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Youth Participation in a Government Program: Challenges in E-Democracy

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Abstract

Declining youth participation in civic affairs has raised the issue of youth disengagement. This paper explores the use of web-based and social networking technologies for the purpose of engaging young people in civic affairs to better inform government decision making. It is based on a field study in two regions of NSW where young people (aged 9-18) participated in an experimental online consultation about youth projects to be funded by the Department of Community Services (DoCS). Several strategies for youth engagement and consultation were implemented and tested including an online interactive game, social networking technologies, local radio and TV, and school newsletters announcements. The findings question the youth disengagement thesis and demonstrate that purposefully-designed and carefully targeted engagement strategies – in both electronic and physical spaces – do attract and engage young people in Government decision making. The paper discusses the challenges of youth online participation and concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords

Online participation, e-participation, e-democracy, youth participation, young people, social networking

INTRODUCTION

New generations of citizens are growing up in the digital era where the Internet, information and communication technologies (ICT), social networking and mobile technologies are an essential part of their lives, in the way they behave and socially engage. Technologies have become their lives. The high rate of technology adoption by young people in the Western world is creating unprecedented opportunities to increase their online participation in civic, consultative and deliberative processes. This in turn may assist in building new relations between young citizens and government institutions, leading to new forms of democratic governance (Loader, 2007).

E-democracy is an emerging field which denotes an expanding range and transformation of citizen involvement in democratic and deliberative processes enabled and mediated by ICT (Gronlund, 2003; Tambouris et al., 2007). Unlike broadcast media that widely disseminate news and information to be consumed by citizens, the Internet and social networking technologies enable interactive modes of engagement and multidimensional information flows. They also stimulate peer-to-peer content creation and dissemination and creative expression. Citizens can connect with each other and with their elected representatives and governments (Tambouris et al., 2007). E-

democracy embraces the ideal of a free, non-coercive, inclusive and meaningful participation by citizens in politics and civic affairs (Sanford & Rose, 2007).

E-democracy has a particular appeal to young citizens as they are likely to be highly competent in ICT and immersed in the Internet and also largely disenchanted with traditional politics (Ward, 2008). Moreover, the extent to which young people are engaged in public affairs and deliberations is considered an indicator of democratic health (Carpini et al., 2004). The challenge for e-democracy in Australia and other democracies is to advance knowledge about youth participation and embark on a transformative course of building, developing and systematically assessing both the new online public spaces and innovative ways to attract and engage young participants in civic affairs on a larger scale (Coleman, 2008).

This paper takes up this challenge by contributing to better understanding of youth online engagement strategies and their effects based on a field study of experimental youth online consultation in the “Better Futures” program in New South Wales (NSW). The “Better Futures” program funds youth projects up to \$30,000 throughout NSW. The youth online consultation project (Dec. 2008 – May 2009), the first of its kind in Australia, was commissioned by the Minister for Youth (The Hon Graham West MP) and the NSW Department of Community services (DoCS). The project explored and tested the use of web-based and online social networking technologies for the purpose of engaging young people (aged 9-18) in making decisions about expenditure in the “Better Futures” program in their local areas (the Central Coast and North Coast) (Hull et al., 2009). The field study investigated the deployment of different engagement strategies and the resulting behaviour and activities by young people: their attraction to and involvement in consultation.

This paper aims to improve understanding of youth online civic engagement and more specifically to assess different strategies for engagement and consultation based on the field study results. This is achieved by first presenting the literature review of e-participation and e-democracy (second section), then by describing the research method and the field study (in the third section) and by presenting and discussing field results (fourth section). Finally, the paper discusses the challenges of youth online participation and concludes with suggestions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-Participation

Participation is generally understood to refer to joining in, either in the sense of taking part in a discussion or activity, or having a role in decision making. Electronic participation (e-participation) refers to participation enabled or mediated by information and communication technologies (ICT) and is usually associated with some form of political deliberation or decision making (Sanford & Rose, 2007). Participation by citizens in politics and civic affairs is considered important for many reasons. Sanford and Rose (2007) find three themes in the literature:

- A participative imperative – the assumption that citizens have an intrinsic right to participate in public policy, especially when it involves their interests
- Instrumental justification – consultation with, and participation by, stakeholders can be instrumental in enabling more effective policy and government
- Technology focus – where ICT is seen to have the potential to improve participation by increasing inclusion, enabling dissemination, providing a forum to contribute and so on.

The focus on participation has thus shifted to e-participation or online participation. E-participation can be approached from the perspective of satisfying both the citizens’ need for being heard and involved in the democratic process, and the need of governments and administrative bodies to devise new mechanisms for promoting and encouraging public consultation. Citizens can connect with each other and with their elected representatives and governments (Tambouris et al., 2007). Being a citizen, or citizenship, is characterized as “a set of values, symbols, experiences, imagination and identification which can provide meaning for political action and behaviour” and includes a balance between peoples sense of rights and obligations (Loader 2007 p. 5).

E-participation grew out of an emerging field called electronic democracy (e-democracy) which has a wide variety of definitions in the literature, from being simply synonymous with electronic voting to covering a much broader range of activities where citizens can be involved in democratic processes and decision making utilising ICT (Gronlund, 2003; Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005; Tambouris et al., 2007). E-democracy itself is related to a field known as e-government which refers to the online access to, and delivery of, government services to citizens (Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005).

There is a growing body of diverse literature on e-democracy, youth online participation and technological infrastructure in disciplines ranging from ICT and information systems to social studies, political science, and

public policy (see e.g. Saebo et al., 2008). Numerous theoretical studies of e-democracy and youth participation explore models and principles of deliberative democracy relevant for the electronic public sphere (Chambers, 2003; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001; Habermas, 1989). They define conditions for free, non-coercive, rational and inclusive debate and deliberative processes. Critical issues related to access, equality, education, communicative competence, and lack of guidelines and norms are raised calling for further empirical research. These among others are the motivations for increasing research on e-democracy and youth e-participation in disciplines as diverse as political science, communication studies, technology studies, information science, information systems, computer science, sociology and social work, and more (Tambouris et al., 2007).

Numerous studies examine barriers to e-participation (Loader, 2007; Tambouris et al., 2007). They include: Citizens' lack of trust in political institutions that their contributions will be taken seriously and lack of commitment from politicians and government to take into account citizen contributions or to interact with citizens via ICT (politico-strategic barriers); organisational and legal barriers such as difficulty in adapting existing structures to accommodate participation through electronic media, shortages of skills and resources, constraints set by existing legislation around privacy; social barriers which include behavioural patterns, cultural attitudes, lack of political engagement, and information and technological illiteracy and unequal access to technology; technological barriers such as infrastructure deficiencies and lack of specifically designed tools; and deployment barriers including lack of guidelines and support for e-participation tools, lack of experience of large scale implementations and insufficient knowledge exchange between research and practice (Tambouris et al., 2007).

Young people face additional barriers. They are often excluded from the political process and denied rights adults take for granted (Bessant, 2003), thus they have participation barriers arising from their status as young people\

ICT in e-participation

E-participation is enabled by the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) embracing a wide range of software applications, products, and tools including discussion forums and e-lists, e-petitioning tools, negotiation, voting and referenda software etc. (Tambouris et al., 2007). It is perceived, however, that there is a lack of specific tools to support and enhance e-participation (Gronlund, 2003).

Early e-participation efforts have been based upon traditional government and policy making frameworks with centralised hierarchical structures, one-to-many communications and "push" models of interaction. These approaches treat the Internet as just another tool for the same kind of information broadcasting as traditional media rather than harnessing its potential as a distinctive many-to-many communication space that may re-configure social relations (Flew, 2005; Flew & Young, 2004). Internet can enable multi-level and directional modes of communication where users "can become authors, dispatchers, receivers, and controllers of communication" rather than passive receivers of information (Tomkova, 2009: p49). There is a growing use of newer technologies such as chat, electronic discussion forums, group decision support systems, blogs, wikis and other Web 2.0 developments (Sanford & Rose, 2007).

The phrase "Web 2.0" became popular after the first O'Reilly MediaWeb 2.0 conference in 2004, thus it is a relatively new. Web 2.0 has come to mean an internet platform which focuses on services, not packaged software. It involves and trusts users as co-developers of content and sometimes of applications, and harnesses the collective intelligence of all users. It facilitates communication, information sharing, interoperability, and collaboration. Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development of applications such as social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies (O'Reilly, 2007; Virkus, 2008). Unlike the broadcast media that disseminates news and information, the Internet and social networking technologies enable interactive modes of engagement and multidimensional information flows. Citizens can connect with each other and with their elected representatives and governments (Tambouris et al., 2007).

Youth participation

Children and young people¹ are often perceived as "apprentice" or "incomplete citizens" (Matthews, 2001) or "citizens-in-the-making" (Collin, 2008). Their participation in politics and civic affairs is often viewed as a privilege rather than a right. This is usually based on perceptions that children and young people are not yet capable of participating and on uncertainty about appropriate ways for them to participate (Matthews, 2001). Coleman (2008) poses the alternative view of youth as "autonomous e-citizens" who can harness the openness and creativity, the "anarchy" of the Internet for their own purposes.

¹ While Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines 'children' as persons up to the age of 18, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) commonly uses the age group 0-14 years for children and 15-24 years for youth although this does not necessarily apply to all their output (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Works that do propose youth participation often focus on participation as a solution for a range of social problems and use the idea as a proxy for extending the management of young people rather than improving their opportunities for democratic participation. As a result much of the youth participation literature has a narrow definition of participation as involvement in community, cultural, voluntary or educational opportunities. Even in government sponsored “Youth Roundtables” there is no commitment or requirement for government to act upon the recommendations of participants (Bessant, 2003).

There is a perception that young people have become disengaged from political processes and other civic affairs (Bennett, 2008). Evidence for this is cited in the reluctance of young people to vote in elections and the rising age of membership of political parties. Recent attitude surveys reveal young people distrust politicians and political processes (Loader, 2007). A recent news article reported that over 20% of Australians aged from 18-24 are not even registered to vote (Hudson, 2009). Loader (2007) however suggests changes such as globalization, individualization, deinstitutionalization, increased mobility, consumerism and new media such as the Internet may serve to disguise participation. Young people may be participating in ways less visible to their elders, engaging in “single issue political campaigns and the politics of lifestyle, environment, global justice, anti-poverty and what have been described as the “identity project”” (Loader 2007 p. xii). Collin (2008) summarises this as young citizens being mobilised by causes or issues rather than the state. These issues are more likely to be centred on new social movements and advocacy networks rather than the traditional associations of unions, political parties or churches.

An alternative view is that it is not young people who have become disaffected with political, participation and engagement, but politicians and others involved in traditional citizenship processes that have distanced themselves from young people. By failing to understand or relate to the ways in which society and therefore young peoples’ lives have changed and the important role of new media in these changes, politicians miss the potential development of young people’s engagement and participation, and therefore political self efficacy, which these media may enable (Buckingham, 2007; Loader, 2007). This does not mean to say that new media are an end in themselves but that they have potential to enhance participation by encouraging young people to interact with others in the broader civic arena and to engage in relevant social matters in new and innovative ways. Youth culture is heterogeneous and contextualised in use of new media which can be seen to both facilitate and inhibit democratic participation (Vromen, 2007).

Youth online participation, the use of the Internet and especially new social media technologies raise many issues for practice and research. The rationale behind the NSW consultation project was to investigate ways of increasing youth participation in government decision making and processes utilising tools we know young people are already using to participate in other arenas such as services, shopping, news and social networking. The aim of this project, therefore, was to explore whether children and young people could be encouraged to participate in consultation and active decision making on youth initiatives in their region using online technologies, in particular Web 2.0 social networking tools. This paper reports on the field study of youth online consultation in this project.

METHODOLOGY

Background: Youth consultation in the “Better Futures” program

The funds available under the “Better Futures” programme, a policy under the NSW Minister for Youth, administered by DoCS, are intended for youth project (in amounts of \$30,000 or less) in different NSW regions. DoCS selected two regions in which to experiment with online youth consultation about projects it would fund in 2009-2010. They were both regional communities with a mixture of urban and rural populations, the NSW North Coast and Central Coast regions. The challenge for the project team was to develop and implement different strategies to attract young people in the two regions and engage them in online consultation within three months and propose practical suggestions to DoCS for real expenditure in 2009-2010. The Project Team consisted of representatives of several stakeholders, including: DoCS (Project Funder), TALC (Project Coordinator), UNSW (Researchers), Office of the NSW Minister for Youth (Project Manager), NSW Commission for Children and Young People, and Small World: Social Media Experts (Web 2.0 specialist creative team). The project used an online portal for project management. The Project Team made detailed plans, monitored the progress and approved the final report (Hull, et al., 2009).

Research approach

In order to achieve our research aims – improve understanding of youth online engagement and assess different strategies for engagement and consultation – we conducted the field study throughout the natural course of the online consultation project. The field study enabled us to become immersed into the social settings and observe firsthand the activities of actors (Gorman & Clayton, 2005; Neuman, 2003).

The field study of youth consultation in the targeted regions took place from mid-January to mid-April 2009. It involved observations in both electronic and physical spaces, interviews, data collection via the Internet and social networking sites, reports by Small World Social Media Experts. It began with an examination of social networking sites, investigating the presence of young people from the targeted regions. It was found that young people from both regions have a strong presence online in social networking sites but little presence on local websites, blogs or forums. Sites such as YouTube indicated a strong youth presence for the region with user-generated content easily found. MySpace and Facebook both had active regionally-focused groups and pages. These findings informed the development of a strategy for reaching young people both face-to-face and online and assisted in attracting them to a consultation site where they were invited to express their preferences.

The field study then followed the six stages of the youth consultation project:

Stage one: Interviews

Eighty “vox pop” video interviews were undertaken with 80 young people along the Central Coast and in Port Macquarie between January 30 and February 3 2009. Young people were interviewed in their natural environments: around schools, in playgrounds, on beaches, in parks and entertainment sites. Each young person was required to take an information sheet which provided information about the project and required them to get written permission from their parents before the information they provided and the film including them could be used. Young people eagerly expressed their views about potential best investments in their region – more playgrounds, music events, sporting equipment and competitions (skating or surfing were popular), protecting environment, and so on. They also answered questions about their use of the Internet:

- All but one respondent accessed the internet
- Internet time per day was 1-2 hours
- Majority of online time was spent on MSN instant chat, BeBo and MySpace

Stage Two: Short listing of proposals

The 80 interviews were analysed and the young people’s proposals classified. A shortlist of the five most frequently occurring themes was constructed:

1. Plant more trees and raise awareness about sustainability and the environment
2. Youth Centre - create a space where young people can hang out, listen to music, talk with friends
3. Sports competitions – start running skate, surf and BMX competitions and workshops for kids
4. Sporting equipment – more sporting equipment for local kids to use like footballs and other equipment for team sports
5. More Under 18 events with local bands and artists.

Stage Three: *Your Spin* - The interactive online game

An interactive online game was developed which encouraged young people to vote for the activities represented by the five themes which they would like to see occur in their region. Each of the themes was ‘advocated’ by a selection from the vox pop young people’s interviews, collated into videos of about two minutes in length. They were displayed in an interactive DJ game *Your Spin* designed on a web Portal. The idea of “spin” reflects the spin of a disc jockey’s turntable (see Figure 1).

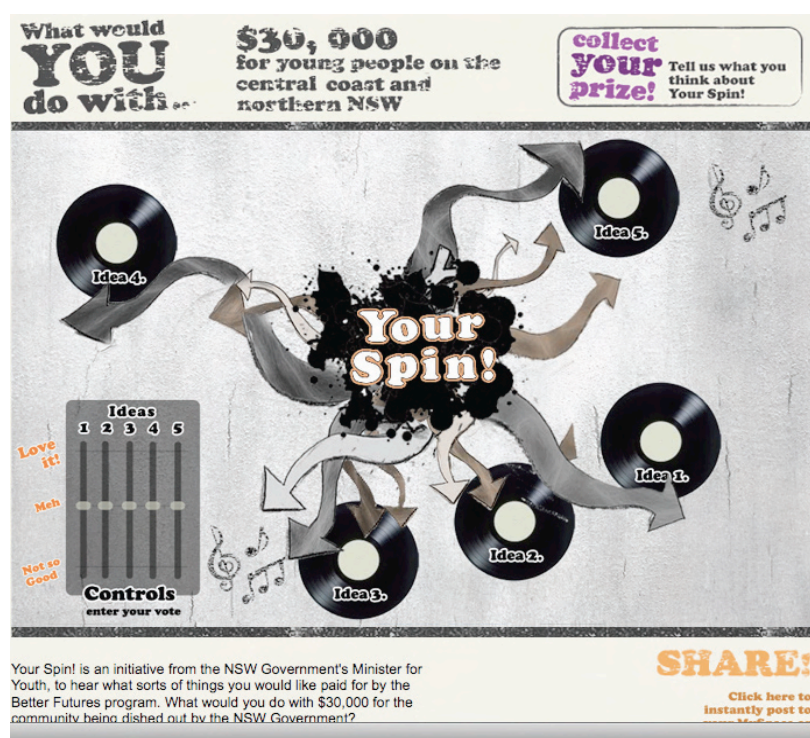


Figure 1. *Your Spin* interactive game website

The key was to design an interactive game online which was ‘cool’. The game used the theme of ‘spin’ to encourage young people to have their say and express preferences for the proposals on which to spend the money. The design of the *Your Spin* game with young people featuring in all the video content reiterated a popular myth that ‘everybody’s a star’ in the electronic space. The design was tested with young people leading to several improvements.

Stage Four: A web-based questionnaire

After they voted young participants were expected to click the “Get your prize” button on the *Your Spin* website. This button was designed to attract young people to click and open a questionnaire. The web-based survey included questions about their views of the Government’s intention to consult them, their use of the Internet and social networking and also some demographic data. The prizes were downloadable tunes for mobile phones.

Stage five: Comprehensive viral campaign

During the project the concept of a “campaign” was conceived, designed, developed and implemented. This campaign was an idea to engage with young people via a real time, interactive on line process, utilising social networking technologies to “drive” young people towards a web portal which contained a “game” that they could play and at the same time “vote” on particular issues. Several strategies were used as part of the overall viral campaign (Bollier, 2008), including:

- The use of ‘connectors’ in the community. Particular members of the community with influence and reach were targeted to help promote events. In the case of this campaign the kids in the video were the connectors who helped spread the videos in their community.
- A traditional word-of-mouth campaign. A *stencil campaign* was implemented in some areas where young people gathered. After engaging with the young people in the region it seemed as though they responded well to the skateboarding theme. The stencils coloured in chalk showed a young person on skateboard were applied to pavements and walls in the following areas: Bellingen, Nambucca Heads, Coffs Harbour and Port Macquarie and this further helped to spread the message and encourage youth to go online and check out the website
- Enlisting the support of local schools and community leaders. In the initial week, school newsletter items were provided to all major schools in the areas targeted
- Building awareness on local radio and TV as these have greater reach among young people than other media such as newspapers. Two radio advertisements were recorded and distributed to local stations for community announcement spots. The regional dance FM station “RAW” featured the advertisements and a range of live radio interviews were conducted during this period.

- Building the online community through a blog and forum strategy in the second week of the campaign with a particular focus on HSC study sites and special interest communities. Advertising online on Facebook and building greater awareness by uploading videos on YouTube which were customised with the Your Spin look and feel. Young people were invited to join online communities that were built on YouTube, BeBo and MySpace for the project. These communities were used as campaign anchors and grew to contain several thousand members. Paid advertisements were taken out on Facebook which directed traffic to the website, and help attract young people to the Your Spin game. A search engine optimisation strategy was also implemented across all major search engines and social media platforms. As the stars of the video were the young people themselves, they were instrumental in ensuring a wide distribution of the videos. Two versions of the DJ game were implemented, the second being simplified with a more direct call to action. An interactive poll was also implemented and displayed within the BeBo and MySpace online communities

The comments from the interviews were prominently featured in all the media work undertaken and media releases were localised to specific geographic area according to the numbers of young people interviewed and the numbers participating in the online communities. This provided local anchors for journalists, and a number of young people and their families made themselves available for photo opportunities and interviews.

Stage Six: Reporting to DoCS and Analysis

After the campaign and voting were complete, the project team reported analysed both the process and the results which we analyse in the next section. The consultation project was deemed to be very successful by the project team as much was learned about strategies of youth engagement which will inform the development of future youth online participation in Government decision making. Young people were to attracted participate through their social networking sites and engaged in decision making via interviews, online comments and various voting tools. The trial was able to indicate that overall music events were the most popular and the MySpace tool was able to identify regional differences for second and third preferences. Young people responded positively by voting and in comments.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

As a first step in encouraging young people to participate in decision making about how the “Better Futures” programme might spend money on youth in their region, the Your Spin campaign created many “friends” in social media communities: 2,138 in MySpace and 5,358 in BeBo. The YouTube videos were viewed 571 times.

Importantly, as well as “friending” with, and viewing the videos 1,145 young people voted on the Your Spin site, 421 on the BeBo poll and 460 on the MySpace poll totalling 2,026 votes in all. In both the Your Spin interactive game and the social page polls, music events received the highest number of votes, a clear standout in terms of voter preference.

While music events ranked highest in each poll, there were some slight variations in the ranking orders from the different polls (See Table 1). It is speculated that the different results by poll type may reflect the age group attracted to the different sites. For example BeBo is a social networking site targeted at younger children (Selwyn, 2007) and to move from their own social networking site to the interactive game may have required a higher level of commitment to voting or a less of a connection to the social networking site. These relationships bear investigation in future studies.

Table 1. Vote results by poll type.

Rank	Your Spin Interactive game	Bebo Poll	MySpace Poll
1	Music Events	Music Events	Music Events
2	Sporting competitions	Youth centre facilities/youth initiatives	Youth centre facilities/youth initiatives
3	Youth centre facilities/youth initiatives	Sporting Equipment	Sporting Equipment
4	Sporting equipment	Environment	Environment
5	Environment	Sporting competitions	Sporting competitions

In the short period of the campaign (early February until early April 2009) 8,067 young people viewed the Your Spin sites and 2,026 voted (thus approximately 25% of viewers participated by voting). This was a good outcome in terms of participation rates. The project illustrated that young people can be mobilised very quickly. The speed with which the online communities grew (and the speed of the exchange of information) between the participants, was both exciting and challenging for the project team.

Only nine responses were received for the survey. Where the respondents recorded their ages they were 9, 12, 13, 15, and 17. The younger people's responses were generally less articulate in terms of their views and opinions. They reported their immediate needs, for example air-conditioning in classrooms, skate parks, sporting facilities, math tutoring, laptops, better playground facilities, rather than offering ways to improve consultation. However the two older responders did make interesting and more articulate comments:

Why not asking us what we think about many issues in our town, our school, our community? We know many wrong things are happening and the Government can help. Drugs, drinking and other stuff. Government tries to help out but this is not efficient as they do not know the real problems ... [17 year old]

The same person also commented:

Government does not provide enough incentives to young people to complete high school and attend university or TAFE. If your family is not supportive you are not likely to go to uni.

Another suggests:

[We need] youth forums where all the kids can get together and voice their opinions. Via email so that it is more anonymous ... [15 year old]

Older and more articulate young people responded to the survey, but the younger people who were interviewed early on and appeared in the videos preferred the activity of the game and then voted and moved on. Totally textual methods of seeking participation and input, such as the survey, are seen as too complex and are unlikely to produce results, especially with the younger age group. Even with the offered reward of free telephone ring tones, only ten people clicked through, and only two actually provided more than cursory answers in the survey. This reinforces the view that young people are a far from homogeneous group (Vromen, 2007), and that the target segment for any e-participation activity has to be clearly identified and strategies have to be specifically developed to cater for this heterogeneity.

Using the social networking and voting game alone did not bring young people to the sites or encourage them to vote in the short space of the pilot campaign. Instead the project team had to utilise a range of strategies. The Your Spin game was launched in early February. Its launch, announced with an email to the 80 "connectors" who were interviewed in the videos and acted as "stars" in the game, caused an initial flurry of activity with the game. Then activity levels dropped. To increase use each of the strategies described in the method section of this report were utilised and each produced a spike in the visitor statistics on the server hosting the interactive game. The project team extrapolated they also would have produced spikes in video views and online poll activity. For example if one looks at the graph of visitors to one of the sites for interactive game (Figure 2) one sees a spike in activity for the week of February 9-16 following the email announcing the game and videos to the eighty "stars" which was closely followed by the school and community emails which reinforced the rise of views. Another spike in activity occurs at around March 9th when the Facebook ads and media releases were commenced and yet another around the 20th March after the stencils were chalked.

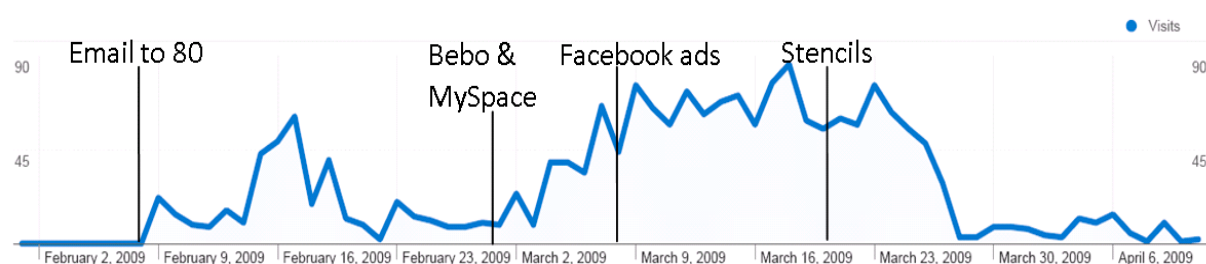


Figure 2: Visits to interactive game

The web statistics indicate that when an activity requires a participant to move from one site to another, for example from my MySpace or BeBo to the interactive game, a considerable proportion of participants will not make the transition. However, we are not able to report reliable statistics for this due to the range of sites used and their different reporting mechanisms.

Utilising local young people as "stars" in the content (extracts from filmed interviews) calling for action proved a successful strategy. The presence of these young people in the videos and interactive game illustrated that young people's opinions were valued and provided audience credibility. The videos looked like their own peer-created content and thus easily blended in youth networking. This was evident in their social activity and the intensity of sharing of the links to the game with their friends and family. The video content of these young people provided an important anchor for the social networking pages.

Feedback indicated that the first version of the interactive game was too complex and required simplification. In all aspects of the campaign, bearing in mind the project ended up interviewing most people at the younger end of the age groups and therefore proposing activities to vote on generally appealing to these younger people, simple, informal dialogue was vital. The Small World: Social Media Experts staff reported that kids could instantly detect an older person's voice in writing and interviewing, and were much more likely to respond in interviews with younger staff members and to text written by younger people.

Some issues were raised which this project was not able to address. The literature points to the fact that when encouraging participation on the Internet, some anti-social and undesirable acts may be perpetrated by participants. In an open consultation process that uses new media traditional concepts of control are meaningless. Opening up participation by definition excludes the possibility of control and therefore risks are involved. This project was fortunate in no anti-social activity was experienced. This was partially due to the major activity being simple voting, however, there were forums and discussion boards which happily remained problem free, perhaps partially because of the short duration of the project. Any project including open communication between younger people may need to address the issues of facilitation and moderation.

The total cost of the consultation project was \$60,000 – which meant that each “friend” who joined the community cost approximately \$9 or each vote could be considered to have cost a little under \$30. As the research continues and provides better information about ways to attract and engage with young people, and increases the understanding of their use of Internet and social networking, costs will be likely to decrease.

Limitations

The consultation was designed and implemented in a very short space of time and on a limited budget. Bearing this in mind a small geographic area and limited range of campaign activities were targeted. As statistics are collated differently on each social networking and web site, there are some activities we are unable to compare. Another limitation was that Google Analytics on the Your Spin voting game and the BeBo software for the poll on that site did not provide a reliable geographic overlay filter. If future work is to target particular geographic areas, then a different approach to verifying geographical location of voters must be considered. Only the MySpace poll was able to reliably confirm that voters came from the two regions specified, as MySpace membership details include location. This limitation means that we are unable to provide reliable analytics by region for this project. However, as participatory activity such as voting demonstrably occurs after other campaign event such as emailing connectors, FaceBook ads and chalk stencilled sidewalk advertisements (see Figure 2 above) it is highly likely that the majority of voters are from the target regions.

It would be interesting to explore further the extent to which a wider engagement process would build a critical mass of young people online to more comprehensively represent the views of the demographic across the State of NSW. We may say that in the regions studied, and within the constraints of time and funding for the consultation project, we saw the beginnings of a larger process of youth online engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper contributes to better understanding of youth online engagement strategies and consultation in Government decision making. It is based on the field study exploring how the website online game and social networking technologies were used to engage young people aged 9-18 to better inform NSW Government decision making. The field study focused on the online consultation in the NSW “Better Futures” programme framework of DoCS (in the Central Coast and North Coast NSW regions) to see if and how young people would engage in making decisions about expenditure in their local areas under the framework.

We found that young people were prepared to be engaged, to communicate with the project team (acting on behalf of DoCS) and with each other, to vote and discuss issues online. This somewhat invalidates the youth disengagement thesis and supports the argument by Bennet (2008) and Loader (2007) among others, that young people are willing to participate in civic processes and Government consultations when they believe in their authenticity and when modes of engagement and consultation suit their lifestyle. However, drawing young people to the game and engaging them in the consultation required a combination of online and offline strategies as part of a targeted campaign. By experimenting with different engagement strategies – that integrated the use of a website, digital media, social media sites MySpace, Bebo, and YouTube, blog and forums, local radio, TV and school newsletters announcements – the campaign attracted young people to the website and motivated them to participate by expressing their preferences about youth projects to be funded by DoCS. Importantly, we also learned that textual only interaction and administering of a survey via a website were not attractive and did not work.

Our study confirmed that many young people are online and that by moving the civic activity of having a say on public spending into a lively and attractive game in the online spaces young people inhabit, we can, as Vromen (2007) suggests, enhance participation through an iterative process, by encouraging young people to interact with

each other, the game, the ideas the game represents and potentially in other civic activities (Tambouris et al., 2007). As the online consultation project studied indicates the transformation of young people's role beyond being passive receivers of information (Tomkova, 2009b) to being active participants and co-creators in Government decision making is feasible and realistic. While we could see that young people were both willing and ready to engage in consultation and vote for action that would be enacted (Bessant, 2003), we could not explain what enabled or what prevented their transition to active participation.

Learning from the consultation project helped DoCS in their decision making but more importantly indicated how the Internet and social networking technologies can be harnessed to enhance the engagement of young people in civic and policy matters and facilitate change in the community. It also revealed how little is known about the adoption of social networking tools and technologies for youth engagement in civic and political matters. It exposed many theoretical and practical questions for which the literature does not give satisfactory answers. It is not known what are motivations, attitudes and behavioural patterns of young people engaged in online participation? How should the web-based and social technologies be designed to attract young people and support effective and continuing youth engagement in such participation? How participation and consultative processes should be structured and facilitated to achieve desired outcomes? How should we assess both the online consultation processes and their outcomes and implications? These questions should be examined if online youth consultation is going to transform our democracy. A young boy's comment on a forum expresses their sentiment:

"What a wonderful thing. Finally we get to make some decisions that are actually going to affect us."

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