



# Have your say?

## Young people's response to the invitation to participate online

**Sonia Livingstone, LSE**

Research from the  
"UK Children Go Online" project  
[www.children-go-online.net](http://www.children-go-online.net)

**Cyberworld unlimited? Digital Inequality and New Spaces of Informal Education for Young People (Bielefeld, Germany, February 2006)**

# Politics is boring

Interviewer: Do you or (.) think you'd ever go on that site are you political people?

Fatima: I don't want to know

Interviewer: You don't want to know?

Fatima: I don't really like politics

Interviewer: What is it you don't like about politics?

Fatima: It's too hard

Int: It's too hard?

Tahirah: It's kind of confusing actually

Fatima: Yeah (.) it's complicated

# Can the internet help?



- Widely hailed as means to invigorate interest in civic/public sphere
- 'Fit' between young people's interests and internet – dialogic, flexible, alternative, non-hierarchical, low commitment
- UKCGO survey of 12-19 year olds
  - 54% visit a civic site
  - 34% made a website
  - 26% read news online
  - 22% have voted for something



# The online invitation

“We want children and young people to feel that they can influence the services they receive. We want to see them contributing to and benefiting from their local communities. We want them to feel heard and valued and to be able to make a difference” (Minister for Young People, 2001)

“. . . an abundance of civic and political activity by and for youth [which] 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” (Montgomery et al, 2004)

# Focus on the gap between producers and recipients

- Young people take the first steps – visit the sites, etc – but don't follow through
- An empirical gap of public policy significance
- Crucially, also an interpretative gap
  - A matter of communication, of communicative roles, mediated textually, between implied authors and implied readers
  - So, we can analyse the online invitation in terms of encoding and decoding, activity and interactivity, genre and context



# Case: Connexions' Epal site

- Six producer interviews with Epal, Need2know, BBC Teens, Childnet etc.
- Nine paired depth interviews/ observations with 14-15 year olds in school

Welcome to epal - Microsoft Internet Explorer

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Back Forward Stop Refresh Home Search Favorites RSS Print Mail News

Address <http://www.epal.tv/>

**epal** Who do you think you are? take Asha's personality test and find out... If you dare!

USERNAME: \_\_\_\_\_ PASSWORD: \_\_\_\_\_ search | terms and conditions | contact | feedback

**log in**

Home

**ASHA** **CREATE** **ISSUES** **INTERACT**

**Welcome to epal: the pilot version.**  
Hi, my name is Asha and I'd like to welcome you to epal - the pilot version. Feel free to click around and explore the site, but remember some bits of the site are still in development, and other areas are in the testing and de bugging phase, all stuff we have to do before we launch. If you find anything that you think needs fixing contact me [here](#)

**Be a Creative Champion**  
13 July 2005  
There's plenty to do in the Create section this month. You can read the latest music and games reviews submitted by our young journalists. Or watch our cool animation "Licken Shot" along with the new epal Radio Station. Come on take

**Epal Issues - you know where you're at!**  
08 February 2005  
Find here facts and articles on hundreds of issues for you, your friends or anyone else! Our latest articles take a look at the what is fashion, Tattoos, and the proposed ban on smoking in public places. [full story >>](#)

**Hot or Not**  
**Do you eat too much fast food?**  
 Burger and fries everytime  
 Salad and fruit for me  
**SUBMIT**  
**Show me another!**

start Microsoft Outlook W... Welcome to epal - Mi... https://exchange.ls... Focus group schedul...

# Subject matter

## Producers

- A managed gateway for ordinary young people to introduce them to local/public services
- Exciting ambition to 'join up' services for 'youth' (i.e. 13-19 year olds)
- 'It's funky, it's cool'
- Aims to 'involve' young people, 'participation in the broadest sense' (meaning?)

## Teens

- 'It's a bit boring', 'quite grown-up', 'just facts'
- Age range too broad: 'for older young people', 'written by geeky young people'
- 'It's cheesy', 'dull'
- Content too broad - unclear if leisure or work, fun or useful, participatory or informative

<b>Careers</b>	<b>Drugs and alcohol</b>	<b>Libraries / Internet</b>	<b>Sport and leisure</b>
Choosing a career Connexions Self employment Work experience	Alcohol Illegal drugs Smoking	Libraries The Internet	Arts and crafts Leisure activities Leisure centres and pools Residential and outdoor pursuits Sport and leisure clubs Street sports
<b>Children and families</b>	<b>Education and training</b>	<b>Looked after children</b>	
Childcare Family support Young carers	Alternative curriculum Basic skills Education support services Further education Higher education Homework clubs and revision Schools Training and apprenticeships	Adoption / fostering Advocacy Leaving care / in care	
<b>Citizenship</b>	<b>Environment</b>	<b>Money and work</b>	<b>Transport and travel</b>
Asylum seekers and refugees Politics and government Travellers	Charities City farms Education projects Pollution Recycling	Benefits & tax General financial advice Job Centre Plus Unions	Cycling Driving Local transport National transport Transport and access Travelling abroad
<b>Counselling services</b>	<b>Health</b>	<b>Race and ethnicity</b>	<b>Volunteering and personal development</b>
Bereavement Bullying and abuse Depression and suicide General counselling Phobias Relationships Self-esteem and appearance	Diet and nutrition Eating disorders General health advice Health conditions Mental health Sexual health and contraception	Advice and support Youth groups	Local Mentoring and befriending National Overseas
<b>Crime</b>	<b>Housing and homelessness</b>	<b>Rights and the law</b>	<b>Working in ...</b>
Domestic violence Police Probation Victim support Young offenders	Accommodation and supported housing Benefits Independent living Refuges Runaways	Advice and youth rights Consumer protection Discrimination and equal opportunities	Airports Computing & IT Service industry The Armed Forces Tourism
<b>Disability</b>			<b>Youth projects and services</b>
Conditions Hearing impairment Learning disability Physical disability			Lesbian gay and bisexual organisations Uniformed youth projects Youth services

# Formal composition

## Producers

- Wanted Lara Croft-type game but too expensive
- Branding for youth – cool, colourful, magazine format
- Asha, the avatar/host, the 'implied author', invites them to (1) interact, (2) explore issues, (3) create (c.f. Ofcom definition of 'media literacy')
- Aim for clean, simple layout

## Teens

- Prefer other sites – more colourful, fun
- 'Just chunks and chunks of writing', no narratives, personal stories, no real people, no games
- Hard to navigate (e.g. look for careers info on 'create') and to understand (become a young people's consultant, you could be a volunteer – meaning?)
- Prefer debates to one-sided (biased) information

## Rights 16-17 at work



### Rights 16 - 17 at work

[<< back](#)

If you do have a problem it is usually better to talk it over with others such as your parents, union representative or work colleague, before raising it with your employer. If you want advice on dealing with a problem please contact the Low Pay Unit, a Law Centre or an Advice Agency.

#### THE CONTRACT

It is important to have written details of your terms and conditions of employment. The law says that you must be given a written statement detailing your pay, hours, holidays, job title, place of work etc., within 2 months of starting a job. It is very important that you keep any information you are given about your job.

#### EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

You must not be discriminated against because of your sex, marital status, disability, ethnic origin or race in recruitment, promotion and how you are treated at work. Contact us for further information about any of these issues.

#### HEALTH & SAFETY

Your employer must provide proper training and supervision so that you do not injure yourself or others. You should be given safety wear, such as safety glasses, boots and gloves, if necessary for your work. You cannot operate certain types of machinery, for example slicing, welding and cutting machinery, or

# Mode of address

## Producers

- Difficulty of identifying producer as government  
url: [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)
- Don't wish to address 'Blue Peter kids', nor the seriously disadvantaged, but all the rest
- Yet feedback obtained from 'the usual suspects'
- Despite participatory aims, also aim to tell young people the things they 'need' to know, 'deliver' info to help them make the 'right choices'

## Teens

- If url was .gov, would be boring, they wouldn't visit, but .tv confusing; prefer to trust big commercial brands
- Unclear mode of address - Asha – is she Asian? Has an American accent...
- Broad appeal to typical kids easily misses its mark (c.f. Eco on closed texts and aberrant readings)
- 'So stereotypical'



ASHA



ISSUES



CREATE



INTERACT

# HAVE YOUR SAY

Epal is your site. If you've created something that can be shown on the site and you want to show it off to the world then send it to us and we'll publish it. Simply fill in the form below and hit 'submit it!'.



## SUBMIT YOUR STUFF

### Submit your own content!

Your name

Your email

What you want to call it

A short description

Related file (if any)

**submit it!**

### MY ASHA

Hi I'm Asha and I'm going to be your guide to epal. I'm not just a pretty face, I can also help you to organise your life. Select an option from the menu below to find out more.

REGISTRATION

SMARTSEARCH

TALK TO CONNEXIONS DIRECT

**SUBMIT YOUR STUFF**

...but **Registering** gives you more services, like your own organiser and text reminders straight to your mobile - just the thing for a busy person like you! **Registering** is really quick and easy, so **come on in!**

# Reception in context

Beyond features of the genre  
(or 'preferred' producer/recipient contract)

- Subject matter
- Formal composition
- Mode of address

Interpretation always occurs in context

A youth-centred approach reveals further themes, where decoding further escapes encoding...

- Action consequences
- Literacy
- Power

# Action consequences

## Producers

- Want inviting space for teens to 'have their say'
- But safety requires all text to be pre-moderated – expensive
- How their 'say' is listened to depends on stakeholder partners, not a matter of design
- Unclear on site what happens to teens' contributions, if anything

## Teens

- Cynical that anyone is listening – either adults or other teens
- Instrumental rejection of talk without direct consequences
- If they want to know what we think, why don't they come and meet us?
- Compare site with other domains where actions do have consequences:
  - Protests on the news
  - School council

# Literacy

## Producers

- Good design keeps safety features in the background
- Much consideration of safety but behind the scenes
- Or buried in unread privacy policies
- Or implicit in the absence of links
- And authorship is not explicit because 'government is boring' and 'it's your space'

## Teens

- Invitation to interact seen first and foremost as a safety risk
- If safety features not explicit, they assume them absent
- Who made this site?
- Who is giving this advice?
- 'Why would you send in a photo, that's stupid'
- 'You don't need to give your address do you?'

# Power

## Producers

- Assume site will be read as intended
- i.e. normative reading
- Aim for clarity (closed texts) rather than dialogic engagement (that assumes variable knowledge and interests)

## Teens

- Some appreciate this, especially the less net-literate, the more literate resent it
- 'It's just like the typical things you find on a teenage website, very stereotypical, all about celebrities and music'
- 'You can't get one site to please all the different kinds of people'
- If knowledgeable, the site is superficial, if not, it's too much writing
- Why do they block the sex sites but not the advertising?

## Do video games cause people to do violent things?

Some people are disgusted with violent computer games, some people cant wait for the next one to be released, but some people can take them too seriously.



There has been lots of controversy recently about violent games and this has cause many people to worry about the link between violent computer games and people doing violent things.

In a Recent case a 17 year old who was obsessed with the computer game "Manhunt" by Rockstar (producers of the GTA series) brutally killed his 14 year old friend. There have been other cases for

example apparently the boys who did the Columbine High School shootings where 13 people were killed were obsessed with a shooting game called Doom.

Many people have called for violent games such as Manhunt and the GTA series to be banned from being sold. In some countries these games get banned before they can go on sale.

I personally don't agree with banning these games as they are authorized for sale by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), And the violent games will be given an 18 age certificate. It is then up to the parents and shops to ensure that the child is only allowed to buy games for his/her age.

Movies are another scapegoat for some violence that happens, for example in America in a high school 3 youths re-enacted a gun scene from the matrix using air-rifles. It is usually a coincidence that the person who causes the violence watches a particular movie or plays a particular game. It is most often the case that the people that perform these murders or acts of violence are mentally unstable.

I think if children have a tendency to be violent they should be kept away from violent computer games, but it is equally the responsibility of the parents/carer and shops to make sure underage children don't get a film or game that is too old for them.

**Author:** Owen Carter

### COMMENTS

What about younger children who see the game that their brother/ sister is playing?

**Oliver Gibson**

I would like to draw peoples attention to the following article which is a much more factual article regarding the recent controversy **Manhunt Murder Twist**

**Tommy Vercetti**

### Rate This!

What do you think of this piece of content? [Click here to vote!](#)  
**This story is unrated.**

#### RECOMMENDED

No recommendations.

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### Hints and tips



**Tips on writing reviews**  
become a skilled reviewer



**Tips on submitting material**

**Writing groups and workshops**

You don't have to write alone

# Conclusion

<b>Communicative...</b>	<b>Producer/ text/reader</b>	<b>Text/reader/ context</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	Subject matter	Action consequences
<b>Form</b>	Formal composition	Media literacy
<b>Effect</b>	Mode of address	Power/resistance

# Thank you

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