst those who have taken the most civic and political action (activists/civic collectives/volunteers) rather than amongst those with highest education or news viewing. Achievements in group or community settings, rather than age is far more related to sense of self and role in civic or political action. Thus the young mayoral advisors who are fifteen have more belief in their ability to impact national democratic processes than many of the 22 year olds in the Facebook users group or the Young Farmers’ Group.

Democracy
While not all the young people mentioned this, many brought up the word ‘democracy’ spontaneously, and discussed it amongst themselves with passion and strongly
opposing views. For some it means: a belief in networks, egalitarian policies, communism as an ideal but not a lived reality, the need to challenge the current status quo, internationalism as an alternative, anti-colonialism, and the potential to have active challenge. For some, it means just voting and leaving everything else to the politicians, whatever one may think of the policies. For a few, they were not sure, they hadn’t thought about it, but seemed to take for granted that the system in the UK works better than other systems elsewhere. A fairly low value was awarded overall to voting, on the basis that most politicians are corrupt, self-centred, liars, unreliable, untrustworthy, removed from reality, biased against young people, ‘playing games’, etc, etc and that one might vote but could not control or influence what happens after that. The need for continued influence (following an election) over the democratic process was seen as being key to its success and to their sustained involvement; but almost everyone in every group where this issue came up expressed the belief that after gaining citizens’ votes politicians ceased to listen to their constituents in a meaningful way.

**Old Media**
Television was by far the most popular medium of entertainment amongst all the groups, although there was a small but vocal minority of young people who rejected it completely and had made a decision not to watch it at all. Newspapers are mainly read free or accessed online, and that too by the young people with most spare time and the most historical or traditional political interest. Radio plays a key role in passing the time in rural Hampshire and in the Northern Irish sample. The hypothesis advanced by some of the studies on political socialisation analysed in the state of the art literature review WP5, that there is a strong correlation between news viewing/ newspaper reading and political activity proves to be untrue when looking more closely at the testimonies of young people across this sample. There is doubtless a connection between staying informed of current events and historical events and expressions of political interest. However, many of the most politically and civically active of the young people, as well as those with the most clear critiques of government, were not those who remained most informed via traditional news media, but those who developed alternative networks – either online or offline – those who felt a strong sense of injustice over a particular issue, those who had taken the initiative organising civic and political campaigns or voluntary activity and those who had felt success in these areas.

**Trust**
Saliently, looking across the evidence from the young people in this piece of research, the common linkage made between trust in traditional political institutions and youth civic engagement is proved to be untenable. While the opposite was not quite the case in this UK sample, the majority of the civic and political engagement mentioned and discussed by the young people was deeply intertwined with or even arose from an avowed distrust of politicians and the mainstream media, concerns with the way democracy functions in their locality, nationally or globally. In most of the cases cited, this distrust was not simply knee-jerk or rhetorical but was supported by detailed and immediate or historical examples, especially in the cases where participants were facing overt discrimination, such as the Young Farmers, the Northern Irish Catholic young men, the Black teenagers in Moss Side, and so on.

**Citizenship and Identity**
Feelings of Europeanness and Britishness was often introduced by me as moderator because unlike issues related to national and local politics, Europe did not come up naturally in groups but were then debated extensively and spontaneously by the groups – what makes one proud (i.e. Empire, Industrial revolution) makes the others ashamed. The wish to be identified with locality/city – Manchester/Lewisham/Belfast but not with the UK, dislike and distrust of the British state and of its colonial past and aggressive warmongering present cut across many of the groups, as did pride in
Britain and British history, a sense of Britain against Europe and of the 'Island' nature of the UK. Distrust of the notion of the recession and the credit crunch – used by the state to control people, ‘make them feel vulnerable so there will be even less protest and questioning of foreign policy’ was brought up on several occasions. Intriguingly, while all the young Muslim volunteers felt more British than European, most of the other leftwing young people felt European or world citizens and wanted to disavow British identity, which they associated with racism, colonialism and oppression.

Websites and Social Networks
The importance of social networks (both commercial and alternative) both online and offline for mobilising support for civic and political action is acknowledged repeatedly by young people in the Young Muslim Volunteers group; the Students Union Activists Group; and the Medical Students; the importance of the internet for ‘staying informed’ and for ‘finding out about the enemy’ and ‘about alternatives’ and for checking facts is also acknowledged. A sense of having to protect some aspects of one’s offline political identity from exposure online was also shown by some, especially those not within traditional left politics with diverse social circles offline but strongly held socialist or internationalist views.

The internet for the promotion of alternative life-styles
At one end of a spectrum, some young people use the internet for the alternative economy of music – alternative (unfunded/new) bands, records, venues and promotion would not be possible without My Space, email, Facebook, texting, and promotional websites; self promotion, DIY music culture, uploading, sampling and the consumption of alternative music is also made possible by these extended online network. But the production-related uses of the internet are far more rare than the promotional uses (political identity and the promotion of events: Facebook groups, blogs, fan clubs based on religion or ethnicity). In the case of (alternative) music subcultures and of identity-based collectives the word ‘lifestyle’ has got to be understood very differently from the way it is used in glossy magazines and in academic literature about individualisation. Many of the choices discussed by focus group members about which groups they felt affiliated to online were strong expressions of collectivity

Civic Websites
‘Fit to purpose’ or ‘Try too Hard’ – even a small site, which is produced with a relatively smaller budget, can suit a particular organisation or campaign; some attempt to reach the youth audience in too many ways and thus end up compromising – placing style over content. ‘Checking out the Enemy’ versus ‘Preaching to the converted’ was something offered by the Medical students, as was ‘don’t like it’s ‘sound-biteyness’ and ‘misleading statistics’. There is no point in trying to find a design that will appeal to all young people: although many prefer to have less text on the homepage, most do not want to be ‘underestimated’ or ‘patronised’ by being drawn in with ‘silly pointless games’. Games are games, civic websites are civic websites, as one person remarked. They do, however, appreciate links to Bebo, Facebook, MySpace and You Tube, enjoy video content as well as express a desire to read further on issues that catch their interest, such as a particular technical or political issue, a social scene or event or an argument or idea. They suggest that linking to further content is very important for them and also that having the option for taking part (not just in online polls) spurs most to read on.

Interactivity
Most young people still appear to read/view content than to make and upload content. Motivation for production and contribution needs to be really clear. Forums are still the most common places for the contribution of user content but civic messages are not just left on civic forums but apparently more commonly on leisure, music and entertainment forums, sport websites, Facebook, etc. Not all interactivity is benign –
‘destroying ones enemies rhetorically’; ‘pointing out stupidity and tearing it to pieces’ were given as reasons by some for interactive postings in forums and to blogs, and others feel put off and intimidated at the thought of being attacked for something they have said. Anonymous interactivity is still preferred to named posting. Facebook can be used cynically and simplistically to discourage offline civic action, to bully or ‘out’ politically opposing factions. In this sample of focus groups, a small minority make and upload video or audio content; an even smaller minority of that minority do this for civic rather than entertainment or skills purposes, unless it is the rationale of the organisation they belong to, to do this, as in the case of the Alternative Musicians Collective. User control, and the ability to navigate around easily, to understand where you were at a glance and to switch off unwanted functions was rated very highly by everyone.

Intergenerational relationships and generational importance

There was no sense from any of the participants that older adults – parents, teachers, lecturers, youth workers, older siblings, religious leaders, other carers etc – had ceased to play an important role in their lives offline or in the formation and inflecting of their concerns, values, politics and attitudes. Fathers and mothers were referenced repeatedly as being sources of political or social knowledge and opinions, as were teachers and youth workers on occasion. While most mistrusted or criticised one or other of these groups of adults for being too controlling or not available enough or not well enough informed or too dogmatic about young people, there were always some older adults referenced as having assisted in getting them to the positions and beliefs they now hold. Only in one case, that of the young men in Northern Ireland, did the young men’s everyday lives involve very little contact with authority figures who were not from their peer-group, and even these young men talked about uncles and grandparents, mothers and older siblings as having shaped and contributed to some of their values but not to their ‘getting into trouble’. On the internet, however, virtually none of the young people in these focus groups had any contact with people outside their peer-group/age range and several of the younger ones were shy or uncomfortable about the thought of online cross-generational contact, particularly because of the scares around online predation.

Cross-cutting findings and implications about civic participation and the internet

While some young people spoke of their despondence on finding that participation in civic bodies like schools’ councils led to no change but allowed school authorities to say they had ‘consulted students’ others confirmed that ‘seeing change happen’ either locally or globally in response to civic actions by themselves and others was one of the largest motivators to continued action.

The fact that a negative attitude towards social and political activists of all ages by the media and state puts young people off from actively participating was one of the most consistent revelations in focus groups.

A sense of being chastised for taking action against a government policy, of being subjected to surveillance, either sporadically or on a regular basis when in groups, and of being afraid to provoke animosity from the police or authorities because of the ways in which one could be hurt or branded in response was variously discussed by six of the groups. Some expressed anxiety even of criticising government policies asking if this would be considered ‘treason’. Others recounted experiences in which their active citizenship either online or offline had incurred derision and labelling (hate tirades from counter-campaigners; sanctions by school or college authorities) or open violence (from police) against their persons.
Contrary to the belief that young people do not participate because they are uninterested in politics, apathetic or completely cynical, these accounts suggest an equally worrying fact: projecting outwards from accounts given in this sample, it appears to be the case that in the UK today a number of young people do not participate, despite a wish to, because they are frightened of the consequences of active participation and dissent. This anxiety – about the potential difficulties of being perceived as having strong political views – can be seen in online forums governed by youth organisations as well as in the posts to civic websites. If indeed this is the case, then the UK is not alone in this situation. As Starr and colleagues argue in their ‘socio-legal analysis’ of the US situation:

Rather than opposing government repression, too many organizations work to reinforce a hard line between legal and illegal political activities… expending extensive resources in “careful wording” which they believe will keep them safe. This conceptual framework simply does not correspond with scholarship on surveillance, which documents a long and continuing history of targeting of non-criminal organizations on the basis of their political ideas. Lack of clarity about who is targeted for surveillance has led to a rationalization of repression, taking the form of blaming young people for their repression (particularly for “provoking” police actions at protests... Rationalization collaborates with the creeping criminalization of dissent and political activity. (Starr et al. 2008: 266)

In these circumstances, the importance of documenting and raising awareness about the ways in which young people’s civic and political critiques and activism (online but primarily offline) have been and are derided, ignored or punished by governments, the mainstream media and educational authorities across the EU partner countries is evident. It is also necessary to understand the effects that this dissuasion from active citizenship of particular types has on future engagement with democracy. It is equally important to document the successes of civic and political interventions, groups, causes and initiatives, and to educate young people about the links between the present and the historical achievements of other civic and political movements. This connection is currently not something that is addressed by the curriculum in most schools or colleges.

In relation to the internet, websites and social networks, some young people in more organised groups (students, for instance), collectives or the voluntary sector already use the internet for civic purposes on a daily basis. For them it is an important source of alternative information, a repository for ideas and a context in which to perform political identity alongside other social identities. This very rarely includes the creation and posting of civic content and is almost always linked to face-to-face (local) initiatives and/or pre-existing intergenerational worldviews.

For a small minority of young people in the UK living in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances the internet is currently all but irrelevant as a civic tool although it could easily become useful for education or leisure. These young people do exist across the UK, despite hype about ubiquitous access, and the current UK civic web does little or nothing to include them in the public sphere. As things stand, therefore, much more can be gained by funding local traditionally civic initiatives such as youth workers and youth centres as well as free internet access at libraries, than by setting up expensive civic websites to give them a ‘voice’. It is also most important to base all civic and political inclusion initiatives on actual discussions with these young people.

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37 Even MuslimYouth.net, analysed in Deliverable 6, 13 and 14, has to remind posters that posts discussing violent civic action might be taken down, while even mild forms of youth dissent such as swearing are not allowed on other forums.

people in care, in disadvantaged families or unstable housing conditions than on attempts to second guess their concerns.

One finding evident from all the focus groups is that a high level of experience, literacy, confidence and sense of personal efficacy is needed for young people to make and post their own civic and/or political content on the internet. The ones most likely to do this, and to be and remain involved in both online and offline organisations, are those who have large amounts of social capital gained through experiences of offline volunteering, socially-orientated peer-networks (for instance religious or political ones) and/or economic advantage and education.

While a sense of injustice about global political situations such as the occupation of Palestine motivates some young people, most are more keenly aware of specific local issues than international ones. There seems, therefore, to be a need for civic and political organisations working online on international social justice issues to co-operate and link to each other, and to spell out very clearly what can be gained by participation in them, rather than to compete for young people’s attention with by building ever more flashy branded websites.

Music forms a hub for numerous youth civic initiatives, and the internet is at the centre of these: from Facebook and My Space groups advertising free music or protesting various bylaws and bans, to young musicians’ collectives such as the one discussed here posting demo songs and organising venues.

Among those young people already active in political organisations such as traditional political parties, advocacy groups or voluntary organisations, there is a complex range of uses of and feelings about the internet as a means of political and civic participation. For some, the opposition (in one case rightwing student activists of various tendencies; in another, the anti-hunting lobby) are perceived as having co-opted new technology in pursuit of ideological causes; therefore, in order to compete, they will have to engage with it at some level. Practically this is not an endorsement of the internet’s democratic potential for young people. It is merely an acknowledgement that it can be used by either side in an ideological argument to further their ideas, and that serious campaigners might pay the penalty of ignoring the internet.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group constituents</th>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Gender, ethnicity and size of group</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequent Facebook users</td>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>3 women, White British; 1 woman British-Asian; 2 men, White British</td>
<td>Un-transcribed - notes</td>
<td>Pilot, testing questions, strategies etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Students/net generation in Small town England – boys group</td>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>6 young men – all White British</td>
<td>Too many voices - difficulty distinguishing who said what on transcript</td>
<td>'Average teens’ – small town UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Students/net generation in Small town England – girls group</td>
<td>16-18</td>
<td>3 young women, all White British</td>
<td></td>
<td>'Average teens’ small town UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Medical Students</td>
<td>20-22</td>
<td>2 White British men; 1 Arabic-British Man</td>
<td>Offered equally to female students – chose not to take part</td>
<td>Young people who would be interested in traditional media and politics – powerful, highly educated, high income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Mayor of Lewisham Candidates and Advisors</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1 White boy of European descent; 1 mixed race boy of African-American and Scottish descent</td>
<td>Several did not turn up for coincidental personal issues</td>
<td>Younger young people participating in an interesting local government youth initiative both on and offline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Farmers and Hunt Supporters</td>
<td>17-24</td>
<td>3 young men, White English; 1 young woman, White English</td>
<td>Twp researchers present, group split into two pairs to look at websites</td>
<td>Rural Youth in local civic organisations – Hunt Supporters Ball committee, Young Farmers and Commons association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Alternative Musicians' Collective</td>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>1 Roma Gypsy-Scottish woman, 2 White British Men</td>
<td></td>
<td>The collective has been active promoting musicians on My Space and has just launched its website – civic action both online and offline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Volunteers at Young Muslim Help-site</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>4 young men – 1 white convert, 3 British-Asian parents from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Ireland</td>
<td>Shift patterns determined who was in the group – young women volunteers were all working at the time; no time for looking at sites</td>
<td>Volunteers, ethnic minority youth working with online organisation – intensely active online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Students using free internet at a community youth library</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2 girls, African-Caribbean, 1 African-Caribbean-British boy (3 other girls present and commenting but comments not included because no permission/too young)</td>
<td>There were three other young people using the computers in the room during the fg, two fifteen year old girls and an eleven year old. No permission so their comments are not included in transcript</td>
<td>Young people from most deprived communities/areas using free internet at libraries/projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students' Union Activists/Activists Students</td>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>1 White British Woman, 1 Mixed race (British-Arabic) woman, 1 White British Man</td>
<td>Ad hoc group, volunteered for Fg.</td>
<td>Intensely active young people in offline students' issues and political causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Men Just out of Prison, Belfast</td>
<td>19-25</td>
<td>6 White Northern Irish young men, one Protestant, Five Catholics</td>
<td>Included the youth worker in the focus group as he was drawn into discussion</td>
<td>Excluded young people unlikely to have internet access</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Fredrik Miegel and Tobias Olsson

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this part of our CivicWeb research has been to focus on young people’s uses and perceptions of the internet. The ambition has been to explore the ideas about and views of the internet that different socio-cultural groups of young users (and non users) have. The most important ambition, however, has been to account for the ways in which the internet is used (and not used) as a civic resource among young people across our European partner countries.

These ambitions have been materialised via focus group interviews conducted in each of the seven participating countries. When approaching this phase of the research project, we also took into account several concerns that arose in previous work packages. These concerns have informed all partners’ selections of focus groups, their design of interview guides, and their interpretations of data. Hence, the outcomes of the focus group interviews are, to a large extent, products that make use of knowledge produced throughout the entire research project.

The previous sections within this report have already presented the country specific outcomes of the focus groups. In all of these sections there have also been concluding discussions aimed at describing and analysing the main conclusions arising from the different national contexts. In general, these conclusions have been extensively informed by the various specificities within different partner countries. To be sure, this is also intellectually necessary, as the different partner countries vary heavily in terms of for instance political and civic traditions as well as in terms of degrees of internet access and literacy among young people.

This conclusion, however, has the ambition to have a look at these data from a more overarching perspective. In order to take on this mission we have divided the concluding section into three different but interrelated subsections. The first part of the discussion, ‘Young people’s views and uses of the internet: general themes and issues across the national reports’, outlines key points from the data already presented in the national reports. Here we present a general discussion on young people and their use and view of the internet. The two subsections following from this one aim to give the empirical results a more theoretical spin, firstly by looking more closely at what part the internet seems to play in young people’s civic engagement and participation and – secondly – by discussing more generally what civic and/or political engagement and participation might mean to young people in today’s late modern political landscape.

Young people’s views and uses of the internet: General themes and issues across the national reports

• The internet appears to be a naturalised part of many young people’s everyday life

Our seven different selections of focus groups have mainly included young people who have a great deal of experience in internet use, and who also are able to make use of the internet in ways that they find useful and/or enjoyable. Basically, the internet appears to be accessible in most places across Europe and, to a greater or lesser extent, for most young people across our European selection.

Furthermore, the internet appears to have lost the final parts of its air of novelty among most young people in this European sample. Instead, it appears to be a very much
naturalised and even mundane part of young people’s everyday lives around Europe. For instance, the internet has quite obviously found its way into young peoples’ everyday environments of ‘old’ and/or ‘traditional’ media – internet use has gained its place there among other kinds of media activities. In general, using the internet does not seem to be of any bigger excitement to young people today than watching TV or reading a newspaper.

Looking across the European CivicWeb focus group data it would be difficult to make any strong claims about a digital divide among young people, not least since our selections of focus groups also aimed to cover a wide variety of categories of young people – from rich to poor, from politically active to politically uninterested, from well educated to lesser educated young people – but tended to concentrate on those with some internet access. Nevertheless, our data also contain some interesting exceptions, contexts in which internet use hardly qualifies to be called a naturalised part of everyday life.

- Social factors are important influences for how the internet gets used

Looking across the different national reports they also make it necessary to stress the great importance of various socio-economic factors in determining how the internet gets used by young people. In some national reports, for instance the Hungarian one, this is brought to specific attention, where level of education appears to be a strong determining factor in shaping young people’s internet use. There are, of course, other important factors, such as family background, ethnic identity and political interest. (Some of these will be dealt with more specifically below). These factors are also paid attention and dealt with within the different national reports.

- Many young users have a critical reflexivity vis-à-vis the internet as a medium

Reading through all the national reports it becomes obvious that most young people included in the focus groups across Europe have developed some degree of critical reflexivity vis-à-vis the internet as a medium. Young users in our sample certainly seem to have moved beyond the rather naïve internet hype from the early years of the millennium and the latter parts of the 1990s.

In most of the national reports this is an implicit dimension (with the Slovenian national report as a notable exception, that pays explicit heed to this kind of reflexivity), which mainly shines through in the users’ discourses about the internet as a medium, or in their comparisons between the internet and other media. When discussing the internet as a medium the users present opinions like ‘you cannot really trust your sources on the internet’, ‘the internet is not that good for discussions as they quite often become very heated’, ‘on the internet your actions are easily monitored’, or ‘it’s better to meet face-to-face than to discuss things on the internet’. When comparing the internet to other media the users in our samples sometimes point to newspapers as more reliable sources of information.

At first glance these comments might appear as merely a general ‘internet negative’-attitude. However, looking beyond the surface of these focus group discussions, it seems more accurate to understand them as indicators of a critical reflexivity concerning the internet. Young people are aware of the fact that there are a lot of potential problems connected to the internet. Still, however, they are also equally quick to point out the many benefits of using it.
Some important internet practices among European youth: educational use, solving everyday matters, communicating with friends and family, consuming news online

From an overarching perspective there are a number of internet practices that seem to recur in all national reports and in close to all individual focus groups. These practices are similar on a generic level – they have to do with the same things – even though the specificities around them, as well as the specific applications or tools utilised, vary greatly.

Since we are dealing with young people here, it is not surprising but important to mention that a fairly large share of the participants’ internet use seems to have its background in some kind of educational context. Looking across the different national reports we find a practice such as searching for information for school or university tasks to be an important part of young people’s everyday internet practices. Another important practice among young people is, of course, also the use of the internet for solving all kinds of everyday practicalities.

As such, the internet appears to have been shaped into an almost natural part of young people’s everyday lives. It therefore comes as no surprise that a large share of their internet use, across Europe, can be summarised under the heading ‘communicating with friends and family’. Furthermore, communication with friends and family also appears to be part of the backbone of their internet use – variants on ‘communication’ are mentioned within all focus groups as they discuss what the internet means to them. The applications for communication via the internet vary, however, and tools such as MSN instant messenger, e-mail and Facebook are very frequently mentioned as important tools in this respect.

Another important and frequent internet practice among young people, as it appears through our focus groups, is the use of the internet for news comparison, gathering and consumption. Through the internet the participants get instant and continuous news updates.

Web 2.0 – a reality check

During the last couple of years the discourse around the so called Web 2.0 has been quick to identify new possibilities in the ‘new’ and increasingly more interactive web. Applications like (we)blogs, communities such as My Space, You Tube, or Facebook together with various wiki-applications have been interpreted as forerunners of the next, more interactive and user generated internet era. One fundamental ingredient within this new internet era is the internet users’ willingness (and capability) to participate as producers (or perhaps rather ‘prod-users’). Basically, the Web 2.0 discourses are frequently centred on ideas about users acting as producers, or at least active content contributors.

In light of this salient discourse within the research field it has been especially relevant for us to pay some extra attention to ways in which young people (all over Europe) interpret and make use of possibilities brought about by ‘Web 2.0’. Looking across all national reports it becomes obvious that at least one part of the internet that often is affiliated with 2.0-discourse, Facebook, has managed to really reach young people in their everyday lives. Through the use of Facebook a large share of our focus group participants keep in touch with their friends and family and in some cases it is also utilised for political mobilisation. On an overarching level, however, these latter cases are exceptions when it comes to young people’s use of Facebook.
Other typical Web 2.0-applications, such as content sharing platforms (You Tube, Flikr) and blogs, are also used among our focus groups participants, at least to some extent. In these cases they are however mainly using these applications to view content produced and/or uploaded by others rather than as producers and/or active contributors of content. The active bloggers that have been included in our selections of groups were deliberately selected in that role and as such they do produce content. But judging from our overall focus group data there are not that many active bloggers hiding out there among young people in Europe.

The internet and young people’s civic engagement and participation

When examining CivicWeb’s focus group data from a more theoretical point of departure and, more specifically, analysing civic dimensions in young peoples’ internet use, a number of points appear especially relevant:

• The internet is an important tool for already engaged young people

The different national reports make it obvious that all kinds of internet applications have been shaped into important resources for young peoples’ civic and/or political engagement. In focus groups with young citizens who are already active the internet is constantly presented as a ‘hub’ for political activities, or as an important ‘node’ for civic activities and encounters. A closer look at these data suggests that the internet is understood both as a) a tool for internal coordination within various civic/political organisations and/or networks and as b) a resource for external information to and communication with surrounding society. Furthermore, our data reveals a number of examples of how networks of social actors use the internet for mobilisation around specific tasks or issues.

The applications used for these practices vary. E-mails are frequently mentioned as an important resource for internal coordination whereas websites often appear to be looked upon as important parts of an organisation’s external self presentation. In some cases, blogs are also used for such purposes. In a few of the focus groups Facebook, and more specifically Facebook groups, are mentioned as tools useful for mobilisation.

With very few, if any, exceptions these various internet tools are applied as means to offline ends. That is, the various internet tools are only to a very small extent related to purely online civic activities, but are rather turned into online tools for offline aims.

Looking across our huge sample of focus groups we find these patterns in a lot of different kinds of political and/or civic organisations. The internet appears to be an important tool for groups as diverse as political party youth organisations, various kinds of already established activist networks (local, national, European and international), and for communities of civic interest.

• The internet is an important resource for minorities (political, ethnic)

It is worth noting the special attraction that the internet seems to have for all kinds of minority groups when it comes to civic and/or political action. In this respect, all of the aspects mentioned above about the internet as an important tool for civic and/or political activities are relevant but the ‘minority’ factor puts yet another spin on them. Looked upon from this point of departure, the internet appears to be a resource for both alternative political organisations and diverse ethnic minorities with civic agendas and ambitions (like the Roma in the Hungarian national report). The internet’s open
architecture – the fact that it opens up spaces for voices to be heard and for people to ‘meet’ and interact – provides a base for these groups, and for their exploration of issues related to social status, culture and identity, in ways that the traditional media landscape has been unable or unwilling to do.

• The internet as a public sphere for young people

The internet opens up spaces for public, or at least semi-public, discussions between young people, and between young people and older adults. Looking at our focus group data it is, however, important not to overrate the significance of these discussions – not all young people who use the internet enthusiastically participate in such civic discussions and the ones who do participate most often do so rather sporadically. Nevertheless there are a large number of examples in our data of young people describing their participation in various online discussions – such online participation is covered in all national reports and in various focus groups.

The civic ‘quality’ of these discussions varies extensively according to our data. Sometimes, some respondents argue, these discussions turn into communicative and forward-looking exchanges, but just as often the discussions turn overheated and are not found to be very productive.

• No cases of attractive websites inspiring civic engagement and participation…

Looking at our focus group data, from all over Europe, there is one really interesting thing missing – cases where a specific website per se (through for instance its interactive attractiveness and/or good design) made young people become engaged. The fact that such cases are missing in our focus groups data is significant in the respect that it counters a familiar and often repeated line of thought, that it is by amusing and entertaining young people (on the internet as well as elsewhere) that you can catch their attention and make them civically or politically engaged.

This is not to say that the internet per se is unimportant. Our data and the analyses of them certainly suggest the opposite – it can be immensely important for civic engagement and participation. Instead, this suggests the need to stay away from making simplified assumptions about the internet (or specific websites and their particular designs) as automatic triggers for civic engagement and participation. The internet interplays with young people’s civic engagement, motivation and participation in far more subtle and complex ways.

• …but some cases of internet practices inspiring civic engagement and participation

Despite the lack of any simple cause and effect relationships between specific websites and young people’s civic engagement, we do find a number of interesting ways in which the internet does inspire civic engagement: we have found examples of how young people’s everyday internet practices inspire such engagement. For example, in our focus group data this kind of internet-inspired engagement is connected to 1) file sharing issues, and 2) issues concerning the threat of surveillance of internet practices.

In the first case the civic engagement grows out of the fact that the internet makes a lot of copyrighted material available for ‘free’ downloading. For many young people this has become an opportunity to download music, TV-serials, and movies – this has even become an integral part of many young peoples’ everyday internet activities. This
practise is, however, obviously illegal, and during the last couple of years, as the downloading has increased, the entertainment industry has reinforced its measures to combat downloading practices. This has spurred a heated debate between, on the one hand, the entertainment industry (claiming its legal rights) and, on the other hand, young people who have become used to downloading through the internet for free. Starting in Sweden but spreading throughout Europe we now see the growth of what might be referred to as a piracy movement of activists arguing for a new, updated copyright law. In our focus groups we do not specifically cover such activists, but we certainly see that a large number of our participants have become at least indirectly involved in and engaged by this issue.

The second case, issues concerning surveillance, is quite sometimes (but not exclusively) connected to everyday life practices of file sharing among young people; surveillance is in this respect a concrete threat towards file sharing practices (not least due to the European Union’s strong laws in this area). Issues concerning surveillance also engage young people. This becomes especially obvious as the theme appears within focus groups whose general civic and/or political engagement is rather weak – they might not have a general civic and/or political engagement, but issues concerning the threat of surveillance make them engaged. Similarly, state interference in internet practices via censorship (such as described in the Turkish report) leads to civic disaffection and unrest amongst young people, but not necessarily action.

Civic and/or political engagement among young people in the late modern political landscape

What general conclusions regarding young Europeans’ civic and political interest and engagement are there to draw from the 71 focus group interviews from seven different countries constituting the empirical data of this work package? The nature of the sample and the method used in this study do of course not allow us to make any quantitative generalisations outside the material as such. The focus groups were strategically chosen and the young individuals included in them purposefully picked in order to get an as varied a set of civic and political engagements as well as, in several countries of those who are educationally or socially disadvantaged and disengaged, as possible. Consequently, some of the opinions and attitudes that the respondents gave voice to during the interviews were not only expected but also deliberately sought. The data is thus not intended to represent anything but itself.

The intention of this conclusion is therefore not to answer the question implied in its title in a strict sense, but rather to give an overarching picture of what kind of civic and political engagement the interviewees from seven different countries, with diverse habits of internet use and various expected degrees of engagement in a range of civic and/or political issues actually describe. We have also tried to identify some general trends or characteristics across both the seven national studies constituting this report and the various types of civic and political engagement accounted for in the various focus groups. The tendencies we identify and the generalisations we make here thus refer to the participants of the focus groups only and not to all youth from each of these countries.

Keeping this methodological proviso in mind, we can identify some interesting and quite distinct general trends and tendencies running through the material.

Beginning with the perhaps most evident of these general findings, we can conclude that there is very little in the interview responses that suggests that any particular
internet content or specific websites as such ignite civic or political interest. On the contrary, the civic and political interest and engagement appear, in most cases, to precede the internet and be rooted in other and more long-term circumstances in the socio-cultural circumstances, life histories and experiences of the individuals.

Classical sociological factors such as class (e.g. the Turkish Sinevler group and the British Young Men out of Prison group), ethnicity (e.g. the Hungarian Zhoriben Roma group, the Spanish JERC group and the Slovenian CONA group), religion (e.g. the British Young Muslim Volunteers), gender (e.g. the Spanish Casal Lambda-group and the Swedish Young Feminist group) and education (e.g. the Slovenian Novo mesto student union group and the Turkish Bilgi University group) highlight possible explanations for the interviewees’ rationalisations of the degree and nature of their civic and political interest and engagement that might be less visible in groups where participants are from majority ethnic groups and from middle-class families.

As discussed in the previous sub-section, this is however not to say that the internet is insignificant or lacks impact on young Europeans’ inclination to get actively involved in societal matters of importance to them, but rather that the relationship between the internet and civic engagement isn’t univocal and one-directional but complex and multifaceted. Far from being imagined as a solitary saviour for an alleged decline in young peoples’ political interest, the internet and its civic potential is conceived by the young included in this study fundamentally as one useful tool among other more or less effective means for advancing certain specific ends.

The only significant exception to the aforementioned state of affairs presented in our material is the growing interest and engagement in the politics of file sharing and related (internet) surveillance issues, which indeed do originate from the internet rather than enabling action or ideas that originate offline. The explanation for this exception is however simple since these issues are direct consequences of the possibilities offered by the internet. On the one hand, to share limitless amounts of digital material (copyrighted as well as legal) without paying and, on the other, the panoptic threat of being constantly monitored and surveilled when online.

The second general theme appearing in the focus groups is related to the apparent absence of a direct internet effect on the interviewees’ inclinations to civic and political engagement. It deals with what kind of civic and political issues actually do attract and motivate the young Europeans who participated in our study. The main thread here is easily distinguished in all the national samples and it implies, simply put, that the intensity of the political and/or civic interest, engagement and involvement radiates with gradually and rapidly decreasing strength from the personal sphere outwards to national and international issues.

Broadly speaking proximity, both in the geographical sense of the word and in terms of personal relevance for the individuals’ actual life circumstances, appears to be the most decisive factor motivating the young people in our sample to engage in civic and political matters. The lifestyle and identity related political questions the young people included in the present study are engaged in come in a wide variety of shapes and forms, but have as a common characteristic their foundations in the circumstances of their everyday lives. Being of immediate relevance to the current life situation of the person is thus also a key factor in explaining which particular issues he or she decides to engage in actively.

Given the age group studied, a number of the interviewees are of course students in one form of educational institution or another and, not surprisingly, involvement in educational matters and school-related issues were frequent among them. The Hungarian girls engaging in protests against the takeover of their school by the
Web-based Civic Participation Among Young People in Europe

Catholic Church and its planned development into a boy school are obviously civically committed to a question of significant personal consequences for them. Likewise, the Spanish and Slovenian students engaged in preventing the implementation of the Bologna model for higher education are acting on an issue with a direct impact on what they do.

In a similar vein, what might called lifestyle choices and leisure interests can spur civic and political engagement. This is for instance the case when young British hunt supporters engage in protests against the anti-hunting legislation in defence of a right to pursue their hunting lifestyle and to preserve an old tradition, or when young female Swedish abstainers engage in the temperance movement to work for an alcohol-free culture. In both cases the engagement is rooted in what they most likely consider as important aspects of their own everyday lives.

Also the widespread and increasing engagement in the opposition towards legislation preventing illegal file sharing of copyrighted material and towards increasing surveillance of the Internet in order to identify the file sharers can be conceived of predominantly as motivated by reasons of personal lifestyle choices or leisure interests. In this connection we can mention that, especially among young people, the increasingly successful Swedish Pirate Party, dedicated entirely to these ‘new’ political issues, legitimises its political position by dressing it in a classical (liberal) ideological rhetoric of the right and freedom of speech, the protection and sanctity of privacy, and the equal and universal right to information and culture. Now, this anchoring of the rights of file-sharing and of not being monitored while doing it in a traditional political/ideological superstructure of fundamental human rights, is not made by any of the young persons in our sample. On the contrary, they are concerned about such matters rather because they have a direct impact on their own everyday (Internet) lives and practices. So, not even this emerging new political field contradicts in any substantial way the most essential of the general features discernable in the empirical material this study draws. Regardless of the attempts to make file sharing into a fundamental human rights issue, for most ordinary ‘file sharers’ it is (still) a threat against their personal habits and their own integrity they are concerned about.

Yet another significant set of personal experiences and circumstances motivating the interviewees to civic and political engagement may be summarised by the concept identity by affiliation, i.e. the individual’s sense of association or identification with a group or category of people with which one is sharing a particular characteristic, be it ethnicity, faith, gender, sexuality or something else. Engagement based on identity by affiliation occurs frequently in the interviews. The concern among the Roma minority in Hungary with the anti-Roma sentiments and violence currently hitting them is an obvious example of an ethnically based civic/political engagement. The civic engagement of the people working with gay and lesbian issues in for instance the Spanish Casal Lamda organisation, and the Young Feminist group in Sweden base their engagement at least partly on gender and/or sexual identity. In a similar vein, the Young Muslim Volunteers in Britain builds on a religious affiliation and the civic engagement of the blind youngsters of the ONCE organisation on a shared handicap.

This kind of identity-based political/civic engagement based on what we have called current life situation, lifestyle choices and leisure interests, and identity by affiliation accounts for a significant portion of the social engagement expressed in not only in the group discussions with people strategically picked because of their interest and participation in such issues, but by interviewees from all kinds of focus groups.

Next to issues directly related to the individuals themselves, engagement in various kinds of civic and political matters of local or municipal character is the most common field of civic activity among the interviewees. On the one hand, this engagement takes
place in the form of actual participation in municipal politics, as is the case with the
participants of the Swedish Ungilund and the related Youth parliament project or the
British local Youth Mayoral advisors. The Hungarian group involved in the production
and publishing of an independent local monthly paper exemplifies another kind of local
civic participation. Besides such structured and organised involvement in local affairs,
several of the focus group participants also expressed interest in more or less
particular local issues of importance to them, regarding for instance the broadening of a
street used by school children, negative media representations of particular districts,
the establishing of more night clubs, creating a wider range of cultural activities for the
young, and so on.

The proximity factor mentioned above is obviously relevant also for explaining the
inclination to political and civic engagement in local or municipal matters, but when
moving further away from the personal/local sphere, the civic and political topics
attracting engagement or interest among the interviewees also gets much more scarce
and scattered.

There are, however, a few interesting examples of engagement in regional issues of
importance to some particular groups represented in the study. Interestingly, also this
engagement is connected to the cultural identities of the interviewees. The members of
JERC, a youth organisation wanting independence of Catalonia from Spain, the
Slovenes interested and/or engaged in the Croatia/ Slovenia border conflict, and the
Belfast group taking pride in an Irish identity and hating most things ‘British’ are the
most obvious cases of regional civic involvement present in the interviews.

Interest and engagement in traditional national party politics were not often expressed
amongst the interviewees in most focus groups, although there was a greater degree of
knowledge about traditional party politics. With a few individual exceptions, it was the
members of the focus groups selected because of their explicit interest in traditional
politics who are engaged in traditional national party politics, e.g. principally members
of the youth sections of established political parties. There is, however, another
interesting observation to make in connection with this issue. Several of the focus
group participants identify ‘the political’ with traditional party politics, and there is also a
widespread tendency among them to voice a strong scepticism, contempt, mistrust and
disbelief in traditional party politics and in politicians. In many cases, particularly in the
British focus groups, this scepticism was supported by evidence from young people’s
own experiences of community politics and politicians.

When it comes to the interest in international questions and global affairs, several
participants in the focus groups did express an interest in such matters and some of
them were also actively engaged in international Non Governmental Organisations
(NGOs) and charities like Amnesty International and the Red Cross. A number had
also taken part in demonstrations against the war in Iraq and expressed strong
opinions on this topic. More common than active participation in civic and political
issues at an international level, however, were general expressions of interest and
concern regarding global issues such as global warming and other environmental
matters.

To sum up briefly, most participants’ civic or political participation, motivation and
engagement begins in an offline sphere. Almost all examples of online civic activity in
our focus groups are related to, begin and/or end, offline. The internet can, however,
be used as a really useful tool, a resource, a venue for or facilitator of civic action and
civic or political networks in cases where young people are already engaged and
occasionally as a starting point for engagement in its own right.