

1. Introduction

Disengagement from mainstream politics has become an issue of widespread concern. The destabilisation of international politics following 11 September 2001 and the resurgence of the extreme right in European politics over the last year have concentrated many people's minds on the need for an active defence of democratic citizenship and decision-making. However, the problem is a long-term one, caused by the gradual decline of voter turnout and identification with political parties, in particular by younger generations.

Dramatic events, such as the French Presidential election in May 2002, still generate energetic responses – hundreds of thousands of French citizens took to the streets to make clear their opposition to the Front Nationale. But in the UK, the victory of three British National Party councillors in Burnley on 2 May 2002 was greeted with a degree of resignation. Commentators conceded that the result reflected both complacency among those who had not voted and a powerful 'anti-politics' vote from many of those who had.

Although the Local Government Association reported a 4 per cent rise in local election turnout in 2002, the total turnout was still only around 40 per cent. In line with a 10–15 year trend, the lowest turnout was among 18–25-year-olds. This 'switching off' from electoral politics among the young is seen as further justification for the numerous government task forces to investigate and address voter apathy, which include work by the Electoral Commission and the Children and Young People's Unit. These initiatives have so far failed to appreciate that low youth turnout is a symptom of a far deeper problem: disempowerment.

Until this root cause is understood and addressed, efforts to reverse the electoral trend are unlikely to succeed.

Our research shows it is misleading to suggest that politics doesn't matter to young people. They are often very committed to single-issue campaigns and active in civil society or community life. Concluding that your vote does not count is very different from believing that politics in the broader sense does not matter. In this respect, young people are not vastly different from others: turnout has fallen across every age group in the last 20 years, apart from those over 65. Young people are among a growing contingent of the population who make the fairly rational decision that an individual vote cast once every four years makes little difference to the political landscape.

Fewer and fewer people are voting, and those that do vote leave it later and later in their lives. In the long term, this 'lag effect' presents a major threat to representative democracy. The pattern of young people's disengagement is fundamentally different from that of any preceding generation. Consequently, they require radically different patterns of engagement. The challenge is more than simply to make voting easier and more convenient; it means tackling the underlying failure of the political system to link voter engagement with realistic expectations of change.

This report asks how information and communication technologies (ICTs) can strengthen the link between young people and the democratic process. Our research has found that there are characteristics of new and emerging technologies that make them particularly valuable allies in this agenda, but to succeed technology must be used as more than a gimmick. Equally, there are inherent problems with ICTs that require careful management and negotiation to prevent them from inhibiting their potential. Politics is not akin to Pokemon – it will never be here today and gone tomorrow. Part of the solution may lie in innovative uses of ICTs, if they can enable young people to engage more effectively with political issues, processes of public decision-making and civil society. Information technology is pervasive in most young people's lives in a way that formal politics is not. By yoking the two together, there is a chance that a more reciprocal relationship between citizen and state can be cultivated. If participation and involvement begins during youth, it is more likely to be sustained throughout adulthood.

The report analyses the major issues associated with using ICTs in this context, and illustrates them through detailed case studies of projects that engage young people in a range of ways. The issues are:

- *Apathy*
How should the terms of young people's political disengagement really be understood?
- *Access*
What needs to be available, and on what terms, in order for ICTs to serve young people's engagement fairly and effectively?
- *Safety*
What risks do ICTs and the internet present to young people, and how can they be managed?
- *Empowerment*
What does an overall commitment to empowering and supporting young people in engaging with politics and society involve?

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for policy and practice.

Democracy is based on the idea of engagement in dialogue and decision-making between equals, yet for young people something is lost between the rhetoric and the reality. Without the franchise, efforts to engage those aged under 18 rarely amount to more than tokenism. Inviting young people to take part in consultation exercises or sit on youth forums pays lip service to promoting participation but frequently fails to deliver. ICTs can enable young people to engage with adults on more equal terms and reduce some of the inequalities of power, self-expression and access that currently hinder their public involvement. For example, our case studies show that the anonymity of the internet can encourage young people to express politically sensitive or contentious issues that might not be brought out in face-to-face situations. It can also neutralise some of the advantages associated with age, race, faith, gender, ability and background. Anonymity can help to build

confidence and empowerment, but exploiting ICTs to promote this is a staging post and not a long-term solution in itself.

The ultimate goal is to create a climate in which the input of young people is not only valued, but also translated into genuine influence and responsibility. ICTs could be instrumental in achieving this, but to be effective they require a strong underlying commitment to promoting young people's participation in public life. This means that individuals and organisations will have to reconfigure their relationship to young people and incorporate them into systems and processes previously reserved for adults. It will involve recognition across all sectors of public life that young people are entitled to make an input into the mechanisms that govern them and that, if their opinions are to be canvassed, then their responses cannot be ignored.

Our research shows that many young people are developing innovative and more relevant ways of using technology to empower themselves and engage with political culture. Our case studies show that in many cases young people have been quick to capitalise on the principles of interaction made possible by ICTs. They are using them to share knowledge, power and responsibility across networks, often in ways that preserve their informality and flexibility. In the light of these examples, the bigger question becomes: How might these developments help to change civic culture and the wider opportunities offered by governance to citizens and young people?

Ultimately, ICTs must become the tool for changing the identity of political institutions themselves. ICT initiatives that are better designed and used strategically rather than simply being 'bolted on' as prosthetics should help enable the kind of organisational renewal necessary to endow political systems with relevance and meaning. This applies not just to young people, but for the whole of a rapidly changing society.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this report show that some features of new technologies can encourage greater participation if they are used in a way that engages and empowers young people. Although the overall picture is positive, there are still significant barriers to this agenda being taken forward.

The internet is only one among many possible technology applications currently being used to promote engagement and participation. All the case studies profiled in this report have been web- and internet-based, but have made little or no use of the other applications of ICTs. There is huge scope to extend the role of mobile technology and digital television.

Even more important, harnessing the potential and opportunities that ICTs can provide remains a sporadic and fairly isolated practice. This report has highlighted some innovative case studies, but such examples need to be scaled up and replicated more extensively. The following recommendations provide practical ways for taking this agenda forward.

The absolute precondition is a commitment to promoting young people's political engagement and participation in decision-making and civil society. Without this commitment, ICT strategies amount to little more than 'bolted-on' prosthetics and will be interpreted as such by young people.

Once this commitment is in place, numerous things can be done to promote the role of technology in encouraging engagement and participation.

In the short term

- 1 Government, via either the prime minister or the ministers with specific responsibility for young people, should publicly commit itself to finding and developing effective strategies, including the use of ICTs, to increase political engagement among young people. This goal should be a priority in any responses to the work of the Electoral Commission or similar bodies.
- 2 The government should fund the development of a toolkit that will enable anyone with an interest in promoting young people's political engagement (such as public servants, teachers, youth workers, businesses, parents and young people themselves) to develop a successful ICT strategy.

The toolkit would emphasise the importance of:

- thinking about the context in which the technology will be used
- allowing young people to own the content of any initiative by including them in the design and maintenance of it
- including interactive features such as chatrooms, noticeboards and email, so that the social uses of technology become coupled with a more political agenda
- considering young people's safety, particularly when using online technologies
- delivering feedback
- linking participation to tangible goals and outcomes so that participation results in empowerment
- integrating ICT initiatives with other schemes and programmes designed to promote engagement and participation, such as youth forums and councils.

The toolkit will also provide some examples of good practice and successful approaches that could potentially be scaled up and replicated. This toolkit should be made available on the DfES website, but a paper version should also be available to interested parties free of charge.

3 The government should establish NET:ENGAGE – a network of young people throughout the country who evaluate ICT initiatives aimed at promoting young people’s engagement. The NET:ENGAGE officials should draw up their own evaluation criteria, which might include:

- the appropriateness of language, tone and content
- the use of good layout and design, including the ease of navigation through the site
- the ratio of young-people-owned content to adult-owned content
- the range and effectiveness of interactive features
- the incentives for participating
- the effectiveness of the initiative in promoting the views of young people and ensuring they are included within the decision-making agenda
- how much fun it is.

Initiatives that score highly would be rewarded with the equivalent of a ‘kitemark’, reflecting a strong commitment to promoting political participation through technology.

4 All government websites should include at least one page aimed specifically at young people, and a minimum 75 per cent of the content must be designed, owned and managed by young people themselves.

5 In order to achieve this, the government should run an annual, national competition inviting young people to design these webpages. Entering this competition could be included within the curricula for design technology and ICT, although it should not be limited to schools. Youth clubs and other facilities providing ICT access for young people should be encouraged to submit entries and the winning page(s) will be incorporated into the national government websites.

- 6 Government should extend its example of producing versions of consultation and other documents, where appropriate, designed specifically for young people. The 2002 green paper on reforming 14–19 education included a version produced specifically for 14–19-year-olds.
- 7 Government should also fund the creation of a citizenship portal. Designed to enhance the forthcoming citizenship curriculum, the site could be used as a teaching resource, but would also provide links to all the initiatives awarded the NET:ENGAGE kitemark. These initiatives should be accredited within the curricula to which they are most relevant – citizenship, ICT, and so on – so that students could participate in the initiatives as part of their study programme.
- 8 The extent to which young people have used ICT to engage with politics, decision-making and civic society should be reflected in the National Record of Achievement. The National Curriculum guidance on citizenship and ICT should be reviewed to include effective engagement in public and community decision-making using ICTs.
- 9 The Connexions Smartcard (due to be launched by the government shortly) should be used to reward young people who use ICTs as a means of political engagement. Having logged on to an accredited website, users would be prompted to enter their Connexions Smartcard identification number. Having contributed to the initiative (for instance, by taking part in an online debate, voting in a straw poll, completing an online survey or posting a message) they would receive a certain number of ‘participation points’. Accumulated points could later be redeemed against a variety of services (such as entry to leisure and sports facilities or cinemas) or products (such as CDs, computer games or mobile phone top-up cards).
- 10 The location of free ICT facilities should be reviewed and refined to reflect the kinds of environments that young people like and

Logged off?

spend significant amounts of time in. This might involve giving young people free access to technology in cinemas, shopping malls, leisure centres and youth shelters.

In the medium term

- 1 The implications of the young people's e-democracy agenda for third generation mobile technology needs to be investigated more fully by government and the industry, in conversation with young people.
- 2 The popularity of text messaging and telephone voting (made popular by programmes such as *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*) could be harnessed to political effect. Given young people's interest in single-issue politics, mobile phones could be used to vote in referendums on key issues of the day, providing certain outcomes could be guaranteed as a result.
- 3 Similarly, government and the relevant industries need to consider the role that digital and interactive television might play in supporting greater youth participation in the e-democracy agenda.
- 4 The computer industry must invest in the development of more sophisticated firewalls and walled gardens which are able to distinguish between sites that are unsuitable or inappropriate for young people and those that are valuable educational resources. This might involve registering all pornographic or potentially offensive sites with a URL that indicates the nature of the content, for example, with the suffix '.adult'. A wider debate about public risk, youth, parental and community responsibility needs to be launched in order to increase awareness of the issues and develop a more robust consensus on the need for appropriate safeguards and balance.
- 5 The Audit Commission should review the effectiveness of local authority arrangements for consulting and involving young people in local democracy and programmes to improve service quality and delivery.

- 6 Central and local government should investigate ways in which lessons for practice and policy in youth engagement can be learned from other countries with a strong record in engaging young people and link such lessons to NET:ENGAGE and the citizenship portal.

If implemented, these suggestions would not only enable young people to engage with politicians and decision-makers more effectively, but would also enable adults to relate to young people better and on their own terms. Technology can increase the number of points of contact between a young citizen and political institutions. With such multiple inputs, those in authority will eventually have to share control over the outputs more widely. The result, far from undermining formal politics and governance, should endow it with a meaning and relevance that it appears to lack for young and old alike.

If the outcome of implementing these proposals is a more engaging, participatory and responsive political system, in which interest in politics and civic society can be cultivated early and sustained for life, then the implications for the future of democracy can only be positive.