

The Young Foundation and the Web

Digital Social Innovation

Working paper

Over 27 million Britons have a Facebook profileⁱ, 40 per cent of internet users upload self-created content to the web, and the same amount post messages to chat sites, blogs and newsgroups.ⁱⁱ Nearly a quarter of UK mobile phones users now have a Smartphone, with over 18 per cent using their devices to access social media sites or blogs.ⁱⁱⁱ We know that digital technology is transforming our professional and social lives. But could it also be ushering in a new age of civic and political engagement?

Studies show that people who access social media are more likely to look at campaigns or engage with politics online.^{iv} In the UK, during the Prime Ministerial debates in the run up to the 2010 UK election, 36,483 Twitter users were active during the first debate 28,790 were active during the second debate.^v Almost a quarter of 18 to 24 year olds commented on politics via social networks during the election.^{vi}

Local, national and international activists are building networks to do everything from getting millions of citizens to sign online petitions on climate change and human rights or to invest in micro-enterprises in Mumbai or Mexico City. Government data is increasingly being made public, improving transparency and allowing software programmers to create extra value from underused data by, for example, mapping out injuries and deaths to cyclists on London's roads.^{vii}

The Young Foundation researches and tests the potential of digital technology as a tool for social change.

- Firstly, we seek out examples of **digital social innovation**: how these technologies are expanding the horizons for social innovators looking to address needs in new and more effective ways.
- Secondly, we look at **local action**: how technology can allow local communities to develop more effective ways of interacting with public servants, policymakers and each other.
- Finally we want to understand to what extent digital technologies are supporting a revival of **leadership and entrepreneurship**, particularly in communities and groups that are democratically disconnected.

Digital Social Innovation

From Neuroresponse,^{viii} a new model of telecare for people with Multiple Sclerosis, to the School of Everything,^{ix} a project that connects people who want to learn with potential teachers; the Young Foundation's work shows how digital technology is leading to increasingly creative responses to social issues.

www.Maslaha.org is an organisation developed by the Young Foundation that aims to help Muslims deal with the everyday dilemmas of living in a western society – predominately through the web. For example, in Tower Hamlets, a London borough with a large Bangladeshi population, Maslaha has been working with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) to offer Islamic advice on how to live a healthy life with diabetes. Digital technology has allowed the service to reach people who are normally isolated or disengaged: advice is provided on Maslaha's diabetes website through videos in community languages.^x

Digital technology makes it much easier to expand the realms of social innovation beyond traditional boundaries such as professions, disciplines or geography. Social Innovation Camp's bring together software developers and service designers with social innovators to build effective, web-based solutions to social problems, resulting in digital innovations such as MyPolice - a tool for people to feed back their positive and negative experiences of contact with the police.^{xi}

In 2008, the Young Foundation launched the Social Innovation Exchange (SIX). SIX is a global online community of nearly 1000 individuals and organisations committed to promoting social innovation. SIX aims to improve the methods by which societies find better solutions to challenges such as ageing, climate change, inequality and healthcare.^{xii}

Digital technologies are also helping drive public sector innovation. www.Fixmystreet.com is a website that allows users to easily report an issue with their public realm to the relevant authority and track progress in dealing with it. More recently through our work on *Listen, Participate, Transform (2010)*, the Young Foundation has developed a framework to help local authorities use social media to improve the delivery of public services.^{xiii}

Building upon the open data movement, www.Mydex.org - a new community interest company backed by the Young Foundation - aims to empower individuals by giving them back control of their own data. The government holds data about citizens in hundreds of databases, with individuals having little control over it. Mydex equips people with a platform for managing, sharing and realising the value of their personal details and preferences.

Local Action

Digital technologies are helping local communities organise local actions. Whether through the development of online networks of citizens, or through digital content created by local people for others in their neighbourhood (what is known as 'hyperlocal media'), freely available web tools are assisting communities to become digitally empowered.

The Young Foundation's Local 2.0 programme aims to learn more about how communities can be empowered using the web and is piloting several projects with four English local authorities: the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council, Kirklees Council and Wiltshire Council.

Projects range from encouraging local people to write their own blogs and training for council officers on how to engage with communities via the web, to the creation of community websites that help people connect with one another and discuss local issues. www.Fairstead.org is a new hyperlocal website developed as part of Local 2.0 for a neighbourhood in King's Lynn, West Norfolk. The website - created at low cost through a partnership of local people and local agencies - aims to build local networks, improve communication between residents and agencies, and increase levels of local action.

Leadership and entrepreneurship

Digital technologies can reach into the handbags and homes of individuals who are alienated from the democratic process. Through The Youth of Today programme, we found that young people are plugged into digital technologies, but their potential as leaders in their communities and in the political process remains largely untapped.

Plugged in, untapped: Using digital technologies to help young people learn to lead (2010), shows that digital technologies can help young people experiment with voicing their opinions and accessing validating feedback, as well as offering opportunities to communicate and collaborate with others and develop skills in these areas. Digital technologies allow young people to develop networks spanning different contexts, giving them quick and easy access to a range of skills and expertise. Importantly, digital technology can give young people the confidence to take action and put their leadership skills to the test with minimal risk, and quick results.

However, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds – even those with good access to digital technologies - are less likely to benefit from the positive development and leadership outcomes of its usage.

Inspired by this research, the Young Foundation piloted www.idoideas.co.uk – a grant-giving platform designed by young people to inspire other young people to develop their entrepreneurial ideas. It allows individuals across the country to digitally submit their own ideas about how they could improve their communities with £1000. During the summer 2010 pilot, analysis showed that more than 60% of applicants were from a BME background – a category that can find it difficult to access traditional grant funding.^{xiv}

Conclusion: Digitally Empowered Communities

The new digital divides relate to usage, rather than access. More capable individuals and communities will grab the opportunities for empowerment afforded to them - including those opened by digital technology. Those that are less capable will struggle to do the same.

Most of the digital tools for empowerment can be harnessed at little or no cost, but the skills, confidence and motivation to use them are not evenly distributed. Only 21 per cent of internet users join in debates online or give opinions on social or political issues; 72 per cent are uninterested and six per cent would like to, but cannot do it with confidence.^{xv}

The risk is that disadvantaged communities become further marginalised from power and unable to attract the resources needed for effective social growth. Tackling educational disadvantage – along with the intersecting issues of low aspirations and apathy – is a critical task if digital technologies are to be harnessed to empower those who are marginalised from mainstream society.

Digital technologies are rapidly evolving, making the future difficult to predict. Whilst the popularity and availability of different tools will change, the behaviour it has instilled in a large proportion of the population will remain. Public sector bodies and civil society organisations need to understand, use and promote digital technology

whilst ensuring that the already empowered are not the only ones who become the digitally empowered.

ⁱ <http://www.clickymedia.co.uk/2010/06/uk-facebook-statistics-for-june-2010/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/iahi0809.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2010/3/UK_Leads_European_Countries_in_Smartphone_Adoption_with_70_Growth_in_Past_12_Months

^{iv} Ofcom Adults Media Literacy 2010

^v <http://www.scribd.com/doc/32819785/Orange-s-Digital-Election-Analysis>

^{vi} http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/rorycellanjoness/2010/05/so_was_it_an_internet_election.html

^{vii} <http://www.citybeast.com/londoncyclists.html>

^{viii} <http://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/ventures-and-investment/health-launchpad/portfolio/neuroresponse/neuroresponse>

^{ix} <http://schoolofeverything.com/>

^x <http://www.diabetesintowerhamlets.org/>

^{xi} <http://www.sicamp.org/?p=356>

^{xii} <http://www.socialinnovationexchange.org/aboutsix>

^{xiii} http://www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/Listen_Participate_Transform.pdf

^{xiv} <http://the-young-foundation.tagmap.co.uk/>

^{xv} Ofcom digital literacy report