



Center for Social Media

Showcasing and analyzing media for social justice, democracy and civil society

Youth as E-Citizens: *Engaging the Digital Generation*

Executive Summary

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Complete report:

<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/youthreport.pdf>

Executive summary:

<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/execsumm.pdf>

Virtual tour:

<http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/ecitizens/index.htm>

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Executive Summary

Mapping the Online Youth Civic Landscape

Youth engagement in politics and community affairs has quietly been taking on new life and a dynamic new look, thanks to the Internet. Scarcely audible above the hubbub over piracy and pornography and the clamor of the media marketplace, a low-profile civic upsurge – created for and sometimes by young people – has taken root on the Net. Hundreds of websites have been created that encourage and facilitate youth civic engagement, contributing to an emerging genre on the Internet that could loosely be called “youth civic culture.”

“Generation Y,” the nearly 60 million individuals born after 1979, represents the largest generation of young people in the nation’s history, and the first to grow up in a world saturated with networks of information, digital devices, and the promise of perpetual connectivity. Youth are more than just consumers of digital content in this new media culture; they are also active participants and creators, developing content, designing personal websites, and launching their own online enterprises.

Young people are also a lucrative target market, with the 8-to-21-year-old segment spending some \$172 billion annually.¹ Their immersion in new media, combined with their spending power, have placed youth at the center of a powerful digital marketing enterprise. Already, a host of new products is being created for youth, who frequently serve as the test market for the next generation of digital content and services. Their passion for communication is fueling the devel-

opment of new handheld, wireless products that are designed primarily for instant messaging and chat, but which also feature interactive gaming, Internet access, digital picture and music storage, and personal information management.

While Internet commerce has focused much of its attention on tapping into the hot youth market, public debate over the Internet and youth has been dominated by a concern about the darker side of online behavior. Throughout the 1990s, fears about pornography, predation, and other Internet dangers prompted Congress to pass several laws to regulate cyberspace, most of which were successfully challenged in the courts by civil liberties groups. More recently, the controversy over the illegal downloading of music by young people captured the attention of press and policymakers alike.

The new online civic sector, although overshadowed by those concerns and by rampant online consumerism, is a noteworthy development. Our report is designed to shed light on this little-known advance in youth civic engagement. The study we conducted is primarily qualitative in nature, providing a broad, descriptive overview of Web-based civic efforts by and for youth. It sketches a “map” of the current online youth civic landscape, featuring website content and the organizations and institutions creating that content. In addition to surveying online youth civic activity, we conducted more detailed analyses of selected issues and projects, including several case studies of individual websites based on in-depth interviews with

the sites' developers. We supplemented our qualitative research with quantitative analysis of key features and content of civic sites.

One of our goals in conducting this study is to explore whether these civic and political Internet-based activities can help reverse declines in youth civic and political engagement, which are reflected in the following findings:

- Over a 25-year span, the national rate of voter participation dropped by 9 percent among all age groups, but double that—18 percent— for voters ages 18-24.²
- A “continuing pattern of decline in interpersonal trust” has emerged in our society, with the youth generation displaying the least social trust. Asked if “most of the time, people are just looking out for themselves,” fully 70 percent of people 15-25 years old agreed, compared to 59 percent of Generation X’ers, 49 percent of Baby Boomers, and 40 percent of older adults.³
- A 2003 report by Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) noted that young people are not only less likely to vote, but are less interested in political discussion and public issues than either their older counterparts or young people of past decades.⁴

A Wealth of Online Opportunities

Our exploration of the Internet reveals an abundance of civic and political activity by and for youth”: Our study identifies more than 400 “youth civic websites” and analyzes 300 of them. We believe this represent only a small segment of such material on the Web. Large, well-known organizations such as Girl Scouts or Habitat for Humanity comprise only a tiny fraction of the

online civic terrain. Thousands of lesser-known nonprofit organizations—local, national, and international—now reach youth via the Internet. While most of the websites we examined were created by nonprofit organizations (just over half of the sites we surveyed), civic content is also produced by educational institutions (about one in ten), commercial ventures (one in twenty), government entities (just over one in twenty), and youth themselves (less than one in twenty).⁵ Many have sprung up over the past several years, as the rapid growth of the World Wide Web transformed the Internet into a user-friendly medium.

Youth civic websites invite young people to participate in a wide range of issues, including voting, voluntarism, racism and tolerance, social activism, and, most recently, patriotism, terrorism and military conflict. Typical goals include:

- knowledge about a particular issue or set of issues;
- youth voice or the empowerment of youth as members of society;
- civic attachment, social trust, or community building;
- team building or leadership skills;
- the skills necessary for youth to engender change.

Most civic sites target a broad youth audience, while some focus on more specific communities, such as minority youth, under-served youth, urban or rural youth. Nine out of ten of the websites surveyed address both male and female populations. Tiny proportions—under three percent in each case—address a specific ethnic, racial, immigrant, or sexual minority population. Most online ventures are rooted in pre-existing

organizations and institutions, although a few have no offline presence at all; they are solely creatures of the digital universe.

We categorize youth civic activity under ten broad themes: *voting, volunteering, youth philanthropy, community engagement, global issues and international understanding, journalism and media production, access and equity, tolerance and diversity, positive youth development, and activism*. That is to say, our “map” of civic websites is organized in reference to types of civic engagement, rather than genres of websites. These ten categories capture the most common forms of civic engagement we encountered, but they by no means represent the full range of civic activity online.⁶ We also focus on the forms of activity most facilitated by the Internet, such as the use of interactive features to engage youth.



Rock the Vote

Voting

Voter turnout among citizens ages 18 to 24 has dropped from 50 to 32 percent over the past three decades—the most precipitous decline of voting among any age group. Responding directly to this decline, roughly 15 percent of the youth civic websites we studied encourage youth participation in the electoral or legislative process. As this report was being prepared for publication, new evidence appeared that the Internet could interest young people in politics, as demonstrated by the presidential campaign of Howard Dean. Pre-Dean electoral websites include:

- Youth Vote Coalition (<http://www.youthvote.org>) is a remarkably thorough, well-designed site full of resources pertaining to youth civic participation, includ-

ing statistics on youth voting; links to academic, state, and federal websites; a state-by-state voters guide; links to legislation concerning political participation; a digest of news on civic participation, and listings of offline events.

- Rock the Vote (<http://www.rockthevote.org>) speaks directly to young people, offering them a spectrum of civic options. These start with “Register to Vote,” a popup window with a voter registration form that visitors can print and mail to their state elec-

tions office. Yet the site’s scope is broad; the interactive menu also offers “Action” (including RTV-sponsored events held around the country); “Issues” (links to other sites addressing free expression, violence, the environment, education, the economy, and debt); “Programs”

(Community Street Team, Human Relations Campaign, Rap the Vote, RTV Latino, and Voter Registration Kits); “Street Team” (voter registration activities at concerts and other youth events); and “Donate” (an online contribution form).

- Kids Voting USA (<http://www.kidsvotingusa.org>) extends the electoral process to grades K-12 with a program that enables students to visit official polling places on election day and cast a facsimile ballot. Through civic education, family participation, and community involvement, KVUSA has reached over 4 million students and 200,000 teachers in some 20,000 voter precincts.

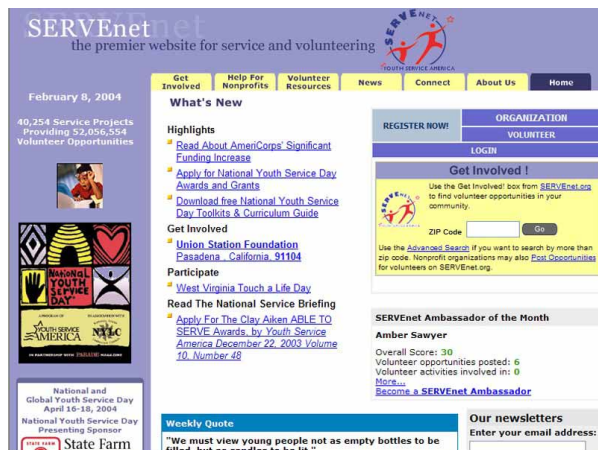
Volunteering

While their interest in politics may be low, nearly half of American young people believe that volunteering for community activities is important. In 2002, 40 percent of youth and young adults donated time to a group.⁷ In light of these statistics, it's not surprising that, of the 300 websites we analyzed, fully a third provide opportunities for volunteer activity. While that opportunity may be as simple as an invitation to volunteer with the organization posting the website, some websites serve as online portals, opening the door to volunteer opportunities in hundreds of organizations around the world. The Internet's power to expand youth volunteering is most visible in the work of portal sites like these:

- SERVENet (<http://www.servenet.org>). Created by Youth Service America, it features searchable listings for volunteer openings. Visitors specify their location, then their skills (33 to choose from), interests (56 categories, from blood drives and day care to language translation and race/ethnic issues), and target population (from infants to seniors, and including emotionally/mentally challenged, physically challenged, and families). The site then presents a list of relevant openings. It also offers a "Virtual Volunteering" section (volunteer activities carried out via the Internet, like editing, translating, tutoring and mentoring) and a "Volunteer Resource" section pertaining to youth service.
- Idealist (<http://www.idealists.org>) likewise offers a large database that users can search by entering their ZIP code or interests. It is

unique in offering a special section called "Idealist Kids & Teens" (<http://www.idealists.org/kt>), which features volunteer opportunities around the world specifically for teens or kids, with offerings in more than 45 categories. The site also offers information on the world of youth leadership, and links to organizations that help young people launch their own organizations.

- NetAid (<http://www.netaid.org/>), in cooperation with the United Nations Volunteers Programme, matches online volunteers with nonprofit organizations to provide technical assistance, translations, data analysis, and Internet research. Inspiring stories and news about international events, designed to stimulate youth interest in volunteering, are also featured on the site.



SERVENet

Youth Philanthropy

While studies have found that most U.S. households make charitable contributions, there is growing concern that philanthropic giving is a lesson that younger Americans have failed to master.⁸ When charitable donations were studied according to age groups, 18-to-35-year-olds were by far the least giving, both in the percentage that gave and the median amount they contributed.⁹ Since not all young people have their own credit cards, some nonprofit websites include "click here and we'll donate" features. Corporate sponsors often provide the money in exchange for a prominently displayed advertisement on the site. Whether through requests for donations or by teaching young people to raise funds, fully a third of the sites we surveyed offered some kind of opportu-

nity to learn about or become involved in philanthropy. Here are a few:

- YouthNOISE (<http://www.youthnoise.com>) runs a “Just 1 Click” program. When a visitor clicks a button, a host sponsor donates five cents to a designated cause. These campaigns have generated \$5,000 to build a safe playground for kids in a dangerous neighborhood, \$10,000 in tuition scholarships to a camp for homeless children, and \$10,000 in school supplies for Afghan girls.
- Youth for Life, a pro-life group, (<http://www.members.tripod.com/~joseromia>) is an example of a youth group that trains its members in fundraising. In its “College Right-to-Life Handbook” (<http://joseromia.tripod.com/rtl-handbook/ch12.html>), the reader can find suggestions on how a group should handle funds, types of campus fundraisers (flower sales, movie showings, fasting and more), and possible sources of donations (churches, direct mail, student government).
- The Center for Youth as Resources (<http://yar.org/>) facilitates community-based foundations that make grants to young people for local service projects; youth participate with adults on the boards that decide whom and how much to fund. It offers young people a rare opportunity to learn the ropes at the high-dollar end of philanthropy.

Community Engagement

When we extend the definition of civic engagement to encompass involvement with the local community, the evidence for youth engagement rises. A large number of below-the-radar websites connect young people to civic activities, resources, and organizations in their own communities, including the following:

On Their Own Terms: YouthNOISE and WireTap Reach Out to Youth

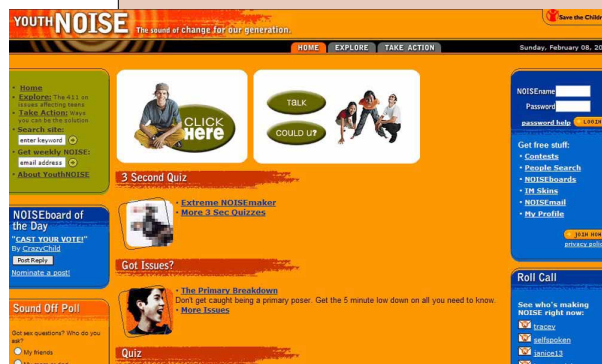
While YouthNOISE and WireTap are not polar opposites—one a polished, well-funded, something-for-everyone youth portal, the other a scrappy advocate for progressive causes—the two sites certainly reflect the vast range of the youth civic Web. Both projects have struggled with many of the same challenges, developing sometimes parallel and other times divergent strategies. The issues they have faced and the choices they have made, moreover, are in many ways emblematic of the experiences of the hundreds of nonprofits that are using the Web to engage youth in civic activities.

YouthNOISE

At first glance, YouthNOISE (<http://www.youthnoise.com/>) looks like many of the commercial teen websites dotting the online landscape. Its garish colors, jarring typography, and fun-flavored content—from quizzes to top-ten lists to celebrity spotlights—have become standard fare in digital teen culture. YouthNOISE, however, has a loftier mission. Speaking to teens on their own turf and in their own language, the site urges them to use the Web to speak out about social issues, take action, and connect with like-minded peers.

YouthNOISE has positioned itself as the “one-stop-shop for teen involvement,” an electronic portal that links teenagers to hundreds of causes in their communities, across the country, and around the world. It seeks to attract a broad, often unengaged teen population, so its carefully crafted messages are designed to translate adolescent fixation on self into broader concerns, then prompt young people to action.

The home page presents a jumble of items—What’s Hot? What’s Going On? 3 Second Quiz, and a dozen others—but the site is basically divided along two broad paths: Explore (“The 411 on issues affecting teens”)



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- Do Something (<http://www.dosomething.org>) is a national organization dedicated to involving young people in locally based, offline service learning, character-building, and civic activities. In a multi-step application process, a group of teens and their mentor envision a key component of a better community, explain why that cause is important to them, and submit an action plan to Do Something. Approved groups are awarded \$500 to carry out the project, a process that has involved over four million youth and one million dollars in grants thus far.
- The Community Information Corps (<http://www.westsidecic.org>) of St. Paul, Minnesota, demonstrates community “mapping,” a participatory process that explores, documents, and celebrates the riches and resources that a neighborhood has to offer. West Side young people crisscrossed their neighborhood and conducted scores of interviews to identify and map “learning opportunities,” local businesses, outdoor murals and public art, and other local resources. The colorful results are available online.
- Youth Communication is an Atlanta-based nonprofit (<http://www.youthcommunication-vox.org/>) that helps teens publish their own monthly newspaper, VOX. In an age when schools are as likely to censor as to publish a student newspaper, VOX involves more than a hundred teens during the school year and reaches some 80,000 people. Back issues of the paper, from January 2000 to the present, are archived on the site.

Global Issues and International Understanding

An emerging aspect of youth civic engagement is the understanding that the civic role can extend beyond the borders of nation-states. This awareness is evident in websites that promote international awareness and collaboration. Some five percent of the sites in this study explore global

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and Take Action (“Ways you can be the solution”). Explore presents serious issues in a variety of teen-friendly formats, including quizzes, debates, first-person accounts, and celebrity profiles (e.g., Kevin Richardson of the Backstreet Boys discussing environmental causes, or Julia Roberts on Rett Syndrome, a neurological disorder affecting infant girls).

The Take Action section views problems through three solutions-oriented lenses: Raise It and Donate It (fundraising), Lend a Hand (volunteering), and Change the Rules (speaking out). All three areas offer both immediate and longer-term solutions—that is, steps that can be taken online at that very moment, and “tool kits” that explore philanthropy, volunteering and social action in step-by-step detail. These range from bake sales and car washes (under fundraising), to do-it-yourself service learning (under volunteering), to walk-outs and sit-ins (under speaking out).

With an annual budget of more than a million dollars, YouthNOISE models itself on the efforts of successful dot.com companies. It has adopted their sophisticated, cutting-edge market research, and it invites corporations to underwrite many of its online features – a practice known as “cause marketing.” In so doing it has become a highly popular site that has gained a prominent presence on the Web, won awards, and generated continued support from foundations and corporations. At the same time, in its alliances with the for-profit community, YouthNOISE has had to walk a thin line between maximizing its reach and adhering to its mission.

WireTap

“Youth in pursuit of the dirty truth,” reads the digital masthead of WireTap (<http://www.wiretapmag.org/>). Billing itself as “... the independent information source by and for socially conscious youth,” the online magazine showcases youth-written investigative news articles, personal essays, artwork and activism resources that “challenge stereotypes, inspire creativity, foster dialogue and give young people a voice in the media.”

WireTap shares the mission of engaging young people and encouraging them to take action in the political and civic arenas. But WireTap addresses an older audience of college-age as well as high school youth, and its strong political stance and more overtly activist orientation stand in sharp contrast to YouthNOISE. Unlike YouthNOISE, WireTap es-

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affairs or foster international collaboration among youth. While many simply post “brochureware,” others have found innovative ways to help young people interact with their peers in other countries and cultures:

- Global Response engages young people in international environmental advocacy (<http://www.globalresponse.org>), sponsoring letter-writing campaigns to protect the environment and the rights of indigenous peoples worldwide. With participants from 92 countries, the Global Response website (offered in English and Spanish) provides three separate, age-appropriate versions of its current action request, including one for high school students and another for college students and adults.
- Voices of Youth (<http://www.unicef.org/voy>), created by UNICEF, provides an international platform for young people to discuss their collective future. It features message board discussions in English, French, and Spanish covering issues outlined in UNICEF’s “10 Imperatives for Children,” including the rights to live in peace, have decent shelter, be healthy and well-nourished, have clean water, play and go to school, and be protected from violence, abuse, and exploitation. The site also includes picture galleries, interactive games, and a message board for each topic.
- iEARN, the International Education and Resource Network (<http://www.iearn.org>), is a nonprofit global network through which young people in 15,000 schools in 100 countries collaborate on educational projects. iEARN projects are designed by teachers and students to advance their classroom study and, simultaneously, increase international understanding. To join, teachers and students select a project, then enter online “forum

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chews commercial sponsorship, relying predominantly on foundations for support.

As a training ground for young journalists, WireTap addresses such issues as race and gender, global capitalism, politics, and youth rights. It also focuses on controversial issues of particular interest to youth, including reproductive choice, issues around gays and lesbians, and dress codes. The writing is sometimes edgy, designed not only to inform, but also to spark discussion and spur activism. Stories, often written as first-person narratives, are infused with a clear political perspective. A frequent theme of the young authors is the politics of youth culture, as they reflect on the meaning of the music, videos and film that fill their lives. For instance, a recent article asked, “Can hip-hop mobilize the next generation of voters?”

The site also posts creative writing, reviews of books, movies and albums, a gallery of graffiti, drawings and photographs by young artists, and hard-hitting letters from readers. Another feature reflecting WireTap’s activist orientation is its Youth Media Network, which provides annotated links to over 100 groups and projects in the areas of activism, media, youth organizations, and youth culture.

Like many websites in our study, YouthNOISE and WireTap are just beginning to explore ways to assess the impact of their work on the attitudes and behaviors of young people. At this point, it is difficult to determine how successful they might be at reversing the pattern of civic disengagement, and it may be particularly challenging to determine their long-term impact. Both sites continue to struggle with ensuring their ongoing sustainability, a challenge they share with the rest of the online youth civic community. The instability of funding, and swift changes in the digital media landscape, continue to make their future — and the future of the entire online youth civic sector — unsure.

spaces” to share work and ideas with other teacher/student teams from around the world.

Online Youth Journalism and Media Production

Through online journalism and media production, youth learn to question the world around them and understand how government and society work. As opposed to the traditional top-down news media, the Internet affords youth an opportunity to respond to the world in their own terms. Youth journalism and media websites amplify youth voice; provide a means of expression for the forgotten and marginalized, and allow youth to communicate to far broader audiences than they might reach through traditional outlets.

- WireTap (<http://www.wiretapmag.org>), a progressive online magazine, features reporting, analysis, and cultural reviews by youth on a wide range of contemporary issues. An early-2004 issue, for example, offered “A Call to Black Youth” to vote; the musings of a pro-lifer in liberal San Francisco; an account of the anti-racist agenda of the Ruckus Society; and a review of women hip hop artists.
- Youth Radio (<http://www.youthradio.org/>) teaches young people a skilled trade—radio broadcasting and/or Web design—and then provides them a venue in which to exercise their skills. The website posts streaming audio files of recent radio packages and a schedule of three daily Youth Radio shows. Transcripts are also available from shows on a wide variety of topics, from the influence of religion on President Bush’s decision-making, to language discrimination, to the declining job market.

- Listen Up! (<http://www.listenup.org/>) is a national youth media network that helps youth video producers and their adult mentors exchange work, share ideas, and learn from each other. The project’s purpose is explicitly civic, committed to helping “youth be heard in the mass media, contributing to a culture of free speech and social responsibility.” Each of the 70 participating projects is provided with an individual Web page, and examples of youth work can be viewed as streaming media files.



HarlemLive

Access and Equity

To gauge the potential civic impact of the Internet on disadvantaged youth, it is necessary to traverse the “Digital Divide”—where the “haves” enjoy access to computers (and, by extension, to the Internet, its information, and its openings for civic engagement), while

the “have-nots” are cut off. Beneath the surface issue of technology acquisition lie the more complicated issues of social use, community integration, and civic engagement. The issue now is not simply whether the wiring is complete in any given community, but also whether the circuits are open and the pertinent civic, informational, and expressive content is flowing—in *both* directions. A number of sites are attempting to meet this issue head-on:

- HarlemLive (<http://www.harlemlive.org/>), launched in 1996 by a former New York City public school teacher, is an online magazine written, edited, and produced by New York youth. The website is polished and professional-looking, in part reflecting the mentoring that participating youth receive from high-powered New York media professionals. The range of material cov-

ered in the youth-submitted stories, essays, articles, reviews, columns, and artwork is impressive.

- Street-Level Youth Media (<http://streetlevel.iit.edu/>) is an interesting example of an “analog” institution (in this case, one that provided video cameras to neighborhood youth “to document the world as they saw it”) that has incorporated digital technologies as well. The site features a collection of Macromedia Flash animations and Web interfaces; a “box set” of streaming videos covering community, identity, culture, conflict, place, and creativity; and websites developed by participants.
- CTCNet, the Community Technology Centers’ Network (<http://www.ctcnet.org>), was founded by a former teacher who started a computer technology center in the basement of a housing development in Harlem. In ten years, CTCNet (first known as the Playing to Win Network) has grown to over one thousand community technology centers that serve, in their words, as “stepping-stones to opportunity, equality and civic participation for youth, senior citizens, and people with disabilities, low-income people and new residents.”

Tolerance and Diversity

From online auctions of Nazi memorabilia to the “World White Web” of the Aryan Nation Brotherhood, the Internet has given new voice to those who would gladly stifle the voices of others. Much less heralded are those who have seized upon the Web as a platform to promote tolerance, understanding, and respect among diverse groups and cultures. Yet these websites do exist—many of them created by or for youth:

- Tolerance.org (<http://www.tolerance.org>) seeks to equip its audience with information and skills to promote tolerance and fight hate. Unlike sites offering one-size-fits-

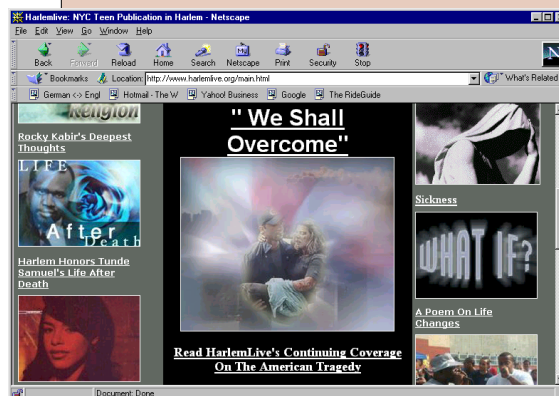
Youth Respond to September 11th Online

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 thrust the youth of this nation into a menacing new reality. Young people found themselves grappling with what it would mean to be a citizen of the U.S. in a drastically new environment, and questioning both domestic and foreign policies. As Generation Y struggled to understand the sudden and terrible events, they turned to the technology that has come to define and to be defined by them: the Internet.

Youth websites responded immediately, providing users with a forum for expression and discussion, offering practical information and resources, and linking them with concrete ways to respond: connecting with survivors and families of the victims, donating blood, volunteering, contacting public officials, starting in-school tolerance programs, and more.

In the first moments after the attacks, most youth websites reflected emotion. Youth filled the chat rooms and message boards with expressions of shock, pain, fear, sadness, and anger. Over the following weeks, information, analysis, and debate surged to the fore. Topics such as civic duty, patriotism, discrimination, and military policy took on a new immediacy for many young people. Both the flood of information and the opportunities to debate and take action allowed young people to explore and refine their own concepts of citizenship.

Online message boards played a particularly important role, becoming hotbeds of intense discussion. Youth posed and responded to such questions as “Why did they do that to us?” “Is war the right answer?” and “Are you patriotic?” In the process, a number of



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all programming, Tolerance.org arranges its content according to age level. The separate section for teens teaches youth to step out of their “comfort zones” and create dialogues across the social boundaries that cleave most schools.

- About-Face (<http://www.about-face.org/>) is a website that “promotes positive self-esteem in girls and women of all ages, sizes, races and backgrounds through a spirited approach to media education, outreach and activism.” At the heart of this “spirited approach” are poster campaigns spoofing the imagery and motives of the fashion industry. By placing its work online in galleries of “Offenders” and “Winners,” About-Face has expanded the reach of its eye-opening, mind-opening imagery far beyond its native San Francisco.
- Out Proud (<http://www.outproud.org/>), the website of the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth, is a model of depth and interactivity, a worthy example for any youth civic site, regardless of its topic of concern. It offers headline news, a community role models archive, resources, links, and an “Outpath” database (<http://www.outpath.com/>), a searchable archive of over 650 personal narratives about coming out. Visitors, both youth and their families, can add their own stories to the collection.

Positive Youth Development

Numerous organizations have sprung up to help young people pilot the difficult passage from child to adult. Positive youth development programs—those that emphasize and reinforce youths’ strengths and assets—have long been part of our civic fabric. A number of these organizations, both traditional and innovative, have moved at least a portion of their activities to the Internet:

- Girl Scouts (<http://www.girlscouts.org/>) has a separate “Just 4 Girls” section ([*Continued from previous page*](http://

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themes emerged: the definition of patriotism; whether the “War on Terrorism,” the war in Afghanistan, and the proposed war on Iraq were “just”; abrogation of human and civil rights, including First Amendment rights; and tolerance and hate-crime prevention. The shift in focus from emotion to public policy reflected a civic maturation in youth discourse, as well as a clear illustration of the potential of the Internet to engage young people in debate about vital social policy.

“Flaming” – harsh, aggressive, or abusive online speech – was heard frequently on some message boards, especially on commercial websites. A promising approach to curbing flaming, and promoting civil and reasoned discussion, was modeled by the group Global Kids in its online project, “Everything After: A 9-11 Youth Circle,” or E.A.9.11 (<http://globalkids.org/ea911>).

E.A.9.11 invited high schoolers to discuss online the impact of September 11 on their lives, one year after the attacks. Special software was used, and special rules governed the process: discussions were limited to small groups; participants had to register beforehand; and each person began by posting a self-introduction. These steps allowed participants to get to know each other and encouraged personal responsibility for postings. Through these means, Global Kids created a safe setting where youth of different national, religious, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds could discuss and debate. The E.A.9.11 discussion groups convincingly display young people’s ability to identify issues that are important both to them and to society at large, and to engage in respectful exchanges among peers.

ifg.girlscouts.org/) with online activities, advice, and other resources for girls through age 17. It allows online submission and display of essays, poetry, book reviews, and works of art. Studio 2B (<http://www.gsiec.org/STUDIO2B.htm>) is a new Girl Scout portal for teens, with information and suggestions on issues ranging from self-esteem and self-defense, to learning to express oneself through writing.

- America’s Promise (<http://www.americaspromise.org/>) seeks to “mobilize people from every sector of American life to build character and competence of our

nation's youth by fulfilling five promises: (1) caring adults; (2) safe places; (3) healthy start; (4) marketable skills; (5) opportunities to serve." Established following the Presidents' Summit for America's Future in 1997, America's Promise offers a fairly top-down view of character education, featuring the thoughts of founding Chairman Colin Powell. One notable feature is a Young Leaders section, designed to inspire young people by profiling youth who have used service to make a difference in their communities.

- SHiNE (<http://www.shine.com/>), which stands for "Seeking Harmony in Neighborhoods Everyday," is directed at youth between the ages of 12 and 24. Although most its five core programs are conducted offline, the SHiNE website highlights the achievements of SHiNE teens and presents news, entertainment and pop-culture information with "a pro-social twist." Colorful and professionally designed, the site is strong on youth-created content and youth voice.

Youth Activism

While voting is a critical element of political engagement, it is not the only one, and a narrow focus on elections overlooks the role of the citizen in helping to shape governmental policy. Young people also engage through letter-writing, petitions, or protest, expressing their positions on particular issues and adding emerging issues to the legislative agenda. Youth websites for activism and social change abound, making it clear that the Web — which lends itself to the kinds of informational, analytical, and organizational strategies on which activism depends — has become a fundamental component of many social action projects.

- Fight For Your Rights: Protect Yourself (<http://www.mtv.com/onair/ffyr/protect>) is a collaborative project involving nonprofit

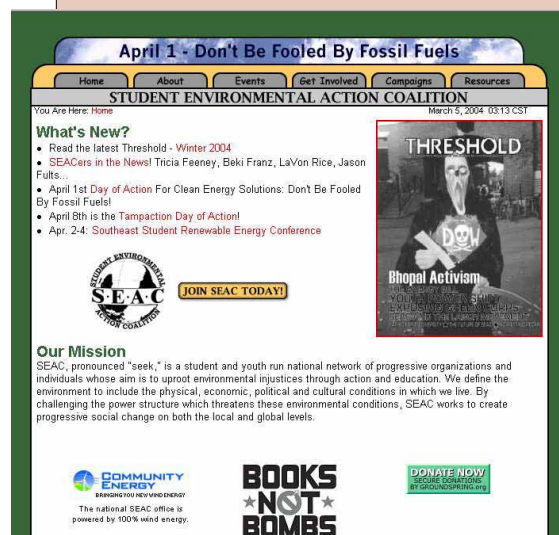
Online Activism

In March 2003, as the United States prepared to go to war with Iraq, thousands of high school and college students across the country staged a national walkout. Rather than bringing thousands of individuals to a single march on Washington, this protest generated hundreds of separate campus-based demonstrations in high schools and colleges across the U.S., all using identical downloaded flyers, posters, and press releases to convey the same message to the media. Organizers drew on a powerful and versatile set of Internet-based tools, enabling them to orchestrate a coordinated national event with precision, and at low cost.

Dozens of youth efforts now use the Web for political organizing and activism. They range across the political spectrum, from the Student Environmental Action Coalition (<http://www.seac.org/>), a "grassroots coalition of student and youth environmental groups, working together to protect our planet and our future," to RockForLife (<http://www.rockforlife.org>), a division of the American Life League, committed to "offering the truth about abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia to America's youth through music and ministry" and providing youth "a voice, encouraging you to stand up among your peers and fight against the destruction of your generation."

Whatever their politics, Web-based tools facilitate their work, including:

- *Organizing and recruiting:* The Web streamlines and assists the recruitment process. The Peacefire website (<http://www.peacefire.org/>) for example, sports a prominent "Join Now" button, which automatically subscribes new members to the site's email newsletter on youth and online First Amendment issues.



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organizations (most prominently, the Kaiser Family Foundation) in partnership with a for-profit enterprise (MTV). Combining the intellectual capital and medical expertise of the nonprofit public health sector with the promotional clout and market share of a media superpower, the project melds offline, online, and on-air components in a campaign to inform and empower young people on the issue of sexual health. The initiative includes PSAs, special programming on MTV, online and grassroots components, and an extensive resource and referral service.

- Student Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) (<http://www.studentpirgs.org/>) makes outstanding use of legislative material to engage youth on policy issues. The college- and university-based Student PIRGs “Offline, they use telephone campaigns and door-to-door canvassing to encourage public support of specific environmental and social legislation. The website demonstrates how these techniques have been adapted for online citizen lobbying.
- Free the Planet! (<http://www.freetheplanet.org>) is a student organization that works to “hold... polluters and politicians accountable and ensure the protection of our planet.” An action-oriented organization, Free the Planet! enlists college students to put pressure on corporations whose activities deplete finite resources, pollute the air or water, or otherwise threaten the environment. The website offers news and reports, downloadable campaign materials, and registration forms for on-campus trainings and briefings.

Taken together, these websites illustrate much about the youth civic Web: its rich diversity, the creativity it embodies, and its energetic commitment to drawing youth into active citizenship.

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- *Publication and distribution of materials:* The rich graphic interface of the World Wide Web, combined with the connectivity of the Internet, have created the perfect, cost-efficient publishing and distribution mechanism for nonprofits, supplanting the Xerox machine and “snail mail” of the recent past. Activist websites offer a wide assortment of downloadable brochures, pamphlets, bumper stickers and training guides, available at the click of a mouse. Downloadable posters, for example, such as those available from the feminist-oriented About-Face (<http://www.about-face.org/su/goodies/>), can create instantaneous, ubiquitous and unified messages and symbols.
- *Alternative news:* A website, bulletin board, or listserv can serve as a cheap and efficient alternative news source, capable of providing information and coverage that circumvent traditional news outlets. The Indymedia sites (<http://www.indymedia.org/>), for example, form a network of collaborating websites operating autonomously around the world.
- *Coordination of action:* The Web has become an indispensable tool for orchestrating online or offline protests, lobbying, and direct actions. The website for the National Youth and Student Peace Coalition (<http://www.nyspc.net/home.html>), organizers of the March 2003 antiwar protest, offers student activists a downloadable, 24-page tool kit for planning a “Books Not Bombs” day of action.
- *Press relations:* Increasingly, the Web has become a sophisticated tool for generating press coverage. Common practices include use of online training in press and public relations, and the distribution of prewritten press releases and downloadable press kits. The College Democrats of America website (<http://www.collegedems.com/>) offers both a press kit and a list of “talking points.”
- *Viral marketing:* Many online activist sites use some form of viral marketing, which quietly promotes products or services by embedding “branded” information (such as a clickable URL or logo) with every email sent. Activists use this marketing tool to spread the word, recruit new members, and mobilize action. WireTap (<http://www.wiretap.org>), for example, the activist-oriented online journal, relies on viral techniques in place of paid advertising to publicize its existence.
- *Fundraising:* A growing number of sites sport “Donate Now” buttons, which in the case of the United Students Against Sweatshops website (<http://www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org/>) links to a form on the Groundspring.org website (http://www.groundspring.org/index_gs.cfm) where visitors can use a credit card to donate money and sign up to receive electronic Action Alerts.

They offer a glimpse at the *potential* of digital media to respond to youth disengagement from civic life, by harnessing the undeniable power of online technologies. The formidable resources of the Internet include:

- An unmatched abundance of information, data, and documents on civic topics, readily available to all who possess the requisite computer connections and English and computer literacy.
- Access to experts, both adult and peer, making it relatively easy to find people with specialized knowledge on topics local, national, and international, substantive and procedural, online and off.
- Ease of conducting basic civic tasks, from voter registration and communicating with elected officials, to finding a suitable volunteer position, or advocating for a position or policy.
- Sharing of strategies as well as “facts,” including information on how to organize other young people, advocate for legislation, secure press coverage, raise funds, or simply learn more about a particular topic.
- Opportunities for youth to showcase their own creations, enhancing their sense of being valued participants, and expanding the opportunities for their input to affect the decisions of others.
- Interchange with people of different cultures and perspectives, strengthening such civic skills as the ability to consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, converse across differences, and enlarge one’s opinions and understandings.
- Structured forums for high-quality civic discourse, such as small-group online discussions. These promote frank speech, participation for

all on an equal footing, freedom from stereotyping, and accountability for one’s statements.

- Inspiring portraits of young people and their achievements, featuring youth whose activities in the civic realm provide real-life models of what young people can accomplish.

Measuring the Impact of Online Youth Engagement

Our study did not—and could not—measure the *impact* of the Web in promoting youth civic engagement. Youth civic websites open doors to access and participation in civic projects, but which young people utilize these opportunities, how, and with what effects over time, are topics that call for more systematic research. Nonetheless, several initial observations can be made about the Web’s potential for deepening youth involvement.

It is clear that the Web is already integrated into most young people’s window on the world, and that it offers them a broader perspective than any before. The Web offers young people the at-your-fingertips equivalent of a library, referral service, peer network, and more. The theoretical literature reviewed for this study suggests that the wealth of civic information on the Web can make significant contributions to civic literacy. While the Internet can provide access to information, what requires greater study and thought are the types, forms, and quantities of information that are most useful to young people, at what stages in their civic development, and for what purposes.

Beyond informational use, the interactive capacity of the Web provides young people with opportunities to hone a variety of civic skills, including the following:

- develop and articulate their thinking on issues of public concern;

- share ideas with youth from different backgrounds, who may hold contrasting opinions;
- build the habits of initiative, analysis, and independent thinking; and
- develop their own sense of being invested in civic issues and actively involved in the civic arena.

Research into youth development suggests that, as a source for learning civic skills, values, and behaviors, websites will be most effective if used over an arc of time.¹⁰ Our study did not allow us to perceive how often any individual user visited a given website, or how sustained this use was over time. Where glimpses of this are possible—for example, on message boards—it appears that many users come and go. Such intermittent use is not likely to reinforce skills that require repeated use and practice, as is the case with sophisticated civic behaviors. This suggests that websites may be most effective at teaching civic skills when used within a well-defined community that can commit to sustained use—such as a youth group, a school, or a civic organization—with a program designed for ongoing, as opposed to one-time, involvement.

Given the hundreds of civic websites that exist, and their tremendous variation, generalizing about their impact is not fruitful. Impact will inevitably depend on which websites are used, how, by whom, with what kind of guidance, and for what purposes. If civic websites are to be utilized in the classroom—and we believe they should be, for the richness of their content and the introduction they offer to real-life issues and situations—they will have to be used selectively. To maximize their impact and appropriateness, educators and researchers will need to develop rigorous criteria in developing online content and in selecting websites that meet both young people’s needs and pedagogical and curricular standards.

The real test of the Web’s civic value will come in determining whether the activity it promotes can be spread and sustained, and whether they can be interconnected to become a genuine civic *movement* with meaningful offline implications.

Next Steps in Assessing the Civic Web

The websites we found offer information, opportunity, skill building, and modeling for youth civic engagement, and some have great potential as didactic tools. However, they are unlikely to be put to use in formal programs for civic education until they are systematically evaluated and, in some cases, improved. Therefore, follow-up research and applications are needed, such as the following:

Develop criteria for judging websites as useful to and appropriate for programmatic promotion of civic engagement. Facilitate the identification of such positive elements as contribution to civic literacy, skills, and attachment; arc of practice over time; degree of youth voice/promotion of initiative; and vision of citizenship.

- Disseminate criteria developed to such audiences as civic and youth development organizations; service learning organizations; classroom teachers of civics, government and social studies; and the nonprofit sector generally.
- Encourage and train youth-oriented organizations to utilize their websites consciously to strengthen civic engagement. This process can be begun by deliberately incorporating elements for civic literacy, skills, and attachment; featuring practical “how-to” information and resources; and identifying promising practices in regard to characteristics, criteria, and techniques for effective online civic work with youth.
- Examine new applications of, and tools for, youth civic websites, including so-called “social

software” that implements social networks online in ways that empower individuals, communities, and organizations to distribute knowledge more quickly and efficiently, create more transparent and public conversations, and increase mutual trust.

- Assess the effectiveness of those civic websites that already use online quizzes and games, both to make learning fun and to introduce new dimensions such as collaborative decision-making.
- Explore the diffusion of civic Web work into the civic curricula of schools, which would vastly increase the use of this enormous pool of material.
- Employ schools as testing grounds for such promising techniques as online small-group discussion circles, which offset some of the negative dynamics that young people confront in face-to-face classroom discussion, while allowing for the participation of different groups (classes, ages, nationalities) in a structured and civil debate.
- Remind the broader nonprofit community, especially groups that do *not* currently address youth, that their websites offer an excellent opportunity to attract, educate, and recruit a new generation of supporters and activists.

More generally, outreach is needed to encourage nonprofits to speak to young people, both on specific issues and as a means of strengthening civic development. Non-youth-oriented civic groups must be schooled in the techniques of welcoming young people in meaningful ways. These include framing issues in ways that are relevant to youth; accommodating young people’s different levels of knowledge and sophistication; providing instruction, models, or

mentors; inviting—and using—youth input; and offering young people pertinent experience and concrete skills.

Nourishing and Sustaining the Civic Web

If the civic Web is to be sustained in the twenty-first century, it will require the same special treatment that we accorded education, arts, and the humanities in the twentieth. These sectors have long been the recipients of extensive public and private funding, with the private sector (most notably the Ford Foundation in the 1960s) leading the way with innovative programs in support of the arts and culture. Thus far, no foundation has emerged to do for digital culture what Ford and others did for analog culture. At the same time that foundations should be encouraged to do so, we should consider that it may be necessary for the government to step into the breach.

Increased private sector support will be also be needed. A series of new public-private pump-priming measures could ensure that corporations make a vital contribution to the future of civic activity in the digital media:

- Broadcasters might be allowed to satisfy their public-interest obligations in the new digital arena by making payments to a public-service programming fund (much as corporations now purchase pollution credits).¹¹
- Entertainment conglomerates, in exchange for the expanded copyright protections that they are now seeking in Congress, could be required to contribute to a “public domain fund” that would support the creation of new work that would be freely shared for educational and other noncommercial purposes.
- The public domain, finally, might be immeasurably enhanced by a streamlined rights-and-

permissions clearance process for noncommercial programming, effectively freeing countless hours of content, originally produced for public broadcasting, that now languish in storage.

It is also time to think more expansively about the future of public broadcasting as it enters the digital era. The role of the public in that system, and of youth in particular, needs to be restored, both by providing more opportunities for community participation, and by exploring the new opportunities for expression that the digital technologies might afford. For example, the existing Corporation for Public Broadcasting could be replaced by a much more ambitious Corporation for Public Telecommunications. Such a body would be charged with nurturing noncommercial and participatory programming for all ages, across a broad range of platforms, from traditional public broadcasting and PEG channels to the latest experiments in streaming media, wireless technologies, and P2P networks.

A clearer sense of identity and purpose will also be needed if the online civic sector is to coalesce from the scattered collection of parts that it is today. Building on the online success stories of youth-serving and grassroots organizations, we must create a coherent sense of the *sum* of those parts. A clearer perception of the online civic sector, fostered by collaboration among civic, educational, and cultural organizations, would help afford the nonprofit sector the same “brand awareness” that the AOLs, Yahoos, and Microsofts of the online world currently enjoy.

Even so, the success of the civic Web is by no means ensured. Other developments will play a role, including changes in technology, media regulation and law. Key issues are the closed architecture and tight control of the new high-speed networks that are likely to emerge as we make the transition from the dial-up to the broadband Internet. By imposing new gatekeepers and higher costs, these changes will further marginalize the content created by community groups, youth, and nonprofits, potentially cutting short the promise of a

genuine online civic sector. For example, an Internet where access was based on ability to pay would cut deeply into the ways nonprofits and youth groups could afford to use their websites. This is especially true today, when many youth civic groups face cutbacks in their funding and/or retrenchment in their programs. We conclude that the well-being of the civic Internet is at stake. We therefore make three policy-related recommendations:

- Specific information on key issues of digital media policy should be provided to youth civic groups and to nonprofit organizations generally.
- Youth civic websites should be utilized as a channel to let young people and the organizations that serve them know that their “space” on the Internet may be endangered. Young people should be encouraged to use the Internet to express their perspectives on the form and function of the Internet.
- “Youth voice” should be made a prominent feature in discussions about the future of digital communication.

The Civic Challenge

The civic Web at its best—a vibrant, visible and freely accessible “commons” where information and ideas flow freely from a variety of perspectives, and social, cultural, and political differences are discussed rather than dismissed—can foster genuine civic engagement both online and off. This is the challenge, and the promise, facing the online civic community. It is a challenge best met through sharing ideas, linking websites and efforts, and embracing a conscious common identity and set of goals. The presence of youth-oriented civic websites and the participation of youth will bring to this task new vigor, resourcefulness, and vision.

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Notes

¹ Masha Geller, “Study: Gen Y Spends \$172 Billion,” *MediaPost*, 4 Sept. 2003, http://www.mediapost.com/dtls_dsp_news.cfm?newsID=217495&newsDate=09/04/2003 (15 Dec. 2003).

² The Ad Council, “Voting—Youth Civic Engagement,” http://www.adcouncil.org/research/wga/youth_civic_engagement/?issue1Menu (4 Dec. 2003).

³ Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*, CIRCLE, 19 Sept. 2002: 39, http://www.pewtrusts.com/pdf/public_policy_youth_civic_political_health.pdf (13 July 2003).

⁴ CIRCLE and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 2003), <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/> (4 Dec. 2003): 4.

⁵ Although 6 percent of the sites in our sample were created by individuals, it is impossible to specify what percentage of these individuals were youth. Additionally, we were unable to identify the organizational status of 13 percent of our sample.

⁶ Some civic categories were not included, such as health, education, religion, and arts and culture.

⁷ National Public Radio, “Civics Lessons beyond the Classroom: Volunteering May Not Teach Students about Problems’ Roots,” 2002, http://www.npr.org/display_pages/features/feature_905341.html (17 May 2003).

⁸ Based on figures from 2000. Independent Sector, “Giving and Volunteering in the United States 2001,” <http://www.independentsector.org/programs/research/GV01main.html> (18 Nov. 2003).

⁹ In 2001, 75 percent of 18 to 35-year-olds contributed, on average, just under \$700 annually. In comparison, 83 percent of 36 to 55-year-olds donated just over \$1,200, while 90 percent of those 56 and older gave an average of \$1,537—twice that of the youngest cohort surveyed. “Survey Finds Americans More Generous Last Year,” *World Vision*, 23 April 2002, http://www.worldvision.org/worldvision/pr.nsf/stable/20020423_barna (18 Nov. 2003).

¹⁰ Reed W. Larson, “Toward a Psychology of Positive Youth Development,” *American Psychologist* 55.1 (2000); Jack M. McLeod, “Media and Civic Socialization of Youth,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 27S (2000).

¹¹ These issues were discussed at length by the Advisory Committee on Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters (<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/pubintadvcom/pubint.htm>), the so-called Gore Commission that operated in 1997-98, whose archives are maintained online by the Benton Foundation (<http://www.benton.org/publibrary/policy/tv/piac.html>).