

Plugged in, untapped

Using digital technologies to help
young people learn to lead



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About The Youth of Today

The Youth of Today is a consortium of leading youth organisations working together to increase the quality, quantity and diversity of opportunities for young people as leaders of change in their communities. It has been created to help young people be leaders of change in an increasingly complex world.

Aimed at young people aged 13 to 19, it is funded and supported by Government and is managed by a range of leading organisations including the British Youth Council, Changemakers, Citizenship Foundation, the National Youth Agency, Prince's Trust, UK Youth Parliament and the Young Foundation.



www.theyouthoftoday.org

About the Young Foundation

The Young Foundation combines creativity and entrepreneurship to tackle major social needs. We work on many different levels to achieve positive social change – including advocacy, research, and policy influence as well as creating new organisations and running practical projects. The Young Foundation benefits from a long history of social research, innovation and practical action by the late Michael Young, once described as “the world’s most successful social entrepreneur”, who created more than 60 ventures which address social needs.



THE YOUNG FOUNDATION

www.youngfoundation.org

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Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Preface	5
Executive summary	6
1. Introduction	10
2. Digital technologies in the context of youth identity, citizenship and civic engagement	16
3. Mapping the benefits: digital technologies as tools for empowering young people to take the lead	22
4. Limitations and challenges: democratising the benefits of digital technologies	32
5. Information and communication technologies in educational settings: mistakes and recommendations	40
6. Top tips for building successful and empowering online initiatives for young people	48
Conclusion	54
Appendix: online survey – descriptive results	56

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Preface

The digital age provides a myriad of new opportunities for youth leadership.

Online video-sharing websites and blogging tools mean that any young person has the possibility of broadcasting to a global audience in ways accessible to only the largest global media organisations until very recently. Online communities and access to information through search and social networks allow young people to discover issues they are passionate about, to learn how to respond to them, and to climb the ladder of participation – from being merely interested, to becoming engaged, all the way through to being positively active.

Additionally, internet-based collaboration platforms mean that groups of young people, and intergenerational groups sharing similar issues and concerns, can work together irrespective of geography: whether they live in the same city; in different parts of a rural county; or in different parts of the world.

The youth-led UK Youth Climate Coalition (UKYCC) couldn't exist without the internet. Its Organising Team (composed entirely of volunteers based around the country) relies on tools such as Skype and Google Applications in order to communicate and collaborate in their work. Using free tools, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Open Source software like Wordpress, UKYCC has been able to engage thousands of young people who, just a few years ago, would have been unreachable. Digital tools can empower young leaders and make new ways of working possible.

But, as UKYCC have found, the digital age has also changed what leadership is and means. Leadership in the digital age requires new skills: skills to listen and facilitate discussion online, as well as skills to lead; skills to work through networks, rather than hierarchy; skills to create and share your own media and messages – as opposed to attracting mainstream media attention; skills to use data to inform projects, and campaign for change; and skills to do all of this at the 'speed of the internet'.

The UKYCC 'Call Gordon' campaign, for example, was the product of team work at digital speed. The UKYCC delegation of young leaders to the UN Climate Summits in Poznań and Copenhagen identified the need for political pressure – and by calling colleagues back home, started flooding the Number 10 Switchboard with calls for stronger leadership from the UK. Within hours a website was online, and thousands of calls from UKYCC supporters, contacted through Facebook and e-mail, were being heard.

As this example shows, the internet offers amazing new tools and opportunities for young people, enabling different types of leadership in the digital age. But many of the challenges in the offline world - including supporting young people to develop leadership skills; addressing inequalities and divisions that mean not all young people have access to the skills, and providing inspiration, support and opportunities to develop as leaders— are the same problems faced in online communities. We may be using different media, but we're working in the same socially divided and complex world. The internet isn't a silver bullet, but it does have a powerful role to play in enabling and amplifying leadership.

As this report outlines, adults, particularly educators, need to pay attention to supporting young people from all backgrounds to develop the practical, social and digital skills for exercising a blend of online and offline leadership. The utopian idea that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are 'automatically' leading to the empowerment and civic engagement of young people has been found wanting. But equally, a future in which young leaders can thrive without ICTs, and in which ICTs play no role, is hard to imagine.

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Executive summary

The Youth of Today is a project dedicated to enabling and inspiring young people to lead positive social change. We start from the belief that the talent and ideas of young people need to be harnessed more effectively towards this goal. Such change requires clear thinking about how young people live today: how they conceive of and access power; engage with institutions; and see themselves as citizens in their societies and the world.

In many ways, young people's experiences of daily life are very different from those of previous generations. The pervasive use of digital technologies, from social networking sites like Facebook, to iPods and mobile phones, correspond to larger societal changes - such as the move from a manufacturing towards a knowledge economy.

These shifts have resulted in changing understandings of citizenship, including the way young people engage with issues of social and political importance. Our research has found that digital technologies can be important tools for helping young people to participate as citizens, develop leadership skills and drive positive social change.

However, the benefits of digital technologies have not yet been democratised as they continue to be fully utilised by a minority. As a consequence, new forms of digital disadvantage – relating to usage, rather than equality of access – are emerging. In particular, factors such as education, social capital and socio-economic status can influence the extent to which young people harness the potential of the internet toward positive aims and outcomes.

Digital technologies do not, in and of themselves, build young leaders or generate social change, and are not benefiting all young people equally. The diversity of young people's voices, perspectives, practices and needs must be central to discussions on how best to use digital technologies to support positive youth development and increase the engagement of

different groups of young people in social and political life.

This report explores how digital technologies can enable young people to develop their leadership capabilities, engage as active citizens, and lead positive social change. It serves as a resource to assist practitioners, educators and policy-makers in better harnessing the potential of digital technologies to engage and empower young people as leaders of change.

In this report, we provide an in-depth account of both the potential and the limitations of digital technologies as tools for youth leadership development. We assess current practice, highlighting both effective approaches as well as mistakes made by institutions and organisations when trying to engage youth through digital technologies. Additionally, we explore new methods and ideas for teaching and engaging young people through digital technologies.

Finally, drawing upon lessons from cutting-edge programmes and evidence collected from interviews and focus groups with a wide range of young people and young leaders, academics and practitioners, we offer recommendations for how digital technologies can be harnessed most effectively by organisations and institutions to promote youth leadership, civic and political engagement and activism.

Given the variation in access to and usage of ICTs worldwide, including differing social and political contexts, our evidence will mainly be presented with the UK context in mind, but will draw on examples from further afield where relevant.

Key findings

Digital technologies can be harnessed to facilitate young people's personal development and leadership journeys.

Our research reveals four key areas where digital technologies can play a role enabling and empowering young people to take the lead:

Communication: The communication benefits of digital technologies can enable confidence-building self-expression and give young people a space in which to experiment with voicing their opinions and developing expertise on issues that are important to them, with the potential for validating feedback. This can be an important foundation or precursor for taking action, particularly for those young people who are lower on the engagement spectrum. Digital technologies can give non-traditional leaders, including the marginalised and disadvantaged, spaces in which to take the lead.

Collaboration: Digital technologies make it easier to develop and practice key leadership skills such as collaboration, teamwork and collective problem-solving.

Connection: Digital technologies allow young people to make multiple and diverse connections across contexts, easily and rapidly, and provide access to diverse communities of practice, enabling them to leverage skills and expertise. These communities can raise aspirations and are a foundation for effective action offline.

Action: Digital technologies enable young people to put their leadership skills into practice - at scale, and at low cost with minimal risk - and see real results in return. The 'real-time' nature of these technologies can help encourage young people to take the lead on issues that are relevant to their lives, as active citizens and leaders of today – thus offering young people the means to be more than just 'citizens in the making' or 'tomorrow's leaders'.

However, certain factors limit the potential of digital technologies as tools for empowering young people as leaders. These include:

Digital divides and exclusion: The benefits of digital technologies bias toward young people with higher socio-economic status, levels of education and social capital. Young people with greater levels of disadvantage appear less likely to use digital technologies in ways that help them transcend socio-

economic barriers and which lead to positive developmental and leadership outcomes. Access to digital technology, alone, does not lead to automatic gains in terms of learning, empowerment and leadership. More focus on digital usage is needed in order to gain a clear and comprehensive picture of what young people are doing online and the different needs of different young people in relation to online engagement.

Shortcomings of online social capital and networks: There is a tendency toward shallow, weaker ties amongst online communities, coupled with a tendency toward 'like-seeking-like, behaviour (homophily) which can result in limited and insular networks. While shallow ties can be beneficial for helping young people build diverse networks through which to leverage expertise and access communities of practice, they can also limit young people's ability to make the most of what can be done online, negatively affecting disadvantaged youth – the poor and the uneducated – most powerfully. Our research found the tendency towards like-seeking-like behaviour at play most noticeably on a generational and power level. For example, young people tend to utilise digital technologies to connect with their peers, rather than adults and institutions or individuals in positions of power.

Challenges in teaching leadership skills online: Certain leadership skills are harder to teach online than others. In particular, the potential to develop key social and emotional skills and competencies appears to be limited in online spaces.

Youth participation and engagement contexts remain crucial: ICTs do not build leadership skills in and of themselves. While digital technologies offer young people key tools through which to effect change, offline contexts are important in galvanising interest, aiding self-development and helping young people see the 'real-time' effects and outcomes of their efforts.

Institutions and organisations working with youth are failing to harness the learning potential of digital technologies.

Capitalising on the enormous potential of digital technologies requires a step-change in the way digital technologies are taught and utilised by adults and institutions working with young people. Barriers to using digital technologies effectively include:

A general 'fear' of digital technologies in formal and informal educational settings, linked with a resistance to engaging with and making sense of new approaches.

One-dimensional, top-down lessons – coupled with a narrow focus on imparting skills and encouraging a functional use of digital tools.

Little freedom of access including institutional gate-keeping, censorship and restriction of access, as well as a focus on the dangers of the internet.

A general failure to capitalise on the fact that many, but not all, young people are living digitally.

Recommendations for capturing digital technologies' potential in educational settings include:

Teach young people to critically assess the quality and validity of information and tools: Young people must be taught how to evaluate which tool is suitable for a given purpose and situation, as well as encouraged to question the validity of online information sources.

Move away from top-down models of learning: Young people are overwhelmingly learning about ICTs through self-exploration. Institutions and organisations working with young people can harness new learning styles by moving away from top-down teaching practices that 'give' information to young people, and rather enable learning through self-exploration and discovery.

Avoid censorship: Schools and institutions working with young people can develop critical digital literacy skills within young people by moving away from censorship, building on

young people's experiences of ICTs in other contexts, such as the home.

Harness peer-based learning: Digital technologies enable collaborative learning, turning concepts of 'authority' and 'expertise' on their heads. It is critical that adults and institutions working with young people harness the potential of peer-based learning by enabling collaborative working.

Capitalise on the publishing potential of the web: Schools should take advantage of the online publishing potential of the web and use it to help young people form and shape their digital identity through the use of blogs and other web 2.0 tools.

Invest in hyperlocal activity: The increasing amount of online public data offers great potential to engage young people in real-world problems and issues in their local communities. Institutions and schools can capitalise on this trend by encouraging, for example, youth-driven energy profiling and citizen journalism.

Invest in pedagogy: As learning styles change, adults and institutions working with young people need to be up-skilled to learn how to effectively harness digital technologies. This means, for example, not buying into technological quick-fixes such as putting whiteboards in classrooms

Integrate digital technologies into lessons: ICTs are often taught as an add-on, rather than integrated into other lessons. By using ICTs as a learning tool, rather than seeing them as an end in themselves, young people can be inspired to take action outside of formal learning environments.

Sustainable online initiatives should adopt a set of best practice guidelines.

Digital technologies can help facilitate young people's personal development and leadership journeys. However, successfully engaging young people online must start by understanding and tapping into young people's passion and interest. Our recommendations for engagement include:

Focus on community-building and facilitate connections: Investing in community-building is integral to engaging youth in the long term. Successful platforms are based on trust, friendship, networks and social capital.

Embrace user-led models: Active involvement by users is critical. User-led models work best as these are led by an understanding of what young people actually want.

Know your market: It is critical to understand what information is relevant to one's target participants, what appeals to them, and what their preferred means of communication are, recognising that young people are a heterogeneous group and engagement cannot be 'one-size fits all'.

Build strong feedback loops: Sustainable and successful engagement requires that institutions and individuals working with young people provide real opportunities for them to make a difference and see positive outcomes from their engagement. Building strong feedback loops is one important way of helping young people recognise the benefits of getting involved.

Be smart about tools and design: Get the technical aspects of online youth engagement

right. Involve youth in design – aesthetics and functionality - and testing. Avoid building websites that are too busy or flashy.

Act at the interface of online and offline contexts: Online tools should be seen as a way of enhancing and empowering real-world action rather than replacing it.

Play the long term game and allow for evolution: Staying relevant in the long run, and keeping pace with technological changes, means seeing involvement as a long-term commitment, and one that requires substantial flexibility. Government should invest its funds into NGOs with a long-term commitment to, and a strategic agenda centred on, using ICT creatively.

Connect, combine collaborate: Partnerships and collaborative work are key to maximising resources, harnessing creativity, and keeping up with the speed of innovation.

This report concludes by arguing that digital engagement is a process, requiring a significant investment of time and attention to the shifting needs and interests of young people in this 'digital age'.

| Introduction



I. Introduction

The rise of the global, network society and the increasing importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to our daily interactions have radically redefined our public and private lives. Digital access is increasing around the world, including in the UK, where access to the internet amongst young people aged 16-24 rose to 93% in 2008, up from 77% in 2006.¹ Digital technologies, from the internet to mobile phones, are rapidly becoming integral to daily life, particularly for young people.

The lives and experiences of young people have been shaped by the increasing ubiquity of ICTs. In turn, the meaning and practice of citizenship and civic engagement are taking new forms.² In the US, social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, were instrumental in helping drive youth interest in the Obama campaign³ and helped galvanise youth participation in the 2008 US elections, which was up 19% from 2004.⁴

Unlike traditional communication tools, digital technologies, in particular newer applications such as social networking sites, are places of interactivity and participation, where young people can find information as well as create and publish content, share ideas and get feedback on their views.⁵ Online communities can also be important places of civic engagement, “serving citizens’ need for knowledge that can enable them to be more active, resourceful, creative and influential.”⁶

The implications of these societal shifts and technological innovations have not been lost on policymakers and practitioners: a host of conferences, policy reviews and debates have taken place examining how society can most effectively harness the power of ICTs to strengthen democracy, empowerment and civic engagement. Additionally, ICT skills are increasingly becoming a third basic skill for life, alongside literacy and numeracy.⁷ Like other forms of literacy, ICT skills:

“... constitute the means by which people can access information of all kinds, learn in

a multimedia environment, communicate in a global context, participate in civic activities, express themselves creatively and, last but not least, obtain employment in a competitive knowledge society.”⁸

Yet ICTs remain problematic: digital divides persist, and utopian expectations have not materialised into reality. Despite their potential to shape a more active and vibrant democracy, the ability of digital technologies to empower young people who are marginalised from mainstream society remains unclear. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) report, *Internet Access 2008: Households and Individuals*, finds, for example, that “individuals who had no formal qualifications were least likely... to have an internet connection in their home.”⁹

Additionally, evidence suggests that the extent to which young people use digital tools to participate in civic and political life varies markedly, depending on a range of

“Young people use digital technologies in diverse ways, yet far too often their own perspectives and understandings of ICTs are sidelined.”

psychological and socio-economic factors. For example, research from the UK finds that, “a high level of experience, literacy, confidence and sense of personal efficacy is needed for young people to make and post their own civic and/or political content on the internet.”¹⁰ In the US, similarly, research has found that the internet has not fundamentally changed socio-economic patterns of political engagement, which favour the wealthy and educated.¹¹ Moreover, ICTs are sometimes problematically used as platforms for extremist views or to extend the reach of autocratic states.

Young people use digital technologies in diverse ways, yet far too often their own perspectives and understandings of ICTs are sidelined. As an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) report on the educational

impact of new technology observes, “Problematically ... ICTs absorb our attention such that we focus on them instead of on children, their lives, their needs, our aspirations for them.”¹² Young people’s individual stories are often ignored altogether, with young people too frequently framed as objects rather than subjects in debates about their experiences and needs.¹³ Additionally, young people are often treated as an homogenous group, ignoring the influencing role of difference, diversity and socio-economic inequalities on how young people use digital technologies.

In this report, therefore, we draw heavily on young people’s understandings and experiences to investigate how ICTs can be used more effectively as tools to enable young people from diverse backgrounds to develop their leadership capabilities, to engage as active citizens, and to lead positive social change.

Framing questions and methodology

The key questions of this report are:

- Can ICTs enable young people to take the lead, and if so, how? Are there particular benefits and limitations of ICTs as tools for leadership development?
- How can institutions and organisations working with young people better use ICTs to promote youth leadership, civic and political engagement and activism?

Through interrogating these questions, we aim to reach a more informed understanding about the potential, as well as the limits, of ICTs as tools for engaging young people as leaders today and tomorrow.

This publication is based on extensive desk-based research, drawing on British and international literature and debates about



young people's online engagement, including theories of youth identity formation and development. Our primary data was gathered through qualitative interviews, focus groups and an online survey. We conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with experts, academics and practitioners working in the field of youth leadership and ICTs, as well as with young people who are using digital technologies to take the lead in a variety of contexts (e.g. education; social and political life, and business/entrepreneurship). We conducted two focus groups with young people aged 15-25 and one preliminary information gathering session, involving a combined total of 26 young people. Additionally, we conducted an online survey of young people, which received 244 responses from young people aged 13-25 living in England. This survey looked at overall usage of the internet, including what young people do online; the impact of ICTs

on identity development and leadership, and young people's views on how well adults and institutions such as schools and government are using ICTs to engage youth, the mistakes they are making, and their key recommendations for improving practice. Key descriptive results from the survey are presented in an appendix at the end of the report.

Defining our terms

Youth leadership

In our previous publication, *Taking the lead: Youth leadership in theory and practice*¹⁴, we have provided an in-depth account of what defines the practice of youth leadership, the skills implicated in being a successful leader, and how to develop those traits within young people. The current report builds and draws heavily on the definitions developed in this previous work. Key findings relating to understandings of youth leadership, the



skills implicated in youth leadership, and how youth leadership can be fostered and developed include:

- *There is a wide debate around what youth leadership is, and how best to develop young people's leadership skills. We have proposed the following definition of youth leadership: 'Young people empowered to inspire and mobilise themselves and others towards a common purpose, in response to personal and/or social issues and challenges, to effect positive change'.*
- *Leadership skills are defined largely in terms of the social and emotional skills and competencies that foster and build personal relationships – including relationship management, communication, collaboration, self-discipline, flexibility, creativity, and emotional intelligence. The emotional and social skills that enable effective leadership are important in preparing youth to take on formal leadership roles but are, more generally, crucial in facilitating a successful transition to adulthood.*
- *While there is no single model for effective practice, there are certain ingredients that are common to successful leadership programmes. Effective practice includes providing opportunities that engage young people in challenging action, around issues that reflect their genuine needs and offer authentic opportunities to make decisions and effect change, in an environment of support in which young people can reflect on their experiences. Opportunities should be sustainable to ensure that young people can carry their leadership skills into adulthood, and this should include clear progression routes and appropriate support at all stages.*

ICTs and digital technologies

Our definition of ICTs encompasses a wide range of information and communication technologies including the internet (including web 2.0 applications such as blogs, social networking sites and online gaming), devices such as personal computers and laptops, as well as mobile phones, digital cameras, video recorders, MP3 players, and traditional media

such as film and radio. However, we give explicit attention to digital ICTs (also referred to in this report as 'digital technologies').

Four dimensions distinguish these digital ICTs from previous technologies - integration of multiple media, interactivity, flexibility of use, and connectivity.¹⁵

- *Integration of multiple media:* Young people are living in a new media ecology where traditional media – print, analogue, and non-interactive media such as books, television, and radio – are converging with new digital media, specifically interactive media and media for social communication.¹⁶ Digital ICTs build, and are partly dependent, upon older information technologies and media but have taken new forms as these technologies converge: for example, mobile phones now have internet capability and incorporate digital cameras and audioplayers/ recorders.
- *Interactivity:* Earlier technologies were one-way channels for distributing information, while digital technologies provide greater opportunities and mixes of interactivity (one to one, one to many, many to one, and many to many).
- *Flexibility of use:* Digital ICTs are increasingly mobile, portable, and personal - they enable flexibility of use. Multi-platform, multimedia, digital ICTs transcend constraints of time and space, becoming more than information media; they are "constantly growing potential spaces, albeit — virtual, hyperreal or even non-places."¹⁷
- *Connectivity:* Access to the internet is increasingly commonplace in many parts of the world, along with decreasing costs and increasing bandwidth.

The focus of this report is largely on the power of the internet and online spaces in enabling young people to develop leadership skills and lead positive social change – while bearing in mind that the internet can channel information and communication from, and be accessed by, various devices and media types.

Overview of report

In this report we look at the debates

surrounding ICTs, and in particular focus on the changing nature of leadership among young people in this digital age. We identify the key benefits of ICTs, their potential to overcome barriers to leadership, and their limitations. We highlight current mistakes made by institutions and organisations, including government, schools and NGOs in engaging with young people, and finally we offer recommendations for how digital technologies can be used most effectively by organisations and institutions to promote youth leadership, civic and political engagement and activism.

This introductory chapter has presented the framing questions for this research, provided an overview of our methodology and defined key terms.

Chapter two looks at the role digital technologies play in the formation of youth identity, and the importance of these changes in relation to broader shifts in understandings of citizenship, civic participation and engagement. The chapter explores how digital technologies influence youth development and youth leadership development, emphasising their role in aiding identity development and exploration. Finally, we present typologies that map out the varying levels of engagement and expression that can be facilitated through ICTs, illustrating that a variety of types of engagement can have benefits for young people.

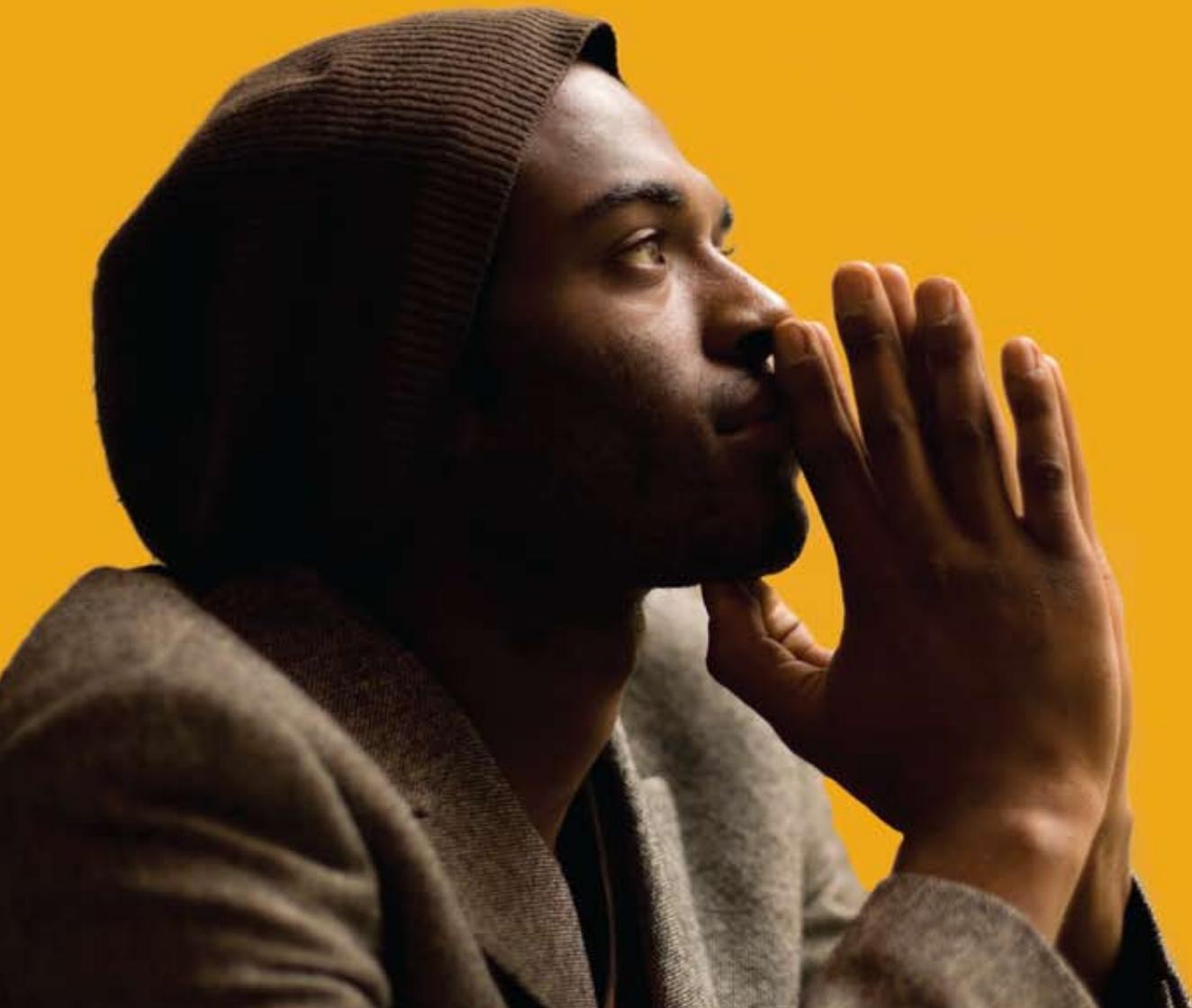
Chapter three explores the benefits of digital technologies for enabling and empowering young people to take the lead. These benefits can be categorised into four main areas - communication, collaboration, connecting, and action - and relate both to young people's personal development and their potential to build and exercise key leadership skills. Chapter four then focuses on the limitations of ICTs in enabling youth leadership, relating to digital divides and exclusion; the shortcomings of online social capital and networks; the challenges in teaching leadership skills online; and the continued importance of offline youth engagement and participation contexts in enabling young people to explore and develop key leadership skills.

Chapters five and six explore how institutions and organisations are applying new digital technologies to engage and empower youth, and the mistakes they are making. We then offer up lessons from practice and recommendations for how these new technologies can be harnessed towards the most productive and positive outcomes for young people and wider society.

We conclude by emphasising the importance of understanding young people's engagement with ICTs as a process, recognising that it must be seen as a site of long-term learning and experimentation.

2

Digital technologies in the context of youth identity, citizenship and civic engagement



2. Digital technologies in the context of youth identity, citizenship and civic engagement

“Technology is not a neutral tool with universal effects, but rather a medium with consequences that are significantly shaped by the historical, social, and cultural context of its use.”¹⁸

Digital technologies are shaping the way young people develop, learn, and lead. As this chapter will show, digital technologies are an important part of identity formation particularly in the context of the changing landscape of citizenship, civic participation and engagement. This chapter, which serves as a backdrop for our primary research presented in later chapters, highlights the following findings:

- digital technologies play an important role in the context of wider social change, and enable and influence new forms and patterns of civic engagement and political participation amongst young people;
- digital technologies can facilitate positive youth development and youth leadership development, aiding identity development and exploration and the pursuit of mastery and autonomy;
- there are a number of key debates and areas of controversy surrounding youth and digital technologies, necessitating the need for an approach that recognises both the opportunities as well as the risks and limitations of digital technologies in the context of youth development and youth leadership;
- digital technologies allow for and facilitate varying levels of engagement and expression. Many types of engagement can have benefits for young people.

Changes in citizenship and engagement Declines in traditional forms of civic engagement

Much has been made recently of the low levels of engagement of young people with traditional political structures. A recent survey of 11-25 year-olds by the Youth Citizenship Commission¹⁹ showed that the majority of young people do not feel they can influence decisions locally or

nationally, with less than half reporting they are interested in influencing decision-making. Only 19% of young people trust politicians to make the right decisions for them. While a majority still think voting is important, only half believe it is a good way to influence decisions nationally and locally. Additionally, research shows that young people do not know enough about political parties to inform voting choices.²⁰

Young people’s alienation from the political system is rooted in a range of factors including the perception that participation will not be effective, that there are few opportunities to become involved in political life in a meaningful way, and that they have insufficient knowledge about the formal political process.²¹ Research also indicates that young people feel a disconnection from the meaning and relevance of concepts like citizenship in a changing world.²²

New forms of citizenship and engagement

Despite low levels of engagement with traditional political structures many young people remain interested in social and political life. Indeed, there is evidence that rather than disconnecting from issues of social and political importance, young people are engaging in different ways, bypassing or supplementing older forms of engagement. Large-scale societal changes – the shift from a manufacturing to an information and knowledge economy, and consequent changes in work and family life, have had a profound impact on social and political identities, changing the meaning and practice of citizenship for today’s young people. In particular, there has been a transition from ‘group based’ society to a ‘network’ society.²³ This shift has seen an uprooting of the broad social influence of groups (the church, labour movements, social class, and political parties) that anchored and assigned earlier generations’ social identities.²⁴ Consequently, individuals have become more responsible for the production and management of their own social

and political identities - with many contemporary young people having unprecedented levels of freedom to define and manage their identities.

In this context, there has been a profound generational shift in citizenship styles in most post-industrial democracies – from a ‘dutiful citizen’ model (still adhered to by older generations and many young people positioned in more traditional social settings) to an ‘actualising citizen’ model favouring loosely networked activism, often enacted through interactive ICTs, to address issues that reflect personal values. W. Lance Bennett (Department of Communication, University of Washington), a leading scholar on youth online civic engagement, provides a useful breakdown of these shifts in citizen styles in **Table 2.1**.

Recent research provides evidence of how these changing understandings of citizenship are manifesting themselves in real life for today’s young people. In 2009 the Youth Citizenship Commission found that the word ‘citizenship’ is negatively associated with national identity, which young people find outdated and not representative of their multiple identities. This study found that by reconceptualising citizenship as connectivity - defined by connections young people share with others across ‘space and time’, and which is most powerfully located within the local community, young people were able to engage with a concept of politics that was more relevant to their daily lives.²⁶

Given the shifts in how young people understand and practice citizenship, it is increasingly important that the measurement of that engagement changes accordingly. A failure to do so will have implications for the ability to connect the bottom-up activities and interests of young people with the top-down efforts of formal political structures.

ICTs in the context of youth development

Digital technologies play an important role in the context of youth development. Online spaces are becoming important sites for positive youth development - for forging, exploring and experimenting with identity and developing mastery and autonomy in adolescence.

ICTs and identity formation

Adolescence is a time of identity formation and exploration.²⁷ From about the age of 12 young people rapidly develop the ability to understand and process information relating to social situations, particularly around impression formation, perspective-taking and decision-making.²⁸ This period forms the foundation of an individual’s ability to express him or herself and relate to others - important skills for young leaders.

Digital technologies can provide “a gigantic generous place” to forge identity during this time of life.²⁹ These spaces can be open frontiers to experiment with new ways of being, or they can simply extend young people’s offline

Table 2.1 **Changing citizenship styles**²⁵

Actualising Citizen (AC)	Dutiful Citizen (DC)
Diminished sense of government obligation – higher sense of individual purpose	Obligation to participate in government centred activities
Voting is less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts such as consumerism, community volunteering, or transnational activism	Voting is the core democratic act
Mistrust of media and politicians is reinforced by negative mass media environment	Becomes informed about issues and government by following mass media
Favours loose networks of community action – often established or sustained through friendships and peer relations and thin social ties maintained by interactive information technologies	Joins civic society organisations and/or expresses interests through parties that typically employ one-way conventional communication to mobilise supporters

worlds, acting as a space for playing, flirting, communication, connecting and learning. Researcher and academic, danah boyd, best known for her work on youth and social networking sites, argues that ICTs create a “radical shift in architecture”, particularly for teenagers, who are typically segregated from adult society (into schools and other ‘youth’ spaces) and who have increasingly little access to public spaces. ICTs create new, unregulated, decentralised, “networked publics” in which young people can freely participate while still safely ensconced in homes and schools.³⁰

ICTs and the drive for mastery and autonomy

Digital technologies provide a medium to explore and fulfil two essential developmental needs for young people - mastery and autonomy. Through the development of these characteristics, young people become agents with the ability to influence their own journey towards adulthood as well as having an impact on the world around them. Youth development specialist John Coleman contends that:

“Mastery and the search for autonomy are at the heart of the young person’s drive towards growing and up and being an adult, and the web offers a golden opportunity to practice and rehearse the skills underlying just these phenomena.”³¹

The drive to develop mastery and autonomy in adolescence is not new – and, in the past, has found expression in forms such as student newspapers, protests and rock and roll. However, ICTs have allowed these traits to be expressed in new and different ways, providing spaces for self-expression, places that for some young people are faster, cheaper and more interactive, and which enable a far greater reach than mechanisms of the past.

While ICTs can influence and enable the process of identity formation and leadership development, the extent and manner in which they do so depends on the individual and the surrounding social context, including access to technologies and education – an issue we return to later.³²

Debates and controversy

Despite evidence that digital technologies can play an important role in facilitating positive youth development, including areas of development relating to leadership, the subject is surrounded by much debate and controversy.

Real room for experimenting with identity?

While digital technologies present many opportunities for young people, there is debate about how much room online spaces really offer youth for experimenting with identity. Social rules and norms that exist within peer groups offline are also present online. A recent study in the United States showed that 8-18-year-olds’ media use had dramatically increased over the previous five years, with average use at 7 hours and 45 minutes per day. As this study showed, multitasking (including texting and chatting) while using ICTs meant that young people were packing nearly 11 hours of usage into these 7 ¾ hours.³³ Because the online world is so embedded into the life-worlds of young people and is so intensely used, cultural stereotypes and relationship dynamics can be compounded, leaving some young people little chance to “get away from their peers” and explore different facets of themselves.³⁴

Safe or risky?

There has been much public debate around the safety of online spaces. A report on youth work and social networking sites finds that such sites open youth up to numerous risks, including “inappropriate content; commercialism and unsuitable advertising; inappropriate or offensive conduct on [social networking sites]; criminal activities such as identity theft; and inappropriate contact (online and offline) from strangers – which may include grooming and in the most serious cases, sexual abuse.”³⁵ According to this report, both young people and youth workers identify bullying on social networking sites as one of the most significant negative issues linked to online social networking³⁶, with one source finding that around 40% of young people with the internet at home reported being bullied in 2008.³⁷

ICTs pose new challenges for safeguarding

young people. However, despite the dangers posed by the internet, most academics and experts working in the field do not advocate a blanket lockdown of internet sites. As a recent Ofsted report finds: “Pupils were more vulnerable overall when schools used locked down systems because they were not given enough opportunities to learn how to assess and manage risk for themselves.”³⁸ Rather, young people need to be taught to navigate digital media in responsible ways.

Youth as ‘digital natives’?

Discussion of young people and ICTs often includes references to young people’s extraordinary facility with technology. Young people are posited as ‘digital natives’ – the prevailing term for the generation who grew up exposed to digital technology in their formative years.³⁹ This viewpoint sees young people as a generation who speak a new and unaccented language, while their parents and teachers (as ‘digital immigrants’) struggle to be fluent in this digital space and expose themselves as newcomers by their clunky or ‘accented’ use of technology.⁴⁰ However, research reveals that ICTs play a radically different role in different societies and even within different segments of the same society. A few of the arguments against a conception of youth as ‘digital natives’ are given below:

- *Inequality and ICT use:* Socioeconomic inequality means that for some the internet is a rich source of information and possibility, while for others it is sporadically and narrowly used.⁴¹ Sonia Livingstone argues that there is little that guides young people online and the result is “both uneven and unequal.”⁴² We will explore this theme in more detail later on in this report.
- *Technical proficiency does not translate into critical capacity:* There is often a gap between technical expertise and critical or creative competencies.⁴³ Ranjana Das’s research finds that while young people may be technically proficient “expert kids” they may also be inexperienced or unaware “stumbling kids”⁴⁴, unaware of how to navigate online social and commercial landscapes.

- *Adults are not digital immigrants:* The differences between young people and adults’ use of ICTs are probably overstated.⁴⁵ Given disparities in proficiency with ICTs among young people, there are many adults who would be technologically more adept and literate than the so-called ‘natives’.

A balanced look at ICTs and youth leadership

As these debates suggest, it is important to recognise the opportunities as well as the risks and limitations of digital technologies in the context of youth development and youth leadership. Additionally, as the ‘digital natives’ debate suggests, the way in which young people use digital technologies is varied and often dependent on socioeconomic factors.

This suggests the need for an approach that recognises the heterogeneity of young people, and takes into account the needs of different groups of young people, at different points on the participation and engagement spectrum. Below, we present two existing typologies that help differentiate between different types of engagement.

Extending civic engagement through online participation: existing typologies

The recent MacArthur Foundation *Digital Youth Project* finds that online spaces allow for and facilitate different types of practice and varying levels of engagement and expression, all of which can have benefits for young people.⁴⁶ The report groups online participation into three different categories:

- *Hanging out* is something that virtually all young people engage in when using ICTs, in which they integrate the common practices of youth culture and processes of socialisation into the digital world. These activities include socialising, cementing friendship, playing games and texting.
- *Messing around* involves more intensive exploration of interests in which “young people begin to take an interest in and focus on the workings and content of the technology and media themselves,

tinkering, exploring, and extending their understanding.”⁴⁷

- *Geeking out* is the most intense form of interaction, where young people “learn to navigate esoteric domains of knowledge and practice and participate in communities that traffic in these forms of expertise.”⁴⁸ Geeking out is a peer-driven mode of learning involving a commitment to deeper exploration of particular interests and is dependent on regular and sustained access to ICTs.

Michael Delli Carpini uses three different categories relating to youth participation and engagement in civic activities, highlighting the possibilities of digital technologies to extend engagement for each group (Table 2.2).

Both of these typologies highlight the fact that various forms of participation can have benefits. Less intensive forms of engagement – for example, signing an online petition – can be an important step up the ladder of participation and

leadership, as evidenced in our own research presented in Chapter 3. Even seemingly playful communication with others, such as through socialising and gaming, are important, “providing teens with a space to work out identity and status, make sense of cultural cues, and negotiate public life.”⁵⁰

As these typologies suggest, the internet can serve as a key tool through which young people can develop their identities, engage in leadership and practice civic activism. ICTs can offer less engaged young people a platform for flexible participation while providing more engaged young leaders with the tools to effect real change. In this way, digital technologies can serve as important media through which to cultivate young people’s understanding and interest in social and political life, which is an important predictor of how involved they will be in such activities as adults.⁵¹ In the next chapter, we explore the benefits of ICTs for enabling youth leadership in more detail.

Table 2.1 Categories of youth participation and engagement, and the possibilities of digital technologies for extending engagement⁴⁹

Category of youth engagement	Description	How digital technologies can extend engagement
Engaged citizens	Young people who are engaged in politics and already likely to be civic activism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet and related technologies provide ways for sustaining, expanding and improving the quality of this engagement. <p>E.g. offering easy, low-cost ways to obtain information; on-line voter registration and even online voting; receiving targeted information; contacting public officials on a variety of issues; identifying volunteering opportunities local communities</p>
Interested but inactive citizens	Young people who might be interested, but only willing easy to engage in relatively or light levels of engagement, such as signing a petition or survey.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The internet could potentially increase engagement of this group by providing information that can help young people take action, and providing easy and attractive ways to do things
Neither engaged nor clearly motivated	Young people who lack the motivation, including self-efficacy, interest and attention to get involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since motivation (interest, attention, efficacy and so forth) is key for participation, the question is whether the internet can be a useful means for increasing these attributes among young adults. • Arguably, the same approaches used to translate existing interest into action could be used to increase interest itself. • The ability of new technologies to increase the motivation to act appears to be the least well-theorised and understood aspect of the potential for increasing civic engagement

3

**Mapping the benefits:
digital technologies as
tools for empowering
young people to take
the lead**



3. Mapping the benefits: digital technologies as tools for empowering young people to take the lead

This chapter explores the benefits of digital technologies for enabling and empowering young people to take the lead. These benefits can be categorised into four main thematic areas – communication; collaboration; connecting; and action - and relate both to young people’s personal development, as well as their potential to build and exercise key leadership skills. These four thematic areas were identified through an analysis of the primary research conducted with academics, practitioners and young people, including our survey of 244 young people in England, and are supplemented with material derived from desk-based research. The chapter also draws attention to some of the limitations of these new technologies as tools for empowering young people to take the lead (discussed in depth in Chapter 4), which need to be considered alongside their benefits in order for us to fully explore their potential.

Communication

One of the key benefits of ICTs consistently highlighted by those who participated in the research - academics, practitioners and young people alike – was their potential to enable confidence-building communication.

On the internet, ‘voice’ is paramount. Whether through written expression or the production of audiovisual content, young people can experiment with voice when they use ICTs by expressing an opinion or testing an idea on their own, without the need for adult or community permission. As Ugochukwu Obi, Founder of the African Caribbean Society website www.africancaribbeansociety.com noted, on the internet, “You have voice straightaway.”⁵² Interviewees consistently cited the link between sharing one’s voice online and building confidence: the internet gives access to rapid feedback, helping young people test and refine their expression, thus building confidence. Confidence, in turn, is one of the main skills needed to help young people take the lead.⁵³

Below, we explore some of the key ways ICTs enable young people to communicate and to build confidence and authority.

Offering excluded and marginalised youth a platform for expression

Several interviewees cited ICTs as an important way for young people who are isolated – because of factors as varied as shyness, disability, or geography – to communicate with others outside their immediate sphere. The possibilities afforded by online communication can often enable less confident or less extrovert youth to have a voice, gain confidence, and exercise leadership (**Box 3.1**). Educators and experts interviewed for this report noted that for shy students, the internet often enabled them to express themselves and take the lead in unexpected ways.⁵⁴

Additionally, the new media environment allows people who are typically excluded from, or misrepresented in, mainstream media and political discourse (including young people, minorities, and low-income groups) the opportunity to represent themselves and speak

Box 3.1 ICTs as platforms for building self-confidence

Sara Patterson, a teacher at the Korea International School, commented on the way in which the use of ICTs can change classroom dynamics: “technology allows students who maybe aren’t the most vocal to find a place where they can have a voice”. One such student was Beatrice Park, who was asked what the benefits for her were of using the internet and other ICTs in school. “I’m not really an outgoing person and I’m pretty shy,” she responded, “but when I use the internet I feel a lot of people encourage me to continue to do what I’m doing ... I feel it gives me a lot more self-confidence.”⁵⁵

on their own behalf. Particularly, a number of young leaders in more restrictive cultural environments have found the internet useful for challenging the voice of authority (**Box 3.2**).

However, it is important to note that this experience is not common to all youth. Many young people have had the experience of not

“ICTs can provide young people access to platforms and communities in which there are different sets of norms, enabling young people to express themselves in ways they might not offline.”

being listened to, despite the ability of digital technologies to offer a platform for greater voice, an issue we return to in Chapters 4 and 6.

Experimenting with self-expression

ICTs can provide young people access to platforms and communities in which there are different sets of norms, enabling young people to express themselves in ways they might not offline. Nearly three-quarters of respondents to our survey (72%) responded affirmatively to the question “Can you do or be things online that you can’t offline?” For example, according to

Box 3.2 Everyone now has their own voice

Esra’a Al Shafei, Founder and Director of Mideast Youth (www.mideastyouth.com), said that, in the past, the “political elite” held a monopoly on voicing opinions: “Before it used to be just one main politician, and one main political party, and whether you agreed or disagreed, they represented you, whether you liked it or not”. Nowadays, with the opportunities the internet presents, she feels that “we have a lot more people representing many, many different ideas ... no one speaks for us anymore ... everyone is their own leader ... I think it’s definitely changing what leadership means, and I think everyone now feels like they have a voice.”⁵⁶

Natalie Campbell (Special Projects Manager, Virgin Media Pioneers Programme, Enterprise UK) young people on their programme tend to have “an online alter ego” that is “far more confident” than they are otherwise: “you can be more than one person online and you can say more and do more and ask questions you potentially wouldn’t ask.”⁵⁷

The online context can also enable young people to avoid being prejudged based on appearances. According to one young person, “Your online persona is a lot more judged by your content rather than the aspects of who you are, your race, your colour, your age ... I think it offers you a lot more creativity and freedom to express yourself in a way that you couldn’t do in person.”⁵⁸

The potential to remain anonymous online also plays an enabling role here - particularly when young people are dealing with, and want to take the lead on, sensitive issues relating to, for example, sexuality⁵⁹ or mental illness,⁶⁰ or for young people who are still experimenting with their identities.⁶¹ Anonymity can offer youth greater freedom in self-expression, helping young people to develop and build confidence.

Interestingly, however, young people in our focus groups did not often see anonymity as key to their freedom to express themselves online, something echoed by Jonathan Nicholas, CEO of Inspire Ireland. He noted that anonymity was important in the past, but it has become less so in recent years: “I think young people’s online identity is getting closer to their real identity.”⁶² For those young people we interviewed who were pursuing professional careers, or who were actively taking the lead on social and political issues, having an alignment between their online and offline identities seemed to be of particular importance.

Challenging traditional notions of expertise

The diversity of the online world means that young people can express themselves and be heard outside of mainstream media or their ‘offline’ spheres of influence.

According to Jonathan Nicholas, the social impact of technology gives the present generation of young people the ability to “go around experts.”⁶³ Phenomena such as crowdsourcing⁶⁴ and citizen journalism⁶⁵ afford ordinary citizens, including young people, the opportunity to produce authoritative reports based on collective methods of data gathering. ICTs provide a platform for self-expression and even harsh criticism of authorities – for example using data to challenge authority figures, and hold leaders to account in a publicly visible manner. As one young person noted:

“Twitter... is pretty hard to ignore. If people hit against Gordon Brown’s twitter⁶⁶ fiercely it is a really immediate way of contacting him. To ignore it would look very bad and everyone would hear about it. So, it works as a threat, and is more powerful in that way than writing a letter to your MP which could be ignored.”⁶⁷

The experience of ‘being an expert’ can help young people develop key communication skills. Lauren Hauser, Manager of Community Organising at LinkTV (YouthNoise), an online community where young people can connect with one another and promote positive change, observed that “There is a great trend in young people feeling comfortable in vocalising their

“Twitter... is pretty hard to ignore. If people hit against Gordon Brown’s twitter fiercely it is a really immediate way of contacting him.”

opinions – whether or not they are heard or legitimised by the mainstream.”⁶⁸ Over time, she noted, in expressing themselves through blogs and other mediums, young people can hone the persuasion and communication skills which support leadership development.

Schools and teachers can be instrumental in teaching young people how to use these tools to question the world around them, particularly the political and social world from which many young people feel alienated (see also Chapter 5). David Smith, Director of ICT at St. Paul’s

School, noted that schools have a role to play in encouraging young people to use ICTs to leverage their power: “When the Guardian put all that MP expenses data online and invited people to start analysing it, I talked about that in an assembly for 14-year-olds, and said ‘there’s no reason on Earth why you couldn’t go into this today and start looking at your MP and trying to sift information.’”⁶⁹

Getting validating feedback

Many of the people with whom we spoke – both adults and youth - noted that one of the key benefits of ICTs is the fact that they can connect young people with immediate feedback from others.

“So I guess the Internet helped me to find what I really wanted to be or what I really could do, kind of discover myself... I guess I got motivated that people I don’t even know like my work.” - **Beatrice Park, Student, Korea International School** ⁷⁰

Sara Patterson noted that due to the publishing power of the Web, when young people’s work gets attention, it can be enormously validating, conveying that “Other people care what I have to say.”⁷¹ This is separate from the validation they might have in other areas of their lives, where they must perform and deliver to others’ expectations (in the structured process of academic feedback, for example). Ugochukwu said that this ability to express an idea and get feedback on it can both improve the idea and “help a long way, especially with confidence-building.”⁷²

Clearly, not all feedback will be positive in nature. However, for the young leaders we spoke with, even negative feedback can be constructive. Alvin Carpio, head of www.World-Makers.com, found, for example, that negative feedback “enabled discussion, where people were able to see whose viewpoint they really agreed with.”⁷³

One area of concern, however, is that young people tend to rely on other youth for feedback and validation, and are less inclined to seek out a response from adults and those in positions

of power. Some of our young interviewees experienced discouraging feedback from adults, or felt that they were not being listened to. We return to this issue in Chapter 4.

Collaboration

ICTs enable young people to turn individual motivation into team work, which is an important part of being a successful leader and also a key step in extending engagement of young people with social and/or political issues. Below, we explore some of the ways ICTs support the collaborative process.

Box 3.3 Sharing and collaborating: Funtwo on YouTube

Video-sharing website YouTube showcases the importance of collaboration in online communities of interest. Charles Leadbeater notes the example of young guitarist 'Funtwo' (since revealed as Lim Jeong-hyun), featured in an 2005 video, cap pulled low over his face, playing a virtuosic version of Pachelbel's Canon in D on his electric guitar. Since 2005 the hits on the video have climbed to nearly 70m views and it is the fifth most 'favourited' video in YouTube history.

Funtwo's early popularity was due to his membership of a sizeable worldwide community of guitar enthusiasts online. They exchange tips and techniques, review each others' work and share their enthusiasm for the music. Funtwo's track was created in a collaborative process in which he used the heavy metal backing from another guitarist. His new version was originally targeted at this online community of fellow enthusiasts and was posted by a third party on YouTube. Leadbeater notes, "Funtwo is in effect a leader of this community. And yet leading doesn't mean the same thing [as offline]. He's the... attractor around which this community has helped to form... it's very peer-to-peer." The collaborative process and a connection around shared interests drives the creative process: when asked if he recorded the video because he wanted to be famous, Funtwo responded that He "just wanted to play the piece better."⁷⁷

Linking shared interests

ICTs enable young people to connect around shared interests and to work with one another to refine and explore those interests. Our interviewees cited examples as disparate as young people starting online campaigns⁷⁴, commenting on and editing each others' poetry⁷⁵, and making videos of themselves playing versions of Pachelbel's Canon in D⁷⁶ (**Box 3.3**). These young people have found each other through file-sharing sites, social networking sites, and offline interest groups.

Achieving shared goals

The process of online interest-sharing can often lead to a shift from self-expression to achieving shared goals. The group dynamics of 'networked publics' tend to favour accomplishment of goals and conception of the individual as part of the group. In a study of an online community called Junior Summit, researchers discovered that young people elected online to group leadership positions were those whose "linguistic style is more likely to keep the goals and needs of the group as central."⁷⁸ Those who synthesised others' ideas were more likely to be elected than those who championed their own. Youth participation expert Tim Davies noted that ICTs can help shape individual thinking about teamwork, pointing out the potential for ICTs to "help young people figure out the different roles they need to play, how to be a team."⁷⁹

The Flat Classroom Project (**Box 3.4**) provided just this experience for student Kathy Lee. She noted, "It was a great experience to get used to working with other people."⁸⁰ The experience also helped her realise digital technologies are more than tools for connecting, but "can actually have a positive impact in our world."⁸¹

Harnessing collaboration for new types of learning

Digital technologies have helped challenge the notion of learning as a one-way process, where questions and problems have one right answer, or one right source. While in the past, teachers gave information to students, ICTs enable a more collaborative dynamic. This change has not removed the need for teachers to facilitate

and guide learning, but has taught young people that they can be the creators and editors of knowledge, which, as Sara Patterson, a teacher at the Korea International School noted, “can be empowering and invigorating.”⁸² In some schools, the collaborative benefits of ICTs are being realised where teachers are integrating them into classroom learning – for example, through the use of wikis and Google docs (Box 3.4).

Connecting

Digital technologies have the potential to benefit young people by connecting them to communities of practice, where the knowledge and networks of different people can facilitate learning and self-discovery, and provide assistance. A majority of young people (63%) who completed our online survey reported spending most of their time, when using ICTs, on social networking sites and roughly half of our survey respondents (53%) cited

“All you really need is a working internet connection and Skype and you can do just as well from your own room, it can be your gateway to the world.”

“Networking skills” as one of the top two skill areas they had developed online. Below, we elaborate the benefits that ICTs offer young people in making connections.

Making multiple and diverse connections across contexts

ICTs enable young people to make connections easily, rapidly and with people they might not have access to in their everyday lives. This shift enables young people to bypass their physical environment and instead make digital connections with peers or friends or those in their community of practice. For some young people, this has challenged the concept of physical space. For Esra’a Al Shafei, founder and director of Mideast Youth (www.mideastyouth.com), digital technologies have changed the concept of ‘office’, and the need to be ‘based’ somewhere physical. As she said, “All you really need is a working internet connection and Skype and you can do just

Box 3.4 Harnessing collaboration for new types of learning: The Flat Classroom Project

The Flat Classroom Project⁸³ is a global collaborative project that connects young people around the world. It incorporates the use of up-to-date technology (particularly web 2.0 technologies) with an approach to learning that ‘flattens’ the divides between pupils and teachers and between different classrooms. The initiative is being taken up across the world and aims to help students to become globally minded, and to equip them with the skills they need in an increasingly ICT-dominated world. The concept of the ‘flattened’ classroom operates by encouraging students to learn from one another, both from those within their class and in a virtual classroom (which connects students around the world via web tools such as Ning and wiki pages). Furthermore, the relationship between teacher and pupil is levelled out, as teachers are open to being educated by their pupils on the latest uses of new technologies.

In one of the projects, students formed groups with students from other schools around the world and were given the task of doing a project themed around the digital divide. Based on their own research, the group had to come up with solutions to the social problems caused by the digital divide – for example, generational divides, or divides between developed and developing countries. Through collaborating to achieve a shared goal, young participants address cultural and ideological differences in a constructive way. Reflecting on what she had learned from this project, Kathy Lee, a student at the Korea International School noted:

“I think number one was that I became more aware of the digital divide; I didn’t know it was becoming a growing problem; and number two I got to meet many other people and learn cultural differences; and number three I had the opportunity to work with people that I had never met before and we had one goal that we needed to accomplish, and I think that really helped us mesh well together... I did find cultural differences become a barrier but most of the time I think because we had one goal to achieve it was easy for us to work together.”⁸⁴

as well from your own room, it can be your gateway to the world.”⁸⁵

Utilising communities of practice

Digital technologies can also connect young people to communities of practice where they can leverage the skills and expertise of a wide range of people. Our research found that engaged young people are tapping into

“Highly successful role models become accessible and approachable through digital technologies.”

these resources to get ideas and make their dreams become reality much more quickly and easily. In developing her campaign to ban khat, a narcotic popular among communities from East Africa and the Arabian peninsula, UpRising leadership programme graduate Muna Hassan found the web beneficial in connecting her to forums and communities where she could find out what people thought in a more dynamic and interesting way. As she said, “There’s only so much you can find out about what people think through surveys and questionnaires, whereas this is live and you can have open discussion, and really dive into what people think.”⁸⁶

Box 3.5 Enterprise UK: building reputation through online contacts and connections

Enterprise UK’s Pioneer Programme helps young people develop, hone and practice entrepreneurial skills. Natalie Campbell (Special Projects Manager, Virgin Media Pioneers Programme, Enterprise UK) stressed the importance of these connections for the young people involved in her programme, noting that building online contacts and connections can help “set your reputation off on a higher footing, because you have that instant bond from being in a community.”⁹² In her observation, once young people have established those online connections, it makes it easier to interact in person because a connection has already been made.

Connecting with inspiring individuals

Young people are also enabled to reach and follow leaders they admire or aspire to be – for example, following Richard Branson, on Twitter.⁸⁷ Highly successful role models become accessible and approachable through digital technologies. This enables young people “to believe and realise that they can be the people they aspire to be. Because they’re not so removed or detached from them anymore.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, “once those initial barriers are broken down, you can start to do the same sorts of things offline. And that has a cumulative effect.”⁸⁹ For Alvin Carpio, head of the website *World-Makers.com*, which profiles positive world-changing role models, connecting with and learning from other successful people gives him “more confidence to do it, the means of doing it, and just the belief that it is possible.”⁹⁰

Online connectors spurring offline action

Young people can build contacts, connections and confidence through online relationships, which can translate into offline action. Building online connections and developing networks is an important part of identity formation and reputation-building on the web (**Box 3.5**). Who you are connected to, networked with and the groups you support can be an important status or identity marker for young people and can be an important part of being recognised as a leader.

Our research highlighted the importance of ‘super-connectors’: young people to whom others pay particular attention because of their large following, most often in social networks. These people often serve as connection points, helping to effectively peer-sanction events, viewpoints or campaigns within particular networks. As one young focus group participant noted, “somebody might just look at the number of people you have in a group and use that as a kind of petition, this person’s got a following, that sort of thing, which is why it kind of still represents leadership.”⁹¹ These young people can also be important in translating online enthusiasm into practical action offline.

The ability to connect also has negative

implications for young people, including online bullying and access to illicit material - issues which are discussed in greater depth in later chapters.

Action

Our research revealed that, beyond the communication, collaboration, and connecting benefits of ICTs, the most profound impact of ICTs is in enabling young people to get things done quickly, easily and cheaply. As a number of our interviewees noted, the internet is much more than a source of information and a mechanism for dialogue and discussion; it is also a platform for action. Our survey results indicate young people see ICTs as vital tools for effecting change, and are explored in detail in **Box 3.6**.

Our research found that for many young

Box 3.6 ICTs as tools for effecting change: findings from our online survey of youth

ICTs can be powerful tools for action. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents to our online survey reported that they thought ICTs “give me and my generation a way to make positive changes in our communities/society”.

Moreover, ICTs may enable young people, who would otherwise struggle to engage, to get involved: 59% of young people we surveyed reported that the internet and other ICTs enable them to overcome barriers to getting involved in politics and/or promoting social change, such as race, money, gender and class.

Over half of young people surveyed (53%) reported that they had used ICTs to make a positive change in their community/society. Other survey respondents cited the internet as a source of information that allowed them to take part in local activities or campaigns, for example: “Through gaining information about how to make a positive change, using it to connect with other people and helping to make them aware of how they can make a difference.”

leaders – young people with higher levels of online and offline engagement - the internet provides a platform where they can showcase and take action and, as a result, build their

“For many young leaders – young people with higher levels of online and offline engagement - the internet provides a platform where they can showcase and take action and, as a result, build their credibility and reputation.”

credibility and reputation. As Muna Hassan, graduate of the UpRising youth leadership programme, said, “People see you as someone who’s actually trying. You’re trying to make a difference without just saying ‘I’m trying to make a difference’. You’re doing something that’s physical.”⁹³ Additionally, being able to see other young people doing things and effecting change can be very empowering for those who might not be as confident in their abilities. Below, we explore some of the key ways ICTs enable young people to get things done.

Opening up routes to leadership

One important way ICTs open access to leadership is that it now takes less time and effort to effect change and see results from action. As Tim Davies, Co-Founder of Practical Participation, emphasised, the experience of taking the lead, making change happen and learning about change can happen “within two weeks online”, and this experience can be “a

Box 3.7 Making a difference

“Recently I did an online petition sort of thing, and it actually helped keep a radio station alive, which was something I really wanted to happen, because it was a youth-led radio station and now it’s got quite a few good guests coming in, and so that’s something positive that has come off through the internet. So it might have been, yeah, sitting at home to do it, but it got the job done.” - **Young person, Focus Group**⁹⁸

lot more powerful than a leadership programme that takes six months or more to complete.”⁹⁴ The internet offers up new, alternative pathways to leadership and power – which means that young people can sidestep traditional routes. The internet enables young people to build and engage a following with greater ease, as

“For engaged young people, the web offers a space where communities of interest can form and take things forward.”

well as often seeing results immediately. As Natalie Campbell (Special Project Manager, Virgin Media Pioneers Programme, Enterprise UK) said, “Doing things online means that (for) young people, their aspirations and sense of leadership become greater. You can be a global leader from day one essentially, you can build your following ... I don’t have to be a councillor and then an MP ...”⁹⁵

Changing conceptions about making a difference

Digital technologies are also helping to open up young people’s ideas and understanding about what can be accomplished (**Box 3.7**). For engaged young people, the web offers a space where communities of interest can form and take things forward. As Grant Bell, founder of Tomorrow’s Web said, “If the internet didn’t exist, then the innovations coming out of this community I’m part of wouldn’t exist, because the ideas evolving around it, and the community wouldn’t be possible.”⁹⁶ Tim Davies echoes

Box 3.8 Minimising risk through rapid feedback

After Alvin Carpio, founder of World-Makers.com, did an interview on BBC radio about the lack of Asian representation in UK politics he decided to bring the issue up on his blog. The post generated so many responses and such fruitful discussion that he felt empowered to continue work on the topic. According to Alvin, the responses gave him the “sense that this really is an issue that should be addressed.”¹⁰¹

this view: he believes digital technologies are creating a group of young people who have much greater expectations about their ability to “make [their] mark on things.”⁹⁷

Doing things at scale, cheaply

Part of the way in which ICTs are expanding leadership opportunities for young people is by giving them the opportunity to do things at a scale that previously could not be done cost effectively. ICTs act as a ‘leveller’ to the extent that they offer a means to overcome the problem of limited access to both financial and human capital.

Minimised risk

While digital technologies might not always deliver real world results, they are highly conducive places for experimentation with minimal risk.⁹⁹ The potential for rapid feedback is one characteristic of online spaces that serves to minimise risk (**Box 3.8**). As Natalie Campbell noted, “And you can blog or tweet something and see how many people respond. You know, you can test your market like that – literally in 30 seconds.”¹⁰⁰

In addition, online spaces allow young people to exercise leadership in an environment where failure and engagement have fewer risks and requirements, meaning more young people, including those lower on the engagement continuum, can get involved in leadership activities. As cultural theorist Don Slater noted, “People get the experience of making an impact, putting themselves forward, and dealing with complicated situations but with consequences that are one step removed.”¹⁰²

Chapter summary

This chapter has highlighted the key areas where digital technologies can help young people develop leadership skills and put them into practice.

The communication benefits of digital technologies can enable confidence-building self-expression and give young people a space to experiment with voicing their opinions and expertise on issues that are important to them with the potential for validating feedback. This

can be an important foundation or precursor for taking action, particularly for those young people who are lower on the engagement spectrum, and/or are excluded or marginalised.

The collaboration and connecting benefits of digital technologies can help young people move towards higher levels on the participation and engagement spectrum by facilitating a shift from self-expression and individual motivation into team-work, collaboration and collective problem-solving. In this way, digital technologies offer young people a platform through which to leverage skills and expertise and find like-minded individuals.

Finally, digital technologies enable young people to put their leadership skills into practice - at scale, and at low cost and minimal risk - and see real results in return. The 'real-time' nature

of these technologies can help encourage young people to take the lead on issues that are relevant to their lives, as active citizens and leaders of today – thus offering young people the means to be more than just 'citizens in the making' or 'tomorrow's leaders'.

Despite the potential and opportunities digital technologies offer for facilitating youth leadership, this chapter has also drawn attention to some of the limitations of these new technologies. Understanding such limitations is vital when assessing the potential benefits of digital technologies: they are not a panacea, and are not inherently supportive of leadership development. In understanding the limitations of digital technologies, we can better capture their full potential. Digital technologies' limitations as tools for engaging young people will be elaborated in the next chapter.

4

Limitations and challenges: realising and democratising the benefits of digital technologies



4. Limitations and challenges: realising and democratising the benefits of digital technologies

In the last chapter we explored how digital technologies potentially can benefit young people and enable them to develop and exercise leadership. But new technologies are not a magic bullet when it comes to addressing problems of youth disengagement: there are also factors that limit the extent to which the potential benefits can be realised.

These factors include:

- *Digital divides and exclusion:* The potential benefits of ICTs are biased towards more educated or advantaged youth. Because of this, a new 'exponential divide' is forming between engaged and disengaged youth.
- *Shortcomings of online social capital and networks:* There is a tendency towards shallow, weaker ties amongst online communities, coupled with a tendency of 'like seeking like' which can result in limited and insular networks. Such tendencies limit the extent to which online spaces can enable youth to develop leadership capabilities and effect real-world change.
- *Challenges in teaching leadership skills online:* There are limits in the extent to which leadership skills can be developed in online spaces.
- *Persistence of context:* Youth participation and engagement contexts remain crucial.

These areas of limitation are elaborated below.

Digital divides and exclusion

To some, ICTs promise a classless space in which the socioeconomic baggage of the 'real world' can be left at the door. However, discussion of the internet as a 'great equaliser' may ignore the reality of the 'Matthew effect' – where 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.'¹⁰⁴

Those who are already socioeconomically and culturally rich can harness the benefits of ICTs, while those who lack access or appropriate support will be unable to take full advantage of

these tools – and the gap will widen.

“Core economic, social, political and cultural activities throughout the planet are being structured by and around the internet, and other computer networks. Exclusion from these networks is one of the most damaging forms of exclusion in our economy and society.”

– Manuel Castells¹⁰³

Evidence suggests that, while traditional digital divides (those that are a by-product of differential access to digital technology) are becoming less important, particularly in developed contexts, new divides are becoming apparent. Despite the fact that the internet can act as a leveller under some circumstances, it biases towards education, as Jonathan Nicholas, CEO of Inspire Ireland, points out:

“In our experience what used to be called the digital divide no longer exists. It's not actually a problem of digital access now, it actually goes back to an education divide, where marginalised young people, or young people from tougher backgrounds have less understanding of how to use technology to better their lives”.¹⁰⁵

Because ICTs bias in favour of education, a new 'exponential divide' is opening between engaged and disengaged youth.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, as other research has found, “efforts in the online civic engagement space are more strongly suited for enabling or more deeply engaging young people who are already civically minded.”¹⁰⁷ Manjit More, a teacher with Teach First¹⁰⁸ (an initiative aimed at tackling educational disadvantage in challenging schools around the UK) said:

“I work with 11 to 18 year-olds. And I actually think it's overrated actually how much they know about the internet. They're not whizz kids. I work with working class kids and they don't know about blogs and leadership; they're not bothered. All they think about when they think about the internet is games and Facebook... I was surprised by how little they know about the

internet... they couldn't believe that you could email companies online... they didn't know that 10 Downing Street had a website... they were shocked; they don't know the potential of the internet; they don't know their own potential either."¹⁰⁹

Our research suggests that marginalised youth

Box 4.1 The importance of face-to-face relationships

Participants in our focus groups and interviews had clear views on the value of face-to-face relationships – and the limitations of ICTs in providing these:

“You can't really build an emotional relationship online. When you speak to someone face to face you react from the facial expressions. And I suppose you've got Skype and all that, but it's still not the same” – **Young male, Focus group**¹¹⁷

“I think it's good to start up relationships, but I don't think it will ever replace actually meeting people. Because it's just a trust thing. You know, you can't really find out who someone is until you've met them. So it's great for starting a relationship but you won't be able to get to a proper level until you've actually met someone.”
– **Young male, Focus group**¹¹⁸

“What would take four weeks online, takes two days in person. Once you add in body language and personal interaction, even a great webcam can't provide you with all of that”. – **Julie Lindsay, ELearning Coordinator, Beijing (BISS) International School**¹¹⁹

may not typically use ICTs in ways which help them to transcend socioeconomic barriers. For example, they may be more likely to use online tools for entertainment and socialising rather than civic engagement and activism than socioeconomically privileged youth. In more extreme examples, they may still use tools to distribute information and connect people, but towards negative ends – e.g. the usage of mobile phones to connect drug dealers.¹¹⁰ Tackling educational disadvantage – along with the intersecting issues of low aspirations and apathy – is a critical task if ICTs are to be harnessed to empower young people who are marginalised from mainstream society. As one young person emphasised, “You need ICT and education in tandem. One without the other is useless.”¹¹¹

Shortcomings of online social capital and networks

Shallow ties

The potential of digital technologies to foster 'weak' or 'shallow' ties has both positive and negative implications for youth development and leadership. The positive benefits, such as creating and harnessing a diverse network from which young people can leverage expertise and connect to communities of practice, has been discussed in Chapter 3. Negatively, the shallowness of online communities and networks can influence the extent to which online engagement translates into real-world empowerment and action. Indeed, the strength of connections and commitment to creating change in the context of online communities

Figure 4.1 Views about ICTs (100%=209 to 211)

I feel people take me more seriously/respect my opinions to a greater extent online than in face to face context

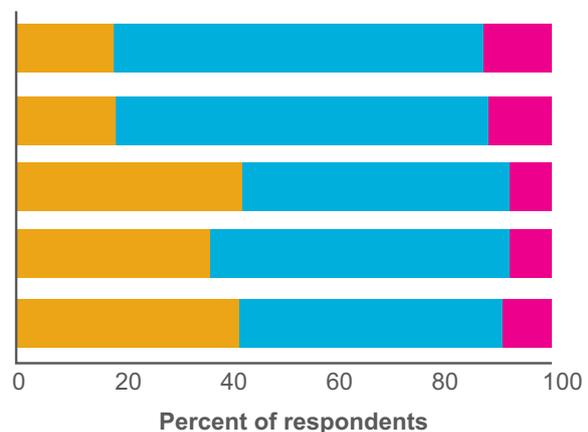
I feel more accepted as a person online than in face to face context

I feel more comfortable seeking help online than in a face to face context

I feel more at ease in making new connections online than in face to face context

I am more confident in expressing myself/ my opinion online than in a face to face context

■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Don't know



and causes is questionable. During our focus groups, young people spoke of a diminished sense of “solidarity and loyalty ties” to certain online causes on the internet as opposed to in the offline context, linked with “a limited amount of accountability” and a “selfish and short-termist” orientation.^{112,113} This shallower and more superficial type of engagement – which has been labelled ‘slacktivism’ – indicates the importance of evaluating online engagement in terms of quality and not just quantity.

“I’m really sceptical about the potential of protests via the internet. We tried to organise a little protest via Facebook and like five people showed up from like 150 who signed up for it, so there’s a real gap between clicking something as you said, and going on the street. That’s why doing something online, it’s just maybe part of the excitement, you know?”
– Young person, Focus group¹¹⁴

Additionally, a number of young people we spoke with were sceptical about the potential for online activism to lead to real world change. Some saw online activities as “lazy”, and “not real leadership.”¹¹⁵ Others saw online spaces as an important, but as only one part of a more in-depth connection that needs to be made offline in order to actually effect change. As one noted: “I think it is a useful starting point...The difficult thing then is how to transfer that into actually going out and doing something ... You have used it to talk to lots of people, to make contact, but how do you now get them to actually go and do something?”¹¹⁶

Our survey evidence supports these anecdotal

reports. Though young people reported in the survey that ICTs had particular benefits for them, this did not mean that ICTs took

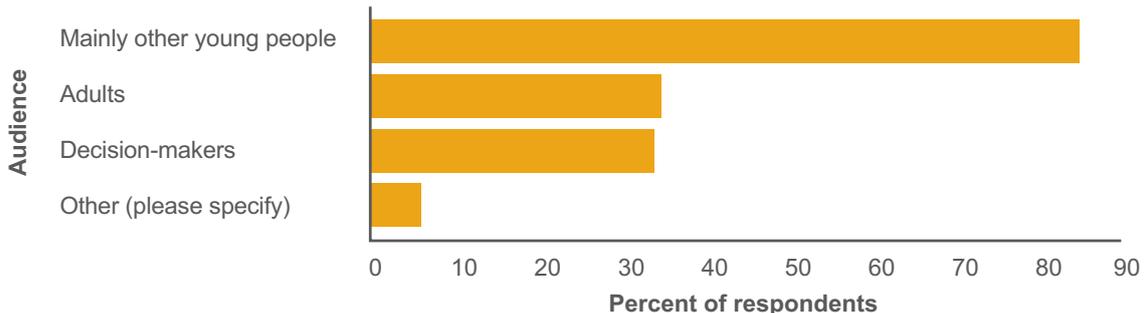
“While there are dozens of social network sites, participation tends to follow cultural and linguistic lines.”

precedence over ‘face-to-face’ contexts (Figure 4.1). That said, 43% of respondents felt more comfortable seeking help online than face-to-face, and 42% felt more confident expressing themselves and their opinions online than in a face-to-face context.

Limited and insular networks

Another issue relates to the openness and diversity – or lack thereof - of online communities and networks. As discussed in our previous publication, *Taking the lead: Youth leadership in theory and practice*¹²⁰, the ability to lead positive social change relies very much on building young people’s social capital and access to diverse, supportive networks. However, a key shortcoming of online communities is a general tendency towards homophily – that is, “people seeking out their own kind”¹²¹ – which can result in limited and insular networks. As academic and researcher danah boyd observes: “While there are dozens of social network sites, participation tends to follow cultural and linguistic lines. Few sites successfully support groups from different nation-states.”¹²² Even Twitter, so often lauded as a new tool for championing a rich diversity of ideas, finds political liberals strongly over-represented among its users.¹²³

Figure 4.2 If you used ICTs to try to make a positive change, who were you trying to reach? (respondents ticked all that applied)



Insular networks can limit young people's ability to make the most of what can be done online. These effects are likely to most powerfully affect disadvantaged youth – the poor and the uneducated – who are more likely than advantaged young people to associate with people like themselves.¹²⁴ This is compounded by the fact that disadvantaged young people often have lower levels of social capital, and lack links to other networks, such as through role models and teachers, which can be important in empowering young people as leaders.¹²⁵

Generational and power divides

This tendency towards homophily, or 'like seeking like', is also at play on a generational and power level. Our survey results highlight the extent to which this is an issue: a full 86% of young people noted that when using digital technologies to promote change they were targeting other young people, while only around a third of respondents tried to reach adults or decision-makers (**Figure 4.2**).

As noted in Chapter 3, young people often experienced feedback from adults in

discouraging terms. Esra'a Al Shafei, founder and director of Mideast Youth mentioned this as a key challenge when trying to set up her online platform:

"I think one of the main challenges [was] ... the overwhelming amount of discouragement and attacks that I've had from communities of bloggers and so-called human rights activists. A lot of what they wanted to do was just have dominance over activism, and they weren't really welcoming of someone else coming in and doing their own thing."¹²⁶

Young people often felt they were not being 'listened to' online by adults and decision-makers, and expressed ambivalence about the potential of the internet to shift power structures and hierarchies. A number of our interviews highlighted the Iraq War as an example of where communication and protest failed to have any effect, signalling their lack of power and voice. As one young person mentioned:

"I have seen so many online petitions and other forms as well, like the march on the war against



Iraq, where you saw so many people coming out against it but then does that actually affect anything? No. They actually just went against the decision anyhow, taking no consideration of the people. It doesn't make it useless but it can be easily ignored."¹²⁷

Generational divides are also evident in terms of how digital technologies are being taken up and used by young people compared with older generations, which can lead to frustration on the part of youth and could further reinforce inter-generational distance. For example, ways of working and utilising ICTs can vary significantly between generations. While young people might feel more inclined to use digital media in the context of meetings or in the classroom to get things done 'on the spot', older generations can be reticent about such changes, as Tim Davies, Co-Director of Practical Participation, has found in his own experience:

"Now I face that constant frustration in campaign meetings or local community meetings with adults where we end up completing the meeting agreeing to find out something that takes two minutes on the web and then it's another two months of time wasted".¹²⁸

Despite the many potential benefits of digital technologies as tools for young people to lead change, there are real issues in connecting the action of young people online with places, positions and people in power. Top-down efforts by government and institutions to engage young people in social and political life often lose sight of the issues in which young people are interested and address them in outmoded ways, for instance through older mechanisms of political action like voting and union membership.¹²⁹

On the other hand, bottom-up pressure and engagement of young people in online spaces in relation to social and political issues often goes unseen and unheard by adults and people in positions of power.¹³⁰ Despite the potential of online spaces to engage and empower young people in social and political life, without a mechanism to connect efforts to structures of power, such potential could be lost, and interest

in politics as a means for promoting social change could vanish altogether.

In Chapter 6, we offer some practical recommendations for bridging this divide, and for facilitating young people's sustained engagement with mainstream civic and political life.

Reinforcing prejudice

Finally, the online tendency of 'like seeking like' can serve to reinforce prejudices and stereotyping and can fuel group polarisation and extremism – as explored in Cass Sunstein's *Going to extremes: How like minds unite and divide*.¹³¹ Similarly, the potential to remain anonymous online, while being an enabling factor in some circumstances (**Chapter 3**), also means that there is no guarantee that inter-cultural dialogue will effectively take place - offering young people

Box 4.2 Promoting cross-cultural dialogue: www.mideastyouth.com

For Esra'a Al Shafei, a desire to challenge and break down cultural stereotypes and divisions was a key factor that motivated her to develop www.mideastyouth.com.

While she saw that a lot of blogging was going on, she found that people were "mimicking what was already happening in real life" – and tended to gravitate towards like-minded individuals. Additionally, there remained an ignorance around and fear of engaging with religious and ethnic minorities. As Esra'a noted, "for me, that was very frustrating, because I thought to myself, here we have a powerful tool for engagement [i.e. the internet], an educational platform for dialogue and people, I felt, were primarily really misusing it. And a lot of people were also using it to express their own opinions, without really being open to the opinions of others."¹³³

In response, Esra'a set up a platform aimed at drawing in youth from across the Middle East, regardless of their religious, ethnic or political affiliations, and putting them together on one platform to engage in dialogue with one another.

little chance to identify and challenge negative stereotypes they and others might hold.

As David Smith, Director of ICT at St. Paul's School emphasises, a key question that needs to be addressed, therefore, is: "how we can use the internet to break down those barriers that result in like going with like ... the question should be how to create a more fluid, open society that enjoys difference, rather than being afraid of it."¹³²

One promising trend identified in our research is that young people are actively taking steps to challenge the perception that difference is inherently problematic. Young leaders were often well aware of the degree to which online spaces mirror offline or 'real-world' divisions and prejudices, and were actively challenging that tendency in their campaigns and through their activism (**Box 4.2**).

Challenges in developing leadership skills online

Certain leadership skills are harder to develop in an online context. While online communities

can certainly be used to 'model' and practice skills that might traditionally have been learned in offline settings – for example, teamwork and collaboration (**Chapter 3**) - what is often missing is an opportunity to reflect on the process of group and individual progress and growth - an important element of leadership development. Additionally, being able to lead and participate actively in a discussion and the ability to work as part of a team in 'offline' settings still remain important skills.¹³⁴

The limitations of digital technologies in terms of developing key social and emotional skills and competencies are recognised by practitioners as well as young people alike. For example, during a focus group, young people expressed anxiety around contacting people they did not know on the phone. This seems to relate, in part, to the fact that young people have become accustomed to the once-removed aspect of the internet, where sending an email or writing a message is done in a context in which they have time to think about what they want to say – making communication less emotional or immediate. As a consequence, real-time



interaction, for some young people, is becoming a daunting prospect:

“I think in a way it stops you from developing actual people skills, like talking to people’s faces. Because I’m scared to ring people on the phone now. I’m actually scared. Because I’d rather just email someone...”¹³⁵

Similarly, our consultations revealed that offline contacts and networking still play a vital role in enabling learning around technical or more difficult issues and can also provide an important step in building an online base of contacts (**Chapter 6**). Offline support is often critical in helping young people develop the more basic and technical skills needed to be a successful leader, particularly given the overwhelming amount of information on the web. As Hannah Carnell, Research Manager at Enterprise UK, said, “Google is brilliant if you’re looking for very specific things, but I think if you search for ‘business plans’ and it comes up with 30 million different options, it’s overwhelming.”¹³⁶

The importance of context

Finally, as our findings above have indicated, context is still very important – ICTs do not build leadership skills in and of themselves. Speaking from personal experience, Tim Davies, Co-Director of Practical Participation, emphasised that offline youth leadership contexts are

crucial in enabling young people to explore and develop skills in using ICTs as tools for change. Advances in technology by no means remove the need for this kind of offline experience.

While digital technologies give young people the tools through which change can be effected, the offline context remains essential to galvanising that interest: “the most effective models for community-based youth organisations involve grassroots levels of engagement, which are led by the adolescent themselves and which involve activism for social change.”¹³⁷ Real-life experiences are important in helping young people develop self-esteem, social and emotional skills, peer networks and connections, and is also vital to developing social capital, learning practical skills and exploring one’s identity.¹³⁸ In addition, these opportunities offer lessons in democratic engagement, and a real opportunity for young people to be able to see the effects of their action.

This chapter has looked at the limitations of digital technologies for enabling and empowering young people to take the lead. Given the challenges presented above, it is imperative that adults and institutions working with young people develop more nuanced understandings of how best to utilise ICTs towards this end. The next chapter provides recommendations in support of this goal.

5

ICTs in educational settings: mistakes and recommendations



5. ICTs in educational settings: mistakes and recommendations

Digital technologies have not been as disruptive as many had hoped. Charles Leadbeater, writer and innovation consultant, maintains that, by and large, most institutions “have sought to use most new technologies in order to sustain their traditional model.”¹³⁹ However, as Leadbeater emphasised, new technologies in and of themselves do not promote learning, empowerment and leadership unless traditional models of doing things are interrogated and revised, often quite radically.

Using digital technologies more effectively and innovatively will require that adults and institutions working with young people do more to understand the nature of young people’s engagement with new technologies. As our research found, there remains significant work to be done in this respect. Of the young people we surveyed and interviewed, few had confidence in adults’ understanding of their digital experiences: more than half of those we polled (54%) said that adults in institutions like schools and government do not understand how young people use ICTs and what they do online.

In this chapter, we explore how institutions and organisations are applying new digital technologies, and the mistakes they are making. We then offer some lessons from practice and recommendations for how these new technologies can be harnessed towards the most productive and positive outcomes for young people and the wider society.

Since our focus is on how to harness young people’s energy and talents, and on how to develop key leadership skills, an important element of our investigation is to look at the ways ICTs are used in educational settings. In this chapter, we explore how ICTs can best be applied in the context of such settings, to best facilitate learning, empowerment and leadership amongst young people. We provide an assessment of current practice, identifying gaps and needs, and then present a set of recommendations for practice. While emphasis

is placed upon education within the context of schools, our findings and recommendations have relevance for organisations working beyond the parameters of the formal education system – such as third sector organisations working with young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) - who wish to harness the potential of digital technologies to engage young people both in gaining accreditations, continuing with education, and/or in re-engaging with their communities in positive ways.

ICTs in educational settings: assessing current practice

“In the education system there is too much blocking of sites that have got high degrees of risk but also incredible opportunities for innovation and expressing their creativity... Go with the grain of how kids are using it... and recognise and understand the risks that that involves. They need to treat the web as the greatest educational innovation mankind has come up with it and embrace it, don’t be scared of it.”

– Steve Moore, Director, Policy Unplugged¹⁴⁰

At the centre of these debates is the myth that putting technology into schools and classrooms leads to automatic learning gains.¹⁴¹ Our research challenges this notion – and reveals a number of obstacles and challenges that need to be overcome before technology can be applied in a way that elicits clear gains in terms of learning, empowerment and leadership development.

Gaps and barriers in current educational practice

On a fundamental level, there has been a general failure to adopt the kind of pedagogical thinking required by the internet era – thinking that results in the old idea of ‘learning how to learn’. Arguably there is a need for a radical “pedagogical shift from a role-based model of education to an immersive, child-centred model

of 'learning through doing.'¹⁴² What is required to make the best use of the new technologies are the skills to decide what to look for, how to retrieve it, how to process it, and how to use it for the specific task that prompted the search for information.

Yet there is a mismatch between the requirements of digital literacy and the typical uses of ICT in the educational context. In particular, "conventional school curricula and pedagogical procedures are out of step" with the demands posed by this new technology.¹⁴³ And, while "the provision and promotion of educational technology has increased significantly, the expectation that children will be encouraged and taught to critically evaluate its use has been significantly decreased within the curriculum."¹⁴⁴

There is also a growing divide between how young people use digital technologies in the school context versus the 'rest of their lives'. David Buckingham describes this as a new "digital divide", which he sees as "symptomatic of a much broader phenomenon – a widening gap between children's everyday 'lifeworlds' outside of school and the emphases of many educational systems."¹⁴⁵ The danger in such an approach is that, as Castells argues, the "task of preparing young people for the new era is left to the homes, a fact that is likely to further add to the disparities in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of children and young people."¹⁴⁶

There are a number of consistent mistakes that act as barriers to realising the full potential of ICTs in learning settings. These mistakes include:

General 'fear' of ICTs in formal and informal educational settings– linked with a resistance to engaging with and making sense of the new

In the UK, 11% of 16 to 24 year olds are digitally excluded.¹⁴⁷ But the integration of technology into schools, third sector organisations and other sites of learning for young people remains low, often due to lack of understanding about how to use such tools effectively. Research has found a skills gap around ICT and digital

media in the third sector in the UK, which can be particularly detrimental for those young people the sector is tasked with assisting.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, both teachers and students alike are often wary of new technology in the classroom context: students may fail to see the point or value of new technologies – often a direct result of teachers' lack of understanding of the potential of new educational technologies.

Sara Patterson, a teacher at the Korea International School, noted that her students can also be resistant to the shift in roles and power dynamics that have come about as a result of the use of digital technologies in the classroom and have "struggled with taking on the leadership". Some of their favourite classes are those where teachers still use a traditional lecture format, and students often see non-traditional classes – which involve self-direction, taking the lead – as "too much work."¹⁴⁹

One-dimensional, top-down lessons – coupled with a narrow focus on imparting skills¹⁵⁰ and encouraging a functional use of the web¹⁵¹

Not enough emphasis is placed on teaching children critical awareness of the use and impact of technology.¹⁵² International educator Julie Lindsay has found in her work with educators across the world that there remains a tendency to "put the lid down" on digital technologies, rather than using them to enable young people to communicate, collaborate and create.¹⁵³

New digital technologies require new styles of learning and teaching, helping to facilitate young people's critical awareness of the web. Sara Patterson explained, "What I love most about technology is how it's changed how I teach, and how it's changed how I interact with my students". It marks a break away from a "classic style" of teaching and learning i.e. a "passive" approach where "we [teachers] give them [students] knowledge": "I think they learn more by just doing it themselves. So I just try to set up opportunities for them."¹⁵⁴

However, this shift radically disrupts traditional roles and power dynamics in the classroom

context and can be met with resistance from educators and students alike. Patterson noted that many teachers “Are scared to give up power. It’s acknowledging that you don’t know everything ... That’s to me one of the main ways that education has changed, that it’s not about me giving you the answer, it’s about us figuring out the best way to find the answer, together.”¹⁵⁵

Little freedom of access – institutional gate-keeping, censorship and restriction of access, lectures on the dangers of the internet

Our research found that some of the greatest tools for learning, and in particular web 2.0 tools such as Ning and wikispaces, are those that are most frequently blocked or censored in a range of institutions. Some schools, however, are beginning to shift how they think about the role of less ‘reputable’ sites in learning. At St. Paul’s School for boys in London, Director of ICT David Smith has noted a shift in institutional standards around knowledge, with Wikipedia being the prime example. According to Smith, the school has gone from seeing Wikipedia with “institutionalised raised eyebrows”, to encouraging young people to use it as a resource, while checking and validating its accuracy. The school now “encourages people to actually consult Wikipedia and start editing it where they find fault with it.”¹⁵⁶

A general failure to recognise that many young people are living digitally

Young people are living in an increasingly digitalised world. Our research found that many of the programmes and activities both in and outside of schools aimed at engaging young people are failing to make things relevant to their interests and lives. Where educators embrace digital technologies, they can enable a “more *participatory* experience for the user”.¹⁵⁷ This new environment “is about uploading rather than downloading. About coordination, rather than delivery. So, for learners: it’s about more audience, more collaboration, more resource.”¹⁵⁸ These changes necessitate new ways of working for teachers and educators. However, far from requiring that teachers play a diminished role, new technologies demand that teachers continue to be actively engaged

in facilitating informal and participative learning, as well as teaching in a way that authentically involves students in the process.¹⁵⁹ The young people who are equipped with the critical skills to use digital technologies flexibly are those who will be best placed to be leaders in the future (**Box 5.1**).

In the section below we draw on best practice to highlight recommendations for teachers and educators working with young people.

Recommendations

As Don Slater, from the London School of Economics, has emphasised, there is a need to rethink issues of leadership and empowerment in the context of new media and ICTs.¹⁶¹ There is often a mistaken assumption that simply greater quantity of and access to information improves young people’s ability to act as both a consumer and a citizen. The real issue, however, is to get young people to think critically and reflexively about what they are doing on the internet. In order to harness the potential of new media and ICTs, young people need to be “socialised to critical literacy, to evaluate their literacy actions and to determine how these actions affect society and support their own development.”¹⁶²

Below, we expand on how digital technologies can be used both in formal and informal

Box 5.1 Digital citizens: the next generation of young leaders?

According to Julie Lindsay (ELearning Coordinator, Beijing (BISS) International School), young people who are learning how critically to use and evaluate ICTs in schools will be the next generation of leaders because they learned how to be excellent digital citizens. For Lindsay, a digital citizen is someone who:

- Knows how to be responsible online
- Is a reliable online learner
- Knows how to treat others online
- Connects with people across cultures and places, gaining a greater understanding of what it means to interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures¹⁶⁰

learning environments for the wider benefit of a diverse range of young people, recognising that leadership and engagement exist on a continuum and, consequently, that success will look markedly different for divergent groups of young people. Our recommendations for adults and institutions working with young people, drawn from our primary research, are:

Adopt an approach that emphasises critical assessment of the quality and validity of information and tools

Young people need to be taught how to evaluate which tool is best suited to a given situation and goal – for example, how to harness social networks as a tool for social change rather than purely socialising, or how to assess the quality of online resources. For example, St. Paul’s school pushes young people to not only use the internet but to engage with it critically. Researcher Ranjana Das thinks it is important to encourage young people to ask, “Who owns the websites you use every day, and what are their interests?”¹⁶³

Move away from top-down models of learning

It is important that adults and institutions working with young people move away from teaching ICTs in a top-down manner (**Box 5.2**). According to one young person, it is “misguided” for schools “to try to hand down information” as this does not recognise “the

level of exploration and self-learning that’s involved there ... you learn to use it the way that it’s appropriate for you.”¹⁶⁴ Supporting this, a notable majority of youth (65%) who participated in our online survey reported that they had learnt the most, in terms of using ICTs, through self-exploration (**Figure 5.1**).

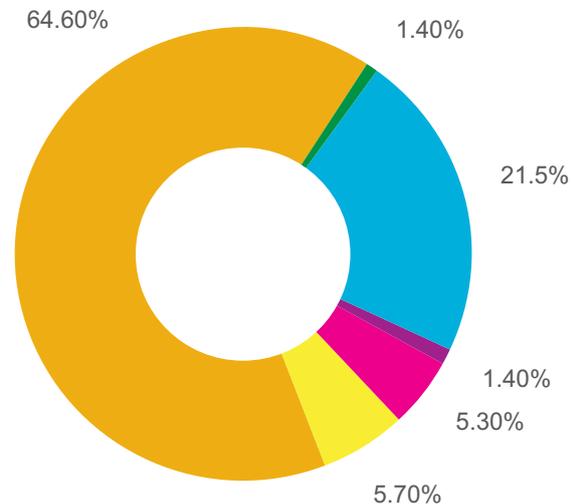
Avoid censorship

Schools need to move away from a culture of censorship, if they are to develop ‘critical literacy’ in young people. Initiatives engaging young people need to build on their experience of technology outside the classroom¹⁶⁵ and be more open to the experimentation and social exploration that often take place outside of the educational context.¹⁶⁶ This often includes the use of social media as well as games. For example, as David Smith, Director of ICT at St. Paul’s School explained, online games, although banned in most schools, actually require a high level of intelligence and can be used to teach critical judgement. At St. Paul’s School, gamers are brought in to discuss the narrative and storyline of their games, helping young people to interrogate the plots as they would in a novel or play.

Putting more innovative practice, and less censorship, into place necessitates those in power thinking carefully about banning sites just because they do not appear to adults to have educational merit, as they can be

Figure 5.1 Where have you learnt the most in terms of using ICTs?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
At school from my teachers and/or classmates	21.5%	45
At work from my boss and/or colleagues	1.40% 5.30%	3 11
From my friends when we hang out	5.70%	12
On my own - I have learnt most of whqt i know through self-exploration	64.60%	135
Other	1.40%	3
Answered questions		209



important and useful in the learning process. However, there needs to be recognition that schools cannot always police what young people are doing online. International educator Julie Lindsay suggests that teachers should be specific about the resources to which their students need access for learning purposes - such as Ning¹⁶⁷ - and ask that those particular sites be unblocked for specific lessons.

Harness peer-based learning

A report on youth, digital media and learning finds that “youth using new media often learn

Box 5.2 Peer-to-Peer Learning: Hole-in-the-Wall Education Ltd

Hole-in-the-Wall Education Ltd (HiWEL) is an initiative providing computer access to communities in India and Cambodia. The organisation provides computers in a hole in the wall that can be used by anybody on the street. These Learning Stations, as the computer access points came to be known, have proven particularly popular with children, and observation of their learning patterns has inspired a new educational theory called Minimally Invasive Education.

The first Hole-in-the-Wall computer was the idea of Dr Sugata Mitra, appearing in a slum in Kalkaji, New Delhi, in 1999. Dr Mitra recognised that the Learning Stations represented a completely different and innovative approach to education. The experiment strongly supported the idea that children were capable of teaching themselves, challenging traditional notions of the best ways to educate. Hole-in-the-Wall has experimented with Learning Stations in slums, on school grounds and in classrooms.

As Charles Leadbeater has pointed out, as well as allowing the children to develop skills in using technology, the method encourages a form of social interaction that sees the children conversing about what is happening and learning from one another. There may be an adult figure present, but it is someone guiding and encouraging natural curiosity rather than defining learning objectives independent of the children’s interests.¹⁷⁰

from their peers, not teachers or adults, and notions of expertise and authority have been turned on their heads.”¹⁶⁸ Teachers, adults and mentors should consider providing opportunities for collaborative work, for example, by getting young people to work in teams to solve problems. Additionally, educators and adults should retain an influencing, rather than dictating, role. Specifically, adults can play a vital role exerting a “tremendous influence in setting ‘learning goals’” and by acting as role models and more experienced peers.¹⁶⁹ Some innovative examples of initiatives that are harnessing the power of peer-to-peer learning include Hole-in-the-Wall Education Ltd (**Box 5.2**) and the Flat Classroom project (**Box 3.4**).

Capitalise on the publishing potential of the web

According to David Smith, Director of ICT at St Paul’s School in London, schools should encourage young people to “form a digital

Box 5.3 Blogging for social change: YouthNoise and the Step It Up project

YouthNoise is a division of Link Media, a San Francisco-based independent media network. It works to empower young people to act for the causes they care about, online and offline, in the US and internationally. On the YouthNoise website, young people are active bloggers, get involved in discussions on message boards, and support a variety of causes.

Step It Up (www.youthnoise.com/playcity/stepitup), a YouthNoise initiative, challenged young people to get involved in the “Super Bowl of step and dance competitions” – competing with other dance teams, but also advocating a cause through online and offline means. As part of this competition, young people in the five boroughs of New York City filmed public service announcements (PSAs) and developed a followership around their cause through their blogs and volunteer activities. Dance teams were judged, in part, on their success in attracting other people to their blog, and on how well they used their media to get others interested in their social cause.¹⁷³

identity and... shape this into something they really enjoy having and are proud of. I think they will then learn to publish online and to find their audiences.”¹⁷¹ Educators can also develop lesson plans around successful online publishing – for example, giving students the task of investigating what makes an effective blog and have students create their own¹⁷² (Box 5.3).

Invest in hyperlocal activity

Data about individual communities is increasingly becoming available online, and there is a trend toward hyperlocal news sites and networks. There is great potential to engage young people in real-world problems and issues in their local communities. As Kay Withers, author of the report *Behind the Screen: The hidden life of youth online*¹⁷⁴, noted, solutions should “be much more locally based”: although “we tend to think that the internet is a global phenomena”, opportunities to engage locally, around issues that affect their daily lives, are a good way for harnessing and channelling young people’s enthusiasm for media into real-world action.¹⁷⁵ The popularity of pirate radio, Withers noted, is evidence of the excitement that can build around local media. Several of the successful programmes we have observed, for example YouthLine America and The

Box 5.4 Local 2.0: hyperlocal media at the Young Foundation

The rapid change and development of web 2.0 technology has sparked innovative thinking in how the technology might be used for the benefit of local communities. The Young Foundation has an initiative devoted to developing such ideas in the form of the Local 2.0 project. The project is in its early stages, but through consultation with local councils and the communities they serve it aims to capture the benefits of social networking and interactive technology, for example by developing an online forum for a community, or mobile phone applications with a local use. Young people are recognised as a very important part of the scheme, both as the main users and the key content creators across a wide range of media.

Challenge Network, are using local exploration and engagement as a foundation for effective social action and citizenship education. Some tangible examples that schools could implement to capture this potential include:

Facilitating youth driven energy profiling

Engage youth in tracking local data around energy use. Such activities can help young people learn about and develop a range of useful leadership skills, such as how to effectively communicate important messages like energy saving tips to a uniformed or uninterested public.

Crowdsourcing and citizen journalism

Involve young people in developing crowdsource newspapers for the local community, which can get youth involved in contributing and publishing ideas relevant to their local communities, and facilitate learning around how to create an effective network, maintain a followership, and disseminate information in an effective manner.¹⁷⁶

Invest in pedagogy

Money needs to be invested in pedagogical change: as learning styles change, adults and institutions working with young people need to be up-skilled to learn how effectively to harness

Box 5.5 Tips for educators

Sara Patterson, a teacher at the Korea International School, had rich advice for educators:

- Be really enthusiastic - “freak out in a good way” when a young person finds something online
- Do it yourself - e.g. blog with your students. Teachers need to recognise the value of and ‘buy into’ educational technology: “It’s all in your leadership. If you buy into it there’s a lot more chance the students will.”
- Be willing to make mistakes
- Be flexible - a one-to-one environment, which supports individualised learning is key
- Give up the power – “it’s OK to not know the answers.”¹⁸⁰

digital technologies. This means, for example, not buying into technological quick-fixes such as putting whiteboards in classrooms. As our research found, educators and others working with young people need to be taught how to harness the myriad learning tools made available on the web: “publishing courses on the web, rather than behind firewalls, making use of free tools that Google and others provide, which are available for anyone to use and follow.”¹⁷⁷

Integrate ICTs into lessons

ICTs are often taught as an add-on, rather than integrated into other lessons. By using ICTs as a learning tool, rather than seeing them as an end in themselves, young people can be inspired to take action outside of formal learning environments. TeachFirst teacher Manjit More uses digital technologies to engage students in a range of issues, which has helped them recognise their potential and power as engaged citizens. For example, when More introduced his class to the potential of the internet, he noted that there was “massive interest”: “They were like, can we email Gordon Brown? And I was like, yeah! ... they never thought they had the opportunity.”¹⁷⁸

Support global connections

Harness the benefits of the internet’s global reach by, for example, linking a ‘skype pal’ with children in the classroom. The Flat Classroom project (**Box 3.4**) reveals how these global connections can support a variety of lessons. However, only one school in Britain is currently involved. Learning across contexts with the help of ICTs can young people “gain a greater understanding of what it means to interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures.”¹⁷⁹

In this section we have highlighted the mistakes educators and institutions working with young people commonly make, and have also provided recommendations for how ICTs can be integrated more holistically into learning contexts to support positive youth development and leadership development. In the subsequent chapter, we look at how online or ICT based initiatives can help us think more creatively and effectively about engaging and sustaining young people’s involvement in activities that can promote leadership and effect social and/or political change.

6

**Top tips for building
online Initiatives that
empower young people
to take the lead**



6. Top tips for building online initiatives that empower young people to take the lead

In this chapter we offer tips for building online initiatives that empower young people to take the lead. These are targeted at policymakers, third sector actors, the private sector, and anyone who seeks to empower and engage young people as leaders through digital technologies.

Many of the lessons from practice that follow relate to building effective, sustainable online initiatives that engage and empower youth, but these recommendations can also be applied in the context of ‘offline’ initiatives and spaces where there is a desire to incorporate ICTs to enhance outreach.

Below, we set out eight recommendations for using digital technologies to successfully engage young people.

Focus on community and facilitate connections

Institutions need to reframe what they are ‘doing’ online. A common element of successful online platforms is their offer of community: they are based on trust, friendship, networks and social capital. Investing energy in community building is integral to effectively engaging young people in the long term. While information can be a draw for youth, and a good way of getting young people onto one’s platform in the first instance, “what makes them stick around is if they find this is the community for them.”¹⁸¹ Jonathan Nicholas (CEO, Inspire Ireland) advises that it is important that organisations and institutions stop thinking of their objective as delivering a service, and reframe their objective as one of engaging a community – “and this has got nothing to do with technology; it’s a cultural thing. If you don’t do community involvement, you’re going to die.”¹⁸² While this can pose challenges, particularly when human and financial resources are limited, some organisations are coming up with innovative solutions (**Box 6.1**).

As our survey found, the majority of young people spend their time online being social:

using social networking sites (63%) and talking/chatting/texting to friends (54%) were listed as the two activities young people spend the most time doing (**Figure 6.1**).

“If the Prime Minister said something [on Twitter] like, ‘Oh, I’m watching I’m a Celebrity’, I’d probably follow him, just to hear what he’s up to, rather than just hearing his political messages.”

– Young person, Focus group¹⁸³

Consequently, creating sites that enable young people to be social and build community on the web is key to driving interest. Politicians and leaders can also take a cue from this information, and could generate interest by showing young people who they are, rather than just what they do. Our research found that young people are more likely to trust politicians if they feel they have an understanding of who they are as ‘real’ people. Interest in people can drive participation in politics:

“They should use a personality, because then I’d actually care. If I got to know the politician and not his policies that I don’t trust anyway, then I’d actually at least care. ...If they’re just

Box 6.1 Creative ways to build community: The Inspire Foundation and Act Now

A key challenge that online initiatives often face is around maintaining communities at scale with fairly small resources and staff. An innovative way of overcoming this challenge is through engaging and training young people as online community builders. The Inspire Foundation’s Act Now initiative, running in Australia, does just this, through an online platform which focuses on using technology to reinforce young people’s engagement and involvement in their communities. Their Cash for Comments programme invites young people aged 16 to 25 to get paid to write engaging articles on current issues, which serves both to empower this group as young leaders and stands as a mechanism for engaging more young people in the Act Now community.

going to sit there and spam everyone with all their policies, then there's no point – I'd rather find out about the politician.” – **Young person, Focus group**¹⁸⁴

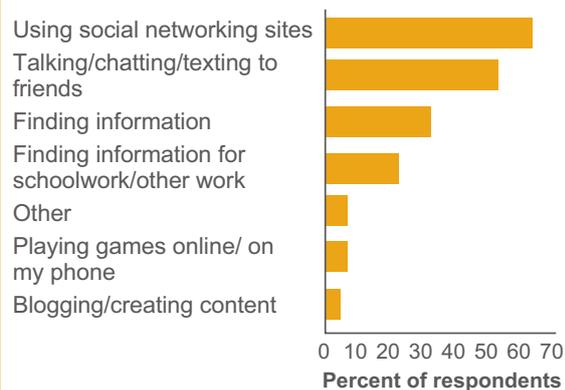
Another important part of online communities is their ability to enable youth to establish and build positive connections. However, tendencies towards creating insular networks can limit young people's ability to make the most of what can be done online. Thus, programmes need to facilitate diverse and multiple connections with other young people as well as adults, and they need to help young people connect into networks of power. For example, Pioneers – young people in the early stages of setting up a business, participating in Enterprise UK's Pioneer Programme – are supported by 'Wiseheads', who are established entrepreneurs and business experts who provide advice and support to Pioneers by uploading their videos of support and advice.

Embrace user-led models

Active involvement by users is critical to driving engagement and building a habit of participation among young people. User-led or peer-led models work best – as these are led by an understanding of what young people actually want. For young people, the realisation that they are influencing the direction of the community to some extent can be an important tool for empowerment.¹⁸⁵

Many organisations and institutions are, however, not very good at this: “with government

Figure 6.1 Activities occupying most time when using ICTs (Respondents asked to pick top two 100%=241)



or organisational-led things, it is usually an entity telling users what the game is, what the rules are.”¹⁸⁶ When institutions or organisations engage in this top-down manner, young people tend to become mistrustful and feel shut out and disengaged. As one young person noted,

“Young people don't feel like they're in it, they don't feel like their opinion is actually being considered. So then, they're like, well 'I'm not really going to be listened to so why would I even bother?' And I think that's quite a massive thing to think.”¹⁸⁷

Jonathan Nicholas explained that, when setting up Act Now they consciously adopted a less top-down approach. They “took a step back” and simply invited youth to “get informed, get involved, join the community”. And young people “chose us because we were willing to start a conversation with them.”¹⁸⁸

To accomplish truly 'user-led' programmes, adults should do more to ask young people what they want in a way that will elicit a response. Youth-to-youth consultations and communication can help achieve this goal:

“I think the government has only just started to clock onto the fact that if they're going to communicate with young people they need to use young people. So to talk about their policies

Box 6.2 Avoiding top-down models: recommendations from young people

Muna Hassan, a graduate of the UpRising youth leadership programme, stressed the importance of making young people “feel like they're part of the decision-making”, and maintained that institutions “need to have a lot more open dialogues” with young people and “need to stop making assumptions about them and their views.”¹⁹⁰

Grant Bell, founder of Tomorrow's Web, said: “I think one of the fundamental mistakes that these people are making is simply being so condescending that young people, and for that matter anyone, switch off. Although your intentions may be just, you do have to use your language wisely.”¹⁹¹

they need a young person, and focus groups, to talk to and really make their policies.”¹⁸⁹

Know your market

Too often, institutions design programmes that are theory-driven, rather than rooted in real-world needs. Ugochukwu, a successful young entrepreneur and graduate of the then Enterprise UK Pioneer Programme (now Virgin Media Pioneer Programme), said that given this, “what you really need to do is tap into your target market and design a product that fits their needs.”¹⁹³

“Too many initiatives are designed to suit the needs and preferences of governments and other bodies. There is a sense that if citizens are given the opportunities to participate they will automatically take it. The reality is that initiatives have to be much more carefully crafted to ‘scratch where people are itching’.”¹⁹²

Interviews and focus groups with practitioners and young people alike suggested that the success of online initiatives rests heavily on knowing one’s target audience - what information is relevant to target participants, what appeals to them, and their preferred means of communication.

Peter Grigg, Head of Policy and Research at Enterprise UK, emphasised the need to “think about markets more intelligently.”¹⁹⁴ Enterprise UK’s Pioneer Programme proceeds out of rigorous profiling research that segmented their market on the basis of attitudes towards enterprise and entrepreneurial behaviour, and identified the key characteristics of each segment, as well as the barriers to enterprise and opportunities for promoting enterprise within each respective group. As Grigg advises, “segment your market properly. For example, young people are not an homogeneous group so don’t treat them all the same”.¹⁹⁵

In the context of the often overwhelming amount of information available online, it is also important to build on personalisation and recognition. Young people need and want information that is “targeted to me,

for me.”¹⁹⁶ The importance of personalising communications has broader importance for young generations, who have highly personalised expectations of politics and “often find that politics and politicians either ignore them or are far off the mark in their communications appeals.”¹⁹⁷

Build strong feedback loops

Strong feedback loops are another key element in effective engagement.¹⁹⁸ Outcomes need to be fed back to young people, or involvement can seem tokenistic, which can be a disincentive for participation.¹⁹⁹

“Let your target audience know what you are doing all the time, let them know what you are doing step by step so that they know they are in there and that you are not dismissing them. It is really important.” – **Young person, Focus Group**²⁰⁰

For example, signing a petition on the No. 10 website can be an important step up the ladder of participation, and for driving young people forward in the exercise of leadership. However, Kay Withers, author of the IPPR report *Behind the Screen: The hidden life of youth online*²⁰¹, warned that if this is a young person’s first experience of engagement, and nothing changes as a result of it, “you risk losing people and them thinking ‘what’s the point?’”²⁰² This practice is particularly relevant for government to take on board, given that people do not often trust government to listen to them:

“the last thing that governments should do is promote online policy engagement exercises and then prove the public right by not appearing to take account of what they say. Unless online policy engagement results in meaningful responses and policy outcomes, the process will lose credibility and democratic legitimacy.”²⁰³

Be smart about tools and design

In the points above, we have deliberately prioritised the importance of people over technology. But getting the technical aspects of online engagement with youth right is also fundamental. Esra’a Al Shafei, founder and director of the website Mideast Youth, advised: “Put a lot of effort into technology... If you’re not

up to date with the latest technology, you're not going to be effective... For young people, it's really important for them."²⁰⁴

Act at the interface of online and offline contexts

As Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, has argued, social software should empower rather than replace traditional forms of interaction.²⁰⁵ Similarly, those working in the area of youth online civic engagement and leadership development should see the role of online tools as “enhancing and empowering

Box 6.3 Focus on technology: mistakes and recommendations from youth

Our survey and conversations with young people revealed some key mistakes and recommendations when trying to engage young people using ICTs.

Key mistakes:

- Websites that are “too busy or too complex ... or loads of horrible colours”
- Broken links – “if you cannot get a link right, how can you trust these guys?”
- Long html links
- “Constant bombardment with messages after you sign up for a mailing list and the majority of it is not relevant to you”
- Lengthy messages – “not the length of essays; I delete them straight away, because I haven't got time to find out whether the content in there is interesting or even relevant”
- What adults “think young people want to see - “Also those that are supposed to be youth friendly websites but in actual fact, how many young people are involved in the design or implementation of that website? Or it is more likely it is actually what [adults] think young people want to see.”

Recommendations:

- Focus on the technology and making it as accessible as possible
- Getting and keeping up with the latest technology
- Keep it simple: “It is just about making things clear and simple, straight to the point, single messages ... What is the message and what do you want them to do as a result, what are you asking them to do?”
- Offer clear call to action
- Involve youth in design – aesthetics and functionality - and testing

real-world action” rather than replacing it.²⁰⁶

Although online community building has clear benefits – for example, building communities at scale at relatively low cost – qualities such as intimacy and maintaining a grip, or traction, on people and ideas are not guaranteed, and if all community activities are run online, staff can become disconnected from the reality of young people's day to day lives and experiences.²⁰⁷ Effective online programmes are ones that create a “partnership between the online world and the offline world”²⁰⁸ and which “recognise the limitations of both and run them both simultaneously.”²⁰⁹

“Civic engagement has to be two-fold ... the internet is not going to solve all our issues in terms of being engaged or really pushing for policy change ... there has to be a partnership between the online world and the offline world.”
– Lauren Hauser, Manager of Community Organising, Link TV (Youthnoise)²¹⁰

Online communities can be strengthened through offline opportunities to network and interact, and offline activities can spur online connectedness²¹¹ – for example, the Act Now programme's community of Cash for Comments writers (**Box 6.1**) participate in an intensive 3-day training course in a face-to-face scenario at their Australian headquarters, which serves to intensify their bond both with staff and amongst themselves. Jonathan Nicholas (CEO, Inspire Ireland) explained that while online training may “technically work”, it is unlikely that it would “emotionally work.”²¹²

Those working in the online space can also benefit from using offline advertising to let young people know about their online engagement opportunities.²¹³ As one young person advised, people should use more than one medium to advertise and make use of the offline context: “like posters in Jobcentre, in the underground, leaflets in the school, they need more media to actually say that these websites allow you to be part of it and be a leader.”²¹⁴

Play the long-term game and allow room for evolution

Because of the speed of innovation in the

technology sphere, forward planning is critical, as is long-term commitment. Our research has found that what makes good online services work is the long-term building of community. One shortcoming of government-led online initiatives is the short-term nature of many initiatives. One way of avoiding this scenario is for government to invest its funds into NGOs with a long-term commitment to, and a strategic agenda centred on, using ICT creatively.

Although long-term strategy and commitment is important, being flexible and open to change over time is also key. Organisations working in the online space should avoid being too prescriptive in how outcomes are to be realised, or run the risk of becoming redundant in a short space of time. It is important to be open to letting the programme develop and grow, while also keeping the broader remit and goals of the programme in sight – which, admittedly, requires something of a “balancing act.”²¹⁵

For example, Ugochukwu attributed the success and longevity of Facebook, the social networking site, to its

“continuous focus on technology development - [they] have continuously added new elements and improved user experience. The desire to continue using the product is driven by the evolution of the product. The internet is not static, it’s very dynamic. Information is regularly updated, so why should the platform for the delivery of that information be static? Businesses using the internet as a key delivery mechanism need to be change leaders. Technology is at a space where you do not have to develop from scratch anymore, you can easily adopt technologies that others have developed ... or come up with new interfaces or new campaigns or partner with existing platforms.”²¹⁶

Connect, combine, collaborate...

Charles Leadbeater, writer and innovation consultant, notes that underlying the success of web 2.0 tools is a more participatory design culture that does things ‘with’ rather than ‘for’ people:

“The ethic of the Web 2.0 world is create,

connect, combine and collaborate. The underlying principle of doing things with people rather than to or for them will breed very different organisations, services and experiences in virtually every field.”²¹⁷

Translating “the principle of With” into practice is critical in realising the potential of ICTs in the sphere of youth leadership development and the social sphere more generally. Partnerships and collaborative work are key to maximising resources, harnessing creativity, and keeping up with the speed of innovation. For example, Apple opened up the iPhone to third party developer platforms to channel in creativity.

According to Jonathan Nicholas (CEO, Inspire Ireland), those operating in the social space – such as government and NGOs – could take a vital lesson from technology in this respect.

“I think the question for me, for government and government investment is really to a large extent ... around how do you foster innovation and ... match the speed of innovation that sits in the technology world in the social world? And what would it take to do that? What money would it take and what partnerships would it take? What education would it take? All those things. Because that’s the challenge.”²¹⁸

Our research with young people revealed that those working in the online space are falling short when it comes to practising effective collaboration and joining together in their efforts to engage young people. A key issue identified during a focus group with young people was the problem of “overcrowding and needless repetition ... too many initiatives at once; doing the same thing but with minor cosmetic changes”. As one of the participants said, “If you look at something like climate change, you have so many organisations doing the same thing rather than collaborating”. Recommendations from young people included the need for more effort and concentration on identifying and avoiding overlap and duplication, and the “consolidation of information in one key place” – for example, a “single umbrella website” which offers a search function for leadership opportunities in a localised area.²¹⁹

Conclusion

“Working with young people and ICTs has to be seen as a process, and a very complex process ... You start from where people are, and even then, it is a dialogue ... it is still a negotiation.”

– Don Slater, Reader in Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science²²⁰

This report is predicated on the belief that young people can do amazing things and that digital technologies offer new and exciting ways for them to develop both personally and as leaders. Digital technologies can be important tools for helping young people engage as citizens, develop leadership skills and drive positive social change.

However, serious limitations remain. A key finding of this report is that new types of digital

divides and disadvantage are emerging – relating to digital usage rather than access – and require attention.

Young people are by no means an homogenous group when it comes to digital usage. The way in which young people use digital technologies varies dramatically, and access to technology does not lead to automatic gains in terms of learning, empowerment and leadership. As our findings show, the benefits of digital technologies are more likely to accrue to young people with higher socio-economic status, levels of education, and social capital – and, often associated with this, with greater levels of confidence and more experience of civic engagement. Marginalised young people appear less likely to use digital technologies in ways



that help them transcend socioeconomic barriers and which lead to positive developmental and leadership outcomes.

Given the evidence on new forms of digital disadvantage, more needs to be done, both in terms of research, practice and policy making, to ensure the benefits of digital technologies accrue more evenly to all young people. While much research attention to date has been given to the issue of digital access, more focus on digital usage is needed. In particular, there is a need for more research on young people's lived experience of digital technologies, what young people are doing online, and the different practices and related needs of different groups of young people. On a practical and policy-oriented level, tackling educational disadvantage – along with the intersecting issues of low aspirations and apathy – is a critical task if digital technologies are to be harnessed to empower young people who are marginalised from mainstream society.

For educators and institutions working with young people, there is a need to understand digital learning as a *process*. Effective practice is rooted in the recognition that digital engagement of young people cannot happen overnight, or in one course or online campaign: there is no magic bullet. Building a habit of engagement through which young people see the outcomes of their efforts is fundamental to ensuring that all young people, and particularly those marginalised from mainstream society, capitalise on the benefits of digital technologies in ways that are relevant to their lives.

These benefits will manifest themselves in different ways for different types of young people - ranging from energising a community campaign, to starting out as an entrepreneur or finding information and support about sensitive life issues, such as sexuality or mental health.

Finally, new technologies in and of themselves do not promote learning, empowerment and leadership unless traditional models of doing things are interrogated and revised, often quite radically. Adults and institutions working with young people need to do more to understand the nature of young people's engagement with new technologies and adjust their approaches to engaging young people accordingly.

Finding new and innovative ways to engage with young people on issues that matter to them and in ways that appeal to them will be essential in helping to bridge the persistent disconnect between top-down efforts by government and institutions to engage young people in social and political life and young people's bottom-up efforts to engage with issues of social change.

To conclude, digital technologies have great - and largely untapped - potential as a tool for learning, criticism, self-expression, teamwork, networking and creating positive change. Our societies' young leaders will increasingly use them to organise and carry out their work. The next generation of leaders will be those who are also good digital citizens, who can harness the power of digital technologies to meet the challenges and needs of future generations.

Appendix: online survey – descriptive result

1. How old are you?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
13	2.9%	7
14	8.2%	20
15	14.8%	36
16	19.8%	48
17	17.3%	42
18	7.8%	19
19	2.9%	7
20	3.3%	8
21	2.5%	6
22	7.8%	19
23	4.5%	11
24	2.5%	6
25	5.8%	14
Answered question		234
Skipped question		1

2. What is your gender?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	36.5%	89
Female	61.9%	151
Prefer not to say	1.6%	4
Answered question		244
Skipped question		0

3. Do you have a computer at home that you can use?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	98.8%	239
No	1.2%	3
Answered question		242
Skipped question		2

4. When we say information and communication technologies (ICTs) we mean digital media including the internet, phone, TV, and radio. Where should you say you spend the most time?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
On the internet	75.4%	184
On my phone	9.8%	24
Listening to the radio	4.5%	11
Watching TV	7.0%	17
Other ICT, please specify	3.3%	8
Answered question		244
Skipped question		0

5. When using any of the ICTs listed above (whether on the internet or your mobile phone, etc), what TWO activities do you spend the most time doing?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Talking/chatting/texting to friends	53.5%	129
Blogging/creating content	5.0%	12
Finding information	32.4%	78
Playing games online/ on my phone	7.1%	17
Using social networking sites	63.1%	152
Finding information for schoolwork/other work	24.1%	58
Other (please specify)	7.5%	18
Answered question		241
Skipped question		3

6. Can you do or be things online that you can't offline?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	71.6%	149
No	13.0%	27
Unsure	15.4%	32
Answered question		208
Skipped question		36

7. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
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I am more confident in expressing myself/my opinion online than in a face to face context

Agree	42.2%	89
Disagree	47.9%	101
Don't know	10.0%	21
Total		211

I feel more at ease in making new connections online than in a face to face context

Agree	37.9%	80
Disagree	54.0%	114
Don't know	8.1%	17
Total		211

I feel more comfortable seeking help online than in a face to face context

Agree	43.1%	91
Disagree	48.8%	103
Don't know	8.1%	17
Total		211

I feel more accepted as a person online than in a face to face context

Agree	19.4%	41
Disagree	69.7%	147
Don't know	10.9%	23
Total		211

I feel people take me more seriously/respect my opinions to a greater extent online than in a face to face context

Agree	19.0%	40
Disagree	69.0%	145
Don't know	11.9%	25
Total		210

ICTS give me and my generation a way to make positive changes in our communities/society

Agree	73.7%	154
Disagree	10.0%	21
Don't know	16.3%	34
Total		209

8. Have you gained skills using ICTs? If so, please tick the TOP TWO skills you have gained. Please choose only two.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Confidence	11.7%	24
Collaboration and teamwork	6.8%	14
Networking skills	52.7%	108
Writing skills	23.4%	48
Communication	43.4%	89
Finding and making sense of information	58.5%	120
Answered questions		205
Skipped questions		39

9. In what area of your life do ICTs/the internet offer the most potential for helping you to reach your goals/dreams?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Personal development- such as gaining confidence, developing social skills, and finding heroes/role models that empower me	3.3%	7
Carrer development-such as developing and practicing my entrepreneurial abilities, learning about what I am interested in and connecting to people who have similar ambitions	13.3%	28

Educational development- such as finding more/better information and/or using the internet to learn new things	27.6%	58
Social/political life-such as giving me a platform to connect with others that are interested in similar issues, and using the internet/ other ICTs to build a following and communicate my message to others	21.0%	44
All of the above	33.3%	70
None of the above	1.4%	3
Answered question		210
Skipped question		34

10. Where have you learnt the most in terms of using ICTs?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
At school from my teachers and/or classmates	21.5%	45
At work from my boss and/ or colleagues	1.4%	3
At home from my family	5.3%	11
From my friends when we hang out	5.7%	12
On my own - I have learnt most of what I know through self-exploration	64.6%	135
Other (please specify)	1.4%	3
Answered question		209
Skipped question		35

11. Do you think ICTs have helped you get a better understanding of any of the following? Please tick all that apply

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Issues in my local area	44.2%	91
Issues affecting my gender, religious, age or ethnic group	48.1%	99
Politics in my country or state	63.6%	131
International affairs	63.6%	131
Social issues (for example, poverty, the environment, homelessness)	66.0%	136
School work	73.3%	151
Other (please specify)	5.8%	12
Answered questions		206
Skipped questions		38

12. Do you feel that the internet and other ICTs enable you to overcome barriers to getting involved in politics/promoting social change? (For example barriers like race, class, money, or gender)

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	59.5%	125
No	18.6%	39
Unsure	21.9%	46
Answered question		210
Skipped question		34

13. Have you used the internet/radio/film/tv to try to make a positive change in your community/society? (for example as an entrepreneur, getting people involved in a cause, organising a neighbourhood event)

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	52.6%	111
No	47.4%	100
Answered question		211
Skipped question		33

14. Who were trying to target or reach? Please tick all that apply.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Mainly other young people	85.6%	89
Adults	34.6%	36
Decision-makers	35.6%	37
Other (please specify)	7.7%	8
Answered question		104
Skipped question		140

15. Do you think adults in institutions like schools and government understand how people your age use ICTs and what people your age do online?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	23.8%	46
No	54.4%	105
Unsure	21.8%	42
Answered question		193
Skipped question		51

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Biographies

Sarah Hewes is a researcher at the Young Foundation, where she works on projects including Community Cohesion, Youth Leadership, and Innovation in Health Metrics. Sarah is also involved in a research project investigating experiences of worklessness in Birmingham. Prior to obtaining her Masters degree, Sarah completed a fellowship in health advocacy at a national non-profit organisation in New York City, The Medicare Rights Centre, where worked to influence federal health policies and served as a state-wide advocate to increase the enrolment of seniors in subsidy programs. Additionally, while in New York, Sarah worked with a number of non-profit organisations focusing on issues such as homelessness and HIV/AIDS. Sarah holds a Masters of Science (2008) in Social Policy and Development from the London School of Economics, and a Bachelors (2004) *summa cum laude* in Writing, Literature and Publishing from Emerson College. Sarah has travelled, lived and studied extensively abroad, including spending a semester in Brazil with the School for International Training (2004) where she completed a dissertation on changes in urban space and access to social services in the northeast city of Fortaleza.

Lauren Kahn is a research associate at the Young Foundation, where she works on a major programme of research mapping effective and innovative practice in youth leadership development, drawn from across the globe, as part of The Youth of Today. Her other work at the Young Foundation has focussed on community leadership; methods of social innovation; and social innovation and creativity in cities. She joined the Young Foundation in September 2008. Previously, Lauren worked at the Centre for Social Science Research, based at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Her work there included research on childhood and adolescence in post-apartheid South Africa; research on HIV/AIDS-related diagnosis, disclosure and stigma; and research exploring the links between violence, poverty and social exclusion. In 2007, Lauren completed her MSc in Psychology at the University of Cape Town. Her dissertation explored female adolescent sexual decision-making, relationships and reproductive and sexual health.

Mary Abdo is the practice lead for Youth Transitions at the Young Foundation. She leads work on global youth leadership as part of The Youth of Today, as well as supporting the UpRising leadership programme. She is also involved in public sector advisory work. Previously, Mary was a consultant with a boutique McKinsey spin-off called Portas, working with the UK's largest sport charities and governing bodies. Her prior experience includes directing a literacy programme in Los Angeles called Reading to Kids as well as working with Ashoka, ACCION International, and the Feminist Majority. Mary has a Masters of Public Policy (2007) from the Harvard Kennedy School, where she held the Pforzheimer Fellowship in Non-Profit Management. She has a Masters (2003) in European Studies from the College of Europe, which she attended as a Fulbright Fellow. She has a Bachelors (2002) *summa cum laude* in Cinema from the University of Southern California.

Digital technologies can be powerful tools for empowering young people to lead positive social change. But these new resources are no magic bullet, and young people aren't always the 'digital natives' they're made out to be. While young people are plugged in to digital technologies, their talents remain largely untapped.

'Plugged in, untapped' explores the potential of digital technologies as tools to enable young people to develop their leadership capabilities, engage as active citizens and lead positive social change. Drawing on young people's experiences, it looks at the benefits and limitations of these resources, and provides practical recommendations to policymakers, teachers and organisations to harness the potential of digital technologies to engage and empower young people as leaders of change.

Sarah Hewes is a researcher at the Young Foundation, Lauren Kahn is a research associate at the Young Foundation, and Mary Abdo is a practice lead at the Young Foundation.

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