Children, Youth, and Civic (dis)Engagement: Digital Technology and Citizenship

Brandi L. Bell
Department of Communication Studies
Concordia University

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About CRACIN

The Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN) is a four-year partnership between community informatics researchers, community networking practitioners and federal government policy specialists, funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). CRACIN brings together researchers and practitioners from across Canada, and internationally, to undertake case studies and thematic research on enabling the uses of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) by communities and through community-based organizations, and to investigate Canada’s national programs and policies for promoting the development and public accessibility of digitally enabled activities and services.

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For further information or to order hard copies of CRACIN materials, contact:

Project Administrator
Faculty of Information Studies
University of Toronto
140 St. George Street, Rm 652
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G6
Phone: (416) 978-4662
Fax: (416) 971-1399
Email: cracin@fix.utoronto.ca
Web: www.cracin.c
Introduction

In the introduction to a journal issue addressing the development of citizenship by youth, Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002) state that “research on the development of citizenship is enjoying a renaissance, fueled in part by the writings of Robert Putnam (2000), who has argued that we face a civic crisis today in terms of young people’s civic disengagement” (p. 173). Some of the current literature about youth and civic participation, especially in the popular press, is directly concerned with this apparent ‘civic disengagement’ of youth, attempting to understand why youth are not engaged and to determine how to encourage increased participation (Bucy, 2003; Iyengar & Jackman, 2003; Smith, 1999). There is a substantial amount of work being done by scholars, however, which is moving beyond this traditional approach to civic engagement and participation, as well as beyond the pessimistic perspective on youth civic engagement in particular. Those undertaking this work are critically engaging with the concepts of civic engagement, civic participation, and politics and are addressing the complexities of applying such concepts to the lives and experiences of children and youth.

In this paper, I will discuss recent academic literature pertaining to youth civic engagement in the Western context and map some of the important changes in the field identified by these scholars. I am particularly interested in examining contemporary approaches to issues such as how youth are conceptualized; how citizenship, civic participation, and civic (dis)engagement are understood with respect to youth; and, what roles media and internet technologies are perceived to play in youth civic engagement. It is important to note that much work has been done on youth and engagement in the context of developing countries, however, this review will engage specifically with work in the Western context as an entry point into the broader issues and concerns.

Following this literature review and examination of critical issues, I will discuss a number of examples of technology-based networking projects that engage youth, as a means of demonstrating how some of these issues are negotiated in concrete ways. These examples will help to ground the issues as well as raise further questions about the perceived roles of technology and the internet in youth civic (dis)engagement and participation.

Review of Literature

‘Youth’ in Civic Engagement and Citizenship Literature

The concept of ‘childhood’

Much has been written in the field of childhood studies about the conceptualizations of childhood and adulthood in Western societies. In discussing this
literature, Spigel (1998) argues that “the child is a cultural construct, a pleasing image that adults need in order to sustain their own identities. Childhood is the difference against which adults define themselves….Childhood has less to do with what children experience (since they too are subject to the evils of our social world) than with what adults want to believe” (p. 110). Spigel and others draw attention to the constructed nature of childhood and adulthood and encourage recognition of the broader issues shaping those constructions. In his introduction to *The children’s culture reader*, Jenkins (1998) provides a comprehensive historical look at the conception of childhood, arguing that “we do not so much discard old conceptions of the child as accrue additional meanings around what remains one of our most culturally potent signifiers” (p. 15).

In this historical overview, Jenkins (1998) focuses specifically on the notion of the innocent child who requires protection from natural, social, and cultural threats. This conceptualization of the child as innocent directly affects the literature on, and approach to, civic engagement and citizenship, since, as Jenkins (1998) argues, “this dominant conception of childhood innocence presumes that children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the political; we imagine them to be noncombatants whom we protect from the harsh realities of the adult world” (p. 2). Thus, in much of the citizenship, civic participation, and civic engagement literature, children and youth are not understood as citizens or civic actors in their own right. As Weller (2003) has argued, “children and young people are excluded from the ‘adult’ realms of socio-political participation and citizenship” (p. 154).

This exclusion of children and youth from research on citizenship and civic participation is changing as scholars increasingly acknowledge the constructed nature of childhood and desire to understand the ways in which children and youth incorporate elements of citizenship into their lives. In addition, inclusion of youth in such research is particularly common now that a number of researchers are publicly lamenting the civic disengagement of youth and searching for solutions to the perceived problem (Bucy, 2003; Iyengar & Jackman, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Smith, 1999).

**Youth: Citizens later or citizens now?**

One important way in which the conceptualization of the child as innocent and outside of politics surfaces in research on civic participation and citizenship is evidenced in two distinctive approaches to youth in this regard: One approach views children and youth as citizens in the future and focuses on discovering how to develop the appropriate skills for their future roles as citizens, while the other approach views children and youth as citizens now and focuses on the ways in which they understand and incorporate the elements of citizenship into their lives as children and youth.

In research conducted from the perspective that children and youth are citizens in development, younger children are often not of concern since they remain distant from their future roles as adult citizens. In this case, adolescents and young adults are more often the focus, and activities such as voting behaviour and other forms of involvement in formal political processes are often considered the most important elements of civic engagement (Bucy, 2003; Iyengar & Jackman, 2003). When children are included in this research, their actions or opinions are studied with a desire to understand how they affect
the children’s future as citizens. For example, Smith (1999) analysed longitudinal data on social capital and political participation in order to “develop an understanding of the important socializing forces early in one’s life” in the hopes that “it may be possible to identify ways to reverse these downward trends [in political participation and civic engagement] and to prepare young people for active and engaged citizenship” (p. 554). In cases such as this, children are considered important only in their roles as future citizens.

The other approach to citizenship and civic participation research views children and youth as citizens in their own right, acknowledging the ways in which they understand and participate in political and civic activities in their everyday lives. This research more often incorporates a child-centred approach to understanding citizenship, civic participation, and civic engagement and often focuses specifically on the experiences and opinions of children and youth (Bonder, 2000; Buckingham, 2000b; Canadian Youth Commission, 1948; Philo & Smith, 2003; Skelton & Valentine, 2003; Weller, 2003). Weller’s (2003) study of teenagers’ spaces of citizenship clearly demonstrates this approach. She “explores the exclusion of teenagers from spaces of citizenship and the potential role of citizenship education in promoting participation” (p.156) through engaging 13-16 year-olds in surveys and qualitative research methods such as photography, diaries, and discussions. The perspective of children as citizens encourages Weller to place emphasis on children’s voices and experiences and to acknowledge, for example, how “spaces such as skate parks illustrate the often hidden geographies of citizenship not just in terms of practical participation but on a much deeper level of identity and belonging” (p. 168).

**Difference among youth**

In addition to the development of a more child-centred approach in civic participation and citizenship research concerning children and youth, researchers in this field are also challenging essentialist definitions of children and youth and working to understand how difference affects youth citizenship and youth civic participation. They have begun to re-think their approach to youth as a group, which also entails a re-thinking of what is considered civic engagement (Thomson et al., 2004), as I will discuss in the next section. An important development in this area of redefining ‘youth’ is the increasing awareness and acknowledgment that ‘youth’ are not a homogenous category of citizens and that disadvantaged and minority youth have different experiences of citizenship and civic participation than those who are more privileged (Beauvais, McKay, & Seddon, 2001).

Social, cultural, and institutional structures of inequality have come to be understood as important elements in youth civic participation, providing opportunities for some youth while limiting possibilities for others. Authors such as Arnot and Dillabough (2000), for example, address the gendered nature of citizenship and argue that it has a profound effect on who can participate, who believes they can participate, and what forms of participation are allowed by whom. In the introduction to their edited collection on gender, education, and citizenship they state that “the contributors to this volume….suggest that the ideas which currently underlie the drive for citizenship and
citizenship education are gendered in ways which may serve to further marginalise, rather than emancipate, women” (Arnot & Dillabough, 2000, p. 17).

It is evident in reviewing current research that it is not only gender which is seen to be a factor affecting the citizenship and civic participation of youth, but other structures of inequality are also considered important, including geographical location, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability. This has led to much recent work in the U.S. and U.K. on the citizenship and civic participation of urban youth (Hart & Atkins, 2002; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003), youth from different ethnic groups (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002), immigrant youth (Stepick & Stepick, 2002), sexual minority youth (Russell, 2002), and (dis)abled youth (Skelton & Valentine, 2003).

It is argued by some researchers, such as Jones and Wallace (1992), that studying youth citizenship provides an entry-point into examination of these inequalities as they are faced by children and youth:

Youth can be seen as the period during which the transition to citizenship, that is, to full participation in society, occurs. However, citizenship offers a more useful framework than adulthood for understanding the ‘end product’ of youth: it allows us to consider process, but at the same time allows us to consider inequality – while citizenship rights are gradually acquired during youth, access to those rights, including to full participation in society, is still determined by the social structures of inequality such as social class, gender, race, disability, and so on. (p. 18)

For Jones and Wallace (1992), by exploring how the citizenship and civic participation of children and youth are affected by various structures of inequality, researchers can better understand how those inequalities are affecting not only how children and youth can participate in their communities, but also how they conceptualize their activities and their own identities in relation to their communities.

In terms of difference in research concerning youth and civic participation, it is not only structural inequalities that are of concern to researchers, but it is also difference in the sense of homogeneity and age groupings. In research concerning youth citizenship and civic participation, it is not always clear what age group constitutes ‘youth.’ The age group in question seems to depend greatly on what the specific research questions and concerns are: research on the role of school programs and civic education considers those of school age as the focus, while research on voting behaviour focuses predominantly on those nearing or close to the age when voting is permitted.

Recently, researchers have begun to move away from defining youth based on age groupings, taking into account the differences between youth that are created and maintained through structural inequalities as opposed to chronological age: “youth is neither a statistical age group nor a homogenous generation” (Bonder, 2000, p. 243). Researchers concerned with understanding citizenship from the perspective of children and youth increasingly attempt to understand how differences that exist in the everyday lives and experiences of those children affect citizenship and civic participation, rather than remaining focused on age. Jones and Wallace (1992) argue that “terms such as ‘adolescence’ or ‘adulthood’ are related to life-course events and social relationships, and
are relatively loosely associated with physical age. Youth is a process of definition and redefinition, a negotiation enacted between young people and their families, their peers and the institutions in the wider society” (p. 4). They conclude that what is required is “a more holistic approach to young people’s needs” and for researchers to “focus more on process in youth, but rely less on age as a structuring variable” (Jones & Wallace, 1992, p. 155).

Youth Citizenship, Civic participation, and Civic (Dis)Engagement

What youth are NOT doing

To conclude their review of research on young people and political participation, Skelton and Valentine (2003) argue that “when young people’s action is looked for, rather than focusing on what they are not doing, it becomes clear that even groups of young people traditionally assumed not to be active social agents are in fact demonstrating forms of political participation and action” (p. 124). As their review suggests, while it is often argued that children and youth are not doing enough in terms of political participation, research has shown that this is not the case. This perspective that children and youth are not participating is likely due, in part, to the tendency to define children as innocent and beyond, or outside of, politics and political matters: From such a perspective, no matter what children do, it will not be considered civic participation or evidence of citizenship. According to Skelton and Valentine (2003), it is often the case that “young people may well be doing political activity but it might not be defined as such by researchers or the young people themselves. Additionally, what young people care about politically does not always, or even occasionally, coincide with the agendas of formal political parties who contribute to the discourse of what is ‘political’” (p. 123). Thus, they argue that it is important for researchers to take care in their approach to, and definition of, citizenship and civic participation in work with children and youth in order to avoid claims of youth civic (dis)engagement and apathy based on restricted conceptualizations of civic participation or engagement.

A number of researchers are struggling with the challenge of redefining citizenship and civic participation with respect to children and youth and this will be discussed below; however, some have also pointed out other possible explanations for the apparent civic disengagement of youth that do not rest solely on one’s definition of civic participation or citizenship. These are important to acknowledge here prior to discussing the redefinition of such concepts.

In his book *The making of citizens: Young people, news and politics*, Buckingham (2000b) explains that there are two arguments commonly made about the decline of political participation by youth: the ‘conservative lament’ position which argues that it is children who have changed in attitude, and the ‘postmodern celebration’ position which argues that young people have a different relationship to information than their elders (pp. 5-7). Buckingham makes a similar argument in *After the death of childhood: Growing up in the age of electronic media* (2000a), stating that while, to some, the
perceived decline confirms “a view of young people as merely ignorant, apathetic and cynical” (p. 171), to others, “young people’s apparent rejection of politics and of news media could also be seen to reflect their sense of exclusion from the domain of politics, and from dominant forms of political discourse” (p. 172). In both books, Buckingham concludes from his own studies that it is young people’s exclusion and disenfranchisement from what is considered politics, citizenship or civic participation that produces much of youth’s cynicism and apparent apathy. Interestingly enough, similar arguments were made almost sixty years ago by the Canadian Youth Commission (1948) in a study of youth perspectives on citizenship following WWII, and also more recently by researchers such as Schissel (1997) and Bonder (2000) in their explorations of youth crime and of young Argentinean women’s representations of citizenship, respectively.

For those researchers who argue that youth civic (dis)engagement is due to exclusion or disenfranchisement of children and youth from political and civic life, encouraging participation of youth becomes a priority (see for example, Hunson, Fournier, Metivier, & Hebert, 1991; Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001). Part of this move to encourage youth participation despite, or because of, youth’s frequent exclusion from citizenship and civic participation activities involves understanding what civic engagement and participation means to children and youth and, consequently, redefining what is meant by citizenship, civic participation, and civic engagement.

**Redefining youth citizenship, civic participation, and civic (dis)engagement**

While some authors remain focused on voting as the ultimate (and sometimes only considered) means of civic participation, a number of researchers have begun to question this approach, especially in relation to youth. As discussed above, how citizenship, civic participation, and civic engagement are defined is of great importance when considering children and youth, since youth are often excluded from what is typically considered ‘political.’ Thus, many researchers have argued that a broadened definition of civic participation is essential for understanding youth civic engagement (Gauthier, 2003; McLeod, 2000; O’Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones, & McDonagh, 2003).

With a broadening of the definition of civic participation to include not only direct political participation but also community service and other political actions such as protesting, research has shown that a disconnect exists between patterns of youth voting and volunteering, where there are low voting levels but high levels of volunteer activity (Bucy, 2003; Keeter, Jenkins, Zukin, & Andolina, 2003). This has led a number of researchers to ask questions about how civic participation in the form of volunteering and community engagement is related to more direct involvement in the political process (Jenkins, Andolina, Keeter, & Zukin, 2003; Keeter et al., 2003; Sherrod, 2003; Sherrod et al., 2002).

In addition to broadening the definition of civic participation to include forms of activity that are perhaps further removed from formal political practice, researchers are also arguing that the definition of politics and of civic participation needs to correspond with the everyday experiences of children and youth. Thus, the broadened definition of
civic participation should include those things that children and youth understand as political or as civic and also those things that may be political or civic in the context of their lives even though they do not recognize them as such. On one hand, it is important to recognize that children and youth may be developing “new forms of social activism” and “a new type of politics” (Megyery, 1991, p. xvii), redefining what civic engagement is to them. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge the many everyday actions of children and youth that may display civic-mindedness or citizenship, such as the restructuring of local spaces described by Weller (2003). In her research, Weller (2003) found that “accessibility to…spaces of citizenship was perhaps one of the greatest problematics for teenagers” (p. 163), yet “many participants demonstrated their capabilities as political actors by reconstructing local spaces” such as skate parks (p. 167). Similarly, in their research on young D/deaf people, Skelton and Valentine (2003) argue that it is important to “wrest the definition of politics from those who have most political power” in order to see how “young D/deaf people demonstrate political participation and are agents of political action” (p. 132).

The desire to understand children and youth’s citizenship and civic participation with broadened definitions has led a number of scholars to question and challenge the research approaches and methods typically used. Research concerning youth and civic participation has often focused on the people and institutions seen to have the most influence on youth development and behaviour. This has resulted in a focus on the role of family, school, and peer groups in encouraging civic participation (Annette, 1999; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Torney-Purta, 2002; Zaff & Michelsen, 2001). Recently, however, this approach has been criticized for its lack of attention to youth’s own perspectives. O’Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones, & McDonagh (2003) argue that adequate understanding “can be achieved only by investigating: how young people perceive and experience politics; and the particular experiences of young people as young people, rather than as a subset of the adult population” (p. 59). They conclude by proposing “an alternative research design to investigate the ways that people conceive of politics, how and why they participate, and also why they do not, which draws on a high degree of respondent-led findings” (p. 55).

Similar arguments for listening to children and youth have been made by Mohamed and Wheeler (2001), Philo and Smith (2003), Weller (2003), Currie (2004), and Galston (2004). According to Skelton and Valentine (2003), “if young people are given the chance to discuss politics in their own terms, so providing a wider definition of politics, then it is clear that they are very much engaged and interested in things ‘political’” (p. 124). Part of this approach to research focused on listening to children and youth involves recognizing the agency that children and youth have as citizens and as social and civic actors. Much of this work remains focused on the agency that researchers perceive youth to have as opposed to youth recognizing their own forms and means of agency; however, the concern that this research shows for understanding youth’s own perspectives on politics and citizenship suggests that this could be an area for further study.
Political agency and community-based civic engagement among youth

Especially common in research concerning youth civic engagement is the argument for increased participation of children and youth in community-based activities. As Currie (2004) concludes, we need “to create new ways for adolescents – whether they are in or out of school – to engage in challenging and useful work on important social issues in the communities around them: working with children, the elderly, or the homeless, tackling environmental problems, improving recreational opportunities, advocating for better schools” (p. 267).

Within the school environment, there have been a number of changes to curricula in recent years which strengthen the focus on civic education and community participation. Compulsory citizenship education was introduced in England in 2002, focusing on providing children and youth with the skills to be responsible citizens in the future (Weller, 2003). Similarly, changes in Canadian school curricula have meant that citizenship has become a focus and, in many regions, students are required to participate in volunteer activities within their communities as part of their education (Faris, 2000; Ministry of Education and Training, 1998). This ‘service learning’ approach of active participation in the community has been supported by authors such as Annette (1999) who states that “Service Learning is an educational method which provides a structured learning experience in civic participation which can lead to the development of the key skills necessary for being an active citizen” (p. 91).

As the research in this area continues, researchers are beginning to examine such ‘service learning’ school programs. According to preliminary studies, while such community participation by students is important, programs are less effective if youth are not involved fully in planning and policy-making activities. In a discussion of civic education in U.S. schools, Galston (2004) details a Carnegie Corporation and Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) joint effort in which it was found that

The most effective programs occur in schools that: consciously promote civic engagement by all students, with special attention to those who might otherwise remain disengaged; give students opportunities to contribute opinions about school governance-through student governments and other forums such as all-school assemblies and small working groups-and to understand how school systems are run; collaborate with the community and local institutions to provide civic learning opportunities; provide teachers with access to professional development in civic education and; infuse a civic mission throughout the curriculum, offer an array of extracurricular activities, and provide a school climate that helps students put what they learn about civic education and democracy into practice. (Galston, 2004, p. 265)

As this preliminary work on ‘service learning’ and civic education demonstrates, beyond creating opportunities for participation, it is also imperative that opportunities for children and youth to directly influence and shape their communities be made available. Many researchers interested in the civic engagement of youth are calling for increased participation of youth in research, program development and delivery, and policy-making
According to Kirlin (2002), “the most significant step is rethinking the front end of service and volunteer programs so that students have as much latitude as possible to learn and practice civic skills through the process of designing and organizing their activities themselves” (p. 573). In a report on youth leadership development, Mohamed and Wheeler (2001) argue that “many youth development organizations and programs have failed to take seriously the need for youth participation, voice, input, and power in the decision-making process” (p. 8). Researchers are looking for places where children and youth are involved in decision-making and planning activities, as well as places where those opportunities may be created as a means of encouraging meaningful civic participation. As Weller (2003), found in her study, finding those spaces in which children and youth already feel passionate and can exert some agency will help researchers to both find and help create opportunities for civic engagement:

Relating [civic education]…to teenagers’ needs and aspirations, as well as providing time for young people to engage actively with local decision-makers over the issues that are of importance at present are, this author believes, important steps to respecting teenagers’ current personhood and inciting confidence that their political actions matter. It is important also to view teenagers as experts regarding their own citizenship. (p. 169)

This attempt to find and create potential spaces of citizenship in order to encourage youth civic participation is common within technology-based networking projects that seek to engage youth. Examples of these networking projects will be discussed later in this paper, situating them within this broader framework of citizenship and civic engagement literature concerning children and youth. First, however, I will briefly review the literature on the role of the media in youth civic participation.

**Media, Technology, and Youth Civic Participation**

**Mass media and youth citizenship**

Prior to discussing the role of technology-based networking projects in encouraging civic engagement among youth, it is important to briefly review the various perspectives on the roles of media and technologies found in citizenship and civic participation literature, specifically with respect to children and youth.

In their report on youth and citizenship in Canada (conducted by the Canadian Policy Research Networks), Beauvais, McKay, and Seddon (2001) do not directly address the role of media or ICTs in civic participation. Appendix A of the report, however, contains a summary of a roundtable discussion held as a means to “assess the adequacy of the paper” (p. 109), and within this section, media and the internet are mentioned as important issues that the report overlooked (p. 111). The roundtable discussants also felt that the role of the media in general was not well shown and that “the media were singled out as too often demonizing young people and denying youth a voice” (p. 112).
Much work on youth and civic participation has tended to include media and ICTs as marginal factors (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002; Russell, 2002; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss et al., 2002). The research that does focus on the role of media has been criticized by McLeod (2000) who argues that “if media are analyzed at all, the focus is usually on television rather than other media, and measurement is of time spent rather than exposure and attention to particular content” (p. 48). This focus on news media and television is apparent in work such as that by Rahn and Hirshorn (1999), Sherr and Jenkins (2003), and Keum, Devanathan, Deshpande, Nelson and Shah (2004).

The traditional approach to studying media in citizenship and civic participation research positioned the child or youth as a passive audience to media and has focused largely on media effects and formal political participation. Buckingham (2000a) argues that mass media forms are often blamed for declines in youth civic engagement, or are at least seen to play an important role in that decline: “On the one hand, the media – and ‘commercialized’ youth culture more broadly – are often seen to be primarily to blame for this perceived decline in political awareness….On the other hand, there is growing concern about young people’s declining interest in news media” (p. 171).

Researchers such as Buckingham (2000a and 2000b) and McLeod (2000) are encouraging a move away from a focus on effects research within a narrow definition of civic engagement, looking instead to the ways in which children and youth make sense of and incorporate media content and activities into their lives in potentially political and civic ways. In an effort to combine a broadened definition of civic participation with a child-centred approach to media, McLeod (2000) argues:

Shifting the focus from formal political outcomes to the informal processes necessary for democratic deliberation directs attention to the development of such skills as critical and reflective strategies for processing information from the media; formulation and expression of opinions; understanding and tolerance for diverse points of view; listening and taking turns; principled reasoning; and bargaining and compromise in group decisions. (p. 47)

This approach informs many networking initiatives which rely on technologies as a means to engage youth in civic and political activities, as will be discussed below.

**Children, youth, and digital technologies**

Researchers have more recently begun to address other forms of media and technology in their work on youth civic participation. Iyengar and Jackman (2003) conducted an “exploratory study to test whether young Americans’ enthusiasm for digital technology can provide a meaningful opportunity to engage them in the world of politics” (p. 17) and found that in their specific case of distributing a CD-Rom of interactive political information, it did. The internet has been addressed by Carpini (2000) who argues that ICTs seem to provide “access to young adults, an increased ability for organized interests to more effectively reach young adults, and new or easier opportunities for already engaged (and perhaps interested but not yet engaged) young adults to participate and do so more effectively” (p. 348). Finn and Detlor (2002) report on a project that engaged youth in the design and development of the Government of
Canada’s Youth e-Cluster and provide suggestions for effective citizen participation in designing electronic government services. In a recent study by Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper (2004) which addresses youth participation on the internet, it was found that “young people cannot simply be divided into those who participate more and those who participate less. Rather, a more complex explanation, based on demographic and internet use factors, leads young people to take up opportunities to participate online in different ways” (p. 14). This difference in participation requires further interrogation, especially in terms of the relationship between offline and online participation and the ways in which the internet may figure into the broader picture of youth civic engagement and participation.

Like childhood studies more generally, there is a large body of literature concerned with the relationship between children and digital technologies such as the computer and internet: How children use those technologies and how those technologies may be changing the nature of childhood are of particular concern (Papert, 1993; Postman, 1982; Sefton-Green, 1998, 1999; Wartella, 2002). Selwyn (2003) believes that the “emblematic role of the child has been exemplified in ongoing debates concerning the increasing role of technology in society and the perceived shift of countries such as the UK into a post-industrial era and associated ‘information age’” (p. 351) and argues that “we need to be aware of what these discourses of the child computer user include and exclude” (p. 374). With this caution in mind, I will focus the remainder of this paper on the potential roles of digital technologies in the citizenship and civic participation of youth, drawing upon specific projects in order to contextualise and ground the discussion.

Digital Technologies and Youth Civic Engagement

The major themes found in much of the work concerning youth and internet use are reviewed in Livingstone’s “Children’s use of the internet: Reflections on the emerging research agenda” (2003), in which she provides an overview of the research trends in the field as well as an assessment of the current status of the field and its persistent research challenges. She argues in this literature review that few research projects have examined the opportunities that new technologies such as the internet provide for communication, identity, and participation (p. 151). The specific topic of civic participation is addressed only briefly by Livingstone in this context: According to her, “the most that can be said is that a few studies are charting interesting initiatives using the internet to stimulate young people’s participation, holding out the promise of new opportunities through instances of ‘best practice’, although it remains unclear how and by whom these could be evaluated or more widely implemented” (2003, p. 152). A recent U.S. report by Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson (2004) addresses these issues. They argue that

| Scarcely audible amidst 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 been taking root on the Net. Hundreds of websites have been |

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created to encourage and facilitate youth civic engagement, part of an emerging genre on the Internet that could loosely be called “youth civic culture” (p. 2)

The following brief examination of technology-based networking initiatives aimed at encouraging participation among youth will help to illustrate how some of these initiatives may be thought of in terms of civic participation of youth, or ‘youth civic culture.’ In order to highlight some key elements found in such projects, I have organized them in the following categories:

- projects which demonstrate how technology is used as a tool to fight apathy;
- projects providing children and youth with different ways of being citizens;
- projects combining online and offline forms of civic participation;
- projects focused on providing children and youth with political or social agency.

**Technology as a tool to fight apathy**

While “technology alone is insufficient to address the complex phenomenon of political apathy,” technology-based networking initiatives aimed at youth demonstrate that, as Woodard and Schmitt (2002) argue, “technology is not a panacea for youth political apathy, but a tool that, with directed use, may help overcome it” (p. 96). Programs such as the Canadian Government’s [Community Access Program Youth Initiative](http://cap.ic.gc.ca/english/7000.shtml) and community-based [Plugged In](http://www.pluggedin.org/) in East Palo Alto, CA, provide youth with opportunities to work and volunteer in technology-focused capacities within their own communities. The Community Access Program Youth Initiative is a program in which youth can work in local community access centres, which are located in various cities across Canada, while Plugged In provides opportunities for youth to volunteer at their East Palo Alto centre. With such initiatives, youth develop skills while contributing to their local community.

Other programs such as the university-based research project [Teen Net](http://www.teennetproject.org/), corporate-funded online community [Spank](http://www.spankmag.com/), and non-profit organization [Youth Noise](http://www.youthnoise.com/Home/), provide spaces in which youth can contribute internet content in the form of stories, articles, opinion pieces, and other modes of expression. A number of these initiatives provide only online spaces for youth contribution (Spank, for example); however, others such as Teen Net also involve off-line activities for youth that feed into programs and online content. As evident from these few examples, such initiatives include research endeavours headed by academics within universities, government-supported projects, and commercial ventures. Further research is needed to examine how these different ownership, management, and funding situations may affect child- and youth-focused content, as well as youth civic participation.

The Australian [Youth Internet Radio Network](http://cirac.qut.edu.au/yirn/) project, which began in 2004, is a university-based research project working to “connect young people across Queensland, through the use of new media technologies, and allow them to learn skills of relevance to new employment needs while
also providing them with an interactive distribution platform for their creative content” ("Youth Internet Radio Network", 2005). This will be accomplished through a streaming website where youth will be encouraged to produce multimedia content and to engage in discussions with other youth, and government, about issues important in their lives.

According to Buckingham (2000b), “the new forms of cultural expression envisaged by enthusiasts for digital media will not simply arise of their own accord, or as a guaranteed consequence of technological change; we will need to devise imaginative forms of cultural policy that will foster and support them” (p. 222). These and other innovative technology-based projects aiming to engage youth in local and dispersed communities are examining these cultural policies as well as addressing questions concerning who has the opportunity to speak and control the means of production in such initiatives. What is common among many such projects is their effort to engage youth by providing them with technological tools with which they can tell their own stories, make their own internet content, and engage in communities in ways that they value.

**Ways of being a citizen**

Kenway and Langmead (2000) argue that internet communication tools such as chat, email, and discussion groups create “new relationships between producers and consumers of cultural texts, new and different ways of communicating and relating, new cultural and social identities, and new ways of developing and assembling knowledge” and that these “all hint at new possibilities for citizenship” (p. 314). Government-based initiatives such as the SchoolNet Youth Advisory Board (http://www.schoolnet.ca/syab-ccjr/e/home.asp) and the National Rural Youth Network (http://www.ruralyouth.ca/) provide opportunities for youth to act in direct relationship with the government and provide input on policy and program development.

Other non-government projects that engage youth online also focus on creating communities of citizens across geographical boundaries. The Canadian Aboriginal Youth Network (http://www.ayn.ca/) is one such project, aiming to create “a network that runs across Canada (and beyond) connecting all Aboriginal youth.” The organizers, who are youth themselves, believe that “by connecting with one another, we become stronger individuals and stronger as a people, better able to overcome our disadvantages, whether they be addictions or just plain old racism” ("The Aboriginal Youth Network", 2004). In this way, the Network brings together Aboriginal youth as Canadian citizens with specific issues and concerns and encourages youth involvement in both the online community and their local communities.

Initiatives such as TakingITGlobal (http://www.TakingITGlobal.org) and Youth Creating Digital Opportunities (http://ycdo.takingitglobal.org/index.html) encourage youth to think of themselves as citizens of both their local communities and nations, as well as citizens of the globe. Through youth-led projects at the local level, youth engage with their local communities, but also connect with other locally-based projects to create larger national and global network of youth working with internet technologies. TakingITGlobal “also works with global partners – from UN agencies, to major companies, and especially youth organizations – in order to build the capacity of youth for development, support youth artistic and media expression, make education more
Online and offline participation

One important element of some technology-based networks seeking to engage youth is their effort to focus on and combine the online and offline activities of youth, relying not only on technology as a means to engage youth within the ‘virtual’ communities of cyberspace, but also working within, or encouraging work within, local communities as a way to build social ties and provide concrete opportunities for youth in those communities. This reflects the current consensus among researchers that “young people integrate on- and offline communication in order to sustain their social networks, moving freely between different communication forms” (Livingstone, 2003, p. 151).

Projects such as the Aboriginal Youth Network (http://www.ayn.ca/), KidLink (http://www.kidlink.org/), and Youth Noise (http://www.youthnoise.com/Home/) provide an online space in which youth can discuss and write about their everyday experiences, as well as provide tools and advice on how to deal with problems youth may have in their communities, both online and offline, such as racism, drug and alcohol abuse, and violence. In an effort to encourage youth to engage with and talk about their own local communities, the Canadian youth internet resource deal.org (http://www.deal.org/) has recently begun a pilot project in which groups of youth are supported in creating a website about their community as they see it and experience it. Many such websites, especially those that are managed by non-profit organizations (such as KidLink and Youth Noise) and those that are government-funded (such as deal.org), publish privacy policies or terms of service which outline the potential risks that children and youth may face online and often provide tips and resources for both youth and parents on staying safe when online. In addition, these policies outline the ways in which the managing organization will use the personal data collected by participants.

The Canadian government-funded National Rural Youth Network (http://www.ruralyouth.ca/) and BC Youth Network (http://www.communityfutures.ca/provincial/bc/ryd2000/bcyn.html) are each concerned with the voices and experiences of youth in rural, remote, and northern communities. Both initiatives focus on providing opportunities for youth in those regions to share stories and strategies in both online and offline forums. In addition, both projects address a concern over youth leaving rural and remote communities and, as such, focus strongly on providing local solutions for challenges youth may be facing, using technology as a way to build culture across many, often distant, communities.
Youth and political/social agency

An important distinction can be made between technology-based networking initiatives which provide youth with specific ways in which to engage and those which provide youth with the tools to determine their own strategies for engagement. Canadian government-supported programs such as the Community Access Program Youth Initiative (http://cap.ic.gc.ca/english/7000.shtml) and SchoolNet Youth Advisory Board (http://www.schoolnet.ca/syab-ccjr/e/home.asp) are focused on very specific ways of engaging youth and leave little room for youth to define civic engagement for themselves. Other projects allow youth to participate in planning and developing initiatives, but this can still be very prescriptive. For example, the university-based research project TeenNet (http://www.teennetproject.org/) involves youth in project planning through focus groups, advisory groups, employed positions, and evaluations. There are numerous other initiatives, however, which explicitly allow youth to define engagement for themselves, choosing to use the technology provided to them through the initiative in the ways that make the most sense to them. So, for example, the Aboriginal Youth Network (http://www.ayn.ca/) is a website that is receives government funding, but is run by youth, for youth, where youth make the decisions about how the website is used and what content is developed and published. TakingITGlobal (http://www.TakingITGlobal.org) and Youth Creating Digital Opportunities (http://ycdo.takingitglobal.org/index.html) are both youth-run programs, receiving both corporate and government funding, which provide guidance and tools for youth to plan and develop local technology-focused projects in their communities, as well as more globally-focused projects. Similarly, the non-profit Barnraiser (http://www.barnraiser.org/index.php) provides youth in disadvantaged nations with technology to help them carry out projects they have developed, and the university-based Youth Internet Radio Network (http://cirac.qut.edu.au/yirn/) is aimed at providing youth with multimedia tools and a place to distribute their productions on the internet.

Conclusion

Following this brief discussion of the changes in citizenship and civic engagement literature, especially with respect to children and youth, as well as a few examples of technology-based projects, it becomes evident that perhaps children and youth are not suffering from civic disengagement in the ways which are often presented. Instead, changing our perception and redefining our notions of childhood, of citizenship, and of civic participation, and looking to see what youth are doing and where they are doing it, we in fact find that children and youth are engaged and that they do participate: they are working within their various communities, they are creating opportunities for other youth, and they are engaging in a variety of different ways.

Perhaps from this perspective we can ask new questions about citizenship and civic engagement, exploring what things are important to youth, how youth themselves
define politics and civic engagement, and how youth choose to become involved in the communities of which they are a part. There are a number of questions that remain to be explored. For example, we still must ask which youth are not participating in online engagement strategies and why, acknowledging that technology is not the only, or necessarily the most important, means of engagement for youth. Talking directly to youth about online and offline civic and community participation, and about their perspectives on related issues, such as politics and policy, will help to develop further understanding of these issues in such a way that values youth participation.
References


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# Appendix

## Overview of Selected Youth Participation Initiatives

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Introduction

The purpose of this appendix is to provide an overview of selected technology-based (and technology-focused) initiatives aimed at youth with the aim to demonstrate the variation in projects and approaches to engaging youth in civic participation through technology. The initiatives presented here represent only a small fraction of the projects addressing youth civic participation, however, these examples should provide an idea of the different ways youth are invited or encouraged to participate. In order to facilitate discussion of youth civic participation, and limit the length of this appendix, a series of categories presented by Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson (2004) will be used in the descriptions of initiatives throughout this appendix.

In their study of online youth civic culture, Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson (2004) present ten youth civic engagement categories which help to break-down civic participation or engagement into concrete and specific segments (pp. 18-19). The ten categories are:

1. Volunteering: Providing live or virtual opportunities to share skills.
2. Voting: Encouraging youth to vote and/or register to vote.
4. Engagement with the local community: Connecting youth to resources and organizations in local communities.
5. Global issues and international understanding: Providing space and means for collaborative discussions and projects on an international level.
6. Online youth journalism and media production: Encouraging, and providing space for, youth to comment on and analyze the world.
7. Access and equity: Addressing issues of inequality, often on a local level of access.
8. Tolerance and diversity: Focusing on diversity, multiculturalism, and inequality.
9. Positive youth development: Providing resources to help youth deal with challenges.
10. Youth activism: Providing a tool for young activists to network and share information.
The appendix is divided into three sections: Canadian Initiatives, U.S. Initiatives, and International Initiatives. Each section begins with an overview of the projects selected from that region, followed by brief descriptions of each initiative. Screen shots of project websites are included where appropriate.

**Canadian Initiatives**

The twelve initiatives described in this section all originate in Canada, representing both national and regional projects. The variety of youth civic engagement approaches is evident in these examples which embody a number of the civic engagement categories described in the introduction. Most predominant among these initiatives are the categories of positive youth development, engagement with the local community, and youth journalism and media production. Youth journalism and media production are often found in youth-run (or established) initiatives where young people are encouraged to submit stories or news items. Positive youth development and engagement with the local community are also evident in these youth-led initiatives; however, they are also prevalent in government-funded initiatives. These often focus on providing resources for youth and promoting opportunities for youth community involvement.

The majority of the initiatives described below have received government support, or are government-run, reflecting the funding priorities of the Canadian federal government throughout the mid- to late-1990s. Government funding priorities have changed recently, however, leaving a number of the initiatives below with either drastically cut funding, or none at all. This process of funding change is still in development and it is unclear what final impact it will have on technologically-mediated youth civic engagement in Canada.
**The Aboriginal Youth Network** *(http://www.ayn.ca/)*

A website established in 1995, the *Aboriginal Youth Network* was originally a Health Canada funded initiative focused on solvent abuse. It has since evolved into a broad network reaching across Canada which addresses multiple issues and concerns for Aboriginal youth between 12 and 29 years. The Network’s stated mission is to “ensure there's a place in cyberspace just for Aboriginal youth in Canada. This is a place for all youth, whether you live in the North, on the Six Nations Reserve in southern Ontario, or on the prairies – to talk and type about your life.”

Over the years, funding and support have come from Health Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, MicroWorks, Kendall Lougheed Inc., and UNAAQ Inc. Since 1998 the Network has been hosted by The Nechi Training, Research and Health Promotions Institute (a Canadian company dedicated to original people’s training, research, and health promotion), and has been funded by Health Canada since 2003.

![Figure 1: Aboriginal Youth Network Website (http://www.ayn.ca/AYNHome.aspx), August 15, 2005](http://www.ayn.ca/AYNHome.aspx)
Following its mission to provide a space for Aboriginal youth voices online, the Network is focused around its website, where Aboriginal youth are encouraged to submit content including events announcements, personal stories, and poetry. The website provides discussion boards where youth can meet others and discuss issues important to them, as well as event listings, news stories, educational and health resources, and traditional stories. With respect to civic participation, the Aboriginal Youth Network demonstrates three of Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson’s (2004) categories of youth civic engagement: Online youth journalism and media production, Positive youth development, Engagement with the local community.


The BC Youth Network was established following a series of consultations with youth from across the province of British Columbia. The consultations revealed that BC youth face a number of common concerns and challenges and the BC Youth Network was established to help build the capacity of youth communities through access to learning opportunities and shared knowledge. Funding for the Network has been provided by the Office of Learning Technologies and the initiative is administered by the Community Futures Development Association of BC and Rural Team BC. The stated goals are: to address the needs of youth in 7 rural communities in BC; to build skills and capacity for to be more involved in their communities, to access educational opportunities, and to access employment and self-employment activities; to develop youth council activities through knowledge sharing; to support ongoing dialogue between youth; to provide in-person and electronic opportunities to learn about leadership, communication, problem
solving, entrepreneurship, citizenship, and project development; to develop a partnership among youth and those who work with them to address the problem of youth out migration from rural areas and small communities; and to develop and test a network model to use in other communities.

The Network is aiming to support regional youth councils to create websites and connect through a Network portal. In this way, the initiative supports youth civic engagement through allowing youth to volunteer their skills and knowledge online, encouraging local and provincial participation in community activities, and providing skill-building opportunities. It reflects the following civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004): Volunteering, Engagement with the local community, Positive youth development.


The Community Access Program Youth Initiative (CAP YI) was established in 1996 with the aim to “provide employment opportunities for young Canadians between the ages of 15 and 30 – primarily students, recent graduates, or the under-employed or unemployed.” Participants in the program are employed at Community Access Program (CAP) sites, which are located across Canada, with the purpose of providing them with career development skills. Youth typically engage in such activities as delivering computer training sessions, developing websites, developing publicity materials, organizing information fairs and special events, and providing technical support.
The initiative is administered by the *Community Access Program* and funded by the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada Youth Employment Strategy. Recent funding cuts to the *Community Access Program* are likely to affect CAP YI, however, it is still unclear how. With the primary goal of providing employment experience and skills, the initiative’s main form of youth civic engagement involves skill development. In addition, CAP YI encourages community involvement and addresses access and equality, reflecting the CAP focus on providing public internet and computer access, especially in disadvantaged regions. The civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) encompassed by CAP YI are, thus: Positive youth development, Engagement with the local community, Access and equity.

*deal.org* ([http://www.deal.org/](http://www.deal.org/))

*deal.org* is a website maintained by a staff of young adults and administered and funded by the RCMP National Youth Strategy and Industry Canada. The goal of the initiative is to provide a resource of information for youth on a variety of issues. It provides spaces online for youth to participate and contribute content and encourages community involvement.
The website encompasses information pages on youth-related topics, a kids page with games, an information page on the work the RCMP does with youth, as well as current and back issues of the website ‘magazine’ (with major topics including youth employment, young artists, and homophobia). The initiative is also piloting a new sub-project in which groups of 5-7 youth are invited to build a local deal.org website for their community with the guidance of an RCMP officer and another adult advisor.

The deal.org initiative most strongly represents the following civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004): Online journalism and media production, Positive youth development.

**Generations CanConnect** ([http://www.schoolnet.ca/grassroots/gcc/about/gcc_e.asp](http://www.schoolnet.ca/grassroots/gcc/about/gcc_e.asp))

**Generations CanConnect** is an Industry Canada funded initiative administered by the SchoolNet GrassRoots program. Established in 1999, *Generations CanConnect* aims
to support cross-generational dialogue while providing youth with computer and internet skills. A project intended to be carried out in a school setting, Level 1 projects are aimed at students aged 6-11 and Level 2 projects are aimed at students aged 12-18. As part of the program, students write stories and create online historical and cultural resources after interviewing older Canadians. The initiative’s project website (http://www.schoolnet.ca/grassroots/e/project.centre/gr2/project-search.asp) includes student-produced stories, images, and other media. As a result of funding cuts to SchoolNet, the GrassRoots program (or which Generations CanConnect is a part) has been discontinued.

This initiative encompassed a number of different civic engagement activities (categories from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) including: Engagement with local community, Online youth journalism and media production, Positive youth development.

National Rural Youth Network (http://www.ruralyouth.ca/)

The National Rural Youth Network aims to connect rural youth across Canada such that they may learn from one another and share their opinions and ideas about policies and services with the government. Youth between 15 and 29 years of age can become members of the Network, which is funded by the Canadian Rural Partnership of the federal government. The Network has a number of stated goals, including:

- To provide space in which youth can meet others and share information on issues important to rural youth
- To build relationships between rural youth and programs and services available to them
- To provide information about youth-related policies, programs and services
To allow youth to voice their opinions and be heard in decision-making discussions about policies and services
To engage youth in existing youth-focused programs

These goals reflect a number of civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004), including: Volunteering, Engagement in the local community, Positive youth development.

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Figure 3: National Rural Youth Network Website (http://www.ruralyouth.ca/en/), August 15, 2005

SchoolNet Youth Advisory Board (http://www.schoolnet.ca/syab-ccjr/e/home.asp)

The SchoolNet Youth Advisory Board was established in 2001 in order to ensure youth were involved in the development of SchoolNet programs. The Board is administered by SchoolNet and funded by Industry Canada, however, recent budget cuts to the SchoolNet program have recently been announced and it is unclear how these will affect Youth Advisory Board activities.

The Board is comprised of youth aged 10-18 years and participants are involved in researching and discussing issues regarding the use of information and communication
technologies (ICT) by youth. This includes addressing skill development, required tools, accessibility, desired online content, and possibilities for youth engagement through technology.

In civic engagement terms (categories from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004), the Board encompasses Volunteering and Positive youth development.

**Southwest Youth Community Learning Network**

(www.swycln.cimnet.ca/cim/72C350_542T22627.dhtm)

Established in 2004, the *Southwest Community Learning Network* is a project in Southwestern Manitoba that aims to build the skills and knowledge of rural youth in the province through the use of technology. It is administered by a regional development associated and has funding from multiple government and other sources. The stated overall goals of the initiative are: “increasing employment opportunities and life long learning through ICT, the reduction of barriers to ICT within the community, the inclusion of individuals in the knowledge-based economy, the increase of creative and interactive use of learning technologies in communities.” Thus far, the project has involved a youth skills inventory, an organizational inventory, and asset mapping, involving youth ranging in age from 15-19 years.

The civic engagement elements of this project are focused most heavily on what Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, and Larson (2004) refer to as Engagement with the local community and Positive youth development.

**Spank! Youth Culture Online** (http://www.spankmag.com/)
Spank is an internationally-reaching youth community online which is based in Calgary, Alberta. It was established in 1995 as an online magazine for youth but has since developed into an online community of 14-24 year-olds. Funded by the corporation Lopedia and through advertising revenue, Spank is publicized as an online space for youth to share information and opinions, as well as meet new friends. The project is encompassed by the project’s website where youth can post messages on forums and can read about news stories and upcoming events.

The civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) most evident in this initiative are: Online youth journalism and media production and Positive youth development.

Figure 4: Spank! Website (http://www.spankmag.com/), August 5, 2005
Street Youth Online (http://collections.ic.gc.ca/rideau/index.htm)

Street Youth Online is a small one-time project resulting from a collaboration between Industry Canada, Rideau Street Youth Enterprises, SchoolNet Digital Collections Program, and the Ottawa Board of Education. The Industry Canada-funded initiative sought to engage street youth in designing and developing a website about their interests and concerns. The goal of the project is to provide youth with computer and internet experience, as well as provide information for youth who visit the site.

The project reflects the following civic engagement elements (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004): Online youth journalism and media production, Positive youth development, Access and equity.

![Street Youth Online Website](http://collections.ic.gc.ca/rideau/index.htm), August 15, 2005

Figure 5: Street Youth Online Website (http://collections.ic.gc.ca/rideau/index.htm), August 15, 2005
TakingITGlobal – Canada (http://canada.takingitglobal.org/)

TakingITGlobal is an international organization (see the Youth Creating Digital Opportunities initiative in the International Projects) begun in Canada in 1999, which solicits donations from foundations, governments, and corporations, as well as individuals, and is partnered with numerous foundations and organizations focused on youth. The Canadian portion of this initiative involves a website that provides youth with opportunities to share ideas and thoughts with others around the world, as well as a resource of information on getting involved in local and global communities.

The Canadian TakingITGlobal website is a portal specifically for Canadian youth and offers them opportunities to get involved in Canadian-focused activities and projects, as well as to communicate with other Canadian youth. The project encompasses civic engagement elements (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) such as: Global issues and international understanding, Youth activism, Positive youth development, Volunteering.

Figure 6: TakingITGlobal - Canada Website (http://canada.takingitglobal.org/), August 15, 2005
The *TeenNet Project* was begun in 1995 as a research initiative at the University of Toronto. Its aim is to utilize an action research approach to mobilizing youth in their communities and to developing websites. Youth are involved in planning, designing and developing projects and websites, as well as participating in research activities including focus groups, working groups, employment positions, youth forums, and evaluations. The initiative has received funding from a number of sources including Canadian Federal and Provincial Governments, hospital foundations, and other health-focused associations and organizations. The overall initiative involves a number of sub-projects such as:

- **Global Youth Voices** ([http://www.globalyouthvoices.org/](http://www.globalyouthvoices.org/)): A project that encourages youth to use technology to identify important community issues and opportunities for action and display their work online.

Figure 7: *Global Youth Voices* Website ([http://www.globalyouthvoices.org/](http://www.globalyouthvoices.org/)), August 15, 2005
- Smoke Free World (http://www.smokefreeworld.org/): A website developed by high school students that addresses issues of tobacco and globalization and provides educational information for youth.

Figure 8: Smoke Free World Website (http://www.smokefreeworld.org/), August 15, 2005

- CyberIsle (http://www.cyberisle.org/access/buspass.php3): An online teen health clinic designed with the help of youth which provides information about finding health resources online and offline.

Figure 9: CyberIsle Website (http://www.cyberisle.org/access/buspass.php3), August 15, 2005
The *TeenNet Project* encourages civic participation of youth by involving them in all aspects of projects and reflects the following categories of civic engagement (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004): Engaging with local community, Global issues and international understanding, Online youth journalism and media production, Positive youth development.
U.S. Initiatives

The five American-based initiatives described in this section demonstrate different approaches to youth civic engagement, including both well-established technology-focused initiatives and a recent venture into technologically-mediated engagement.

Girls, Inc. (http://www.girls-inc.org/)

Girls, Inc. is a non-profit organization focused on encouraging girls to be strong and smart. The initiative originally began in 1864, but was renamed to Girls Inc. in 1990. While this initiative encompasses much more than technology, a new online community project is currently being tested that is aimed at girls between 9 and 17 years of age.

![Girls Inc. Online](http://www.girlsinc-online.org/), August 15, 2005

Girls Inc. Online (http://www.girlsinc-online.org/) is a members-only online community involving activities, quizzes, and other prepared content for girls. In addition, there are avatars, discussion boards, and spaces for girls to submit their own content. In
terms of civic engagement, *Girls Inc. Online* reflects the following categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004): Online youth journalism and media production, Positive youth development.


Established in 1995, *Oblivion* is an organization run mostly by teenagers that focuses on issues important to youth and aims to encourage youth involvement. The website provides youth-related and youth-interest news stories and an online version of the initiative’s zine covering issues more in-depth. Discussion boards provide youth with an opportunity to provide their opinion on issues and submit content for the website and zine.

![Oblivion Website](http://www.oblivion.net/)

*Figure 11: Oblivion Website ([http://www.oblivion.net](http://www.oblivion.net)), August 15, 2005*

The civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) reflected in this initiative include: Online youth journalism and media production, Youth activism, as well as Voting.
Playing2Win (http://www.playing2win.org/)

Playing2Win is a Harlem community-based initiative which began in 1980 as an education and community center. It currently runs programs for youth 7-10 years of age and 11-14 years of age, as well as programs for adults. The purpose of the initiative is to provide economic, social, and educational opportunities to residents, especially through knowledge of technology skills. According to the Playing2Win website, “the organization provides youths and adults a creative environment where technological arts are the centerpiece of learning. Through independent study, group workshops, and one-on-one interaction, students gain experience in web design, digital art and video, music production, e-business, and an array of other marketable skills.”

Figure 12: Playing2Win Website (http://www.playing2win.org/), August 15, 2005
In terms of civic engagement, *Playing2Win* addresses these categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004): Access and equity, Positive youth development, Engagement with the local community.

**Plugged In** ([http://www.pluggedin.org/](http://www.pluggedin.org/))

*Plugged In* was established in 1992 and aims to use technology to encourage community members to learn new skills and express themselves. The initiative has programs for all members of the community, including youth.

Figure 13: *Plugged In* Website ([http://www.pluggedin.org/](http://www.pluggedin.org/)), August 15, 2005

*Plugged In* currently runs three sub-programs:

- **Young Producers Program**: A web and video production business run by youth. Participating youth also train others in the community.

- The **East Palo Alto Community Network**: Nine public access points aiming to provide computer and internet services to those with the most need.

- **EPA.net**: An online resource center with information, news, and tools for community workers.
The civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) this initiative reflects include: Access and equity, Online youth journalism and media production, Positive youth development, Engagement with the local community.


*Youth Noise* is an online resource center and community which is focused on providing youth with a space to voice their opinions and become engaged in social and political issues. The U.S.-based and internationally-focused initiative includes a website with youth-interest news and awards, information on how to get involved in communities and in politics, toolkits, listings of local volunteer opportunities, and tips on donating. The website also hosts very active youth forums and is run with the help of a youth advisory board.

The civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) encompassed include: Engagement with the local community, Youth activism, Volunteering, Philanthropy.
Figure 14: *Youth Noise* Website (http://www.youthnoise.com/Home/), August 15, 2005
International Initiatives

This section presents a selection of five initiatives: four of which are explicitly internationally-focused, and one which is based in Australia. While these initiatives often address engagement concerns such as global issues and diversity, they also reflect other categories of youth civic engagement.


*Barnraiser* is an initiative dedicated to providing internet tools for knowledge sharing, focusing on social software development. While it is not only dedicated to youth, *Barnraiser* does participate in a number of youth-focused projects, providing support, knowledge, and resources.

Examples of projects include the Kosovo youth community project where local youth in Kosovo are provided with access to the internet for educational and developmental purposes, the Small Islands youth community and WiFi island project where *Barnraiser* is helping to build the network and provide internet access, and the Estonian youth community project in which an internet community is being developed and funding sought for computer training.

The civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) encompassed by this initiative are: Access and equity, Positive youth development, Engagement with the local community.

KidLink ([http://www.kidlink.org/](http://www.kidlink.org/))
Established in 1990, *Kidlink* is a non-commercial organization based in Norway. Its goals are to provide children with educational programs and information, as well as to encourage creativity. In addition, the initiative aims to create worldwide networks of youth in order to encourage youth to learn from each other and share their different experiences of childhood.

The *Kidlink* initiative involves over 100 public and private virtual communities and facilitates interaction in over 30 languages. The website also has informational content with sections specifically for children and youth, teachers, and students, as well as information for parents, seniors, family members, libraries, museums, and other organizations providing services to children and youth. The primary civic engagement category (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) *Kidlink* addresses is Global issues and international understand, but it also encompasses Tolerance and diversity and Positive youth development.

![Kidlink Website](http://www.kidlink.org/)

*Figure 15: KidLink Website (http://www.kidlink.org/), August 15, 2005*
Orphan IT (http://www.orphanit.org/)

Orphan IT is a non-profit organization, established in 2000 and managed from the Philippines and Australia, which is concerned with providing consultations for telecentres and ICT organizations in developing nations. The initiative focuses on training, mentorship, jobs, sustainability, and profitability and aims to train young leaders in developing countries.

In focusing on providing training, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities, Orphan IT fulfills the following civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004): Positive youth development, Access and equity.

Youth Creating Digital Opportunities (http://ycdo.takingitglobal.org/index.html)

Youth Creating Digital Opportunities (affiliated with TakingITGlobal) was established in 2002 in order to develop a framework “for supporting youth involvement
in ICT for development (ICT4D) policy and practice.” The purpose of the initiative is to encourage youth to participate in policy-making, project development, and global networks of youth.

The initiative supports an online community, and provides news reports, articles, research reports, toolkits, forums, etc. The civic engagement focus of YCDO is on Global issues and international understanding, as well as Positive youth development and Engagement with the local community (categories from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004).

Figure 17: Youth Creating Digital Opportunities Website (http://ycdo.takingitglobal.org/index.html), August 15, 2005

Youth Internet Radio Network Project (http://cirac.qut.edu.au/yirn/)

Established in 2004, the Youth Internet Radio Network Project is a research initiative based at the Queensland University of Technology. The aim of the project is to connect youth across the region in order to share skills and knowledge through the use or
computers, and to provide youth with a platform upon which to create and distribute their own cultural products.

Youth are involved in developing a streaming website and are participating in training sessions where they learn about creating web content, including text, visuals, and audio. Youth are also invited to participate in online discussions. The civic engagement categories (from Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004) this initiative encompasses include: Online youth journalism and media production, Positive youth development, Access and equity.
References