Project no. 028357

Project acronym: CIVICWEB

Project title: Young People, the Internet and Civic Participation

Instrument: STREP

Thematic Priority: Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Based Society

D17 Report: Synthesis of Results and Policy Outcomes

Due date of deliverable: 15.10.2009

Actual submission date: 31.10.2009

Start date of project: 1.09.2006

Duration: 3 years

Organisation name of lead contractor for this deliverable:

Institute of Education, University of London

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CivicWeb
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REPORT: SYNTHESIS OF RESULTS AND POLICY OUTCOMES

This Work Package was coordinated and the report written by Shakuntala Banaji, Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, Institute of Education, London; David Buckingham, Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, Institute of Education, London; Liesbet van Zoonen, University of Loughborough and Fadi Hirzalla, ASCOR, Netherlands.

Although we have authored this report, the findings discussed here are the collective work of our seven teams of researchers in the UK, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Hungary, Spain, Turkey and Sweden. All the reports referred to are available in full for download from www.civicweb.eu

Language editing across the report was carried out by Shakuntala Banaji, Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, Institute of Education, University of London.

We would like to thank the European Union, the civic and political web producers in our seven countries who participated in our research and all the young people whose insights and input in focus groups and online made the research interesting and fruitful.
CONTENTS

Executive Summary and policy recommendations .......................................................... 4

1. CONTEXT, FOCUS, AIMS AND METHODS ................................................................. 7
   1.1 Summary .................................................................................................................. 7
   1.2 Context ..................................................................................................................... 8
   1.3 Focus ....................................................................................................................... 10
   1.4 Aims ....................................................................................................................... 15
   1.5 Methods ............................................................................................................... 16

2 SUMMARY OF THE KEY FINDINGS OF THE MAIN WORK PACKAGES ...................... 19
   2.1 The Online Civic Landscape for Youth in Europe: The Content and Design of Youth
        Civic Websites ....................................................................................................... 19
   2.2 The Production of Civic Websites in Europe .......................................................... 37
   2.3 Civic Uses of the Internet by European Youth ......................................................... 46
   2.4 Young People’s Views on Civic Websites and Civic Participation ......................... 54

3. CROSS-CUTTING CONCLUSIONS ................................................................................ 62
   3.1 Young People and the Online Civic Sphere in Europe ............................................. 62
   3.2 Motivating Civic and Political Participation ........................................................... 63
   3.3 Using the Internet Wisely: Suggestions for Civic Producers .................................... 65
   3.4 Civic Life Online: A Brave New World? ................................................................. 66
   3.5 The significance of history, proximity and national context ...................................... 67
   3.6 Doing Politics Online in Europe ............................................................................. 68
   3.7 Conclusion: Challenges for Research, Policy and Practice .................................... 69

Appendix 1: List of Reports .............................................................................................. 77
Executive Summary and policy recommendations

• **The potential of the internet.** Policy-makers and practitioners in this area should recognize the considerable potential of the internet in terms of connecting with the new forms of civic and political culture and orientation that are emerging among young people. However, they need to beware of an over-optimistic or utopian approach: the use of networked technologies is not inherently democratic, nor does it automatically have democratic consequences.

• **Engaging the disengaged.** Our research suggests that the internet can be a valuable tool for young people who are already engaged in civic and political activity. However, policy-makers and practitioners should beware of assuming that the internet will be a very effective means of engaging young people who are currently disengaged and/or excluded: different means are required for such young people. There is a danger that the use of technology may reinforce inequalities between those who are included and those who are not. Consequently funding for offline projects in this area must be balanced against that for online ventures.

• **Online and offline.** Even for those who are already engaged in civic action, online provision needs to be connected with offline activities, and related to concerns and issues that young people are experiencing in their everyday lives. Our research suggests that the most engaging online content is that which relates to issues arising in the local neighbourhood or community, or to aspects of ‘identity politics’.

• **Engagement with political power.** Young people need opportunities to interact with each other online, but they also need opportunities to engage directly with those in power, to have their concerns and opinions heard and listened to, and to receive recognition and response. Our research suggests that young people’s civic and political participation and action, like that of adults, is not always viewed positively by figures of authority and those in positions of social power: in some cases it is even censored or punished. Policy-makers and civic educators need to encourage adults in positions of power to engage in more constructive forms of dialogue with young people.

• **The diversity of young people.** Young people across Europe and Turkey are a diverse and stratified group cross-cut by age, region, ethnic origin, language, social class, gender, religion and sexual orientation. The mode of address and language on civic websites aimed at young people in general needs to take into account the diversity of young people, rather than aiming for a ‘one size fits all’ standard which potentially includes only the most highly educated young people or those already predisposed to participate, or those who are most attuned to the use of technology.

• **Making one’s presence known.** Unless a website has grown organically from a widespread grassroots organization or issue-based campaign, it is unlikely that the site will be well known amongst its target users. In the information saturated web environment, becoming known is not simply a matter of building a website and expecting young people to stumble upon it via search engines. Therefore, funding also needs to be directed in a balanced manner towards publicity: via mutual agreements with other websites; in other media; and offline, at events and through face-to-face contact.
• **Staffing and employment.** According to our research and the findings of the Renewed Social Agenda, young people between the ages of 15 and 25 are amongst the most poorly paid and insecure sections of the workforce in Europe. Young people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds need to do paid work in order to survive in their day-to-day lives. By planning websites that can only thrive on the unpaid labour of young volunteers, civic organisations may sometimes be contributing further to the participation divide between young people of different classes. Funders in this field should therefore build in remuneration for those young people unable to contribute time for free but who wish to contribute to the civic sector.

• **Expenditure.** Civic and political organisations using the internet need to think carefully about how they spend their money in this area. Large, expensive websites with multiple interactive features may appear impressive to funders, but may not be effective or necessary to fulfill their civic or political aims. Sites need to be assessed in terms of whether they are ‘fit to purpose’.

• **Use of interactive features.** The use of interactive features does not automatically guarantee that interaction will occur. Where such websites do use complex interactive features and digital tools, the skills and knowledge necessary to use such features productively should not be assumed on the part of the audience but need to be built into the site. This might be via explanations of internet terminology such as RSS Feeds or podcasting as well as user-friendly tutorials.

• **Enabling participation.** While many young people across Europe do use the internet on a daily basis for entertainment and information purposes, many of these young people do not necessarily create or upload original content. Funding needs to be directed, not just at the design and production of sites, but also at ongoing maintenance and content creation. Discussions on forums need to be moderated and nurtured.

• **Citizenship education.** Our research also has implications for practitioners involved in formal civic education. Citizenship education in secondary/ high schools needs to move beyond teaching about the structures of democratic society, governance and processes of voting. Active participation in local decision making and debate should be central to the curriculum from a young age and encourage genuinely open debate, critique and divergence of views. Schools and informal education centres should also ensure that their own institutional processes are democratic and effective if they are to act as a model for successful participation.

• **Citizenship education, media and digital literacy.** Citizenship education must be actively linked to media education and the development of digital literacies. This means that digital literacy needs to move beyond the more mechanical skills of technological competence and information retrieval, and incorporate both critical and participatory skills. Digital literacy should also include wider debates on data protection, privacy and commercialisation especially in relation to new communication technologies. This applies equally to adults as to youth.

• **Intergenerational and collective action.** Our research suggests that young people are actively involved in building organisations, movements and communities
alongside people of other generations, whether online or offline. The assumption that civic participation is a largely individual skill or practice needs to be rethought in light of this. Policies aimed at encouraging participation should be based on the notion of collective rather than individual action; these policies should also take into account the civic learning that occurs when generations work together.
1. CONTEXT, FOCUS, AIMS AND METHODS

1.1 Summary

Over the past two decades, there has been widespread concern across Europe, and in many other industrialised countries, about an apparent decline in civic and political participation. Commentators point to long-term reductions in voting rates, declining levels of trust in politicians and waning interest in civic affairs; and this is frequently seen as evidence of a broader crisis in democracy. These characteristics are generally seen to be most apparent among the young: it is often asserted that young people are increasingly apathetic and reluctant to exercise their civic responsibilities. In this context, some have looked to new media – and particularly the internet – as a means of re-engaging young people and thereby of revitalising civic life. The internet is seen to have greater appeal and relevance for young people than ‘older’ forms of civic participation; and to have the potential for creating new, networked forms of communication and democratic political culture.

CivicWeb was a three-year research project funded under the European Commission’s Framework 6 programme for targeted socio-economic research. It sought to put these latter arguments to the test by analysing the potential contribution of the internet to promoting civic engagement and participation among young people (aged 15-25). It took a broad view of the internet, but focused specifically on the range of youth-oriented civic sites now emerging on the web. These sites are created by many different organisations, interest groups and individuals; and they range from small-scale, local initiatives to national and international projects.

The research used both quantitative and qualitative methods, and focused on three key dimensions of this new online civic sphere:

- the nature and characteristics of such sites, in terms of their content and formal features (design, mode of address, structure), and the extent to which they invite active participation among their users;
- the production of the sites, including the motivations, working practices and economic models of the producers;
- the uses and interpretations made of such sites by different social groups of young people, and the relationship between this online activity and their civic participation ‘offline’.

Potentially, these sites constitute a powerful form of non-formal learning: they can promote the development of social capital, and create new forms of political, social and economic participation. Yet their effectiveness in doing so generally depends on the ‘offline’ social and political context in which they are situated. Our research has therefore explored the different ways in which the civic potential of the internet varies across the different political cultures of seven European member states or applicant nations: Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK. In so doing, we aim to identify some of the issues and dilemmas that are faced by practitioners and policy-makers in relevant fields, and to understand some of the key characteristics of good practice.
1.2 Context

There has been widespread concern expressed across Europe – and indeed throughout the industrialised world – about the apparent crisis in modern democracy. The proportions of people voting in local and national elections are in long-term decline; citizens’ levels of interest in, and knowledge about, social and political affairs are waning; and levels of trust and confidence in politicians and in the political system are at an all-time low. However, this crisis is not simply about the relationship between citizens and the formal political system. For many commentators, these phenomena reflect a broader decline in ‘social capital’ – in the forms of knowledge and skill that are developed through participation in informal public associations and networks (Coleman, 1998; Fahmy, 2006; Galston, 2004; Mindich, 2005; Putnam, 2000; Sloam, 2007). Civic cultures – which are broader than political cultures – and the processes on which they depend (the public sharing of information, the creation of community, the commitment to rational debate) are now seen to be in serious decline. While these developments are more apparent in some countries than others, this is a European-wide issue that needs to be addressed at a European level (Bynner et al., 1997; Instituto di Ricerca, 2001).

These problems are often seen to apply particularly to young people (for recent overviews, see Bennett, 2008; Dahlgren, 2007; Goma, 2002; Loader, 2007). A good deal of research appears to show that young people are less interested in social and political issues, less knowledgeable about them, less trusting of traditional forms of public authority, and less likely to be actively engaged in civic participation than adults. There is some evidence to suggest that this is a ‘cohort effect’ rather than simply an effect of age differences, and that it has been subject to a long-term decline over several decades. Furthermore, young people are often seen to be to blame for this situation: the problem is typically constructed as one of ‘apathy’ (or even laziness) on their part. Alternatively, the blame is placed on the forms of entertainment media or consumer culture that are particularly popular with the young; although here again, young people are typically seen as too vulnerable or too lacking in critical ability to resist such influences.

However, some commentators argue that the problem is quite the opposite: it is not so much that young people have abandoned civil society, but rather that social and political elites have abandoned – or even positively excluded – young people. Furthermore, such arguments about the decline of civic culture tend to rest on a traditional understanding of what counts as civic or political practice, which may not be relevant to younger generations. Research suggests that some young people can in fact be very passionately engaged in particular campaigns or in community-based issues, even if they feel alienated by conventional forms of political discourse; and that their level of civic engagement depends very much on the opportunities they are given to participate in public life. In general, however, it appears that most young people are engaged not by the ‘macro’ politics of politicians and political parties, seen by them to be dominated by older generations and outdated cultural modes, but by the ‘micro’ politics of everyday life, or of ‘single-issue’ campaigns. From this perspective, then, the problem is more to do with the perceived lack of relevance of mainstream national politics to young people’s everyday interests and concerns (Buckingham, 2000).

These developments could be seen as symptomatic of a failure in socialisation, and hence in intergenerational relations. It could be argued that the means by which young people come
to see themselves as functioning citizens have been weakened or dislocated to the point where many no longer see themselves as having any investment in civic culture, now or in the future. This debate thus raises much broader questions about the changing social constructions of youth, and the changing forms of socialisation that are seen as characteristic of contemporary democracies (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Wyn and White, 2007). Many social theorists suggest that contemporary life-courses are more differentiated and heterogeneous than in earlier times: life transitions are prolonged or delayed, and life narratives are accordingly becoming more fragmented. Young people are born into a globalised consumer culture in which the resources for identity formation have proliferated, and social roles and expectations (as defined, for example, by occupational careers or religious identifications) are no longer so clearly mapped out. In this context, social theorists suggest, they have to engage more actively in a form of self-driven ‘identity work’ - variously labelled ‘self-socialisation’ or ‘reflexivity’ – which is characterised by diversity, fluidity and an emphasis on ‘weak ties’ in personal relationships rather than obedience to strong authority figures (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Vinken, 2004). The shift towards a more personalised or localised ‘micro-politics’ might therefore seen as characteristic of the period that is variously labelled ‘the risk society’, ‘late modernity’ or ‘postmodernity’.

One key dimension of these changes has been the fundamental shift in the nature of knowledge production and dissemination, not least as a result of the advent of digital media (Haken, 2003). New forms of knowledge production are seen to provide new opportunities for social organisation and identity formation; and this has contributed to a situation in which the existing forms of authority invested in social and political elites are more open to challenge. Again, it is not unreasonable to expect that such developments will be particularly apparent among young people who have grown up in this changing environment. Thus, research suggests that young people are increasingly sceptical about the obligation to inform themselves (for example via the news media) in the way that is associated by their parents’ generation with the role of the ‘dutiful citizen’; and that this is part of a more general rejection of traditional forms of authority, and of conventional notions of citizenship (Bennett, 2008). For young people, it is argued, the focus is now on more individualised or privatised responses to changing social circumstances. The minority of young people who are interested in taking social or civic action tend to favour protests of various kinds, political consumerism, ‘lifestyle politics’, and a focus on local or sectional issues – an approach which is sometimes called ‘DIY’ (do-it-yourself) politics (Gartside, 1998). Likewise, it is argued, young people prefer to gather information ‘on the fly’, from a range of sources, and in less formal ways than those that tend to be favoured by mainstream media (Katz, 1993).

In terms of politics and civic culture, this new situation therefore requires new strategies. Political parties alarmed at falling membership figures and declining levels of trust in politicians have tended to opt for institutional responses such as devolution, a greater emphasis on marketing and public relations, and the creation of new institutions such as ‘youth parliaments’. However, critics have suggested that such responses are merely cosmetic. The crisis of democracy will, it is argued, require a more radical re-thinking of the meaning of politics – and of civic participation more broadly (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Corner and Pels, 2003; van Zoonen, 2004).

New media – and particularly the internet – have often been seen to provide a potential solution in this respect. According to their advocates, new media offer possibilities for citizens to make their voices heard, to contribute autonomously to public debates, and to
play a more active part in the political process. The internet is seen to offer a form of ‘networked citizenship’ that will be more inclusive and more participatory than the passive, dutiful citizenship of the past. This, it is argued, may be particularly relevant for the ‘socially excluded’, who have effectively been left behind by mainstream political discourse. And these arguments are frequently applied to the so-called ‘digital generation’ of young people who are apparently developing new forms of global political consciousness and activity as a result of their use of new media (Tapscott, 2008). Far from dumbing down and disengaging young people, these new media are seen as politically and personally empowering: they enable young people to become the agents or authors of civic action rather than merely the objects of adult interventions.

However, the evidence for such claims is quite limited. There is a danger here of romanticising young people’s relationship with new media, and the political dimensions of their everyday interests and concerns. It is possible that young people are developing new forms of politics or civic culture, which involve new ‘informal’ modes of participation, civic education and collective action; and that the definition of what counts as ‘civic’ or ‘political’ may be changing. However, we need to be wary of making unduly simple distinctions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ in this respect. Furthermore, there has been little evidence thus far that the internet is an effective means of engaging those who are socially excluded, or of giving marginalised groups access to significant social power (Dahlgren, 2003; Gibson et al., 2003). More disturbingly, it has also proved to be a valuable resource for groups whose interests are distinctly anti-democratic, such as those seeking to promote xenophobic violence and religious sectarianism.

Several empirical questions need to be critically addressed here, therefore. Can the internet in fact deliver on this promise of re-engaging young people in the public sphere, and of creating new forms of political and civic culture among young people? How far does participation online result in greater participation offline, in the field of civic culture? Are some kinds of young people (for example, as defined in terms of social class, gender, ethnicity, religion or culture) more likely to respond to such invitations than others? Are some groups more likely to stay within more traditional forms of civic participation, or to resist them altogether? What are the obstacles to such new media initiatives? How can we distinguish between good and bad practices in this field? How far does the model of ‘networked citizenship’ actually correspond to the everyday practices and motivations of the majority of young people? Do these virtual networks constitute new forms of civic participation in themselves? And how do these developments vary across the different political cultures of European member states? These are among the questions that CivicWeb has sought to address.

1.3 Focus

CivicWeb focused on the use of the internet as a medium for promoting civic participation among young people across Europe. Each of these elements requires some further definition and elaboration at this point.

1.3.1 The internet
The internet is an ever-changing phenomenon. Since the CivicWeb project was first conceived in 2004, we have seen the emergence of a wide range of new participatory possibilities online, sometimes termed 'social software' and sometimes 'Web 2.0'. For their advocates, these developments have represented a step-change in technology; although others – including the inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee – have questioned whether they are really as novel as is often suggested. In the course of our research, we have inevitably taken account of these changes – for example, the emergence of so-called 'social networking' sites and of new media genres such as blogging. Particularly during the second and third year of the project, we found social networking applications being mentioned more frequently by civic producers and in the project's third year many young people in focus groups spoke at length about their use of social networking sites for social and civic pursuits. Furthermore, some of the research in some partner countries uncovered civic organisations launching social networks aimed at specific groups of young people or people from minorities. However, although we do consider some civic-orientated social networks and refer to others, our textual focus has largely remained on civic websites aimed primarily at young people.

These are, by definition, non-commercial sites created by private individuals, citizens' or public interest groups, governments, NGOs or other non-profit agencies. Such sites cover a range of civic and political activity by and for young people, including areas such as voting, volunteering, local community involvement, identity politics, global issues, tolerance and diversity, equity and activism (cf. Montgomery et al., 2004). The nature and availability of such sites varies across European member states, partly as a reflection of different levels of access to the internet, and partly as a result of differences in national (as well as regional and local) political cultures. These sites are also diverse in form. Some (such as many of those produced by major political parties) are relatively inert, and provide limited interactivity and a more static top-down model of learning, at least beyond the mechanical means of online polls and petitions. By contrast, others make extensive use of the interactive dimensions of the medium, including message boards, chat facilities and even games.

On the face of it, there are good reasons to assume that the use of the internet could have significant effects on civic participation, and that it might at least contribute to new ways of 'doing politics'. If we compare the web as a medium with offline forms (both 'older' media such as newspapers or television, and forms of civic engagement such as voting, attending meetings or demonstrating), several differences are apparent. Some of the most relevant characteristics or 'affordances' in this respect would include:

- **anonymity**: the internet provides opportunities for ‘trying on’ or ‘trying out’ ideas, positions and ‘civic identities’ without the necessity of personal commitment
- **instantaneity**: the internet is significantly quicker than other media in terms of the ability to disseminate, gain feedback and update information on a regular basis
- **accessibility**: at least for the growing majority with access to the technology, the internet is significantly cheaper and more accessible on an everyday basis than many other media
- **ongoing involvement**: ease of accessibility permits regular ongoing involvement and dialogue, as compared with the episodic or sporadic nature of most other forms of civic participation
• **disintermediation**: in many (though not all) contexts, access to the internet is not controlled by ‘gatekeepers’ or other intermediaries, allowing more direct access by users

• **equality**: at least in principle, the internet is an egalitarian medium, in which all participants have an equal right to ‘speak’, and there are fewer rules regarding formal requirements for participation

• **abundance**: information on the internet is abundant (some would say too abundant), and the ‘costs of entry’ for producers are significantly lower than in older media such as television

• **deterritorialisation**: the internet allows instant access to information from all around the world, making distant events appear close, and hence offering new possibilities for transnational forms of engagement

• **personalisation**: many of the above characteristics permit users to develop personalised approaches to the medium that will serve their individual motivations and purposes.

These characteristics are certainly debatable, and they do not necessarily apply in all contexts, or to all users. Furthermore, their consequences for civic engagement could be seen as negative as well as positive (Bentivegna, 2002; Rice, 2002). The use of this medium may democratise public debate; but it might equally well be seen to result in superficiality, disrespect for evidence and logical argument, and an incoherent ‘dialogue of the ignorant’ (Keen, 2007). Likewise, the rise of specialist, ‘net savvy’ interest groups might prove empowering for their members; but this could ultimately undermine the legitimacy of more official forms of communication and further dissipate most people’s interest in the political process. The proliferation of information on the web could be seen to promote a diversity of views; but it might equally lead to a chaotic ‘information glut’ that results in alienation on the part of users. The lack of intermediation might allow greater freedom of expression; but concerns about the reliability of information on the internet could lead to a form of cynicism and to faulty decision-making. The internet might be seen to encourage less hierarchical networks, and to promote dialogue; but it also provides a valuable medium for conspiracy theorists and hate groups of various kinds.

Such arguments will undoubtedly continue to rage; but ultimately, they run the risk of a kind of technological determinism, which attributes an overweening power to technology as a force in its own right. There is a tendency here to essentialise technology, making generalised claims about a given medium irrespective of the specific ways in which it is used. Such arguments also typically extrapolate from the analysis of the medium to make assumptions about its effects. By contrast, this project has sought to develop a **socially situated** analysis of the role of media and technology in social life.

**1.3.2 Civic participation**

Civic culture might best be seen as a continuum, ranging from organised public activities and associations of various kinds (which might include groupings based around music, sports or language interests: cf. Putnam, 2000), through what might be termed ‘para-political’ activities (such as campaigns, volunteerism and social activism), to more explicitly ‘political’ activities (including those of political parties). Many religious groups also play an important role in
creating a civic culture based around forms of social action and public debate. As Dahlgren (2003) puts it, “civic” should be understood as a prerequisite for the (democratically) political, a reservoir of the pre- or non-political that becomes actualised at particular moments when politics arises. It is through civic processes – of collective organisation, public debate and social action – that particular issues come to be identified as matters of political concern; and this may be particularly the case for young people, where the notion of what counts as political may be highly porous or flexible. In terms of our research, then, the question is how these sites shape civic consciousness, what values are transmitted and the changing forms of social capital these imply. We take civic engagement to refer to a subjective state of interest, investment or personal commitment, while civic participation is a matter of objective actions of various kinds (including ‘speech acts’).

In light of this broad definition of civic participation, the kinds of sites and activities we have analysed include:

- initiatives on the part of government (including the EU itself), political parties (for example via their youth ‘wings’), NGOs or organised religions to secure greater civic participation
- those based on ‘single-issue’ campaigns, ranging from broad issues (e.g. globalisation, discrimination) to narrower ones (e.g. opposition to hunting, homelessness)
- sites promoting social activity or participation based on religious beliefs
- more open forums, in which young people from particular social groups (e.g. the disabled, refugees, gays and lesbians) come together to define and debate their own agenda of issues
- sites designed for specific ethnic or religious minorities or geographically isolated groups
- sites and message boards based around local campaigns, for example on environmental issues
- sites seeking to promote less overtly ‘political’ forms of participation, such as volunteering and social activism
- transnational sites, addressing members of diasporic communities
- cross-European sites, both ‘official’ sites devised by governments or NGOs targeting young people, and ‘grassroots’ sites devised by young people to address Europe-wide issues
- sites addressing areas that might be seen as problematic, such as those promoting political violence or xenophobic hatred.

Our relatively inclusive categorisation reflects a broader imperative that is implied by our discussion above. In light of broader changes in civic culture, we argue that it is important to take account of young people’s own perceptions of what counts as civic participation, and to beware of narrow definitions. As we have noted, many young people resist the conventional conception of the dutiful citizen, whether or not it is embodied in the formal activities of political parties; and, as Coleman (2004) suggests, some may even regard it as a form of collusion with powerful forces that are not to be trusted. This implies that we need to take a broader view of engagement and participation; although we also need to be wary of extending the definition so far that it encompasses everything (see Serrano and Sampere, 1999).
In some respects, it is possible to regard such sites as manifestations of an online public sphere; and hence it could be argued that the use of such sites could in itself be seen as evidence of engagement in civic culture. From this perspective, active participation in such sites (for example via postings to message boards or more elaborate forms of content creation) – as opposed simply to accessing or reading them – could be seen as an indication of civic engagement in itself. However, our primary interest is in sites that seek to promote participation in online communication, not so much as an end in itself but as a means to promote wider civic participation in the public sphere. Thus, while the central focus of our analysis has been on the production and use of the sites themselves, we are also primarily concerned with the ‘offline’ consequences of online participation.

1.3.3 Young people

‘Youth’ is a flexible category, which is defined in different ways in different contexts. In the interests of clarity, CivicWeb has followed the United Nations definition of youth as encompassing those aged between 15 and 25; although we have also recognised the fact that definitions of youth vary depending on national traditions and political histories, as well as on features of identity such as social class, ethnicity, gender and religious affiliation. This age group is generally seen to represent a key stage in the development of a ‘civic identity’, in which young people begin to define their basic social and political values, and adopt a broader orientation to the public sphere. Many young people in this age group will have grown up with digital technology, and are also the heaviest users of it; and many researchers suggest that they are using these media in more distinctive – as well as more participatory and innovative – ways than the majority of adults (Ito et al, 2009). As we have noted, this age group is also generally seen to be in the forefront of much broader social changes that are characteristic of late modernity.

We regard young people’s civic engagement as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which involves a range of competencies and attributes – which, when taken together, might be seen to comprise a form of ‘civic literacy’. These might include:

- **civic knowledge**: the mastery of specific information and of skills for obtaining, processing and evaluating information
- **civic skills**: including skills of communication, leadership and team-building, organisation, negotiation, reasoning and understanding opposing views
- **civic discourse**: related to the above, this involves a specific mastery of discursive resources, vocabularies and ‘speech genres’ appropriate to civic participation
- **civic attachment**: engagement (and the trust and respect on which it depends) also has an affective dimension, involving emotional connections with others, a sense of belonging and personal investment
- **civic identity**: citizenship depends upon perceiving oneself to be a member of a group (or groups), and hence upon the kinds of ‘identity work’ that characterise this age group.

We return to this notion of ‘civic literacy’ later in this report, not least as it would seem to provide a productive basis for developing educational practices in this field.
At the same time, it is vital to acknowledge that ‘young people’ are not an homogeneous social group. Young people will have different forms of social, educational and cultural capital; and different forms of affiliation and social positioning will be available to them in different social and cultural circumstances. Opportunities for civic participation – and hence the nature of ‘civic literacy’ - will therefore vary according to factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity and religious affiliation; and they also depend upon intergenerational relations, for example with parents, community members and political leaders.

Finally, we also regard civic engagement as something that is gradually acquired through a process of social learning; and the same is true of online communication (van Lieshout, 2001). As such, the development of civic participation is a complex, multi-factorial process, which involves various kinds of formal and informal learning, and needs to be understood in the context of broader social and institutional forces, including social class, gender and ethnicity. The skills for participation are not equally available to all, nor automatically bestowed via one’s use of the technology. We have therefore sought to consider the various ways in which these competencies and attributes are acquired, and to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of the sites in terms of the pedagogy of civic engagement.

1.4 Aims

CivicWeb brought together partners in seven European member states, and focused on the diverse range of civic websites targeted at young people. It addressed three key dimensions of this phenomenon:

- the nature and characteristics of such sites, both in terms of their content and their formal features (design, mode of address, structure)
- the production of the sites, including the motivations, working practices and economic models of the producers
- the uses and interpretations made of such sites by different social groups of young people, and the relationship between this online activity and their civic participation ‘offline’.

In addressing these three aspects, we have sought to:

- identify the conceptual, economic and practical models motivating or constraining producers in the construction of civic websites
- analyse the content, structure and presentation of civic sites, and the extent to which they invite active participation among their users
- explore the variety of uses to which young people put civic websites, and the meanings such sites hold for them
- explore the role of such sites in the construction of young people’s civic identities, paying attention to factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity
- investigate the different modes of participation and activity such sites make possible, or indeed prevent
- assess the relationship between young people’s uses of civic websites and their ‘offline’ civic participation
• analyse the diverse forms such initiatives take in relation to the broader social, cultural and political differences between European member states
• address their implications for practitioners and policy-makers, nationally and Europe-wide.

1.5 Methods

Our research here begins from the recognition that people use media in ways that depend on their social motivations and purposes; and hence that the ‘effects’ of media cannot be abstracted from the broader social context. In this respect, our approach draws on recent work in media sociology and social studies of technology (e.g. Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002). Research in these fields shows that people integrate new media and technologies into the ensemble of their existing media practices, and into the processes and relationships of daily life. While media do possess particular potentialities or ‘affordances’ (of the kind identified in our list above), these will be realised (or not realised) in different ways by different people in different social contexts. In seeking to understand these processes – and hence to address questions about the potential impacts or effectiveness of media – we need to recognise the diversity of social practices of which media form a part.

In addition to researching the users of such sites, however, we believe it is necessary to research the nature of the sites themselves, and to analyse the processes by which they are produced. CivicWeb therefore sought to combine the analysis of three dimensions – producers, texts and ‘audiences’ (cf. du Gay et al, 1997). In media analysis, these dimensions are often considered separately and in isolation from each other. Yet it is increasingly recognised that a full explanation of the power and influence of the media depends upon taking account of each of these dimensions and the complex and dynamic relationships between them.

Research in this field therefore also requires a combination of methods and approaches. CivicWeb has involved both quantitative approaches – for example in the form of surveys of the range of available sites and of their potential users – and qualitative ones – for example in analysing the formal or textual characteristics of the medium, and some of the more complex social-psychological dimensions of users. A more detailed account of the methods used is contained in later sections of the report: what follows here is a brief summary in each of the three areas identified above.

1.5.1 Nature and characteristics of sites

In terms of the analysis of sites themselves, the substantive empirical work of the project began with a descriptive survey of available civic sites produced within each participating country (Deliverable 6). The sample here was obtained through using search engines and following links, as well as interviewing the producers of such sites (see below) and contacting relevant organisations to obtain recommendations. In addition to sites based in each of the partner countries, we paid particular attention to European-wide sites, and to the extent to which nationally-based sites are attempting to ‘Europeanise’ their approach. Sites were categorised in terms of broad areas of content or aims, as well as aspects such as the
extent of youth input, the use of interactive features and user-generated content, the basic structure and organisation of the site, and aspects of visual design. Some limited quantitative analysis was undertaken here, although the main account was descriptive. Given the constantly changing nature of the sites, this aspect of the project was periodically updated, and a separate update report was published towards the very end of the project (Deliverable 7).

This led on to a further qualitative analysis of a range of sites, covering issues of content, design and interactivity (Deliverable 14). The aim here was to provide a more in-depth understanding of the different ways in which issues are represented, and in which users are addressed and invited to participate. We analysed 6-8 sites in depth in each partner country, seeking to compare sites that adopt relatively traditional approaches, both to civic participation and to the Web as a medium, with those that are more innovative. The analysis employed broadly social-semiotic approaches and covered issues relating to content (for example, the framing and representation of social issues), as well as design (for example, the use of visual and verbal dimensions, and the structure of sites), interactivity (the address to users, and the ways in which users are invited to navigate and participate), and genre (for example, the use of different media styles, levels of formality, and so on).

1.5.2 Production of sites

We interviewed producers from a selection of the above sites, including those focusing on local and national issues, as well as areas of civic participation such as politics, social activism, volunteering, and so on (Deliverable 13). We conducted between 12 and 15 interviews in each country with the producers (designers, moderators and ‘web masters’) of these sites, face-to-face, via telephone and online. The interviews covered a range of logistical issues, including the funding models of the sites, editorial control and moderation, the extent and nature of young people’s direct involvement, the marketing or publicising of the site, and the broader combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media in the strategy of the producing organisation. They also explored key questions about: how producers conceptualise their audience, and the constructions and definitions of ‘youth’ that are entailed here; how producers conceptualise the medium, and the specific potentialities or affordances of the web; and how they (and the organisations they represent) conceptualise civic participation.

1.5.3 Uses and interpretations of sites

This aspect of the research included both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. We conducted a large-scale online survey with just over 3,300 young people from the seven partner countries (Deliverable 8). The survey covered factors such as patterns of internet use, expressed expertise in internet use, functions of internet use, and interest and levels of participation in civic sites specifically. These factors were correlated with measures of civic participation and social/political attitudes and activity, for example involvement in formal civic/political organisations, expressed levels of trust in the formal political process, attitudes towards civic participation, and social, political and religious values and beliefs; and with key
demographic variables. The findings here were compared with other recent surveys of internet use and civic participation internationally.

The survey was complemented by qualitative focus group interviews with users and potential users of such sites (Deliverable 16). These included groups chosen to represent specific sub-categories of users (or non-users) as identified in the survey: for example, high-level users of civic sites, those with ‘extreme’ political attitudes or commitments, those who are particularly alienated from civic participation, and so on. Both here and in the survey, we also sought to compare the perspectives of two cohorts within our age span, roughly 15-19 and 20-25. Around 50 young people were interviewed in a number of focus groups or group interviews of 2-8 people in each country. These interviews provided an opportunity for more in-depth investigation of issues such as the nature or potential nature of young people’s engagement with such sites, their responses to their mode of address, structure and design, their perceptions of bias, and the ways in which the sites provided useful resources for learning.

Each of the above areas formed the basis for a separate report (each of which can be found on our website www.civicweb.eu in the reports section). The key findings of these analyses are discussed in the following section; while in Section 3 we look across the different areas of the research and draw out key findings relating to our overarching themes of young people, the internet and civic participation.
2 SUMMARY OF THE KEY FINDINGS OF THE MAIN WORK PACKAGES

2.1 The Online Civic Landscape for Youth in Europe: The Content and Design of Youth Civic Websites

2.1.1 Aims and sample

In order to get an idea of the range of civic websites available to young people in Europe, our initial step was to produce a bird’s eye view of the virtual civic landscape. Each participating country identified 80 websites that could be considered ‘civic’ according to the dimensions outlined in section one of this report, and that were aimed at youth, or contained youth sections. While this may seem a rather straightforward exercise, the differences between the countries already produced a first key insight. The word ‘civic’ proved an obstacle, since it does not have a simple parallel in the language of, for instance, the Netherlands and Slovenia; while in other contexts it has very specific connotations, for instance in Turkey where it denotes any sphere of life not connected to the military or in Hungary where the parallel term is mostly used by conservative political groups. In addition, the participating countries have had quite different trajectories in the development of democracy and civil society, and with respect to Internet access, resulting in widely different amounts of civic activity on the web. In Hungary, for example, it turned out to be hard to find 80 websites that fulfilled the requirements for selection. In the UK, on the other hand, the offer of websites was so enormous that it would have been hard for any selection to do justice to their range and diversity. Nevertheless, a rough categorization of types of websites turned out to be possible, giving a sense of the research material we worked with.

In Table 1 we list the categories in descending order of homogeneity and show how many of them were included in this survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU or EU oriented</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National governments</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political organisations</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious organisations</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International network</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>N=570</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Websites analysed

From the data set, it is clear, first, that there are a number of traditional public actors involved in making websites for young people in Europe and Turkey. These include the EU and national governments, political parties, religious organisations, international networks and charity organisations, many of whom could be labelled representatives of the official public sphere and civil society. Second, by far the most diverse and hard to categorize
websites are those concerned with grassroots and temporary activism, which are often produced as bottom-up efforts by single issue activists or NGOs. In the following sections, we give a further description of the websites in each category, and present one typical website of each category for more in-depth illustration, which is drawn from our report offering detailed analysis of sites (Deliverable 14). While we found considerable diversity in topics, mode of address, style and interactivity, it is nevertheless entirely possible to identify general tendencies and similarities among the 570 websites analysed. These are the principal focus of this report.

2.1.2 EU or EU oriented websites

In this category, we included websites of the EU itself, the Council of Europe and other organisations concerned with European ideals. Possibly the biggest one of these is the European Youth Portal, which aims to give quick and easy access to relevant youth-related information on Europe. Basic information is offered in all the EU languages and the site serves primarily as a hub providing numerous links to other websites. In many other EU oriented websites this role as a repository of data constitutes the main function of the site. The European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy, for instance, developed within the framework of the Partnership Programme between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, is a tool for the implementation of the White Paper on Youth. The site is available in English only and mostly provides information on thematic priorities in the White Paper. On the European Youth Forum, however, slogans such as 'Get involved' and 'Be informed' furthermore underline the purpose of these sites to get European youth connected to the policy and cultural priorities of Europe and the EU. Most such sites address young Europeans as an homogenous group whose differences are mainly seen in terms of language and nationality. On the general sites there is no specific address towards different groups defined in terms of race, gender, religion, class, disability or sexuality. An exception is the All different, All equal campaign site, which has the recognition of diversity as its main focus. The site, organised in partnership with the European Commission and the European Youth Forum, is a reply to the call of the Council of Europe for Diversity, Human Rights and Participation. It is a site opposing racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance, with 42 CEE member states participating. The main site is available in English, but since the campaign has attracted much global attention, some countries, like Turkey, have opened blogs to aid the campaign.

Sites like these, coming out of different kind of European organisations, promote a wide range of issues, such as youth mobility, volunteering and career options in Europe, the European Youth Card, educational and training opportunities, integration, anti-racism or EU citizenship, and all work to integrate youth within the broader European project by, for example, promoting intercultural understanding. The pictures belonging to such sites are those of young and happy European youth, coming together in joyous celebrations and events. These happy images are unlikely to be disturbed or challenged by user interference, since another feature of these sites is their low levels of interactivity; while polling and contact details are generally present on these sites, there is very often little other opportunity for feedback or sharing of comments with other users. An exception is Generation Europe, which aims to provide a network for young Europeans between 19 and 29 to discuss their views on political and social changes in Europe. It contains news pages and discussion
forums on which people can upload their comments and their own news items in six categories: General, Education, Employment, Economy, Politics and Society and Local Point of View. These are regularly updated, and do not seem to be strictly controlled within each theme.

In sum, the European oriented and organised websites can be characterized, with some exceptions, as:

- mostly providing information about a range of issues concerning the European ideal;
- providing few opportunities for online participation or interaction;
- primarily addressing and assuming a young target group that is visualized as happy, healthy and homogeneous.

A typical example of such a site is the one the Centre for European Education and Training Programs of the Turkish government. The explicit aim of the site is to give information about EU education and youth programs. The implied users are primarily youth (18-30 year olds), followed by related policy makers, NGOs, SMEs, teachers and educators. The design of the site is simple and uses trustworthy colours (predominantly blue and white). The main emphasis is on written text and detailed information is provided on all sub-themes. Memorandums, agreements and all official documents are also included as a sign of central authority and trustworthiness. Another sign of the official Turkish state is the dominant presence of Ataturk on the site, portrayed as the heroic leader of the nation. The promotion of education and training programs in EU countries is sustained by Ataturk’s principles and political strategies related to increasing the potential of youth. The structure of the website enables one-way communication from the Turkish government to Turkish youth and leaves very little room for interaction.

Figure 1. Example of a typical EU oriented website
2.1.3 Sites of national and local governments

This category included websites of national and local governments that are aimed specifically at youth. Straightforward as such a definition may seem, it did not apply easily to all participating countries. The Hungarian case was exceptional, for instance, since its government subcontracts the production of its websites to separately funded independent producers. On the other hand, the Spanish government sites were in fact the only sites in the Spanish virtual civic landscape that conspicuously tried to appeal to young people. Nevertheless, the similarities between the sites were relevant and revealing of what national governments consider to be ‘good civic participation’ by young people. To begin with, this expressed itself in the range of similar topics addressed on the websites:

- information about legislation relevant to the young, especially with respect to education, employment and housing;
- campaigns about appropriate behaviour regarding, for instance, safe sex, voting, respect or non-violence;
- guidelines and instructions for civic participation, such as starting an organisation or making a news medium (these topics were especially prominent on local government sites);
- promotion of sport and exercise.

As far as we did find national differences in content, for instance in the prominence of national heritage and culture on these sites, these have to be considered as reflections of national agendas and policies, rather than as indicative of structural differences in the nature of the virtual civic sphere.

The similarities between the sites expressed themselves, secondly, in their mode of address, which was by and large top-down and formal. The governments set the agenda and seek to tell their website visitors what correct modes of action or behaviour are. They are instrumental in providing links to other kinds of information considered necessary for the young to be or become good citizens. In the Netherlands, for instance, the sample included government portals dedicated only to listing such links. Sites mostly offered simple response opportunities, specifically contact details and contact forms. More interactive talk-back opportunities like bulletin boards or forums were rare. The incidental opportunities for participation that were offered on some sites did not seem very popular and attracted few discussants. There was one clear exception to this in the sample, the Spanish YouthNet, a true online participation hub, where young people have the option to post messages, find similarly-minded friends and search in very extensive database of youth associations.

Thus, the combined similarities in topics and mode of address suggest that national governments in the EU generally consider young people as subjects in need of education about important civic issues. The main differences between the sites have to do with their style and design. As most national researchers noticed, these differences were most likely the result of more or less funding being available for a government’s online presence. Turkey, for instance, had just witnessed the launch of an extensive e-government programme, and its government youth sites contained cartoons, games, animations, sound effects and other ‘attractive’ features. The Hungarian sites, on the other hand, which were mostly subcontracted to outside agencies, were considered old-fashioned and dull in design.
Countries with a slightly longer established tradition of e-government had a wider diversity of styles, but almost all of the sites were text heavy, also reflecting the strong emphasis on providing information.

**In sum**, governmental websites aimed at youth in the seven participating countries share, with some exceptions, an implicit definition of good civic participation of the young through:

- a top-down definition and understanding of relevant topics for young citizens;
- a didactic mode of address, positioning the young as in need of civic education;
- an implicit understanding that civic participation means being able to find information;
- the use of different styles and designs to communicate with the young, depending on nationally available expertise and funding for e-government.

A typical example of a governmental site is the one of the Government Office for Youth in Slovenia, which is part of the Ministry of Education and Sport. The most prominent issue that was addressed at the time of the research was the campaign *All different, All equal*. Written text is the most salient mode of communication of the site. That the site is dedicated to youth is only visible in pictures of young people in the banner, who are vividly gesturing to show that they are hearing, seeing and speaking. The homepage is the most diverse, with a range of different contents featured. The organisation of all other pages is linear and there is hardly any usage of possibilities of hypertext. The only exceptions are links that are found in abundance and pdf versions of publications which deal with issues such as education, social exclusion, youth unemployment, violence, and global learning. The website has no interactivity and offers only contact information.

Figure 2. Example of a typical governmental website
2.1.4 Sites of political organisations

This category included websites of youth branches of political parties, and other websites about party and electoral politics especially aimed at young people, such as election campaign sites. Special care was taken to select all sides of the political spectrum in the participating countries. It was clear, in all countries, that the online presence of youth branches of political parties is directly connected to the parent parties, in terms of ideology and issues; differences with the parent party occurred in the mode of address, the visual style and the levels of interactivity offered. In addition, the sites all provide many links to other compatible political organisations at home and abroad, thus enabling their users to immerse themselves in national and international political spheres that are close to their own views. It seems however, from our analysis, that such immersion is much easier for left-wing youth than for centre-oriented or right-wing youth. Despite our efforts to include all sides of the political spectrum, most of the sites we found were located broadly on the left. However, the researchers from Hungary, Slovenia and Spain also noticed strong, well organised interactive or participatory options on the extreme right sites in the sample.

Compared to the EU and government sites, the sites of political organisations are distinct because they offer many roads to offline political participation. Thus, all but one national analysis demonstrated that these websites contain announcements of events, calls for participation, petitions and demonstrations or invitations to conferences, workshops and debates. The exception was Slovenia, where at the time of the research the political websites hardly contained any calls for offline activities, and if they did inform their users of such possibilities it was usually in the form of a news item about a past event. The sites also offer some limited possibilities for online participation: visitors could apply for membership online, or contribute financially through online means. In addition, many sites communicate with their constituencies through newsletters or RSS-feeds. Other possibilities for online participation, such as online petitions, discussions, vary strongly between the countries, with the Hungarian and Slovenian sites in the sample characterized as mostly top-down in their communication with their visitors, and the Dutch sites offering more opportunities for bottom-up online participation than any other type of Dutch website in the sample. In Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK, the presence of online participatory options was more diverse.

With some exceptions, the sites of political organisations were typified as text-heavy with visuals reflecting the political orientation of the sites, and pictures of youth in a meeting or other activity indicating the target community. Design and style differed considerably between and within countries.

The amount of political activity on the web obviously increases at election time. Both Turkey and the Netherlands were in the middle of campaigns when the research was conducted, which produced a number of sites directly aimed at providing young people with news, forums, e-voting and advice about the elections. Of special interest in this context, is the highly interactive Dutch VoteMatch project, aimed at offering voters a rational option to decide whom to vote for. During elections, this website invites the public to answer 30 questions about policy preferences and then identifies the political party that has policies that are closest to the answers. The result is directly reported back to the user. It has dedicated options for young voters and has been so successful in terms of usage that the concept has been exported to numerous other countries in Europe.
In sum, the websites of political organisations aimed at the young are:

- strongly related to the parent organisation and the national and international political sphere;
- mostly located on the left wing of the political spectrum;
- directed to promoting and reporting offline participation;
- offering few or minimal opportunities for online participation (with the exception of the Netherlands), and offering more interactivity during election times
- text heavy.

A typical example of such a website is that of the Dutch Young Socialists. The site briefly introduces the young socialists, highlights news items and refers to a poll, a web shop, a weblog, an “about us” section, lists of activities, information about local branches and links to international sister organisations and events. Next to these main sections, the website has online possibilities for membership, a newsletter and RSS-feed applications. The weblog written by board members offers the only interactive feedback option; other participatory elements are absent. The language used is quite informal and straightforward. White and darkish red are the principal colours of the website (as they are the official colours of the Dutch Labour Party), and the only artistic touch appears in the right frame of the website, where thin grey lines symbolize a loose sketch of an unidentified object.

Figure 3. Typical example of a website of a youth branch of a political party
2.1.5 Sites associated with religion or religious organisations

In this category we included sites made by religious and spiritual groups or organisations, promoting civic activity or participation by young people. Sites from major organised religions were included - Roman Catholicism, Evangelical Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism - as well as sites made by ‘new age’ spiritual groups. Especially with Islam and Judaism, it was sometimes unclear whether the sites could be identified as ‘religious’ or as representing a particular cultural identity, or as both. We nevertheless qualified these as ‘religious’. Furthermore, the sites in our sample qualified both as religion online (with sites representing existing offline religious institutions) and as online religion, with site specifically aimed at enabling the discussion and experience of faith among believers. For example, the Opus Dei website in the Spanish sample can be typified as online religion, while the Muslim Youth Forum in the UK sample would count as religion online.

The sites connected to offline institutions generally promote a range of cultural and religious activities for young people, and share a strong sense of community building and maintenance. The aim, apparently, is to provide young people with virtuous ways to live their lives and spend their leisure time. Thus, in Hungary the Jewish Student Union promoted a summer camp on their website and a Christian news site advertised a gospel concert; in Slovenia and Spain Roman Catholic youth clubs used their sites to invite their visitors to several kinds of scouting activities, and to point their attention to concerts, sports events or arts and language courses. While announcing and promoting similar activities, the UK evangelical sites always added the provision that these activities would be used as a means of ‘spreading God’s word’ and ‘bringing Jesus’ to those who need him. In addition to the leisure activities promoted or organised, many of these sites more generally uphold a virtuous life style for the young, stressing the importance of academic excellence, volunteer and paid work, permanent learning, family life, and so on. Often this combines into an inwardly or individually directed view of civic participation, in which work, volunteer and leisure activities contribute to personal growth and/or the good of one’s personal faith. Articulations of the wider political and social environment were rare on the sites in the sample, unless framed in general worries about ecology, peace and morality. Most of these sites wrap their content in a design and style that denote that the site is aimed at young people: playful and pop culture fonts, bold colours, many pictures, cartoons, informal language, and so on. However, they offer little possibility for online participation or user feedback.

The possibilities for online participation are diametrically different on many of the websites in our sample aimed at young Muslims, especially in the six countries where Islam is a minority religion. A number of sites had been set up following violent events such as 9/11 or the Danish cartoon crisis. They are aimed at providing balanced information about Islam and Muslims, and enabling young European Muslims to meet each other online, discuss, learn and get help. The UK site Muslim Youth seems the quintessential example of this type of religion online: the increasing hostility towards ethnic minority youth in the UK and their sense of political isolation and potential danger led to a rise in telephone calls to the then existing Muslim Youth helpline, and this prompted the launch of a website with wider possibilities for exchange and community building.
In sum, the characteristics of websites of religious organisations and groups in our sample are:

- online religion sites which are hosted by existing offline religious institutions, communicating top-down with their constituencies and containing few interactive options;
- religious and cultural sites which emerged from grassroots initiatives and are aimed at promoting religious and cultural experience and discussion among believers, and thus often use state-of-the-art technology for online participation;
- the promotion of a virtuous lifestyle including work, volunteer and leisure time and religious learning, either framed explicitly in the context of spreading one’s religion, or implicitly as an exercise in building and maintaining one’s community;
- a mode of address and visual style expressing all the informal features of youth culture.

A typical example of a religious website is the Spanish site of the conservative catholic organisation Opus Dei. While the site is not specifically aimed at the young, its visuals feature many young people and children, testifying to its desire to appeal to young people. The site has the usual menu and many illustrations and videos about Opus Dei, its founder and his writings. All the videos have a transcription written in words to make access easier for people with hearing impairments. The site does not have any forums where people can write their opinions, although it is possible to send an e-mail in the section Escríbanos (Write to us) or through the section named Preguntas (Questions) There is a detailed ‘Contact’ section and users can also subscribe to the newsletter. The site makes it easy for people have access to information on the organisation, and to read and contribute opinions that support the Opus Dei mission.

Figure 4. Typical example of a website of a religious organisation trying to include youth.
2.1.6 Sites of international civic networks

In this category we included sites with a presence in more than one country and defining themselves as part of an international campaign. These contained well-known democratic international organisations, such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund, Unicef, Oxfam, or the All Different, All Equal campaign, but also extreme right wing sites of, for instance, the International Blood and Honour movement (Combat 18). The latter sites are easily recognizable because of their typical colour schemes: black, red and white dominate the sites, often with images of flames, and iconography and fonts mainly come from the Nazi period.

In overall contrast to the starkness of the far right sites, the websites for large global organisations such as Generation Why (the Oxfam Youth site, now defunct), Unicef Youthvoice (now TaGD), Amnesty International and OneWorld have numerous language options for their international visitors, many links to information and other activist sites, and the well-funded ones are also carefully designed using the ‘visual language’ of global youth culture. The pictures are multi-racial, often showing women and children or men with children, fonts and colours are friendly and inviting. The mode of address is informal and inviting and encourages youth to ‘Do Something’, ‘Act’, ‘Join’, ‘Be Active’, ‘Help’ or ‘Donate’. While such imperatives may make young people feel that that they matter in society and that they can have an impact on events and politics, the global reach of the sites also leads to the paradoxical situation that problems on the doorstep of the users often do not appear on these sites. Hungarian users, for instance, are being encouraged to participate in a campaign to save whales or to help children dying of famine in Africa, while Roma children in Hungary itself also suffer from homelessness and famine. Nevertheless, the options provided to participate online and offline are numerous on these sites. The website of Amnesty International, for instance, offers a complete toolkit and examples on how to let politicians know one’s opinion. Many other websites promote ethical or socially-conscious consumption and direct their users to Fair Trade sites, or offer such products, gifts and services themselves.

In terms of online participation, the opportunities seem to depend on the organisation behind the site, its size and its funding. Thus, the UN sites resemble EU oriented and governmental sites in their top-down approach: they give information on very specific topics, enable downloading of official documents and use online templates for talk-back options. At the other end of the scale are websites such as Globalise Resistance, Amnesty International, Indymedia, OneWorld or No Sweat (the anti-sweatshop campaign) that give the sense of vast, global networks whose interests lie with ‘the people’ and organisations that represent people’s rights rather than with parliamentary or formal governmental processes. These kinds of sites provide extensive hyperlinks to sister sites in other countries and other languages; they have a huge amount of user generated content in terms of blogs, images, videos, posts to forums; and the topics addressed in their user forums appear to be decided upon democratically by the amount of interest in each topic or event. OneWorld is a site networked in this style: its main business is the online networking of hundreds of other sustainable development oriented NGO sites, to the extent that it can seem overwhelming at first glance. There are news items posted everyday, content is constantly updated, and links and visual links change regularly. The site has very many language options and a map of the globe showing where OneWorld partners are: clicking on regions can take you to a
different site or to different content on this site. Registered users can participate in a number of forums on this and the sister site OneClimate or can post content or can ask for content to be posted.

**In sum**, the websites in our sample of international organisations that foster civic participation of the young:

- are mainly backed by large international and democratic NGOs, but also represent international far right networks;
- address the young using the language and visual style of global youth culture, through which they suggest joyous cohabitation;
- offer and encourage manifold possibilities for offline participation and volunteering;
- offer diverse possibilities for online participation and discussion, depending on the status and the goals of the organisation behind the site.

A typical example of an international network site is *Unicef Youth Voice*, which aims to provide a 'voice' for deprived, under-educated and disengaged youth in developed countries such as the UK. The site suggests that these youth can be 'empowered' by taking action to educate and help other young people. The site uses bright colours, numerous images, a small amount of written text (expandable by clicking on specific links), a small number of embedded videos and online games to engage young people in its pro-child campaigns and its education about issues such as the prevention of HIV transmission and the rights of the child. The site has a dedicated link to online interactions and so called ‘fun stuff’: ‘watch videos, play games, enter competitions and test yourself with our challenging interactive quizzes’. The links page also provides links to Unicef groups on social network sites under the motto ‘Get connected’. The website represents idealised role models of young people as activists who are also often pictured helping poor children from developing countries.

![Figure 5. Typical example of an international youth website](image-url)
2.1.7 Websites of charity organisations

The charity category in our sample was largely dominated by British websites: more than half of the charity websites (28) in our sample were maintained by nationally registered UK charities (although international networks like Oxfam or Unicef could also be typified as charity organisations). By contrast, in other countries charities have a much less central role in civil society. In Sweden, for instance, charity organisations lead a comparatively anonymous life, largely due to the existence of a strong, publicly financed welfare system. Hence, the ‘market’ for charity work has not been very developed in Sweden and it is also especially hard to find charities dealing specifically with children and young people. This is reflected in the Swedish sample of websites, which contains no organisations that could be described as pure charity organisations. A similar lack of qualifying organisations was reported from Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey.

The British charity websites in the sample pertained to various causes, such as anti-suicide support for young men, help for the young homeless, improving childhood, helping the blind or supporting the environment. Some of these are not especially aimed at the young but contain sections for young people. By their nature, they all contain possibilities to make online donations or requests for offline information so that users can financially support the charity. Other common features on these websites are the links to officials and authorities to promote a cause, and agendas for offline events and demonstrations. In terms of participation, these sites promote offline participation in the form of volunteering much more than they enable online participation in the form of discussions or bulletin boards. The differences between these sites are related to the size of the organisations backing them, with big international sites being highly professional and generally organised in a top-down manner (see international networks, 3.1.6) and smaller single-cause charities being designed in alliance with supporters of the cause.

In sum, charity websites aiming at young people:

- are basically a British and transnational phenomenon covering a wide range of issues;
- foster donation and membership through online means;
- promote offline volunteering
- display characteristics of design and layout reflecting the cause and size of the charity.

A typical example of such a site is the website of the suicide-support and anti-depression charity for young men CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably). In terms of its mode of address this site is apparently addressed partly to the corporate sector, asking them to donate to help sustain the site, although its primary audience is young men themselves: it deals with men's issues and problems, and tries to deconstruct masculinity for those having problems with it. The site’s homepage has an image of a hooded black man, but turns the stereotypically threatening undertones of the image on their head with the banner: ‘Being Silent Isn’t Being Strong’, which is the organisation’s motto. Design and lay out are colourful and eye-catching, using a number of different fonts and different sizes of fonts, and containing many references to pop culture. Its presentational style has been matched to its purpose and content: in order to communicate both with corporate donors and with the kinds
of frustrated, at-risk young men (including those from non-white communities) whom the
campaign targets, the mixture of commercial cultural iconography and sponsorship visuals
and the slangy, fast-paced language are necessary tools.

Figure 6. Example of a British charity website aimed at young men

2.1.8 Websites of national NGOs

The websites of NGOs comprised the biggest category in our overall sample and in the
national samples, although there are considerable differences between the participating
countries. In general, it seems fair to say that the civil societies in post-communist countries
such as Slovenia and Hungary are acknowledged to be weak, whereas the UK, Netherlands
and Sweden have a long tradition of non-governmental organising for various purposes. The
UK at present has over 3000 registered NGOs. We defined NGO’s as non-profit
organisations that address particular topics such as the environment or human rights, and/or
are aimed at youth outreach programs. This definition led to a huge and diverse category of
websites that contained, for instance, the websites of student organisations, youth media
and youth centres, and websites aimed at giving youth advice and stimulating them to take
up volunteer work or social activities. In addition, we categorized websites based on a pre-
existing sense of communal identity as NGOs, including many ethnic minority sites.
Common features of these sites are: their call to young people to participate in offline leisure
activities, such as concerts, shows, exhibitions, sports, events and workshops; their
announcement of informal education possibilities like language or arts and crafts classes;
the frequent presence of advice and counselling services specifically for the young, for instance about health, personal growth, self-esteem, relationships, sexuality and/or drugs.

An important dimension of these sites is the relatively frequent occurrence of calls for youth to engage in volunteer work, either in the organisation itself or in the direct environment or community. Thus, the Slovenian website Volunteering.org provides a search engine of all the organisations in Slovenia that are looking for volunteers; the Spanish Volunteering.net is dedicated to creating a national network of volunteers; and the Turkish Community Volunteers mediates between the supply and demand of volunteers. The contents and mode of address of these sites suggest that young people already acknowledge the importance of volunteer work, and have the time, energy and desire to engage in it. Volunteer work is thus presented as a self-evident part of young people’s lives, and as something that is integrated within mainstream youth culture (as reflected in the use of colour and visual style). The main content of these sites consists of information, links and calls for the recruitment of new volunteers. Interactive features of such sites are rare, however, and online feedback from volunteers is hardly ever asked for, received or discussed. While such sites strongly promote offline civic participation in the form of volunteering, they rarely enable online participation beyond simple membership or donation possibilities (with the exception of the Spanish sites in our sample).

The ethnic minority websites are markedly different when it comes to online interaction, with a number of groups exclusively set up to provide a forum for ethnic and cultural minority youth to meet, socialize and discuss with each other. Roma.hu, for instance, is a typical website in this genre, aiming at dialogue between Roma and non-Roma, as well as providing discussion forums among the Roma; the Dutch Tans similarly offers a network for young Moroccans in the Netherlands; while Racó Catalá offers a community for young Catalans. Between them, these sites differ in their view of multiculturalism and integration, but they offer similar online means of community building, dialogue and discussion.

In sum, with respect to the sites of NGOs working for or with the young, the conclusions are:

- they exist either as extensions of the offline presence of youth clubs and organisations, or are especially set up to build online communities. Mixed forms were rare in our sample;
- the websites of youth organisations offer many announcements of and calls for offline participation in volunteer work or social events, but are much less strong in offering possibilities for online participation;
- volunteering seems to be the preferred mode of civic participation on these websites;
- the websites set up for online community building among specific groups of youth enable discussion, dialogue and networking, but do not offer much information about offline participation.

A typical example of such a site is Prostovoljstvo.org funded by Slovene Philanthropy, an organisation promoting volunteering. The website functions as a portal for all organisations in Slovenia that are looking for volunteer help (379 of organisations are in the database at the time of the analysis). This is one of the rare websites in Slovenia that tries to promote a specific mode of civic participation. It functions as a portal enabling organisations that seek
volunteers to present themselves and especially tries to promote volunteering of young people to provide help to the elderly. Mobilisation techniques that the website uses are: short appeals by those in need of volunteer help, volunteers’ descriptions of their motivations for volunteering, short diaries of volunteers in India and Africa, short promotional videos and radio advertisements for volunteering, and a search engine that allows users to search among all the organisations that are seeking volunteers in Slovenia. The structure and navigation through the website is complex, although the design is simple with some multimodal features. Although the site provides a forum for discussion, the extent of forum conversation remains low.

![Example of a typical NGO website](image)

**Figure 7. Example of a typical NGO website**

### 2.1.9 Activist websites

Activist websites are the second largest group in our sample and comprise sites that initiate or contribute to political or civic action, whether at a global or local level. There is therefore a certain overlap with political and NGO websites, although the activist websites are distinct in their relative lack of institutional backing, organisation and funding, and their often temporary nature. Many of them have come into being in the wake of a political crisis or a big demonstration. Their temporary nature also means that a number of them analysed in the first year of the CivicWeb research (2007) have already disappeared or moved to another URL. Many of these websites entail and encourage specific online forms of participation that would not have been possible without the internet. The Swedish website *Reklam sabotasje* is an example of such a website representing a network of activists inspired by the international Adbuster movement. The topics of activist websites are as different as the issues of offline activism: anarchism, arts, alternative culture and lifestyles, globalization, anti-capitalism, rights of minorities, human rights and protection of the environment are some
of the more self-evident themes of these sites, but less visible issues like free public transport or countercultural slogans were present as well. Most of these sites have a critical approach to current culture and society and try to inform the public about injustice or simply point at the absurdities of modern life. Some nationalist and hate sites also belong to this category but were less conspicuous in our sample. Their topics seem to be slightly different, with, for instance, the economy, religion and terrorism prevalent on conservative Turkish activist websites.

The activist websites are different from all other types of websites in our sample in their relatively frequent dedication to offering online participation through discussion boards or comment sections, opportunities to contact officials and authorities, donation and sponsorship. This is in many cases combined with calls for offline action, for example in the form of demonstrations, events and volunteering. Moreover, the sites have a tendency to monitor their own activities and report with text and images about past events. The analyses of these websites, however, suggest also that they exist in a more or less self-contained environment that includes relatively few links to other websites, little or no information about other issues or spheres of activism and hardly any encouragement for more official forms of participation like voting.

Many of these sites are not well funded, which is often visible in their limited design and low quality visuals. However, it is striking that these sites in particular often use preset web design software, such as blogging templates that enable both the provision of information and the possibility of feedback and discussion.

In sum, the activist websites in our sample are the most diverse set of our sample:

• they represent a wide range of issues in parallel with offline activism;
• they are usually not well funded, temporary, and lack institutional backing;
• they use template design software, especially for blogging, to provide information and allow discussion;
• they offer more options for online participation than other types of websites, with online activism in some cases being the exclusive kind of participation engaged in;
• they encourage offline participation.

A typical and simultaneously exceptional example of such a website is Roma.Hu, a website that was online during our research but has since disappeared, demonstrating the ephemeral nature of such activist websites. The site is meant to give Roma people a voice and does so very consciously; the makers of the site are hard to identify and the contact address is simply foszerkeszto@roma.hu, which translates as editor-in-chief@roma.hu. While this may have political causes, it also underlines that the ‘ownership’ of the site is supposed to be with its users. There is hardly any non-user generated content and the site offers a message board, a forum, e-voting, a private messaging system and a friends list among the registered users, as well as private photo galleries for users. The site’s relatively sober and modest lay-out further supports the idea that it is there for its community. In addition, the site can easily be customised to one’s own preferences.
Figure 8. Example of an activist website
2.1.10 Conclusion

Looking at the defining features of these diverse categories of websites, it is striking that most of them offer relatively few opportunities for intensive online participation. While almost all the sites we analysed have extensive links to other relevant sites, offer contact information and - if relevant - online possibilities to join or donate money, the input of users is seldom sought. This is most likely due to the fact that most of the websites in our sample are set up as the online voice of the offline organisation that funds them. Organisations that are trying to maintain control over their own flows of information and communication thus apparently cannot afford to open up to a diversity of user statements and opinions. Particularly clear instances of this phenomenon are visible in the websites of EU, national and local governments, but also in those of religious and non-governmental organisations.

The absence of a formal offline organisational structure seems to be the key factor determining the level of online participation that is encouraged: those groups without offline organisational presences are more likely both to promote online participation of some kind and to use bottom-up interactive modes of communication. Nevertheless, even these websites contain fewer opportunities for participation than one would expect, given all the optimism and enthusiasm that characterises discussions of the role of the internet in stimulating youth civic participation. By and large, civic participation is seen to take its most important forms offline: thus, volunteering, demonstrating, meeting, socialising and leading a virtuous lifestyle are called for on many websites across the different categories.

In general, the online civic sphere for young people in Europe seems to be dominated by institutionalised, top-down perspectives and prescriptions of what youth civic engagement means, leaving little room for bottom-up initiatives and alternatives coming from young people themselves. The diversity in the websites in our sample therefore does not derive from the different ‘pedagogies’ of the sites – those are remarkably similar - but from the different issues the sites cover, and the different designs and styles they employ. The exceptions to this were the websites especially designed for online participation, discussion and user-generated content, such as MuslimYouth.UK or Roma.Hu, both discussed in this review. A tentative conclusion could therefore be that the online civic sphere for European young people is predominantly engaged in disciplining them into good citizenship, rather than engaging them in a collaborative development of norms of civic participation, or inspiring them to produce their own alternative understandings of civic engagement.

National differences were hard to identify because of the wide varieties among the websites. As far as a particular national feature emerged (e.g. the strong presence of civic websites in Sweden or the dominance of charity websites in the UK), these seemed to be reflections of the state of civil society in the participating countries rather than manifestations of nationally specific online civic landscapes. As far as the latter kind of differences did exist, they seemed to be largely the result of different e-government trajectories in terms of history, policy and funding, than of other kinds of national differences. Thus, the Spanish and the Turkish websites in the sample seemed to have profited from strong government initiatives, while Slovenia and Hungary were lagging behind. Sweden, UK and the Netherlands have a longer internet history, and thus also more developed sites. Yet given the overall similarities in the websites analysed, it seems but a matter of time before these differences disappear.
2.2 The Production of Civic Websites in Europe

2.2.1 Producer sample and interviews

Following the broad survey of civic websites available to young people in the seven partner countries (Deliverable 6) and concurrent with the in-depth analysis of sites (Deliverable 14), we conducted interviews with the producers of a further range of sites in each country. These sites were selected to reflect a cross-section of civic or political concerns, ideological frameworks, genres of organisation and website, and organisational arrangements. They included those focusing on local, European and national politics, as well as areas of civic participation such as voting, social activism, volunteering, gender, sexual, religious, ethnic and national identity issues, global campaigning, youth advocacy, counselling and so on. The producers of these sites – primarily designers, moderators, content editors and/or ‘webmasters’ but also, sometimes, organisation directors or co-ordinators – were interviewed face-to-face or over the telephone between February 2007 and May 2008.

An open-ended qualitative interview schedule was used. In each country 12-14 such interviews were conducted covering a range of logistical issues, including:

- the funding model on which the site is based, and the prospects for survival in a more competitive (and commercialised) online environment
- the governance of the site, for example in terms of editorial control and moderation, the extent and nature of young people’s direct involvement, and the way they perceive and deal with ‘malignant’ users
- the marketing or publicising of the site – how potential users are made aware of its existence and encouraged to use it, how links between sites are decided, maintained and encouraged
- the broader combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media in the strategy of the producing organisation, and the purposes to which these different media are put.

The interviews also covered some broader philosophical issues that are directly related to the broader themes of the project, including:

- How producers conceptualise their audience (the users of the site). What constructions and definitions of ‘youth’ are entailed here (not least in terms of gender, ethnicity etc.)? How are youth addressed, and what assumptions are made about their interests, motivations and relationships with the medium?
- How producers conceptualise the medium. What do they see as the specific potentialities or affordances of the web? For example, to what extent do they see it as a means of organising existing activities, publicising or proselytising to attract new adherents, or building communication among those who are as yet uninvolved?
- How do producers (and the organisations they represent) conceptualise civic participation? What skills, knowledge and investments do they perceive as necessary for civic participation? How do they believe young people best acquire such skills?
What kinds of activities do they invite their users to participate in, both on- and off-line?

In this section, we offer a brief summary of some key points emerging from these interviews, along with some illustrative quotations relating to particular sites.

2.2.2 Purpose, organisational ethos and funding models

Some of the websites in our producer sample have no offline component, or a loosely related parent organisation, and exist as virtual experiments in youth e-consultation, or e-democracy. Others have major offline organisations behind them and their purpose is akin to that of a virtual advertisement for the offline civic work of the organisation. Producers were keen to suggest that researchers should not be judging sites by a single uniform standard of what makes an excellent civic site for youth. Rather, we should be looking more holistically at the purpose of the organisation, its team, its ethos and the role the website plays therein.

In line with differing purposes and contexts, the organisational ethos and funding models of civic websites for young people vary considerably. Institutional requirements often constrain website content or its presentation, and this has to be balanced in everyday practice against what individual website producers think or want to do:

**F, Your Amsterdam, Netherlands:** Basically, I can do whatever I want, although [my employer] has some norms, for example, they want the information on the website formulated as *neutrally* as possible.

**TL, UK Youth Parliament:** We have to be very careful about child protection issues and also about allowing certain kinds of language.

In most of the organisations we surveyed, the issue of funding is also crucial to the type of experience provided for young people on their websites. This has implications, for example, in terms of whether content is updated regularly, whether anyone responds to emails, comments and questions, and how quickly post-moderated contributions go online. Many sites are not updated for months because initial grants only funded the building of the site and not its updating and maintenance. Indeed, funding can be key to the civic or political ideology and actions encouraged by the site and can influence the type of youth participation suggested. There is a fairly high turnover of volunteer staff and sometimes this leads to the closure of a site entirely.

An inadequate supply of funding also makes for a very insecure working environment, with almost equal amounts of time being spent on the work of the site and on looking for funding to continue the site in the future. The issue of funding is also linked to the demographics of the organisational teams and to the sense of belonging experienced therein. Currently, a high proportion of the day-to-day work on sites in our sample is undertaken by part-time or voluntary staff or by staff who also have many additional duties in the organisation attached to the website. The commitment and motivation of many of these staff is what sustains the sites, but the sites are often only one element competing for their time and attention:

**M, Young Socialists, Netherlands:** We have a new board and co-workers each
year, and that makes it very difficult to have a website policy. For example, each new board demands an entirely new website. And they are responsible for the website, and don’t allow me to make a website policy. That is how our organisation works. (...) Also, the design of our present website is made by people who don’t work with us anymore. That’s the problem with volunteers. They work on the website when they happen to be available. That can be bothersome.

As this suggests, changes to a site’s management and to the volunteers in an organisation can make continuity and maintaining a ‘brand image’ a difficult proposition.

2.2.3 Marketing and Promotion

Most civic website producers have neither the time nor the money to publicise their sites adequately among those who are not already engaged. Hence the core of users remains relatively small. How to get young people to ‘google you’ even if you believe that they have the skills is a key question for some site producers. For most organisations in this sphere, publicity and becoming known is a key issue. We encountered a number of strategies for doing this from word of mouth recommendations to an attempt to be listed higher than other similar organisations in search engine rankings. However, in many cases in our sample marketing and publicity is not given as much thought and/or financial input as it needs. This is partly due to the idea that the internet in itself is an excellent means of becoming known nationally and internationally, but also because most small civic organisations do not have a dedicated budget for promotion.

The producers we interviewed also indicated a number of best practices in this area. Some sites seek publicity offline in as many older media as they can afford. If finances are tight, they rely on word of mouth, Facebook links, a multiplicity of broadly sympathetic mutual links with other organisations, face-to-face presentation of the site to large groups, and big or topical events to bring users to the site. Turkish producers in this sample were particularly aware of the importance of these best practices. They have also been challenged by the banning of You Tube and various other websites in the Turkish internet sphere.

2.2.4 Conceptions of Young People as an Audience

Definitions of young people among our producer sample varied broadly along a spectrum. At one end were producers who may or may not be young themselves, but accepted some of the current discourse about young people as the ‘disconnected generation’. For example, one producer who was himself from an older generation spoke as follows:

L: Hungary … young people today seem to be terrified of commitments. Of getting involved, standing behind something firmly, something that could determine your future, it freaks them out.

In some cases we found that young producers (under the age of 25) thought that they could communicate easily with young people simply by virtue of being young. While some saw youth as fun-loving, entertainment-orientated, internet-savvy and enthusiastic, other refused such generalisations, arguing that youth were internally differentiated and non-homogenous.
There was a general sense in many interviews that contemporary youth were misrepresented or misunderstood by older generations. For example, the producer from Judapest in Hungary talked about the way in which pre-democracy era adults think about young people:

**B., Judapest: Hungary:** [They think] we are the hot-headed young doing stupid things, and what’s worse, he started giving me this paternalist, authoritarian bullshit, when he doesn’t even know me, he has seen me, and yes, I am young, but not that young, so that he could talk to me this way. [...] They are not like me, not really democrats and they are not interested in this whole thing.

Another producer in the UK echoed this, but provided a more optimistic view that was shared by many civic producers, particularly in the Netherlands:

**MB, B-Involved UK:** It’s embarrassing, the low level of respect [young people] expect from adults in the community. So if you actually treat them with a level of respect I find them no more difficult to engage or have serious political or social conversations than any other group - actually I find them easier because […] they’re enthusiastic, they’re unused to people taking their views and opinions seriously, they’re used to people challenging their views and opinions, they are used to being told they are wrong…

In some cases, as in the Hungarian example, national histories partially account for some of the orientations towards young people, while in others it appeared that more general commonsense views were being challenged.

The rhetoric of ‘youth empowerment’ and youth ‘voice’ was also evident in a number of the interviews with producers across the sample, particularly in the UK, Turkey and Spain. These discourses see young people as needing to ‘find a voice’ and to be given the skills to make this voice heard. Some producers within more activist and/or charitable organisations felt that there needed to be more opportunities for young people to receive the training and develop the skills necessary for making their concerns heard in the public sphere. Ironically, however, some of them were aware that their users tended to be mostly those youth who are already engaged or skilled in forms of civic participation offline.

While several producers seemed keen to shed the ‘one size fits all’ view of young people, this could conflict with the assumptions of their funders who have particular conceptions of their target audience which vary depending on political commitments, age differences and preferred pedagogic styles. Some producers, notably those with extensive experience of working with youth communities offline, were keen to stress that young people are not generic but specific and exist in real local communities. They do not necessarily experience politics and civic action as utterly alien and hence do not always need to be seen as wanting a ‘sweetener’ (parties, cinema, entertainment) to ease its passage. However, most older adults and young people do not view either political or apolitical civic work as something that is a replacement for leisure activities, or an alternative to them; and hence competing with websites that offer such leisure activities by trying to add a veneer of fun or to disguise politics as a game, might prove ineffective.
These discussions led producers to consider whether websites should be attempting to ‘speak’ to young people in ‘their’ language, using slangy expressions and informal language, cheerful iconography, bright colours, text message speak, and so on. Some producers suggested that this was the only way to speak to youth, while others argued that this was a complicated and potentially patronising enterprise.

2.2.5 The Internet as a Medium

A sizable number of producers in our sample viewed the internet as a ‘youth tool’. The internet was variously described in interviews as ‘a brilliant first point of contact’, a ‘multimedia medium’, now possessing ‘much of the power of traditional broadcast media’ and a ‘bottom-up medium’. These views were reiterated by many of the producers, who insisted that they saw the internet as an ‘inherently democratic’ medium. One producer in the Netherlands contrasted the internet’s potential with the closed and biased agendas of the mainstream media:

M, Maroc, Netherlands: The media have a way of publishing: [they are] not critical in copying each other’s news. And before you know, a whole new reality is created which is, in fact, fictitious and which makes our target group feel treated with contempt. This is why we call it “Islam bashing”, you know, “fucking Moroccans”. (…) Young people in their puberty, aged twelve to eighteen, will arrive at a stage in which they will try to “find themselves”. And the formation of identity is heavily influenced by the debate about integration. This kind of thinking is inherently exclusive: you are either this or that. Are you a Moroccan or Dutch man? But you are not one of both, you can be both at the same time.

However, evidence from across the sample in all the countries also suggests that neither of these assumptions - about the internet being inherently democratic or a youth tool - is wholly true in relation to civic participation. There are also more complicated positions taken up in relation to it. The representative of the Union of Catholic Scouts in Slovenia, for instance, suggested that civic organisations should use the internet and be up-to-date with such technologies and communication opportunities in order to ‘bring young people back’ to offline civic action from ‘where they have gone’ online.

The internet was also mostly regarded as an inexpensive method of disseminating information and making contact with young people. However, some producers pointed out that for a site to be known there needs to be quite a lot of thought and funding given to marketing and publicity, and that the type and quality of internet access is very variable for young people and for organisations, with hidden costs that are not often considered.

Many websites and organisations in this sector also have to appeal to stakeholders, funders and educators, a large number of whom fall outside the 15-25 age range. Indeed, in some cases, part of the raison d’être of the organisation is to communicate a specific set of ideas and values about young people to older adults and establishment institutions. This makes the language chosen on the site and the manner of communication all the more complicated, and changes the amount of control that young people outside the organisation might have over the ways in which the organisation presents itself online: if funding depends on government and government bodies are wary of certain kinds of language or politics, then
the site might well have to censor or control young people’s contributions in order to achieve continued funding.

2.2.6 Interactivity and safety online

According to most producers in our sample, forums and interactive applications have to be carefully encouraged, motivated and managed. This takes time and money for personnel or a high degree of voluntary motivation, which may not be readily available. However, getting civic or political discussion going artificially online where there is no organic or bottom-up interest in an issue or cause was seen to be particularly difficult, regardless of the amount of money and effort put in:

**F, Your Amsterdam, Netherlands:** Nobody used our forum. I therefore decided to add some of my own fictitious content on the forum, to see whether people would respond to that. But that also did not happen. I tried several times, but people are not interested apparently. And it was spammed all the time. (...) I know that there are forums that are used very intensively, but ours is not; perhaps because we have a very general target group.

A content editor from Spain introduced the notion of ‘quality control’, suggesting that it is not just important but vital to moderate content:

**I, Jove Cat, Spain:** Like many other institutional sites [our site] goes from the Administration to young people. But we’ve also taken the challenge of encouraging participation [...] What we’re not going to do is to open a Messenger or a YouTube in our site because we believe that government money is not for that [...] We’re going to open this section next year [where] we will encourage participation of young people that have something to say about…global warming, housing, sports, etc […] However, we need to …think of some type of quality control, to decide what type of experiences we will publish. This can’t be like a blog where you publish and I comment. We need a quality control of what is published here.

In Netherlands and the UK most notably, young first- and second-generation immigrants are forming civic organisations online to challenge prejudice both within and outside their communities. Some of them are subjected to fierce and sometimes racist critique and flaming, sometimes by organised rightwing groups. In such instances, and perhaps more generally, the internet is not necessarily a completely safe place for all young people to engage in civic debate. In Hungary, Roma sites attempt to avoid this situation by having closed membership or by censoring posts from racist users. This experience of being ‘attacked online’ and hence requiring a closed community was also the case for many of the sites devoted to issues of sexuality and gender.

We also heard from other producers who had been threatened personally or institutionally because of the content of their sites. This was true of sites run by and for young feminists, gays and lesbians, as well as those for black and ethnic minority youth or young Muslims. Safety and protection from harm is thus more evidently a concern to producers of sites which appeal to children, ethnic minorities, sexual minority groups and religious groups. Many of these producers report that their sites have been the target of forms of online violence and
some that they have even been pursued and threatened at offline events, or personally harassed. More generally protection against spam and flaming are often at the forefront of a content moderators' concerns, although there is typically little financial aid in this endeavour.

2.2.7 Online and offline

Most producers were of the opinion that personal contact trumps internet contact for the overwhelming majority as a means of getting young people to have sustained participation in civic and political activities. However, for one-off mobilisations where vast numbers are needed, the internet and mobile phones were seen as invaluable tools. Problematically, only a small minority of online producers were aware of and anxious about the problem of marginalised young people becoming further marginalised because they are neither explicitly targeted nor reached by internet-based civic organisations. Generally there seemed to be little awareness amongst producers that they are reaching only a fraction of youth, mostly from amongst the most highly literate and most politically or socially motivated. This pattern varied a little across the national samples, with the UK and Spanish producers showing more awareness and desire to change this situation, and the Slovenian producers the least, but overall organisational strategies to reach marginalised young people were few and far between.

Similarly, the way the organisation uses the internet is what makes it appealing to young people or democratic. It can be made more accessible and more democratic or less so. For instance, the AKP youth site producer from Turkey maintains that comments by users would not be appropriate on a political party website, albeit one for youth. In a different instance, the forums of the website of the far right group Screwdriver – Blood and Honour are unsurprisingly full of anti-democratic and racist remarks and rhetoric but also of claims to civicity. The use of the medium and the message depend partly on the ideology, aims and ethos of the organisation and partly on the ways in which users choose to interpret and act on these.

2.2.8 The Civic and Political Sphere

There was a wide spectrum of ideological standpoints and political views in our sample, from left-wing, anti-capitalist and socialist through liberal and social democratic to rightwing or even far right producers. Many producers in our sample, of all ages, felt that young people do not have a problem engaging with politics and the civic sphere; on the contrary, it is traditional political organisations that have disconnected from them. Producers suggested that some civic websites for young people are tapping into newer forms of civic and political participation such as ‘ethical consumption’. However, they indicated that it was generally young people who are also already interested in traditional offline issues of social justice and new social movements who also engage with these ‘new’ forms of action online.

In discussing how to define and talk about political and civic participation with young people, one producer summed up their approach:

**MB, B-Involved, UK:** We *never* talk about it as politics. The way we’ve talked about it is: ‘What kind of world do you want to live in and how do you want to get it?’
Crucially, with regard to the hype about young people being reconnected to politics and civic participation in the online world, in the view of several producers, interaction with the public sphere from young people's perspective seems to be most successful when it is both peer-to-peer and enables opportunities for reciprocal engagement with those in power. Most youth civic organisations tend to offer one or the other, and the engagement with politicians is most often not reciprocal, in the sense that there is little two-way dialogue. Some producers see this as a limitation of the online sphere and suggest that offline, though there is not nearly enough ‘vertical interaction’, there is more genuine interaction.

Wishing to remain ‘non-aligned’ with the adult or governmental audience is one of the reasons given by some producers for favouring a simpler website even if this means no funding with ‘strings attached’. Other producers of all ages appear very clearly committed to engaging young people with particular kinds of politics and with giving them opportunities for particular kinds of civic participation. They have, however, accepted that their websites’ funding models mean they will not be putting young people themselves completely or even primarily in control of the ideas on the website or of the organisation because they fear that this could potentially jeopardise the funding by damaging the public image of the organisation. Yet other producers in this sphere, who work on a website for a larger funded civic organisation, claim that while addressing young people and appearing to represent their concerns, the parent organisations, generally made up of older adults, maintain tight control of their public image. This is a very political trade-off and must be seen as such. One producer summed it up in the following way:

The thing that always interests me most in any project is what is the agenda of the person who pays the bill? My point is that when government or grant-funders fund youth engagement projects it’s like a parent organising a birthday party for the child. The various possible approaches are likely to be variations of: (1) the parent organises a party that they themselves would enjoy (2) the parent organises a party that they believe the child will enjoy (3) the parent and the child organise the party together according to the child’s wishes (4) the parent gives the child some money and lets them organise the party in whatever way they want...The commonly held belief in youth participation circles is that option (4) is by far the best, because the young people have the power. My contention is that while there might be other benefits coming out of the experience of organising the party, the child has no more real power under option 4 than in option 1 because ultimately all the spending power remains with the parent and can be withdrawn at any time and 100% of the accountability for what happens remains with the parent under all circumstances. The agendas of the people with the power and achievement of projects are often positive, but there is a misguided, much promoted, notion that government agencies or groups actually give power to young people when in fact what they are mostly doing is keeping power and using young people to help them exercise it.

In light of this, claims to ‘represent’ young people, to be ‘bottom-up’ and to be ‘grass-roots youth networks’ either on or offline, and in local, national or EU contexts, need to be understood as part of a specific rhetoric. As such, these claims need to be interrogated properly to ascertain whether and how young people do participate in the organisation, what they gain from this participation and what they expect the outcomes to be.
For most producers in our sample, as for the young people in focus groups (see DEL 16), the most important forms of civic motivation and serious political action are usually found offline. The internet is seen to serve various potential functions here: it might provide a spark that provokes people to action; it might serve as a conduit or a tool or a space for storing information and for communication; it might be primarily a promotional gimmick enabling ideas and issues to circulate, and campaigns and movements to organise and debate. In all these respects, the online and the offline are connected and complementary in various ways. The online world exists within, and as part of, the offline world. This has two key implications: first, we should not be drawing such large or binary distinctions between the two; and second, that we should not be searching for some form of ‘pure’ online civic participation that begins and ends online.
2.3 Civic Uses of the Internet by European Youth

2.3.1 A survey of European youth

Do young people in Europe use the internet for civic purposes, and if so, for which specific purposes do they use it and in what way? These are the questions that were answered through a European-wide online survey, conducted in the autumn of 2007 among 3,307 young respondents in the seven participating countries (Deliverable 8). Respondents were, on average, 19.2 years old. 55% of them were female; about 10% were not born in the country of residence. 56% said that they had a full-time or part-time job. 57% reported that they belonged to a religion: this figure was mainly divided between Christianity and Islam (respectively, 32.3 and 20.1% of all respondents). Overall, the respondents had completed some ten years of education, and the majority (70%) reported that they lived with their parents and depended economically on them.

The response was not evenly divided among countries, with the UK, Netherlands, Turkey and Slovenia among the better response groups, and Sweden, Spain and Hungary less well represented. Given this uneven distribution of respondents among countries and the means we used to collect our data, we did not assume that our sample was representative for the youth population in the participating countries. This means that we cannot reliably compare distributions between countries, although we can give European-wide results.

2.3.2 Overall patterns of internet use by young people

We found that the internet use of young people in the participating countries can be identified as follows:

*Patterns of use:* 90% of our respondents used the internet most often at home; on average, our respondents throughout Europe used the internet 6.2 days per week and 3.3 hours a day; about 74% of the respondents said that they were completely free to use the internet as they like; on average, our respondents said they have used the internet for some seven years now; most young respondents throughout the European countries surveyed said they feel confident in using the internet.

*Gender:* Of all the possible socio-demographic variables that we correlated with internet use patterns, gender most often produced a significant connection, predominantly in the direction one would expect on the basis of digital divide literature. Thus, girls and young women felt less confident than boys and young men in using the internet, had fewer years of experience, used the internet somewhat less intensively, and in the Netherlands and Turkey in particular they reported more often that their internet was controlled by adults. The respondents from the UK constituted the most striking exception to the whole group: in the UK gender came out as unrelated to almost all questions; there, girls and young women were less likely to report that there was control over their internet use than boys and young men, but on no other factor.

*Ethnicity:* Only with respect to years of internet experience, did it matter whether respondents said they belonged to an ethnic group or not in their country: in Slovenia in particular, ethnic minority youth reported fewer years of internet experience. With respect to
the other questions, there were no general tendencies related to ethnicity, nor were there specific national patterns in the data.

Reigion: Belonging to a religious group sometimes affected patterns of internet use. We found that religious youth across Europe used the internet more often outside the home; that in Slovenia and the UK they used it more days per week than other youth; that they experienced more control over their use, especially in the Netherlands; and that they had longer experience in using the internet. In the UK and Sweden, we found no correlations at all between internet use patterns and reported religious affiliation, and in the Netherlands and Hungary only on one question. This suggests that the impact of religion on internet use patterns partly follows a north/south divide in Europe.

Education: With one exception (Turkey), the length of one’s education correlated positively with years of internet experience. In addition, in the Netherlands, Slovenia and Spain, those with more years of education also report experiencing more control over their internet use.

Living situation: Next to gender, the living situations of the respondents appeared to exert most influence on their internet use patterns. Most of the young people using the internet at home did so at their parents’ house. There was also a clear and positive correlation in all countries between not living with parents and the number of years one has used the internet. Yet, living with one’s parents also means one is less able to access and use the internet intensively. These three findings together suggest strongly that a majority of youth in Europe gain access to the internet through their parents’ computer, which results in early acquaintance but also less intensive use (as compared with those who have other means of access). Only in Turkey and the Netherlands did this also seem to result in less freedom to use the internet to their own liking. Finally, living situation appeared to be unrelated to confidence in internet use.

Age: The factor of age revealed some strong and predictable tendencies. Older respondents in the 15 to 25 age range used the internet less at home; they reported more freedom in how they use the internet than younger counterparts; they had more internet experience, and they claim to be more confident in using the internet. Intensity of internet use was also positively, albeit less clearly, related to the age of our respondents.

2.3.3 Websites that interest young people

All in all, the European respondents to our online survey present a common picture of interest in entertainment and lifestyle issues. While this might be partly attributable to the fact that the survey was posted primarily on the MTV Networks online sites, it is unlikely to be a consequence of this alone.
Figure 2.3.1 shows that music, movies and news were the most popular sites among our respondents. They reported least interest in websites about romance/dating, porn and political parties. When we categorize these sites on the basis of respondents’ answers, 6 categories emerge:

- entertainment websites, including movies, music and sports;
- lifestyle websites, including fashion, shopping, romance and chat
- websites about digital culture, including sites about on- and offline games, hardware and software;
- websites about social justice, such as racism, sexism, discrimination, human rights and social inequalities;
- new social movement and spiritual issues, for example, sites about the environment, animal rights, religion and health;
- electoral politics, including sites about elections, political parties, government and news.

In this categorisation, the civic and political potential of the web pertains to social justice, new social movements and spirituality, and electoral politics. Over half of our respondents, however, expressed hardly any interest in these kinds of sites, with the interest in electoral politics lowest. However, some 10 to 20% of our respondents expressed some interest, especially in environmental, new social movement and spirituality-related issues. About 15% demonstrated strong interest in the three kinds of civic and political sites mentioned. In table 2.3.1 we summarize whether and how different groups in our sample expressed interest in these latter sites:
Table 2.3.1. Interest in civic websites and socio-demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Living</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSM and spirituality</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral politics</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A + in a cell indicates a positive correlation between interest in the type of site and the variable at stake.

Table 4 shows that the interest in civic and political websites appears to be stronger among older respondents in our sample, those not living with their parents, youth that identify as religious, and among girls and young women.

2.3.4 How young people use the civic potential of the internet

While the majority of our respondents overwhelmingly expressed an interest in lifestyle and entertainment websites, 15% asserted their interest in civic websites and blogs. Yet do we see the same patterns if we look at the civic and political websites that the respondents tell us they have actually visited? And how do they use the internet for political and civic participation? The data yielded the following picture:
Figure 2.3.4.ii shows that: only a very small group of our respondents report using the internet for online civic or political participation. Apart from youth and student sites, hardly any civic or political sites drew a larger proportion than 10% of our respondents. Similarly, only about 10% of our respondents reported any form of online participation. Within this apparent overall lack of active participation online, everything to do with party politics and government drew the least attention or activity.

The sites that were actually visited could be categorized in three categories: social justice, institutional politics and youth sites. Older respondents visited these sites more often than those still living with their parents did, and those that belonged to a specific religion. Years of education mattered positively for sites about institutional politics, and for visits to youth websites (which includes student websites). Respondents from ethnic backgrounds visited social justice websites more often than other respondents, girls and young women visited websites about institutional politics even less than boys and young men. In table # these patterns are summarized:

Table 2.3.4.ii Actual use of civic websites and socio-demographic variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Living</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral politics</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A + in a cell indicates a positive correlation between interest in the type of site and the variable at stake, a – in a cell indicates a negative correlation, e.g. girls have less interest in electoral websites than boys do.

In addition to visiting websites, forwarding emails and signing online petitions were reported to be the most popular forms of online participation. Those not living with their parents and those with a religious commitment engaged in such activities more often than others, as did the older and longer educated groups among our respondents.

2.3.5 The relation between online and offline civic and political participation

An important question for the civic participation of the young is whether and how online participation (visiting websites, sending emails, signing petitions) replaces or complements forms of offline participation such as organising or participating in a demonstration, strike or protest, working for a voluntary or charitable organisation or attending a public meeting. Our data shows that our respondents did engage in such forms of offline participation, but still no more than 13% of participants reported taking part in them. Working for a volunteer or charity organisation, and donating money to social and political causes were the most popular forms of such offline participation. Those not living with their parents and those with a religious commitment did this more often than others, as did the older age group among our respondents. The level of education of the respondents did not make a difference in this respect.
The data show furthermore that there is a strong correlation between offline and online participation, as summarized in table 2.3.5.i:

Table 2.3.5.i. Correlation between online and offline participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offline participation</th>
<th>Online participation</th>
<th>Visiting civic websites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offline participation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online participation</td>
<td>.639</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting civic websites</td>
<td>.569</td>
<td>.608</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These correlations clearly suggest that online and offline civic action complement rather than replace each other. These strong relationships also confirm our earlier point that an a-priori distinction between online and offline civic and political activities may not be the most helpful in understanding civic participation among young people. When analysing these activities as combined means of civic participation, four different types of engagement (defined by clusters of activities) emerge from the data: we have labelled these social activism, civic sharing, socially conscious shopping and lobbying. These types of engagement typically operate both online and offline:

- the most likely form of activity for those with an interest in electoral politics or for those who actually visit sites of/about governments, is contacting politicians and government officials online and offline;
- similarly, socially conscious shopping is connected especially to an interest in new age sites, but much less to an interest in electoral politics or visits to sites about institutional politics;
- civic sharing, i.e. discussing with family and friends in both on- and offline forms, extends more or less equally to all civic and political interests and site visits, but least to new age interests;
- finally, offline activism pertains in particular to social justice and social movement interests and actual visits to sites about social justice and institutional politics.

Of all these four categories, our respondents reported engaging most often in civic sharing and socially conscious shopping. The majority reported little interest in traditional politics and government, and basically did not seek contact with them, either offline nor online. Offline activism ranked only a little higher. There were clear differences between boys and girls, with girls reporting more engagement in shopping and civic sharing and less in lobbying than boys; in addition, religious youth reported more engagement in all types of participation; living alone and being slightly older positively affected all forms of civic participation, with the exception of socially conscious shopping.
2.3.6 Explaining young people’s use of the internet’s civic and political potential

Of the four forms of participation that emerged from the data, civic sharing is closest to the heart of our key research questions about the potential of the internet for increasing civic engagement among the young. Civic sharing consists mostly of online activities and of talking in real life to family, friends and colleagues about political and social issues. Moreover, this turned out to be a participatory form that was more or less evenly connected to substantial interests in and actual visits to civic and political websites. In the whole sample, the analysis of explanatory variables showed that a sense of political efficacy was the most important predictor of civic sharing. The absence in all country samples of education as an explanatory variable was the other most striking feature. As for national differences the figures for Hungary, Spain and Sweden can only be taken as indicative because of the small sample size. The models for the Netherlands, Slovenia, Turkey and UK are more telling:

**Netherlands**: Political efficacy, and watching and listening to news about social and political issues are the most important independent variables in the model. Two attitudinal variables (civic attitudes and internet efficacy) follow at a distance, while gender and age do contribute to the fit of the model, but much less than the attitudinal and behavioural variables.

**UK**: By and large, the UK follows the Dutch model, with the exception of gender, which does not contribute to explaining civic sharing in the UK sample.

**Slovenia**: Slovenia is similar to the Netherlands with respect to the importance of political efficacy, and watching and listening to news about social and political issues, for explaining civic sharing. However, the other three explanatory variables are socio-demographic and have higher coefficients than in the Dutch model: these are gender, living with parents and age.

**Turkey**: The Turkish model is the most parsimonious of the seven models, since it contains only three independent variables, political efficacy, age and gender. Also, Turkey has the highest age coefficient of all countries.

2.3.7 Conclusion

The analyses here have shown the enduring significance of a digital divide among the respondents in all countries along the lines of gender, education and living situation. The respondents in this survey also present a rather familiar picture of being mainly interested in entertainment and lifestyle websites. Yet among the older respondents in our sample, and especially among the older young women and religious youth, there was a clear interest in civic and political sites, especially when they cover social justice, spiritual and/or new social movement issues. Even so, the proportion of respondents reporting that they have actually visited such websites was only around 10%.

While the civic online and offline participation of our respondents was not very frequent or intensive, 32% of them had undertaken at least one offline civic or political activity, whereas 23% reported having taken some form of online action. Participation in offline and online activities turns out to be strongly positively correlated, demonstrating that online and offline
are complementary to each other, rather than substitutive. We therefore approached online and offline activities as part of a common set of participatory civic forms, and examined them for other underlying structures. This produced two clear offline dimensions of civic participation (offline activism and socially conscious shopping) and two mixed forms (civic sharing and lobbying). Civic sharing, in particular, connects best to the core interests of the CivicWeb project, and includes 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. Almost half of our respondents reported that they had undertaken one or more of these activities. Engagement in civic sharing turned out to be dependent on age and the amount of time respondents spend watching and listening to news about political and social issues. While gender does play a role in this, it tends to be less important than the attitudinal and behavioural variables. Education, finally, did not emerge as an explanatory factor. While there are a number of differences between the models that fit the national samples best, these are differences of degree, rather than of kind.
2.4 Young People’s Views on Civic Websites and Civic Participation

2.4.1 Aims, objectives and theoretical premises

The general objectives of Workpackage 10, the qualitative focus groups with young people, were, firstly, to offer an analysis of young people’s social, cultural and civic contexts, motivations and concerns, their general internet use and reasons for civic/political engagement or lack of engagement; and, secondly, to explore which groups of young people use the internet for civic participation, which do not, and why, and the connections between offline civic engagement (or disengagement) and online participation.

In order to explore ideas about the internet as well as internet practices arising from other strands of this project, and from theoretical literature, we chose to conduct focus groups within a range of contrasting socio-cultural and economic contexts. In this sense, we set out to analyse the reasons young people give for political and/or civic engagement in the context of specific historical and national civic traditions and movements as well as contexts of internet access and use. 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, their motivations for both on and off-line civic participation and the social circumstances in which sustained offline and web-based participation occurs.

2.4.2 Focus groups and selection criteria

We conducted focus group interviews between April 2008 and February 2009 in Hungary, Netherlands, Spain, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey and the UK, with diverse groups of young people between the ages of 15 and 25. All the focus groups were conducted between April 2008 and March 2009. There was a total of 70 focus groups of different sizes (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 composition of the focus groups took into account concerns discussed previously in relation to young people’s perceived apathy or distaste towards politics, their preference for entertainment rather than political websites, their apparent lack of political self-efficacy, concerns around a lack of civic participation and intergenerational challenges. The selection of participants also reflected issues linked to recent history and changes in civic/political participation in the different national contexts (such as the rise of Islamophobic politics in the Netherlands, Catalan Nationalism in Spain, conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or the growth of neoliberal economies alongside democratic politics in Slovenia and Hungary), and specific issues that generate civic/political participation (such as internet censorship in Turkey or music downloading in Sweden) in each of them.

The selection of focus groups inevitably varied between partner countries according to specific national contexts, the logistics of the researchers’ working lives and locations, and the exigencies of specific research situations (far right youth in some countries refused to be interviewed, for example; young mothers and carers often did not turn up to groups). However, the general criterion used in the selection of all focus groups was that those could give insights into the motivations and contexts of specific sub-categories of young users or
non-users of the internet and into specific sub-categories of young civic actors or youth at risk of political and social marginalisation. To this end, the focus groups included:

- young people who are active in traditional politics (for instance, in political parties or fringe political groups or local government)
- those in traditional civic organisations (global and local charities and voluntary organisations, counselling centres, student unions)
- those involved in new social or civic movements (DIY musicians, environmentalists, peace campaigners, housing campaigners and citizen journalists or bloggers, anti-immigration campaigners)
- young people who are self-avowedly not involved in civic and/or political activities either offline or via the internet (young people just out of prison or living in hostels, school students using youth centres).

This selection was also informed by some of the key findings of the survey (section 2.3 above).

The focus groups provided us with a more detailed insight into the perceptions of civic/political participation and engagement both on the internet and offline amongst certain groups of young people, their motivations and reasons for participation or non-participation. The groups also shed light on the kinds of design and interactive features that might be off-putting or attractive to particular groups of young people, and the specific ways in which they respond to being addressed - for example, as fun-loving young people, as formal political subjects or as challenging activists. The role of family, inter-generational relations, friends and social contexts in terms of how young people understand politic/civic issues was also explored.

2.4.3 Uses and perceptions of the internet among young people

In many but not all cases, the internet appears to have become a naturalised part of young people’s everyday lives in Europe and increasingly in Turkey, as the following response indicates:

**A:** It is almost the same as 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 the 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. [Turkey]

Especially in urban areas, the young people frequently asserted that going online was no longer novel, nor always exciting or interesting, and in fact could even be boring. It was generally something taken for granted, and difficult to imagine living without. Access issues, the poor quality of broadband and working patterns made such ubiquitous use less common in rural areas in our sample.

Our seven national samples were primarily comprised of young people who have a great deal of experience in internet use, and are able to make effective use of the internet for leisure, communication and information purposes. However, there were also groups chosen
who reflected common problems in going online – lack of stable housing leading to lack of access, lack of formal literacy training and education, or parental strictures restricting access to information and other civic activities online. As in the broader survey, various social factors such as social class, ethnicity, age and religion also appeared to affect the ways in which these young people approached and used the internet. Amongst these, the most prominent across most of the countries was social class.

There were other accessibility issues raised in particular groups, however. One of these came up in a focus group with young blind people in Spain:

**F:** Yes [the internet is an everyday part of my life!] The only problem of surfing the net with Jauss, Hal, Orca or MVD is the little image codes that many sites ask for in order to register …. Technically this is known as a CAPSA or ANTIBOT mechanism. Essentially it restricts automatic registrations. Supposedly it’s to make sure a real person is registering, so robots can’t automatically open accounts… But neither can blind people! [Spain]

Such concerns, which need technical solutions to reduce barriers to online participation, also require social awareness on the part of web producers. The threat of spam registrations is obviously an everyday reality but complaints from partially sighted or blind users are less common.

Across most focus groups in all the countries, our respondents displayed a degree of critical reflexivity vis-à-vis the internet as a medium. For example, they would assert opinions such as ‘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 pointed to newspapers as a more reliable source of information and frequently acknowledged that television was a preferred entertainment and news medium within family groups.

Some internet practices that appeared to be significant among young people across our European sample were: educational and pedagogic purposes; the solving of everyday problems in relation to travel or health and information-seeking via the web; consumption – both socially conscious and mundane; communicating with friends and family, discovering news online and occasionally reporting news items or uploading newsworthy photographs; and participating in organisations for leisure and civic purposes.

### 2.4.4 The internet and young people’s civic engagement and participation

Our research confirms that the internet is an important tool for young people who are already civically engaged. 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 was constantly presented as for instance a ‘hub’ for political activities, or as an important ‘node’ for civic activities. Looking across our sample of focus groups, these kinds of uses were evident in different kinds of political and/or civic organisations, including political parties’ youth organisations, already established activist networks, and communities of civic interest.
The internet can also be an important resource for minorities (political, ethnic, regional or religious) in terms of promoting civic and/or political action. The internet’s open architecture – the fact that it opens up spaces for voices to be heard that might be suppressed offline, and for people to meet virtually and interact – provides a basis for these groups, and for their expressions of and debates about identity, in ways that the traditional media have often not done. It must be noted that while many of these initiatives are very earnestly attempting to intervene in the public sphere, to engage with political issues, or to take civic action, not all of the expressions or debates about identity in these groups are necessarily pro-democratic or altruistic.

The internet may also an important way in which young people seeking information on one topic become aware of the existence or activities of other like-minded individuals whom they may or may not contact either online or offline. This does not always involve expensive interactive applications, however.

C: As for the net, it is sometimes too hard to moderate a forum. Instead of spending that time, going onto the streets is sometimes much more effective. Mail groups are much better than forums. They are always active. You can convince on the net... announce your plans. Two years ago, there was a peace fete 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. [Turkey]

Also, for instance in the sphere of music, the internet has facilitated the formation of alternative cultures of use and connection amongst young people that sometimes circumvent the traditional hierarchies of record companies. As this implies, the internet can serve as a form of public sphere, opening up spaces for public, or semi-public, discussion between young people. However, it important not to overrate the significance of such discussions or to homogenise the content – not all young people participate and the ones who do participate most often do so rather sporadically.

However, there were no cases of attractive website designs inspiring civic engagement and participation in themselves. There is one significant absence in our focus group data – examples where a specific website per se (through for instance its interactive attractiveness and/or good design) had resulted in young people becoming engaged where they were not already engaged.

Nevertheless, there were some cases of internet practices inspiring and motivating participation. For instance, civic and political movements had grown up online around issues relating to file sharing, the threat of surveillance of internet practices and political censorship of particular websites. These are clearly political and civic engagements online that would not be possible but for the internet – although we need to beware of assuming any simple cause-effect relationship between internet use and civic engagement.

There were also cases of young people looking online for one type of information (to do with general volunteering, for instance, or language learning) and stumbling upon the website of a related civic or political group, organisation or movement which they then went on to become involved in. For example in Hungary it was reported that having searched for information about how to mend a particular kind of bicycle, several young people discovered
the website of a large and significant cyclists movement, which they became interested in, joined and are now enthusiastic members of.

2.4.5 Forms of civic engagement and participation

There is evidence from focus groups in all the partner countries that a significant number of young people are engaged with their local communities, with volunteer activities, groups and causes in their local areas, schools and religious bodies, as well as with civic and social debates amongst friends, in the news, within families and sometimes internationally.

**F:** At home, well, we’ve always talked about political issues, or even town issues. And we talk about how people criticize lots of things, and then you see that it does also have some positive aspects. There’s a little bit of everything. And not everything is negative. [Spain, 17-year-old]

**P:** 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 interested to get her to explain about it and then I decided [who to vote for] by my self….We all have the same conviction, so … I was raised in that direction. [Slovenia, 20-year-old].

**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. [UK, 23-year-old]

A number of young people also complained about what they perceived as the apathy and lack of interest of other young people and of some of the adults around them in relation to social and political issues. Additionally there is also evidence from the focus groups with disadvantaged young people and young people not connected to any form of civic organisation that opportunities to become involved and to be active are much more difficult to access either offline or online if you are not connected to communities through your family, through formal education or through work. Clearly the fact that many civic activities are low paid or unpaid and that young people are often the ones in civic organisations who are expected to work for free makes this more difficult for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Young people in the UK described 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. This situation may be seen as a serious and practical barrier to consistent and sustained active participation for many young people.

The most significant characteristic of the civic and political engagement discernible among the participants in the focus groups is that it tends to concern predominantly issues of immediate proximity to them. Much of it related to individual and group identities, for instance, built around race, religion, sexuality, music, political belief or language, sometimes particularly linked to a sense of discrimination, and to one’s current life situation. From discussions with older civic website producers, and with young people about their families, we would suggest that this might also be the case for many older adults’ civic and political engagement.

Most of the young people in our focus groups had a very negative view of traditional governmental or party politics and politicians. Most respondents saw politicians as corrupt,
controversial, argumentative, unresponsive, deliberately misleading, boring or hard to
understand, only working for their own interests, and far removed from the everyday needs
and realities of common citizens. This distrust and criticism of national politicians was most
sweeping in Slovenia and Hungary, as the following excerpt from the Hungarian national
report suggests:

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. (Bognar and Szacaks, 2009)

A large proportion of respondents also argued that things in society needed to change, but
many insisted that they themselves are unable to effect such changes. This applied to a
range of issues, including social 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 so on. This lack of efficacy was
often related to

a) their feelings about the unresponsiveness, untrustworthiness and distance of politicians
(and, on occasion, other authority figures such as school principals or university vice-
chancellors):

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 [opposition party] would have done it as well! [UK]

b) actual experiences of having participated (in school councils, e-petitions, pickets or
demonstrations) but having not been listened to or managed to change anything

c) fears about how active participation or political critique might impact on them as
individuals (and make them targets of the state, school authorities, the police or other
aggressive citizens with opposing views).

D: …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. [UK]

However, in most of the groups, when young people described being involved in civic
activities related to their immediate contexts (both on and off-line) their sense of efficacy and
confidence in their own ability to change things, at least in localised ways, appears to have
increased. For instance, this student spoke about an experience of trying to make changes
in the systems operating in the faculty and university:

J: I was firstly active in my faculty. And I did that because I noticed that a lot of things
could be done better, and it was great because I met a bunch of people. And then I
saw… you’ve created a network, you’ve reached, and you saw that actually the
things that you thought you can change in a faculty, you can’t. Then I tried out the
University and now here, and then you see that you in fact can’t do a lot by yourself
and that is it is great if there is a network of people, so we can do a bit more,
although we are very weak in certain things, because you can’t change the system.

[Student, Slovenia]

It is clear then that civic and political interests and motivations to participate do seem to be related, in a number of cases, to having a family and/or close community that is interested in these issues and concerns.

In a number of cases also, local civic achievements, the feeling of solidarity generated by being active together whether online or offline, the feeling of having organised an event or campaign and received some positive feedback from peers or older adults, all 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.

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 display 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 (which we can sense at the national levels, and that is clearest at the local or regional level) when discussing the notion of ‘Europe’. These points are best illustrated by the fact that throughout our focus groups the European level of politics was rarely discussed spontaneously, except in those cases where young people were specifically asked to do so by the interviewers: talk of European politics does not seem come as naturally as talk of national politics.

In some cases the issue of Europe and European politicians arose in relation to legislation or potential legislation that was threatening the livelihoods of certain young people. Young farmers in the UK and young ‘diables’ (fire-throwers) in Spain, for instance, were concerned to get their points of view about issues to do with their occupations into to the European political sphere.

N: There’s this European proposals that will regulate certain use of pyrotechnic material. And supposedly Spain must follow it…. In a way, they’re severely limiting what being a ‘diable’ means. Being a diable without being able to be among the people is just not being a diable at all…

X: And the law also talks about minors.

N: Yes, it says that those who are under 18 cannot use pyrotechnic material, which means all that the youth diable groups would have to cease to exist. It would erode many national traditions.

Moderator: And this is at a national or European level?

N: European.

X: But it’s in the Catalan Countries where fire is a strong component of traditional festivities… It’s not really an issue in Belgium, or wherever.
N: And that's why we organised a protest in Berga against this law proposal. We have to make sure that our precious cultural heritage isn't destroyed by some European directive. [Spain]

Such discussions do not indicate either a detachment from the political process or from the civic sphere. Participants in this group discussed how they used Facebook to connect and organise over issues such as this one. On the other hand, a small minority of the respondents felt more positively that European identity or identification was a way of avoiding aspects of national cultures and traditions that they wished to get away from or were critical of.

However, equally significantly, there was a separation in young people's minds between formal or traditional politics at a European level – which was generally despised – and grassroots connections with other young people across Europe. The world wide web and civic organisations more generally were seen as being able to give access to different views and perspectives from young people in other countries and to inform common struggles and debates. In the instance below a young Slovenian respondent describes how her civic organisation has enabled a cross-European discussion on the issue of the privatisation of Higher Education:

K: Basically we wanted to show that the process of privatization is not happening in Slovenia alone, that this is some wider trend of neoliberal politics in Europe and beyond. There are fights against privatization going on also in other areas…. [Therefore we need to] connect with others. So that they could support us and we could support them, so we can share our experience….For example Serbia, who were fighting for the same cause. They wanted to introduce to us the problem that is continuing in the background. So you don't stay isolated within national borders. Connecting is good... It was [also] good when an Erasmus exchange student from Spain told us her opinion on what happened in Spain. She said that they promised them delayed school fees but once school fees were introduced, she said, additions to the law were introduced and quietly, by stealth, privatization is happening step by step. She said that now there is some sort of segregation going on between people who can afford it and those who can't. [Young Blogger, Slovenia]

Finally, and supporting the assertions of many of the producers (section 2.2), most of the civic and/or political participation and engagement, in particular sustained engagement, described and identified across these focus groups, appeared to begin and to end off-line. What this means is that it is located in real communities or communities of interest that often do exist in real physical spaces and thrive on face-to-face contact, even if the internet has provided a space, a tool or a focal point for aspects of this engagement. More importantly, it means that the problems and issues debated and engaged with online usually exist in circumstances offline: the kinds of changes to society and the civic or political sphere that much of the engagement is aimed towards are changes that would affect the offline world, affecting the everyday lives of young people and those they associate with. Here again, we need to avoid the online/offline binary: the internet exists in the real offline world, it is a part of the world, rather than a separate space or a competitor with it. Its potential for supporting civic engagement should thus necessarily be viewed not separately but alongside the offline activities of young people.
3. CROSS-CUTTING CONCLUSIONS

As discussed in section one, the aim of CivicWeb was to study the expectations, assumptions and experiences of the different players associated with civic website provision for young people, and the relationships and connections between them. In doing so, we sought to evaluate the popular claim that the internet can provide an alternative and more vibrant public sphere for civic action, particularly for young people who are perceived to be disconnected from conventional politics. In the cross-national research of the project, this has also involved exploring differences in terms of social and historical contexts, intergenerational civic relations, as well as broader historical and national trends in relation to civic and political participation and interest amongst young people. Relationships between design and content, pedagogy and ideology, funding models and organisational ethos, national internet usage trends and various forms of civic action online have all been examined. These analyses have revealed national variations in some areas and fairly similar practices and connections in others. However, certain key patterns and themes emerge repeatedly across all national data and in our textual, audience and producer analyses. In pulling these together in this section, we seek to identify some more overarching conclusions and to draw out some general implications for practice and policy.

3. 1 Young People and the Online Civic Sphere in Europe

While the rhetoric of youth ‘empowerment’ and youth ‘voice’ was evident in a number of the interviews with producers the key challenge for all concerned was to find ways of reaching ‘hard to reach’ and disadvantaged young people, who are most at risk of exclusion from civil society and politics. Many of the websites claiming to represent youth voice remain in the control of older young people or adults, who are often the ones with permanent jobs or institutional affiliations. While some of these organisations consult with young people about the design of a site in the hope that this will make the site ‘cool’ or attractive to young users, and most employ young people as volunteers, only a tiny minority of organisations we have encountered cede control of content and design entirely to people in the 15-25 age range.

While most producers still see the importance of promoting their organisation or activities through traditional media channels (TV, newspapers, radio) there is a sizable minority of producers who view the internet as a challenge to the gate-keeping of old media, and who say their users come to their sites for an alternative and more open perspective. This view needs to be balanced against the experience of a number of young people, and findings from our survey of sites. These suggest that a large number of civic websites for youth still maintain a strong ‘gate-keeping’ function, albeit sometimes for quite understandable reasons to do with quality control and the need to safeguard users, and with a more diverse set of content producers than mainstream media.

Contrary to the view that there is nothing new in the politics taking place online, there is evidence that civic websites for young people are tapping into newer forms of civic and political participation such as ‘ethical consumption’. The question remains whether and how these are linked to traditional forms of political participation, and indeed to forms of offline activism associated with ‘new’ social movements. However, there is also still a tendency for some sites to be set up on a ‘build it and they will come’ model. This assumes that the
producers’ interest in an issue will be shared and reciprocated by various as-yet-unknown young people surfing the internet and stumbling on an attractive youth civic site. In fact, such sites are rarely heavily used over an extended period of time, unlike ones that have more concrete motivations such as the coming together of a community of young people who are linked by common bonds, many of which may derive from offline affiliations. In line with this finding, websites created by members of specific ‘specialist’ groups (based on religious, cultural or sub-cultural identity or locality) support a sense of belonging and ‘community’, and therefore tend to be more intensively and consistently used regardless of their design features.

As discussed in section 2.3, interest in civic and political websites appears to be stronger among older respondents to our survey (19-25 year olds rather than 15-18 year olds), those not living with their parents, youth who identify as religious and among girls and young women. This contradicts some commonly held perceptions, for instance that girls and young women are less motivated to participate politically than boys and men or that growing religious identification amongst minority communities across Europe is always and only a political and social problem.

Our research confirms that the internet has not yet been found to be a particularly good means of reaching young people who would not otherwise have been involved in civic or political organisations offline. Traditional offline approaches such as via youth workers and local youth groups are still the main points of contact for economically and socially excluded young people. This has serious implications for the allocation of European and other funding intended to galvanise participation in the civic and political sphere by young citizens. If a majority of those youth being targeted, catered for, reached or given chances to participate by online civic organisations are those already traditionally involved or interested in politics and the civic sphere, then attempts to bring traditionally excluded youth closer to participation in civic and political action would be better advised to use alternative, offline approaches, involving face-to-face outreach work.

There has also been a fear expressed about the potential impact of the online civic sphere on offline volunteering or political action. Some have worried that young people would desert activities like volunteering, demonstrations or voting in favour of signing online petitions and internet shopping. However, the majority of civic website producers in our sample do not see the internet civic sphere as a replacement for but as a complement to offline civic and political action. For many of them, engagement still begins and ends offline, with the internet sustaining and contributing to this. This was supported by data from our survey of young people and our focus groups, which all suggest that young people who are active online are also active offline, that those who are interested, engaged and participate online are also motivated to participate offline.

### 3.2 Motivating Civic and Political Participation

From young people’s perspectives and in their focus group testimonies, participation in the public sphere appears to be most successful when it is both peer-to-peer and enables opportunities for reciprocal engagement with those in power. Most youth civic organisations tend to offer one or the other, and the engagement with politicians is most often not reciprocal. This can be seen as a disincentive for young people to engage with formal
politics online. As several young people in our focus groups said: ‘why should we speak if no-one is listening?’

Most of the focus group respondents across all our national samples saw 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. A large proportion of respondents felt that there were things that needed to change but that they themselves could not change them. As we have noted, this lack of efficacy is often related to their feelings about the unresponsiveness, untrustworthiness and distance of politicians; their actual experiences of having participated; and their fears about how active participation or political critique might expose them as individuals.

We found few cases in our interviews of attractive website design or the latest interactive features motivating civic engagement and participation. This counters a familiar and entrenched view that it is by amusing and entertaining young people (on the internet as well as elsewhere) that you can attract their attention and encourage them to become engaged in civic initiatives. The most significant characteristic of the civic and political engagement we found among the focus groups is that it tends to focus predominantly on issues of immediate proximity for the participants. Individual and group identities, a sense of discrimination and/or current life situation are of central importance. The cost of living, housing and availability of jobs were named in several focus groups as reasons for becoming involved in a group or cause or as reasons that might motivate protest, whether on the internet or via offline means such as demonstrations. Additionally, there was a significant minority of young people in our focus groups, generally in the 19-25 year old range who were interested in and motivated by global issues such as democracy and good governance, climate change, militarism, sustainable development and international poverty and were taking part either virtually or face-to-face in campaigns which they felt would change society.

Civic and political interests are related, in a number of cases, to having a family and/or close community of relatives or friends that is interested in particular civic issues and concerns, be these concerned with region, language, traditional politics, religion or social justice. Many producers are aware of this and do not address their concerns to youth alone but to an intergenerational audience. Especially where the focus of attention is a global issue or a political one, younger people in civic organisations do not always distinguish between youth concerns and the concerns of other generations. In a number of cases also, local civic achievements, the experience of being active together and of group 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.

To sum up, the results or effects of active civic participation – whether online or offline - are frequently called into doubt by young people who raise serious questions about why governments do not respond when they demonstrate in large numbers against tuition fees and for better housing provision, for example, or against the government’s involvement in wars. Motivation to participate is most often reduced after seemingly ‘unsuccessful’ protests, although for some, the resulting anger leads to a sense of injustice and thence to further participation. By contrast, when young people are involved in civic activities that succeed in
making a meaningful difference to their immediate contexts (both on- and off-line) they seem to feel more confident in their capacity to change things, and to help achieve a better society.

3.3 Using the Internet Wisely: Suggestions for Civic Producers

While the internet is mostly regarded as a cheap method of disseminating information and making contact with young people, it is not always effective in these respects. As some producers pointed out, for a site to be known (and hence used) there needs to be a good deal of thought given to marketing and publicity. Most civic website producers have neither the time nor the money to adequately publicise their sites and hence the core of users remains relatively small. Indeed, a majority of the websites surveyed across the project function with a combination of one or two part-time paid employees and several voluntary staff. Many sites would cease to exist if the volunteers left. Others are not updated for months, because initial grants only funded the building of the site and not its updating and maintenance, which are crucial to success. There is a fairly high turnover of volunteer staff at the real or virtual offices of many of the civic websites surveyed and sometimes this leads to the closure of a site entirely. There is thus fairly high attrition of sites themselves and the picture changes from one year to the next.

Despite the availability of more or less interactive applications such as blogs, wikis, message boards, forums, video uploading, podcasts and so on, static websites composed primarily of written text and a few visual images are still generally the norm. Out of potentially ten interactive applications, most youth civic websites offer only an average of 2.5 and this includes photographic content and embedded You Tube videos. The possibility for young people to post their own content is far more rare. However, we should beware of assuming that this in itself is necessarily a bad thing.

Even amongst producers, there are differing views on this issue. Despite the actual absence of such features on most civic websites, some funders of such websites appear to think that complex and more expensive sites are always and automatically ‘better’ than their simpler counterparts. We would assert that this is categorically not the case, based both on the evidence from our producer discussions and from focus groups with users. Offering interactivity does not automatically mean that young people participate. We have found several instances of websites which have forums, user content upload facilities and message boards on general themes relating to Europe or more global issues which are under-utilised or merely full of spam. Forums, user generated content and other interactive applications have to be carefully explained, encouraged, motivated and managed. Internet jargon has to be clarified or avoided. The skills for the use of applications such as RSS feeds, videocasts or podcasts have to be taught, rather than being taken for granted. This takes planning, time and money for personnel that most youth civic organisations simply do not have. Many therefore feel it is better to provide a clear, helpful but static site with the possibility for emailing the organisation than to offer potentially off-putting or even counter-productive and damaging opportunities for ‘interaction’. Young people can sometimes be as intimidated by what they view as a ‘requirement’ to contribute original content as they are disappointed by the lack of possibilities for giving comments or interacting online. Our discussions with young people themselves clearly show that there has to be a real and ‘live’ issue or social and political context for young people to engage with: if not, even the best designed and well funded applications remain under-used.
We have, however, come across examples of good practice in relation both to organisational ethos and the use of new interactive applications for fostering user debate and participation. Generally these examples involve the extensive involvement of wide networks of young people effectively ‘training’ each other and moderating each other’s content or a much more close and critical focus on internet and information literacy on the part of producer teams. This focus on developing ‘internet literacy’ alongside ‘civic literacy’ can entail a relegation of traditional political concerns, at least temporarily.

For producers of political and civic websites, our research therefore suggests that considerable thought needs to go into the allocation of spending on the website. We have identified a tendency for significant amounts of money to be spent on websites without a clear conception of their function. This seems to be increasingly the case with regard to what some consider to be interactive features: while the assumption might be that such facilities make the organisation look good, a big expensive site isn’t necessarily better for the users. There is a need to think clearly about the function the website is intended to serve and to make sure that it is ‘fit to purpose’: this means looking beyond the latest gimmicks and beyond some politically correct sense that an organisation lives or dies by its website. Spending an entire grant on design and initial programming is also a mistake if it leads to neglect of other aspects. More money needs to be spent on moderating and maintaining, on proper ongoing staffing, not just on volunteers, and on publicity in other media.

3.4 Civic Life Online: A Brave New World?

Our research with producers and users challenges much of the currently popular hype about the internet being a completely safe and egalitarian space for participation. As we have seen, many users were concerned about the possibility of being ‘attacked online’. This was the case for many of the sites devoted to issues of sexuality and, in the case of Sweden, gender, where dealing with controversial issues of social justice could provoke strong and negative responses from some members of the public. In the Netherlands and the UK most notably, young first and second generation immigrants are forming civic organisations online to challenge prejudice both within and outside their communities. However, many of them are subjected to fierce and sometimes racist critique and flaming, sometimes by other organised rightwing groups online, thus showing that the internet is not necessarily a completely safe place for all young people to engage in civic debate. In Hungary, Roma sites attempt to avoid this situation by having closed membership or censoring posts from racist users.

Our research also challenges the notion that online civic action and offline civic action reside in separate realms, with separate participants. Many of the producers interviewed were at pains to connect online and offline politics and civic action explicitly, suggesting that they were never quite sure about the status of actions that took place solely online. Signing online petitions, or forwarding letters to big corporations – termed ‘one click activism’ by one producer and ‘feel good activism’ by another – were generally seen as very limited forms of interaction, and indeed as a substitute for more meaningful participation. On the other hand, most civic producers view the information gathering necessary for making up one’s mind about a particular cause, or the various forms of offline meeting, discussion and protest, as being supported and enhanced rather than replaced by the kinds of online actions offered in
polls or forums. This is confirmed by focus group discussions with young people who connect their offline and online participation, and do not see the internet as an entirely separate sphere but as feeding into offline organisations in the areas of formal politics, music, environmentalism or other campaigning. As this implies, offline civic-based or politically sympathetic friendships and comradeship can be strengthened and complemented online.

3.5 The significance of history, proximity and national context

Of course, one of the important factors inflecting our findings is that there are issues that are particularly acute at particular historical moments, or that take on different forms in different countries, according to national and historical contexts as well as international and national current events. For example, the sphere of politics is widely seen as dirty and corrupt in both Hungary and Slovenia, with a clear predisposition towards detaching civic organisations from politics. This means, ironically perhaps, that voting is not generally encouraged by youth civic sites in these countries, and that even party sites attempt to steer clear of connections with politics.

Crucially for those interested in European civic identity (cf. Tuzzi, Padovani and Nesti 2007), the notion of European citizenship and belonging is viewed in very different ways by young people in different countries. Concurrently, civic websites addressing pan-European youth issues, travel and integration are found to be more or less appealing. In the UK, for example, findings emerging from focus groups with young users suggest that European identity is not at all valued or highly developed, except amongst a small minority of politically left-wing and anti-authoritarian youth who see it as a positive identity which supersedes aspects of the national one that are seen as retrograde. In Slovenia, on the contrary, there appears to be a greater degree of positive feeling towards the idea of European citizenship amongst a range of youth.

With notable exceptions, most focus group participants usually displayed either a lack of knowledge with regard to European level politics or a sense of distrust about them. Many interviewees also seemed to lose their sense of motivation and affiliation to politics and the civic sphere (which we can sense at the national levels, and is even clearer at a local or regional level) when discussing Europe. Most of the civic and/or political participation and engagement, in particular sustained engagement, described and identified across our focus groups appears to begin and to end offline in local communities or communities of interest and identity, even if the internet has explicitly provided a space, a tool, or a focal point for aspects of this engagement. There were exceptions here, of course – notably among those website producers trying to promote the European Union or to organise against national elites. As far as we could ascertain, however, Europe as an entity and the European Union were not generally viewed as a ‘real’ or participatory communities or communities of interest by a majority of the producers and users we approached. In order to challenge this perception, much more work would need to be done in offline settings such as schools and colleges, youth groups, and via cultural activities and exchanges. While a few such initiatives exist, for instance the ECs e-Twinning initiative, far too much of this rhetoric is still virtual and does not connect to the offline lives of young people.
3.6 Doing Politics Online in Europe

The abiding question, then, is whether the internet is actually engaging young people who would not otherwise be involved in political and civic action. Ultimately, we have found little evidence that it is. Unsurprisingly, we found that social factors play a key role in internet use across the partner countries, albeit more in some than in others. Traditional demographic factors such as class, ethnicity, age and religion do 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 that of social class. In general, the internet emerges from our research as an important tool for young people who are already engaged in civic or political activities offline. Among young people who already play an active role in global or local political, religious or identity-based groups, the internet is increasingly seen as a central node or hub for political activities. This appears to be the case for groups as diverse as political parties' youth organisations, various kinds of established activist networks and for broader communities of civic interest. The internet is also an important resource for political, sexual, ethnic, regional or religious minorities; and in some notable instances (Banaji 2009, Bogner and Szakacs 2008, Kissau 2008), it functions to allow young people from such communities a space to question and enact identity, to debate notions of tradition, to discuss the meaning of culture and citizenship or to organise methods of participation and protest.

However, it is important not to overrate the significance of discussions taking place online or to homogenise the content and loci of those discussions which do take place. Not all civicly active young people participate in such discussions; the ones who do participate most often may do so sporadically; and there is evidence that civic discussions may take place between young people (or between people of all ages) on websites set up with the purpose of entertainment or social connectivity rather than civic or political change.

Even so, we have found further interesting exceptions, where the internet does seem to make a clear difference to individuals or groups of young people in terms of engagement with a wider civic and political sphere. For example, in a number of our partner countries, the internet is used by groups of young people as an alternative to mainstream media: young people seek for and put out perspectives and information not found in the mainstream press or broadcasting. The importance of the informational role played by civic websites was emphasised by users (‘I’d never have heard of that otherwise’) and by producers (‘there was no other way we could have told so many people about what we were doing/experiencing’) and must not be underestimated. Although here again there is a question of how this relates to action, the significance of having a freer flow of information and a less rigid hierarchy in terms of who can express and broadcast civic and political ideas online should not be downplayed. In countries such as Turkey where the authorities have begun to systematically censor and regulate the online sphere for political motives, the loss of this freedom highlights its importance still further.

Meanwhile, the use of the internet as an arena for socially conscious shopping – which obviously plays on the internet’s qualities as a medium of shopping and marketing par excellence – does embody a growing and relatively novel form of civic engagement. The question of how this relates to offline action and to social or political change is another matter, which needs further research. We have also found evidence that the internet enables young people to take on and refine their role as monitorial citizens – for instance, by tracking
elections, keeping abreast of privacy issues, discussing, photographing and publicising police behaviour, debating civil liberties and getting behind the scenes in conflict situations. In special cases such as movements around file-sharing and the free downloading of music, the internet itself can also become the focus of and reason for civic action. Young people who take part in such civic actions are not always from amongst those already or necessarily active in civic or political campaigns offline.

3.7 Conclusion: Challenges for Research, Policy and Practice

Most of these cross-cutting findings underline the need for examination from different perspectives and for the kind of multi-disciplinary empirical research we have undertaken here. They also point to the necessity of challenging an unduly utopian view of the role the internet can play in civic participation, as well as simplistic generalisations regarding youth interests, concerns and activities in Europe. These cautionary conclusions also have important implications for future policy and practice, not least in respect of funding.

There is also clearly a need for research that takes account of the changing nature and uses of the internet itself. CivicWeb was designed in the age of what is now commonly known as ‘Web 1.0’ – with a general idea of the web as a matter of individual or linked sites put up largely by established organisations, often with quite substantial funding, almost as a means of advertising for the work they were doing. This is to some extent an old ‘mass media’ model. Earlier research, such as the work of Kathryn Montgomery and her colleagues (2004) describing youth civic organisations online in the US accorded with this approach, as did emerging work on politically active young people’s use of civic websites in Sweden (Dahlgren 2007, Olsson 2007). In the interim, however, more interactive and ‘social’ networks have emerged online. While we can certainly be skeptical about an overly optimistic view of the possibilities of ‘Web 2.0’, it is clear that instant messaging and social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, as well as Wikis and other kinds of ‘social software’ do represent a significant shift, and offer different possibilities for participation in particular (Jenkins, 2006).

Even so, these new developments raise difficult methodological issues for future research. Even if we had been able to explore these emerging and potentially participatory media, how would we do so? How would we find instances of civic activity in the breadth and depth of MySpace or Facebook, for example? What would our sample consist of? Our research has addressed some of these issues, but only in the context of sites put up by more or less formal or already-constituted social/political groups. Trying to track civic and political participation in domains like Facebook is increasingly important but also hugely complex. It also begs a further theoretical question that has been relevant throughout our project, that is: what is the meaning of ‘civic’? And how does the ‘civic’ relate to the ‘political’ or the ‘social’?

As we found, the term ‘civic’ does not simply translate across national contexts: in some cases, even on our project, there has been no obvious word to use in different languages. In English, it has the same linguistic origin as the term ‘civil’ (as in ‘civil society’), but it appears to have rather different connotations. It can also be seen to be affiliated to the term ‘citizenship’, although this itself has several competing definitions. Even in the literature in English, it becomes clear that people have very different criteria for defining what counts as
civic. In some cases, it appears to be a synonym for politics; although in others it seems to be something 'pre-political', a kind of engagement that is about collective identifications, rather than individual ones – but identifications that are not yet articulated in political terms, or indeed adversarial terms. In other cases, ‘civic’ seems to be much more nebulous or general, so that volunteering to help the elderly people, or picking up litter in the street, become forms of ‘civic’ action. Yet while such activities might be seen to constitute what many people think of as being a ‘good citizen’, and perfectly good in their own right, they are not necessarily ‘civic’ in a more political sense.

In talking about the notion of ‘civic’, people often seem to have recourse to the notion of ‘common good’. But who defines the common good, and who gets excluded when we define civic in this way (Banaji 2008)? This question raised some serious dilemmas for our project in terms of what to include or exclude from the samples of websites and groups being researched. For example, there are many things that go on in religious communities and hence on religious sites that we might want to call civic – but would we include all Christian or Muslim sites as civic sites? A more pertinent example might be that of extreme right sites: again, a lot of the rhetoric on those sites is about maintaining that they are being civic, that they are absolutely about the common good – with the common good defined here in terms of ethnic and national purity. Indeed, the way these sites work is often very similar to the way more mainstream sites work. But many people would vehemently reject the idea that they could be described as civic.

Pushing this question further, we have found it necessary to ask: what counts as civic participation? There are many kinds of social participation – and some forms of participation that young people engage in are just not recognized by adults, while others are positively denigrated or seen as threatening (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). So, do we count, for example, so called ‘ethical consumption’ as civic participation (Scammel 2000, Banaji and Buckingham 2009)? Is signing an online petition, or responding to someone on a message-board, civic participation? Is smashing the windscreen of an SUV or the window of a Starbucks coffee shop, or setting fire to a vivisection lab civic participation?

Behind this is the real danger that – far from encouraging civic participation – some online activity might be seen as a safe and acceptable substitute for it. So, this argument runs, brief and episodic participation via email petitions or Facebook statuses or message boards might allow us, and particularly young people, to feel good about having done something, even to feel ‘empowered’, but does it really make much difference to the offline world? Might it not enable them to feel that they have done enough, and that no further action is necessary?

Young people are repeatedly encouraged to ‘have their say’, but many of the young people in our research argued that nobody in a traditional position of political power is really listening in a systematic and respectful manner – or, even if they are, they are not actually doing anything positive in response. We have, of course, found a few examples of political will to take on board young people’s concerns, particularly within local government projects, but a greater number of cases of censorship or negative reaction in response to young people organising on- and offline. When it becomes apparent that this is all that happens when participation does take place, it can be easy to fall back into a kind of cynicism or apathy.
Finally, as some other research in this field has suggested (cf. Coleman 2008), there may be a danger here also of assuming that participation is always a good thing in itself – better than non-participation – and that young people are somehow at fault if they choose not to participate. But looking at some of the ways in which people interact online or some of the forms of offline participation that this may lead to (such as racist violence) can we really be so sure (Banaji 2008)? We should look at the question of what young people are being invited to participate in before judging participation to be always better than non-participation. This should be a serious matter of debate for civic educators, policy makers and practitioners.

In line with this discussion, a key question that has run throughout our project is how we avoid normative assumptions about what responsible young people should be doing. Looking at the academic and policy literature, and at websites and at the debates around this issue, there is clearly a dominant conception of what young people should be doing online that is not so different from the conceptions that dominated debates about offline participation in a pre-internet age. Thus, there are implicit rules about good behaviour, implicit constructions of identity, a favouring of certain kinds of responsible orientations – and these are embedded in the designs of websites, in how young people are addressed, in the kinds of (limited) participation that are invited, and in the way actual participation on the sites is moderated. Additionally in particular national contexts across the project there are further disavowals – for instance of religion or politics – or specific affiliations that need to be made in order to support particular national civic identities.

The problem with this discourse is that certain kinds of activity do not get recognised as civic, or as in any way valuable; and more particularly that certain people’s modes of expression – the forms of activity that are adopted by particular social groups – tend to get ignored or marginalised (Deliverable 16). While our research clearly shows that the internet is an excellent tool at the disposal of those already interested in politics, it is much less effective in reaching out to and engaging those who are not already engaged. This is partly because of the nature of the medium, but also because those who are less likely to be engaged are also those who are less likely to enjoy good access to the medium. While this is changing, internet provision is still largely governed by the logic of the market and the logic of markets is to target those who are already well served (Warschauer 2004, Fairlie 2006).

As such, the danger is that the closure of offline civic or political groups and community youth centres in favour of e-groups ends up reinforcing what Henry Jenkins and colleagues (2006) have called the ‘participation gap’. In terms of rhetoric on the websites in question, this becomes self-confirming – a matter of preaching to the converted. Understandably, as discussed earlier, most sites are addressed to those who are already engaged – and this is apparent in assumptions about what they know, what they are likely to be interested in, and what is likely to motivate them. Casual visitors, perhaps also less well-educated, less middle-class visitors, are far less likely to be addressed or drawn in. Thus, problematically, we must face the fact that the internet might actually reinforce particular forms of exclusion – that it might become a forum where young people are invited to participate, but only if they follow rules set by those already in power, and only if they behave according to certain adult middle-class norms of responsibility and good manners. And it is likely that many already marginalised young people will refuse or resist such expectations.
In light of that, the question then becomes, not ‘can the internet re-engage young people?’, can it enable them to participate when they weren’t participating before, but rather ‘how can the internet engage with other movements within society, or how can those other movements use technology, to bring about change?’ It becomes a question not about technology, but about social and cultural processes.
References


Appendix 1: List of Reports

Deliverable 4: Young People, The Internet, and Civic Participation

Deliverable 6: Websites and Civic Participation: A European Overview

Deliverable 8: Uses of the Web for Civic Participation

Deliverable 13: The Production of Civic Websites for Young People

Deliverable 14: Qualitative Analysis of Civic Participation Websites

Deliverable 16: Web-based Civic Participation by Young People in Europe