'What makes you tweet?'

Young people's perspectives on the use of social media as an engagement tool

Written by:
Jen Rose and Lisa Morstyn

youthaffairs
COUNCIL OF VICTORIA INC.

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Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body representing the youth sector in Victoria. YACVic provides a means through which the youth sector and young people can voice their opinions and concerns in regards to policy issues affecting them. YACVic works with and makes representations to government and serves as an advocate for the interests of young people, and organisations that provide direct services to young people. YACVic also promotes and supports the participation of young people in debate and policy development areas that most affect them. YACVic's resources are primarily directed towards policy analysis and development, research and consultation, and to meeting the information, networking, education and training needs of our constituency. YACVic is funded by the Office for Youth, Department of Human Services.

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Some terms explained

Information communication technologies (ICT): 'a broad term that includes technological devices (such as computer software and hardware), related communication practices (such as social networking, emailing, game-playing) and the relationships that develop through the use of technology. ICT also encompasses applications of technology including the internet, mobile phones, gaming...music and media production.'[1]

Social media: the 'internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information among people. It refers to user-generated information, opinion and other content shared over open digital networks.'[2] Social media includes the following: social network sites, sites for photo and video sharing,[3] blogs and discussion forums. [4]

Social network sites: 'web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.' [5]

Youth-led organisation: 'an organisation that is predominantly governed and staffed by young people.'[6]

The following forms of social media were primarily discussed by young people in the focus groups and online survey:

- **Blogs**: forums that allow individuals to create content (e.g. personal thoughts and experiences) and share it with an audience of online 'readers' as a sort of 'online publication'. According to danah boyd from the University of California-Berkeley, 'the practice of blogging is an active one, where the blogger produces semi-regular expressions that build on top of each other...'[7]

- **Discussion forums**: websites that allow individuals to 'post a comment or question online', or read comments/questions, which others have posted. See http://www.edtech.vt.edu/edtech/id/ocs/discuss.html.

- **Facebook:** a social network site, which allows users to create profiles, connect with others by 'friending' them, and create or share content, such as photos, videos or news items. See: http://www.facebook.com/facebook.

- **MySpace:** a social network site, which allows individuals to design a profile, connect with friends as well as the 'music, celebrities, TV, movies and games' they are interested in. See http://www.myspace.com/Help/AboutUs.

- **Pinterest:** a 'virtual pinboard' on which individuals can add images. Pinterest also allows individuals to create a board as well as follow and view others' image boards. See http://pinterest.com/about/help/.

- **Tumblr**: allows individuals to write personal blogs and 'post' photos, quotes, links, music and videos. See http://www.tumblr.com/about/.

- **Twitter**: network which allows individuals to write and publish online messages, or 'tweets', which are up to 140 characters long. Individuals may 'follow' individuals, organisations or conversations that they find interesting. See http://twitter.com/about.

  o Hashtag (#): a 'symbol...used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet' that 'was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorise messages'.[8]

- **YouTube**: web resource that allows individuals to create, watch, discuss and share videos with one another. See http://www.youtube.com/t/about_youtube.

Executive summary

How are young people using social media in Victoria, and what do they use it for? What opportunities does this present for government and community services to engage more directly with young people and to get more young people leading or participating in broader community action? Do young people want to engage with government and services in this way and what ethical or operational issues may arise in that engagement?

Social media is a part of many young people's daily lives. According to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), 90 per cent of young people between 12–17 years and 97 per cent of those aged 16 and 17 years use social network services.[9] In recent times, governments and organisations working with young people have also increasingly been using social media in their engagement with young people and to promote their work.

This research report seeks to explore:

• the ways in which young people in Victoria are using social media

• young people's experiences using different forms of social media

• what young people think about how government agencies and community organisations should use social media to communicate with them.

The report also examines some of the ways that community organisations and governments (federal, state and local) are currently using social media to engage with young people and develops recommendations for better use and engagement.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used, including an online survey taken by 55 young people and focus groups to canvas the views of young people from diverse backgrounds, including:

• young people experiencing insecure housing or homelessness

• young people with disabilities

• young people seeking mental health support

• same sex attracted and/or sex/gender diverse (SSASGD) young people

• young people involved in the youth-led organisation, UN Youth Australia.

A second online survey was completed by five youth-led organisations, responding to questions about how they use social media and what benefits it has brought, and recommendations about how governments may use social media in their engagement of young people.

Case studies were also developed for:

• Banyule Youth Services

• Humans vs Zombies Victoria Inc.

• the Koorie Youth Council (KYC) (formerly the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council)

• Minus 18

• the Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS).

Key findings

About young people

The data collected through our surveys and focus groups supported the evidence that young people use social media daily and in various forms. All but one participant in our consultations used one or several types of social media and many used social media daily.

The form of social media used primarily depended on what they wished to use it for (e.g. communicate with friends, share photos or videos, etc).

Facebook was the most popular form of social media, followed by YouTube, blogs, and Twitter.

Some key themes in existing research about young people and social media include:

- the benefits to wellbeing and social connectedness of using social media
- risks and concerns related to that use
- impacts of social media use on youth participation broadly.

Our consultations revealed the following benefits for young people of using social media:

- making new connections and building community (including the opportunity to create 'safe spaces' to engage with others online)
- taking action and creating change
- strengthening existing relationships
- seeking information or entertainment.

While these benefits were experienced by young people across the focus groups, some resonated more strongly with participants from specific focus groups. For instance, a number of young people with disabilities spoke about building an online community in which they provided one another with friendship, support, information and advice. Participants in the SSASGD focus group discussed how they used social media to create safe online spaces, in which young people could talk about issues relating to their sexuality as well as other topics. Young people seeking mental health support discussed using social media to gain information, as well as strategies they used while on social media to protect their privacy and wellbeing. Young people experiencing housing instability discussed using social media to remain connected and in touch with significant people in their lives. In addition, young people involved in UN Youth Australia spoke about how they used social media as an advocacy tool aimed at creating change.

The majority of young people indicated that organisations and services should use social media for reasons including:

- social media is often the first place young people will go to seek information
- it is accessible and easy to use for young people
- it can increase engagement with young people who might face other barriers to connecting with a service/organisation
- social media is an effective way to increase young people's awareness of the programs available through organisations and/or services.

Young people indicated that often services or organisations use social media simply to get information to young people. Whilst information sharing was flagged as a useful function of social media, young people highlighted the opportunity that exists to engage in respectful, purposeful two way dialogue with them through social media.

Social media is used by all levels of government in Australia and the report presents examples of the Federal Government's 'Australian Youth Forum', the State Government site 'Youth Central' and the use of social media by local governments. Most young people indicated they were keen to engage with government via social media because:

• it is a convenient, accessible way of communicating

• governments should communicate with young people via mechanisms young people use, rather than making young people "come to them"

• governments should make use of emerging technology.

However, several young people expressed concerns regarding privacy issues that may arise from the use of social media by both governments and organisations. Some felt the use of social media should depend on the nature of the topic being discussed (i.e. it may not be appropriate for all topics), and others believed that social media should remain a 'social' space.

About youth organisations

Many youth-led organisations and youth services are developing social media strategies and using social media for a variety of purposes including:

• making connections and engaging young people in their work

• promoting events and sharing information to members and others who may be interested

• promoting opportunities for young people to be involved

• communicating with young people in rural and regional areas

• connecting with other organisations.

Recommendations

The report concludes that social media is an important tool, which may be used to facilitate youth engagement and youth participation.

It recommends that strategies to engage young people through social media should draw upon general principles of good practice in youth participation as a fundamental guide in planning or developing strategies using social media. To support this, the report outlines good practice principles in using social media to engage young people, specifying that the use of social media by organisations or governments should:

- Empower – so that participation means young people have greater control over their lives

- Purposefully engage – address issues that are relevant to young people, value their roles in engagement, and influence real outcomes

- Include – ensure that all young people are able to participate, particularly those who are socially, physically or geographically isolated.

Additionally, the report recommends that the State Government:

- Support an initiative to develop expertise in the use of social media for youth services and organisations working with young people. Consider opportunities for young people to be directly involved in the development and delivery of this professional development.

- Recognise and showcase examples of young people doing innovative, positive activities through social media, such as the examples included in this report. This will celebrate young people's achievements and provide examples for services and organisations to develop effective engagement strategies.

- Make greater use by all departments of Youth Central, the Victorian Government's web-based initiative for young people aged 12-25[10] so more young people can engage in the development of policy and programs by the State Government.

The report recommends that local government:

- Support the development of the expertise of youth services (and other relevant local government services) so they can better use social media to engage young people

- Build the capacity of young people to use social media to undertake activities that create community, strengthen connectedness and create positive change in their communities.

The report also recommends that youth services:

- Undertake professional development to improve the capacity of staff to engage young people through social media.

- Seek opportunities to hear from young people directly about the use of social media.

- Embed social media engagement into position descriptions and workplans to ensure adequate time and resources are allocated to this task.

- Ensure clear guidelines relating to the use of social media as an engagement tool exist within organisational policies and procedures.

- Consider the functions of the various forms of social media when choosing the best medium to engage young people.

Introduction

Social media is used extensively by many young people in their daily lives.[11] However, not all young people have equal access to social media. Young people also use social media in different ways and for a variety of reasons.

This report draws on young people's voices to explore their own use of social media (as individuals or as members of youth-led organisations) and their thoughts on the use of social media by organisations and government. The report investigates:

- what young people say about the forms of social media they use and why

- some concerns they have about social media

- the range of benefits they experience from using social media

- the ways in which they believe government and organisations should use social media to engage young people.

It draws out tips from youth-led organisations on how to make the most of social media and makes recommendations to government and organisations relating to the use of social media to engage young people.

In addition, this report puts forward good practice principles in using social media to meaningfully engage young people. In recognition of social media as a tool that may be used to strengthen young people's participation, these build on already existing principles underpinning youth participation work, which were originally developed through a partnership project between YACVic and the Office for Youth in 2004 resulting in the *Taking Young People Seriously* series of resources.

While potential negative effects from young people's use of social media are addressed, the report has adopted a positive 'digital citizenship' approach[12], acknowledging the range of benefits young people have attributed to their use of social media and recognising that social media provides an avenue for strengthened participatory practice by services and organisations.

Essentially, the report highlights opportunities for organisations working with young people and for governments to ensure that their use of social media facilitates engagement that is empowering, purposefully engaging and inclusive.

This report demonstrates that while social media can be a very effective tool in improving young people's access to opportunities to have a say and participate, perhaps its greatest value as a participatory mechanism is to support ongoing two-way dialogue between services and young people or governments and young people.

Methodology

The qualitative and quantitative information collected to inform this report was gathered through the following processes.

Steering committee

In conducting this research, a Steering Committee was established to provide guiding advice in the direction and development of the research. The following individuals were part of the Steering Committee:

- Dr Michelle Blanchard: Head of Projects and Partnerships, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre

- Dr Philippa Collin: Research Fellow, Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney; Research Program Leader, Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre

- Daniel Donahoo: Director, Project Synthesis (until late May 2012)

- Matthew Haworth: Manager, Youth Central, Victorian Office for Youth

- Nic Kimberley: YACVic's Young Media Spokesperson (young person)

- Chris Pyecroft: social entrepreneur (young person)

- Jurgen Scaub: Senior Manager - Information Systems, Berry Street

- Hugh Stephens: Director, Dialogue Consulting (young person)

Existing research

An analysis of existing research was undertaken to provide background and contextual information on young people's use of social media. The analysis contains a brief discussion about:

- the everyday use of social media by young people

- risks and concerns about that use

- benefits of young people's use of social media – including its role in building connectedness and strengthening wellbeing

- the impact of social media on 'youth participation'.

Project research

Online surveys

To consult with young people about their use of social media and views about social media as a tool of engagement by government and community organisations working with young people, YACVic developed two surveys via Survey Monkey. One was for young people; the other targeted youth-led organisations.

The general survey was disseminated through YACVic's networks and via YACVic's Facebook and Twitter pages. In the survey, young people were asked about:

• their experiences of social media

• the types of social media they have used and why

• how often they use various types

• whether government agencies and community organisations should use social media to communicate with young people aged 12 to 25 years and why or why not

• any examples of good experiences using social media to either express their views or receive information from government, community organisations, or commercial organisations.

A copy of this survey appears as Appendix A. In total, 55 young people completed the general online survey and the results were analysed thematically and quantitatively.

The majority of young people who engaged with the survey were between the ages of 18 and 25, as illustrated by Figure 1.

Many more young women participated in the survey than young men; however, the small size of the sample does not allow us to draw conclusions in relation to this.

Figure 1: Age of participants

Age (years)
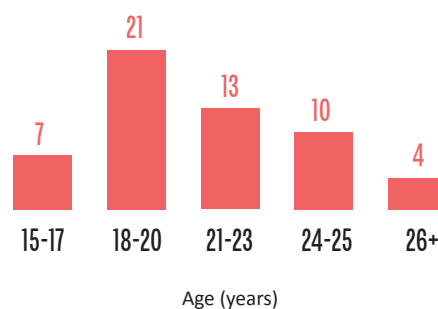
Figure 2: Gender of participants
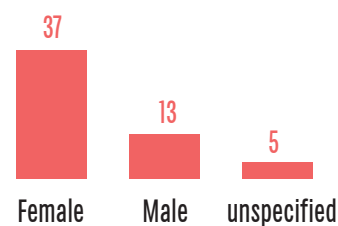
The second survey was promoted to Australian youth-led organisations via YACVic's Twitter and Facebook pages and broader networks. Youth-led organisations were asked:

• how young people are involved in their organisation

• how they use social media in their work, particularly in relation to recruiting volunteers and involving young people in the organisation

• whether they see social media as useful to their organisation

• whether they see social media as being useful for the government to engage with young people

• what three recommendations they would give government regarding the use of social media to engage with young people.

The survey was completed by a total of five organisations, and results were analysed thematically. A copy of this survey appears as Appendix B.

Focus groups

In order to delve more deeply into young people's experiences and ideas around social media, YACVic also conducted six focus groups with young people. The focus groups were semi-structured and each lasted approximately an hour.

Young people were asked a range of questions, including:

• which forms of social media they use (if any)

• how often they use it

• why they use it

• whether they use organisational websites or services online

• what would make a good social media initiative for organisations/services

• whether they believe the government should use social media to communicate with young people

• what messages (if any) would they give government about social media.

Focus groups were conducted with:

• young people experiencing insecure housing or homelessness (x 2)

• young people with disabilities

• young people seeking mental health support

• same sex attracted and/or sex/gender diverse (SSASGD) young people

• young people involved in the youth-led organisation, UN Youth Australia.

A total of 28 young people aged between 15 and 25 years participated in the focus groups, with an average of five or six young people to each group. To preserve confidentiality, young peoples' names, as well as the names of youth services through which they were recruited, have not been included in this report. The exception to this is UN Youth Australia, which has been identified as an organisation that young people were recruited through. Consent for this identification was provided. We did so to differentiate between information provided by the focus group participants that related to the use of social media in their personal lives (de-identified) and information provided by the participants in the UN Youth Australia focus group, which related to their use of social media in an organisational capacity.

Case studies

To further explore the use of social media by youth-led organisations, YACVic discussed the use of social media with Minus 18, the Koorie Youth Council (KYC) (formerly the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council), and Human vs Zombies Victoria Inc. The aim was to develop specific case studies regarding their use of social media to engage young people as well as achieve their organisational objectives.

In addition to exploring the use of social media by youth-led organisations, case studies were developed with the Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) and the local government youth service, Banyule Youth Services (BYS) to understand more about how organisations providing services to young people and governments use social media in their youth engagement, participation and support work.

These case studies appear throughout the report, where relevant.

Limitations of this research

The relatively small sample size (N=55) of the online survey of young people means that the results may not be generalised; however, the detail of the surveys reveal deeper insights into the ways in which young people use social media that are useful to consider in developing engagement strategies.

Given the survey was completed online, it must also be presumed that young people who took part in the survey have reasonable access to ICT or have a strong interest in social media. To balance this bias, young people were recruited for the focus groups through youth services rather than online networks.

In addition, though young people in the focus groups were aged between 15 and 25 years, most of those who participated in the survey were over 18 years. As such, this research is limited in what it can reveal about the use of social media by adolescent young people.

A higher number of the survey participants were also female. Further research is required to explore gender differences in relation to young people's uses of social media.

Focus groups were not specifically conducted with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) young people or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. The experiences and perspectives of these young people should be pursued in further research.

It is also important to note that this report has a strong focus on young people's perspectives. Additional investigation of the experiences of service providers and government regarding their use of social media would be valuable in further research.

Painting a picture through existing research

Young people's engagement with social media has received significant attention in research internationally. Here we provide a snapshot of insights relating to the following themes in the literature:

• young people's everyday use of social media

• risks and concerns

• benefits to wellbeing and social connectedness

• the impact of social media on young people's participatory practices.

Today, information and communication technologies (ICT) play a significant role in the lives of many young people, including those experiencing marginalisation or increased vulnerability.[13] In Australia the substantial majority of young people use one or more forms of ICT, including social network services and other forms of social media. According to research conducted in 2009 by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), 97 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds use social network services, as do 90 per cent of young people aged 12 to 17 years.[14]

Many young people use social media daily or multiple times each day, some 'more than five times a day.'[15] Research has indicated that the average rate of internet use among 12–17 year olds is 2.9 hours per day, rising to 3.5 hours per day for 16 and 17 year olds.[16] New ICT and cheaper mobile platforms has contributed to a growth in numbers of people communicating online,[17] with young people able to access social media at home, school, when out with friends, and in other ways and places.[18]

Research has found that young people use social media sites, such as Facebook, for entertainment purposes and to 'maintain relationships'.[19] Social media is used widely by young people to communicate with friends and family,[20] assisting them to maintain existing relationships from their 'offline worlds.'[21] Research also indicates that young people use social networking sites and other forms of digital media to discuss issues affecting them in their everyday lives, including sexuality and intimacy, identity, and relationships.[22] Social media may also be the only way in which some young people communicate with certain others,[23] such as via discussion forums or Twitter.

It is apparent that social media plays a significant role in the lives of many young Australians,[24] and that 'online technologies [are] thoroughly embedded in the routines of everyday life.'[25]

This reality raises questions of both benefits and concerns, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Risks and concerns

Importantly, not all young people using social media have positive experiences. They may experience cyber-bullying, that is, bullying that occurs via the use of ICT such as mobile phones or the internet.[26] This can lead to substantial distress, anxiety, and relationship difficulties.[27] Research suggests that people who cyber-bully others may 'feel less inhibited and less accountable for their actions' if using technology as a means to bully.[28]

Parents/guardians and others have raised concerns about the largely unregulated nature of many forms of social media, worrying about what young people may encounter in these online spaces. As online media analyst danah boyd notes, 'the internet…allows teens to participate in unregulated publics while located in adult-regulated physical spaces such as homes and schools.'[29] A study exploring the 'legal risks' of the use of social network sites by young people noted that parents and teachers who were surveyed were 'particularly concerned with issues of cyber-bullying, and grooming or stalking'.[30] Research has also found parents to be concerned about their children's use of 'chatrooms' and exposure to 'pornography and paedophilia' while online. Some parents/guardians use 'informal…control[s]' in an effort to protect their children, such as by limiting time spent online and ensuring that computers are located in 'public areas' at home.[31]

Other concerns raised by researchers, parents, and others include the disclosure by young people of too much personal information via a social networking service or other form of digital technology[32] and issues regarding privacy more generally.[33] While young people's 'primary audience consists of peers… they know primarily offline', it is almost impossible for young people to know who else is part of their audience.[34]

In 2009, the *Effective Communication with Young People* report outlined a variety of concerns that surveyed young people, who had been surveyed, had about their uses of social networking sites.[35] Their concerns included:

- *'privacy and security issues*
- *hackers and employers gaining access*
- *embarrassing photos*
- *loss of privacy through 'tagging'*
- *loss of some control*
- *concern about privacy rules (while some users were aware of the rules, others were not)*
- *claims that one provider was encouraging them to not go 'private'*
- *lack of internet access, slow service and/or poor coverage in some rural and more remote locations*
- *'addiction' to use of the sites by some users*
- *involvement with the site is sometimes taken 'too far' and users say things they would not normally*
- *loss of personal intimacy*
- *advertising by some companies and organisations on social networking sites.'*[36]

Researchers are also exploring whether the quality of young people's online relationships comes 'at the expense of reliable social support' or the ability to relate intimately with others.[37] However, a study of 88 Californian university students found that, while the majority of their Facebook friends were 'relatively superficial relations', there was a 'significant positive correlation of network size with close connections.'[38] The research proposed that social networking sites may function as a 'new psychosocial adjustment tool' for young adults given the 'increased mobility of modern society'.[39]

Benefits to wellbeing and social connectedness

Despite the concerns discussed above, recent research has pointed to a variety of social, emotional and developmental benefits to young people in using social media.

For instance, research has found that social network services provide young people with a variety of opportunities to socialise with others, allowing them to maintain and deepen offline relationships, as well as form new relationships online.[40] Social media may, therefore, reduce feelings of social isolation as well as deepen existing relationships.

Social networking sites may also provide young people with 'modern-day 'hangouts.'[41] Young people can use such sites to interact with one another, share and discuss interests, encourage or support each other, and access information that is relevant to their lives.[42] In such a way, social media may contribute to a 'sense of community,'[43] as well as increase young people's sense of wellbeing.

Social media may also allow young people to explore different aspects of their identity and facilitate their self-expression.[44] Young people use social networking sites to create online profiles about themselves,[45] share personal information, send messages to others or post about issues or events they are interested in, and create or share content.[46] Research involving qualitative interviews with 16 young people aged between 13 and 16 years found that 'most profiles are designed to provide 'a way of expressing who [the young people] are to other people'.[47] Ultimately, young people have the option of using social network services to create 'a more or less complex representation of themselves linked to a more or less wide network of others.'[48]

In creating their online profiles or communicating via social media, young people make choices about how much or little of themselves to reveal as well as how to represent themselves online. These decisions allow young people to explore aspects of their identity as they represent different parts of themselves to different groups of people or via different forms of social media. This may positively impact young people's self-confidence and sense of wellbeing.[49]

In addition, it appears that the use of social network services may be related to young people's overall social capital. Social capital is associated with 'psychological wellbeing', including greater self-esteem and overall contentment.[50] A survey of 286 young people at Michigan State University found 'a positive relationship between certain kinds of Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital'.[51]

Benefits from young people's use of social media were also identified by the participants in the *Effective Communication with Young People* report. These included:

- '*providing a convenient means of keeping in contact with friends (both current and past)*

- *being an ideal method for keeping in contact with friends overseas or when overseas, keeping in contact with family and friends at home*

- *being suitable for informal social contact and chitchat*

- *providing an ideal opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex*

- *relieving boredom*

- *enabling young people to have an identity or create an identity and to share experiences*

- *extending the ways by which young people socialise and providing an opportunity for them to project their personality.*'[52]

danah boyd has asserted that the behaviour and activities undertaken by young people in the 'new social realm[s]' created via the internet and social media are akin to young people's interactions and activities in physical public spaces[53] and allow them to experiment to discover 'the boundaries of the social world.'[54]

Impact on youth participation

While there is a need for further research in this area, recent studies have explored the impact of ICT on young people's 'participatory practices',[55] indicating that social media is being used by young people to 'create...new participatory communities by and for their peers'.[56] An examination of Vibewire, ActNow, and GetUp! noted that the internet is 'facilitating young people's political spaces' and being used by young people to 'debate and dissent,' share information and 'build...autonomous communit[ies]'.[57] Exploring how the internet impacts upon 'young people's political identities',[58] researcher Philippa Collin found it was used by young people 'as a tool for identifying issues [and] learning more,' generating content and participating in issues they were passionate about on their own terms.[59] Collin also discussed evidence that the internet was facilitating participation by some young people who had not identified themselves as 'politically active'.[60] Interestingly, the young people she interviewed generally considered government's youth participation policies as talking 'at' not 'with' them and associated non-government organisations as well as youth-led spaces as facilitating more 'open and democratic' youth participation.[61]

The value of social media as a tool that enhances young people's participation is an area of contention.[62] Research indicates that young people who participate in the 'online civic engagement space' may already be politically engaged or interested in civic action.[63] According to Livingstone, 'the internet is not, yet, 'the answer' to [youth] disengagement'.[64] Additional research is required regarding whether and to what extent young people's political participation is expanded through online spaces, such as social media, and the varied ways in which young people are participating.

Significantly, rather than merely providing the spaces in which young people may participate in political or civic action, social media sites may be enabling young people to participate through other avenues in their personal life.[65] According to Raynes-Goldie and Walker, organisational websites, online communities and other online spaces that promote 'online engagement,' may be providing young people with the knowledge, tools and support to enable them to participate to a greater extent in their 'offline communities.'[66] They argue that online sites and spaces that allow young people to access 'information about issues', 'tools to organise,' and connect with others with shared interests, enable them to become more involved in their physical communities and take action on issues that are important to them.[67] In such a way, 'online engagement sites'[68] may be facilitating greater youth participation in other areas, such as in young people's communities.

A number of these issues were discussed by the young people who took part in the focus groups or completed the online survey, and are set out in later sections of this report.

Young people's perspectives on their use of social media

The following sections provide a summary of the key themes which emerged from the focus groups and online survey regarding young people's use of social media as well as whether and how governments and community organisations should use social media to communicate with young people.

What social media do we use?

All of the young people (with the exception of one) who participated in a focus group or completed the online survey used social media in one or several forms. Most young people engaged with several forms of social media. In the online survey, respondents reported using, or having used, the following forms of social media:

Forms of social media used by survey participants

Form of social media	Number of young people*
Facebook	47
YouTube	43
Blog (written or viewed one)	33
Twitter	29
Online forums	25
Tumblr	23
Internet chatrooms	17
LinkedIn	15
Google+	14
Flickr	11
Foursquare	7
Bebo	4
Flixster	3

*NOTE: 47 young people provided this data

Focus group participants also reported using one or more of the above forms. In addition, several focus group participants discussed using 'Pinterest' to share images.

The majority of survey participants reported that they used social media daily. The most frequently used forms of social media were reported as:

Use of social media at least once a day by survey participants

Form of social media	Number of young people*
Facebook	46
YouTube	29
Twitter	13
Blogs (either viewed or written)	11

*NOTE: 47 young people provided this data

What particular type of social media was chosen was primarily influenced by the purpose of that engagement. Whilst there can be multiple purposes for a particular form of social media, specific types of social media are seen to be highly relevant for particular purposes. Such observations may assist organisations or government agencies to determine what form of social media might be most appropriate for a particular purpose.

For example, one young woman described why she had chosen Facebook over Twitter:

"Facebook, because it's a very social medium I guess, with a visual element. There are photographs that I find interesting and I wouldn't call myself super tech savvy so I haven't gotten into the world of Twitter... I think things like online forums are often quite focused so I don't tend to use them because I don't have one of those niche interests."

The various 'uses' young people attributed to particular forms of social media through the survey and the focus groups were analysed and key themes drawn out. Below is a summary.

Facebook

For the young people who completed the survey, Facebook was the most common form of social media used. All but one used it at least once a day.

For some young people, the motivation to engage with Facebook came from its popularity and a desire to be included in that 'space':

"Pretty much all of my friends are on it [Facebook] too, so that ubiquity is a very strong drawing point."

A reported strength of Facebook is that it can be used as a tool for various purposes.

"Facebook, I think, is pretty popular because it combines pretty much everything. You can post videos like YouTube, you can post photos like Flickr, you can send direct messages to people like Twitter, you can even write notes, which is a bit like a blog, and you can check in, which is like Foursquare, and you can even chat to people in like chat rooms and you can join groups, which is like a forum...and people use either a combination of all of these things or individuals bits depending on who they are."

The primary purpose Facebook serves is to engage with friends and stay in touch. This was particularly raised in the focus group with young people experiencing housing instability.

The use of Facebook as a 'space' through which young people can 'chat' and share thoughts is central to its value as a tool to build connections and relationships.

Facebook is also used to 'scope out' individuals that a young person is considering engaging with either socially, or in a group activity.

Another function is to assist in the planning and promotion of events.

Facebook was also reported as a useful tool for seeking information about a social issue, cause, organisation or group, and as a channel for hearing news.

Blogs

In the focus groups, blogs were reported as another useful advocacy tool. For example, one focus group participant discussed voluntary work she did, which was to support a youth-initiated blog run by a Victorian local council. According to her, the aim of the blog was to promote 'positive stories and images of young people to counter stigma' as well as provide young people with the opportunity to gain writing experience. She described the benefits to young writers when they saw the product of something that they have helped to create.

While the aims and content of blogs can vary significantly, a blog such as the one described above appears to provide a useful avenue to hear the concerns, perspectives, experiences and ideas of young people in the local community. Blogs may, therefore, be used as an outlet for young people and others to share personal experiences or discuss larger issues or themes.

YouTube

YouTube was the second most commonly used form of social media by the young people who took the online survey. On YouTube, young people may view film footage about a wide variety of topics, including music, film and television, comedy, health and politics and current affairs. Young people may make comments and participate in discussions about footage they have just watched. In addition, YouTube allows individuals to develop or create their own content and upload it for others to watch. In this way, YouTube provides an avenue for young people to create videos about topics or issues of interest to them, which others may then watch and comment on.

For young people in the focus groups, its main function was reported as viewing videos/film footage. It was also described as a useful tool in 'creating change' by sharing footage with a wide audience.

Twitter

Survey participants said they used Twitter to share information with like-minded others or to share an interest in a specific field and for promotional purposes. Twitter is seen as a good way to 'follow celebrities', but also as a useful news source.

Young people who were engaged in activism or 'change-making' activities more commonly reported finding Twitter useful as a promotional tool:

"I use it mostly for...promoting UN Youth on the official Twitter, but also on my own Twitter and trying to spread it to my friends in a less official capacity."

Some other young people reported negative associations they made with Twitter:

"Twitter is full of rubbish and full of stuff that is stupid...It's more for celebrities and for gossip; much more than Facebook."

These negative associations with Twitter appear to be influenced by its use by/about 'celebrities' and 'gossip', much of which is reported in the media.

Tumblr

Via Tumblr, young people can share thoughts about various topics or issues that are of interest to them, as well as post pictures, videos and other content.

In the focus groups, Tumblr was reported as a useful informal avenue to share thoughts and feelings. One young woman said:

"I use it to kind of vent and just talk about things to people even though they don't really know me... All these people, they feel the same way. It's just a blog where you can do text, prose or photos, post videos and you can just talk to people. You do get a little bit of that bullying, but it's mostly, you know, it's mostly positive."

Choosing a medium that best protects privacy and wellbeing

In the focus groups, young people raised a number of concerns in relation to their use of social media. Several participants in the focus groups discussed experiencing bullying via Facebook and other forms of social media.

In these discussions, a number of young people spoke about how they changed their use of social media as a result to maintain privacy as well as ensure their emotional 'safety'. One young woman who spoke of being bullied via Facebook swapped to Twitter and Tumblr, using Tumblr to discuss things occurring in her life in a way that felt, to her, more anonymous.

Another young woman discussed using social media in a way that made her feel comfortable, restricting the number of friends she had on Facebook to only those people who she was very close to.

"I only joined Facebook only a year ago, and everyone was like 'why don't you do it, why don't you do it', but I was like, 'I don't feel comfortable with those people so why would I want to set myself up for possibly being ridiculed or rejected, just because I'm like 'oh be my friend' and they're like 'no'. I don't want to put myself out there for that to happen."

The process of deciding about what forms of social media to use and how often to use it allowed these young people to connect with friends, family or services online, while protecting their privacy and emotional safety.

Why do we use social media?

When asked to choose from a list of options, in the general survey young people reported they used social media for the following reasons:

Reasons	Number of young people*
To communicate with friends	44
For entertainment	34
To share photos or videos	29
To find out about upcoming events	29
To look for information (e.g. health, job, housing information)	23
To express my ideas	18

*NOTE: 46 young people provided this data

In the focus group discussions, young people also reported numerous benefits from their use of social media and motivations for their use. These may broadly be described as:

• making new connections and building community (including the opportunity to create 'safe spaces' to engage with others online)

• taking action and creating change

• strengthening existing relationships

• seeking information and entertainment.

While these various motivations were experienced by young people across the focus groups, some resonated strongly with participants from particular focus groups. For example:

• Young people with disabilities spoke often of the role of social media as a community building tool.

• Young people from UN Youth Australia talked particularly about the role of social media in advocacy.

• Young people experiencing housing instability gave particular insights into how social media helped them strengthen existing relationships, navigate new relationships and 'keep track' of important people in their lives.

• Young people seeking mental health support shared insights into how they sought information and support through social media and discussed strategies they used to protect their privacy and wellbeing online.

• Young people who were same sex attracted or gender diverse shared experiences of creating safe online spaces that could be accessed by young people who may not already be 'out'.

In this section, each of the four benefits identified above is discussed in relation to conversations that occurred in the different focus groups, including those with members of youth-led organisations. These benefits are further explored in the case studies.

Making new connections and building community

In all focus groups, young people described the value of social media as a means through which they could build new connections with:

• people with mutual interests or experiences

• new friends or acquaintances

• networks

• services or organisations

• members of the public they may be trying to reach.

Discussions in the focus group of young people with disabilities revealed the value of social media in assisting young people to go beyond simply making new connections to actively building community online. As one participant described:

"One of the key things is that there is a disability community online and many people become friends with people who are known to the community of people or they'll read someone's work and connect with them because of this."

Young people with disabilities, particularly those with limited mobility, can experience social isolation. Public transport may not be accessible and can be difficult to navigate, accessible taxis are not widely available and the costs can be prohibitive, and social venues often are not accessible. In some cases, young people with disabilities rely on a family member or carer to help them to get out and this can limit privacy.

Social media provides an avenue to reduce social isolation, share experiences, explore identity, build new friendships and engage in discussion with other young people without a family member or support worker present. As one focus group participant described:

"For people with disabilities it can be good because, not me personally, but some of us are very isolated and we don't venture outside our computers, not because we don't want to, but just because it is the way it is. So social media and, so yeah, it's a good thing to have a place, even if it's online, to feel included and the sense of importance, even if it's just through words on a keyboard, it's really valuable to some people."

Young people with disabilities frequently experience discrimination. Using social media to connect with people who share these experiences is a useful way of accessing information, support and advice. As young people reported:

"Before social media, as a disabled person if you were discriminated against...there wasn't that same opportunity you have now to, like, get that support that you can now get from something like Facebook... and it also helps people to then advocate for themselves on different issues."

As other members of the focus group explained:

"People on Facebook are your friends. You get moral support from them and you get advice."

"There is a community. If someone puts up anything about (someone who) discriminated against me, they'll have 15, 20, 30 comments..."

Young people also value the opportunity to have a say and feel that their engagement is valued. This encourages their participation:

"The reason why it keeps going is that people will get comments...and if people are being heard, then they're going to speak again."

Some young people experience regular breaches of their physical and emotional safety, particularly those who are subject to bullying, discrimination, racism or homophobia. The functions of social media can be harnessed to ensure young people can interact in a 'safe' space. An example of this was described in the focus group of same sex attracted or gender diverse young people: a support group creates two Facebook pages, one public page and one private page for members only where young people can engage with each other away from the broader public gaze.

Individual young people can utilise social media in a similar way, creating more than one online identity to enable 'safe' or comfortable engagement with people in their lives. As one young person described:

"I have two Facebook pages. One is for family and it has my other birth name (name removed). The other one is for friends and has my name (name removed). When I only had my birth name up people were asking my parents about (name removed) and they did not know who that was. I was not ready to come out to them and my mother is still not ready to tell the other members of the family."

The youth-led organisations that completed the online survey also discussed how social media helped them to engage and communicate with a greater number of young people and to promote awareness of their aims and activities more than through traditional means like word of mouth or in-person meetings.

"It has given us a much wider reach and access to people in places we couldn't previously engage with..."

"...allows people to connect with us even if they can't in person, allows us to connect with low socio-economic [individuals] who don't have internet or credit but have free Facebook..."

Case Study: Minus 18

This case study illustrates how Minus 18's use of social media has:

- enabled many young people to make new connections and friendships
- helped to disseminate resources to support same sex attracted and gender diverse young people (e.g. via YouTube and its website)
- enabled a worker to provide direct support and referrals to young people using the discussion forums
- dealt with issues around negative online comments.

Minus 18 is an Australian youth-led organisation for same-sex attracted and gender diverse young people which runs a wide range of social events and workshops and provides resources, information, advice and support. Minus 18 is run by the 'Minus 18 crew,' a group of young people aged between 14 and 21 years, including three volunteers who manage its social media use.

Minus 18 makes significant use of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter. The organisation also runs discussion forums on its website and develops video resources, which are available on YouTube and its website.

Its central aims in using social media are to inform people about the organisation and communicate about current events, projects, and opportunities to get involved.

Many young people engage with Minus 18 via social media, including:

- over 70,000 visits to its website each year
- 3,246 'likes' on Facebook
- 1,058 Twitter followers (as at 1 November 2012).

Young people steer the organisation's use of social media. Minus 18 regards it as a strength that its strategies and resources are developed by its target audience (i.e. young people). Volunteers look at what content and networks are creating the most engagement. They also speak to young people at Minus 18 events, asking what networks the young people are on and how they would like to see Minus 18 use social media.

Facebook has been important in generating awareness, allowing young people to see items, posts, and other content that their friends have 'liked,' thus learning more about the organisation, its events and resources. In addition, Minus 18 will post photos from its events on Facebook and individuals will then often tag themselves and their friends in the photos, generating more engagement.

Minus 18 also uses social media for two-way engagement. While Facebook and Twitter generally lend themselves to shorter or more superficial discussions, Minus 18's forums provide members with a private space for deeper and more personal discussions. Through the discussion forums, young people may receive coming out support from peers as well as discuss a wide range of topics. In addition, young people may receive support, referral advice, and information from a youth worker who regularly checks the forums. The forums also provide opportunities for general socialising and friendships. Some young people get to know each other first via the forums before meeting in person at Minus 18 events.

While Minus 18 does not have a formal social media policy, the organisation has guidelines about what is acceptable, such as the importance of respecting other people and ensuring that content has positive messages that are in line with the mission and aims of the organisation. It also strives to be flexible and to experiment with social media to discover how best to engage its audience. When negative comments or items are posted, they are not immediately deleted; rather they are discussed honestly and openly, but in ways that encourage positive posting.

Ultimately, social media has been extremely significant to Minus 18, allowing it to spread messages to audiences that would otherwise have never heard about the organisation. Adults also often engage with Minus 18 via social media, posting encouraging comments and often noting that they wish they had had an organisation like this when they were young. In this way, awareness about the organisation is generated among different audiences without additional effort by the volunteers.

Nonetheless social media does require significant investment of time, as Minus 18 CEO Micah Scott notes:

> *"There's no point making an update every month. The real trick is to maintain the constant communication and connection..."*

The organisation seeks to maintain a balance between devoting too much time to social media, while remaining in communication with those engaging with Minus 18.

More information about Minus 18 is available at https://minus18.org.au/.

Taking action - creating change

A number of survey participants and young people in other focus groups discussed social media as a 'space' which could be used to have a say about issues that affect them.

As noted earlier in this report, using social media to take action and create change was an idea that resonated most strongly with the young people from UN Youth Australia. The main tools used by this group were Twitter and Facebook and these platforms were used primarily to:

- communicate the activities and ideas of the organisation

- share information and generate conversation about current events

- build on the dialogue created about these issues, to mobilise other young people around issues that they were passionate about.

Focus group participants noted that social media was an effective, low cost way to promote the organisation and keep followers informed. In the past, the most common way young people heard about UN Youth Australia was through "teachers or word of mouth from friends." Participants in the focus group commented that this is changing and that social media plays an increasingly important role.

"With relevance to social media, I think now because we're making more of an effort on Twitter, we might be bringing in followers who have only really encountered us on cyberspace, but, before, it was very much based on an experience."

One participant spoke about the way the organisation was able to use topical issues to raise awareness of its existence.

"It's attracted a different sphere of people so it's really good for broadening interests and using different hash tags and cottoning on to different topics. For example, #Kony 2012 got us a lot of followers as did #anti-Kony 2012."

In this example, the participant is talking about 'tweeting' using a hash-tag (#) to connect their tweet to an issue that a lot of people are following, thus broadening its online presence as well as gaining new members or followers.

Topical issues were not just a way of getting noticed. Participants noted that generating awareness and discussing issues was a key component of UN Youth Australia's social media use.

"We use it to post things that we think that our subscribers will find interesting...[There are] certain news stories that people will all find mutually appealing so we post those to people so then they can read them."

One focus group participant noted that, after members of UN Youth Australia posted tweets on Twitter, other followers then "banter[ed] about the day's events and retweet[ed] whatever's been going on". Through sharing information in this way, participants noted that UN Youth Australia's members are able to contribute to public discourse and get involved in global debate about the issues that they are passionate about.

As noted above, young people from UN Youth Australia reported social media as being a useful tool to mobilise people around the numerous social action campaigns that they are involved with. For example, focus group participants discussed UN Youth Australia's involvement in 'Count Me In', a national campaign aimed at increasing the number of Australian young people enrolled to vote.

"We did 'Count Me In', the electoral enrolment campaign for the Federal Government that was run by UN Youth Australia. Social media was one of the main ways that people heard about it, the main ways that people knew that they needed to enrol to vote...

Describing how the campaign was carried out, one participant noted:

"Eight to ten people in each state went out to regional areas and metropolitan areas, stood outside Flinders Street Station and said, 'Have you enrolled to vote? Here's a card, enrol to vote,' but [the campaign] was really Facebook heavy. You'd share it to your feed and then encourage everyone else to share it along and try to do it that way and also changing your profile picture."

In such a way, UN Youth Australia used social media as a way to add value to the face-to-face campaign and reach young people across Australia.

Case Study: Koorie Youth Council

This case study illustrates how the Koorie Youth Council uses social media to:

- increase opportunities for Indigenous young people throughout Victoria to meaningfully participate in decision making that affects them
- create change to improve the wellbeing of Indigenous young people
- engage in two-way conversations with Indigenous young people across the state
- build relationships with other organisations in the sector.

The Koorie Youth Council (KYC) (formerly the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council (VIYAC)), is a state-wide network of Indigenous young people aged between 12 and 25 years, who provide their views to government and the community about issues that are important to them. KYC aims to give Indigenous young people more opportunities to have a say, to support their skill and leadership development, and increase their sense of wellbeing and pride.

KYC uses social media as a tool in much of its work. KYC has a Facebook group and an organisational Facebook page. The Facebook group is currently open only to members of KYC and is used by members to have discussions about upcoming events, activities, or issues, as well as engage in planning. Facebook is KYC's members' preferred way of communicating. While members may not respond to emails, they will often respond to private Facebook messages.

KYC's Facebook page provides a vehicle to inform a broader number of young people about issues that are likely to interest them, as well as news about current KYC activities and opportunities to get involved. For instance, KYC recently conducted a series of photo shoots with Indigenous young people across Victoria in places that were significant to them. While on the road, a number of behind-the-scenes photos were posted to increase awareness about KYC as an organisation as well as the change of its name and rebranding around that.

One of KYC's key objectives is to provide Indigenous people with opportunities to be part of discussions about issues that are relevant to all young people, not just Indigenous-specific issues. Facebook provides one of the 'spaces' for this. However, such discussion usually occurs once a question or other prompt is posted rather than spontaneously. It is an eventual goal that one or more KYC members will maintain KYC's social media, under supervision from the Coordinator. Ultimately, KYC identifies three main benefits of using Facebook:

- information sharing
- connecting to KYC members
- engaging young people more broadly.

KYC has also found Twitter useful, though there it has quite a different audience. While Facebook is used mostly to engage young people, Twitter allows KYC to connect with state and national organisations in the youth sector, build relationships, and promote its work at an organisational level. KYC also has a YouTube account, in which profiles of two KYC members have been posted.

Following KYC's rebranding and launch of its new website, KYC will also use the application Instagram to run a photo competition, in which Indigenous young people will be asked to take and send Instagram photos to KYC. This is aimed at providing positive imagery of young Koories as well as showing the diversity of Indigenous young people throughout Victoria. The competition will also be used to increase awareness about the organisation and build its membership base.

More information about KYC is available at http://viyac.org.au/kyc/.

Strengthening existing relationships

In the online survey, communicating with friends was the primary reason provided by young people about why they use social media.

Similarly, a number of young people in the different focus groups spoke about how social media allowed them to keep in touch with friends, family, and others in their lives. As already mentioned, a number who had experienced insecure housing discussed how social media enabled them to keep in contact with people who were important to them, such as siblings, other relatives and friends. One young woman described the benefits of being able to communicate by Facebook:

"Because we are separated I talk to my sisters a lot. It makes me feel fuzzy and warm inside when I talk to my siblings."

Communication with friends and relatives was also important to participants in other focus groups and was particularly helpful to bridge geographic distances:

"I live in Bacchus Marsh and my friend lives in [another suburb - name removed] and we use it to study."

In the focus group with young people with disabilities, several participants noted that social media was a cheaper way to connect with friends and family – particularly when they had difficulties in accessing or affording transport.

"…[Y]ou might not be able to go to the 21st [birthday] of your friends, but the next day you'll be able to flick through the 500 photos they've taken and feel part of it."

The cost benefits of social media were also discussed by a young person in another focus group.

"I use it when I don't have (phone) credit; it's an easier way to talk".

Case Study: Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS)

This case study illustrates how the Youth Disability Advocacy Service uses social media to:

- facilitate more direct engagement with young people for whom it advocates

- create new 'spaces' in which it can hear directly from young people about their experiences and perspectives on issues that are important to them

- promote events, activities and advocacy services to young people.

The Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) provides advocacy for young people with disabilities, mainly through policy work, but also through individual, one-on-one advocacy and case management. YDAS also undertakes project work designed to create systemic change. The focus of these projects stems from young people's input and identification of issues of importance.

In the last few years, YDAS has incorporated social media into its work, using Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to promote its activities, upcoming events, and projects to young people more directly than has been possible in the past, said YDAS Coordinator *Dr George Taleporos*:

> *"[T]raditional forms of promotion have mainly been to services and local government and paid staff who may possibly send it out in a newsletter...or an email. Social media is a direct way of reaching out to young people. Furthermore, we find that we can do things almost live...there was a discussion of almost 200 comments about something we had done within four hours of us having done it...The beauty of social media is that people just tell you what they think. It does publicise what you're doing, the good and the bad, and everyone gets to have a say."*

To ensure that as many young people as possible hear about YDAS events or initiatives, YDAS also networks with other organisations, sharing information about upcoming events and initiatives on these organisations' Facebook walls.

YDAS also uses social media to hear directly from young people about their experiences or issues that are relevant to them.

> *"...we also use it to talk to young people about whatever they post on Facebook".* (Jarrod Marrinon, YDAS Project Worker)

Social media is used by YDAS to communicate with young people with a range of disabilities across Victoria for whom it would otherwise be difficult to have a say.

"I have chats with people who are nonverbal... when I'm face to face with them it's impossible to communicate, but when I'm in front of a computer, it just opens up that opportunity." (Dr. George Taleporos)

YDAS also uses social media to create groups (such as via Facebook), in which young people may discuss important, relevant issues, such as sexuality or the development of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This ensures that young people have a wide range of accessible opportunities to provide direct input into YDAS policy and project work.

However, YDAS is mindful that some young people do not have ready access to social media. For instance, young people living in community residential units may not have access to the internet or very limited access.

YDAS considers a number of factors to be important for effective communication with young people via social media. Firstly, it uses social media both as a "source of support" for young people as well as for "information provision".

"Part of it is around source of support, part of it is about information provision. For example, if a government department puts out some kind of media release regarding something that's important to young people, then we'll post it, and, that's us doing a service for them, because otherwise young people may not have heard about that or might not be able to avail themselves of the services as well" (Dr. George Taleporos)

It is also important for young people who participate in discussions or consultations via social media to understand what their input is likely to achieve or the effects it may have on them.

"Particularly, when you're trying to get input from young people about certain things, you need to really make sure that they understand what effect their input and opinions are going to have and what change it might have for them personally" (Madeleine Sobb, National Youth Disability Conference Coordinator)

YDAS also tries to post something new each day:

"We have a promotional plan where we try to post something once a day, we try to keep it relevant to the day..." (Jarrod Marrinon)

Social media activities for young people should be entertaining and that organisations should experiment. As Dr George Taleporos notes, *"If you do enough of it, you're going to strike gold occasionally."*

More information about YDAS is available at http://www.ydas.org.au/.

Seeking information and entertainment

Young people who took the online survey and participated in the focus groups reported using social media to search for information. In the online survey, 23 out of 46 young people selected looking for information, such as on health, jobs or housing, as one of the top five reasons they used social media. Their comments included:

"Social media is where the majority of people aged 12-25 will learn about things, via a post made by a friend, an advertisement on the side or just an instant message".

"...it is an easy and modern way to find out about current events and debates, get opinions, on different subjects."

"A more accessible form of info. Most young people use some form of social media, very few go into services physically (unless they are forced, e.g. Centrelink)."

Similarly, the use of social media to look for up-to-date and relevant information was discussed in some depth in the focus groups with young people with disabilities and those seeking mental health support. One young man said:

"Facebook is where all the information is, so that's where I go"

Several young people with disabilities used online forums to seek objective advice about products that may be useful to them, such as adaptive equipment.

Young people also reported accessing information and support provided by the following organisations or support services: ReachOut, Headspace, Lifeline, Beyond Blue, the Chronic Illness Peer Support Program (CHIPS), and the Cerebral Palsy Support Network.

Regarding their use of these organisations' social media pages, several young people noted that they will 'like' a page on Facebook, often to return to it later, or they will follow links to other sources of information. Young people also reported sharing items posted on organisation pages with others in their social media networks.

...[T]hrough some of the other pages that I've 'liked', they'll post something from another one, I'll be like 'oh this is really good, there's this really good service, I'll 'like' that page'"

"I've looked up Beyond Blue and headspace for other people, like I've always had the support, but I've printed some stuff out for other people..."

For these young people, social media appears to provide avenues to seek out and share information about interesting or relevant topics.

However, several young people indicated that it is not always easy to find reliable information or resources using social media.

"I've looked online for lots of things about how to support a person who's going through this or who's had this happen and is going through PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder] because it's not always intuitive. Like how do you listen to people and not be judgmental and just be there. And it's not always easy to find good resources..."

One young woman also noted that she had heard about headspace and Beyond Blue via television advertisements, not through the use of social media. As such, social media should not be the only mechanism used by organisations to promote their work or inform young people about services and supports, as the messages may not reach all young people.

Entertainment was also one of the most common reasons that young people gave for using social media. A number of young people in the focus groups also discussed using social media for relaxation and entertainment. Young people spoke about sending messages to friends, playing games, and looking through friends' photos. One young person spoke about enjoying listening to music on YouTube:

"YouTube for music. I love the way YouTube works."

Case Study: Humans vs. Zombies Victoria Inc.

This case study illustrates how Human vs Zombies Victoria uses social media to:

- engage young people around an outdoor game of tag for entertainment, recreation and to connect with others

- enable participants to discuss events, information about the game, and other issues on the discussions forums located on the website

- promote the game via Twitter and YouTube

- communicate with members and others who may be interested in becoming involved with the organisation

- engage particularly with young people from rural and regional Victoria.

Humans vs. Zombies Victoria is a youth-led, not for profit organisation in Victoria whose aim is to promote physical activity and social inclusion of young people through the outdoor game of tag called 'Humans vs. Zombies.'

The organisation originally began via a Facebook page in early 2010, but has since incorporated and is run by a Committee of Management. Individuals are elected to positions via those who have paid a membership fee.

Social media is used extensively by the organisation, with different forms selected for different purposes. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are used to promote events, inform young people about the organisation, and communicate with members and other individuals who may be interested in getting involved. Discussion forums, located on the organisation's website, provide a way for individuals to discuss upcoming events, the game, and the organisation more generally. Humans vs. Zombies also uses its website extensively to provide information and promote upcoming events. The organisation notes that social media has been especially important in engaging young people from rural and regional Victoria.

Facebook is the primary way for communication with members, and most of that takes place on the Facebook Group Page, which currently has over 500 members.

The Committee of Management and a group of volunteers moderate the forum and social media spaces. Behaviour that is not tolerated online includes fighting/exchanging insults or posting information relating to illegal activity. The Committee has the final say on issues related to moderation of the forums.

When writing messages or communicating with their members, Humans vs. Zombies notes the importance of communicating messages in a clear and friendly manner, responding to questions promptly, and using a number of forms of social media.

More information about Humans vs. Zombies Victoria is available at http://www.humansvszombiesvictoria.com.au/.

Use of social media by youth services and organisations

Many youth service providers are interested in the potential benefits of using online platforms to engage young people, particularly those who may otherwise be difficult to engage.

Some youth services have already incorporated online platforms, including social media, into their work with young people. For example:

- In 1998, Inspire Foundation launched ReachOut.com[69], an online service providing mental health information and support to young people. ReachOut.com aims to 'increase mental health literacy, help-seeking behaviour, social connectedness and resilience' using online forums, blogs, podcasts, social network services, and factsheets.[70]

- Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation, headspace, has developed eheadspace, an online 'space' in which young people aged 12 to 25 years may register and receive 'esupport' or 'etherapy'.[71]

- Youthlaw: Young People's Legal Rights Centre, a statewide service providing free legal advice for young people up to 25 years, has developed Youthlaw Online. This enables young people in rural and regional areas to speak to a Youthlaw lawyer and receive legal advice via Skype.[72]

- The Starlight Children's Foundation Australia provides Livewire.org.au, an online community for 10-20 year olds experiencing a significant illness, disability or chronic health condition.[73] On Livewire.org.au, young people can talk to one another via a moderated chat room, receive information and support from others experiencing similar health issues, 'create…blog[s]', play online games, listen to music and/or communicate via 'group…and private messages'.[74]

Other service providers have been wary of engaging or communicating with young people online.[75] In the 2010 Research Report *Bridging the Digital Divide: Engaging young people in programs that use information communication technology to promote civic participation and social connectedness*, researchers identified a need to build ICT capacity in the youth sector in order to address the following challenges:[76]

- lack of staff skills and experience using ICT

- restrictive organisational policies

- lack of sufficient infrastructure.[77]

What did young people say about the ways services use social media?

The focus group with young people with disabilities saw social media initiatives by community service organisations as ways to receive information about the organisations and upcoming events, rather than spaces in which they could directly talk with those in the organisation. They noted that they don't tend to post questions or comments on organisations' Facebook pages or other forms of social media.

"People don't tend to [post comments]..., I think people see organisations' pages as like an information source."

However, several young people noted that they will share information or links from the organisations' Facebook pages with others.

"I think it's more, especially with organisations, commenting on the content they present you... [Y]ou comment on that and then most people I know, if they're interested in something, they share it around their own friends so they'll repost it and then say, 'check this out'".

A number of young people experiencing insecure housing identified sites or services that they considered to be particularly helpful. These included YouTube, Centrelink, Seek, banking services and a website created to support young mothers. While only YouTube and the website for young mothers appear to be forms of social media, these comments point to the importance of the internet in their daily lives. The young mother's website provided a space for young people to engage with each other and access information and social support.

"You create a profile and then you speak to them and they help you out and stuff. It has mums from all around the world...It is good because you can meet new people and it is focused on new mums."

The use of social media by community organisations was also discussed by young people in the online survey. In total, 39 of 45 young people said that community organisations should use social media to communicate with people. Only one young person said 'no' and five indicated they were 'not sure'. Their concerns were primarily around privacy.

Some key points

1. A number of focus group participants tended to view community organisations' social media initiatives as spaces in which to receive information about the organisations, rather than spaces in which they could engage in a dialogue.

2. Of the 45 young people who answered the survey question, 39 said community organisations should use social media to communicate with young people. This was primarily because social media is:

   • often the first place young people will go to seek information

      "Social media is a good way of getting information to young people, who can then look into it further through other outlets if interested."

   • accessible and easy to use for young people

      "Because it's quick, easy and effective"

   • a way for services to make contact with people who may otherwise not connect

      "These are services that are otherwise difficult or tedious to access in person."

      "Social media may be a place where people who cannot rely on people close to them for support find refuge. It may take seeing an ad for e.g. mental health service on one of these sites seeking to connect them in order to get help."

   • an effective way to increase young people's awareness of services' programs.

      "More accessible way for younger people to access information they wouldn't normally know about"

3. A number of the survey participants expressed concerns about privacy issues, including that the services they were communicating with via social media may have access to personal details they may wish to keep private.

   "...again I think forums like Facebook could still be dangerous to use in areas like these as it involves people's personal lives"

One young person in the focus group with SSASGD young people said that organisations using social media must, *"respect...people's privacy because people might not be out and identified online"*.

Use of social media by governments

Social media is used by federal, state and local governments in Australia for a variety of purposes, including:

• announcing new government initiatives

• disseminating information about issues

• providing mechanisms for consultation and dialogue between individuals and governments.

A few specific Australian examples will be discussed in this section.

Declaration of Open Government

Following the completion of its 2.0 Taskforce's report, *Engage: Getting on with Government 2.0*, the Australian Government made a 'Declaration of Open Government' in 2010, which set out a commitment 'to reduce barriers to online engagement, undertake social networking, crowd sourcing and online collaboration projects and support online engagement by employees'.[78] The Declaration noted the need for government to be 'more consultative and participative,'[79] recognising the potential for emerging online technologies, such as social media, to facilitate more participation and input by Australians into the policy and programs that affect them. The Government also emphasised the benefit of such participation, noting it will 'enhance the processes of government and improve the outcomes sought'.[80]

Australian Youth Forum

The Australian Youth Forum (AYF) was established in October 2008 to provide opportunities for young people to participate in discussions about government initiatives and policies.[81] Topics have included issues such as 'mental health and workforce participation,' young people's experiences with mobile phones, 'cyberbullying,' and 'marriage equality.'[82]

Youth Central

In Victoria, the website Youth Central was established by the State Government for young people aged between 12 and 25 years. Youth Central contains information about education, employment, relationships, and upcoming events,[83] and uses social media to engage and communicate with young people. There is a Youth Central Facebook page, as well as Twitter and Flickr accounts. As of 31 October 2012, Youth Central's Facebook page was 'liked' by 4,589 individuals.[84]

Local government

Many local governments throughout Australia are also making use of social media. A 2012 report by Dialogue Consulting found that 213 of 571 local governments in Australia have some social media presence, including 72 which have both a Facebook page and Twitter account.[85]

In 2011 the Australian Centre for Excellence for Local Government surveyed local government and found that social media provides local councils with 'a successful way...to engage with youth'.[86] The case study of Banyule Youth Services provided in this report is one example of good practice.

What did young people say about the use of social media by government?

Young people indicated in both the online survey and in focus groups that they wanted government to engage them in policy development and decision making processes.

"What you should do, instead of releasing [the report] at the end is get people involved at the start, you know what I mean, so then if something's wrong, they can tell you before it's published and proof read...so you can get drafts."

"Feedback from the social media world before implementing policy decisions, using Facebook/Twitter instead of email for asking questions…"

They emphasised the importance of being listened to and treated with respect.

"If you want to reach young people, you need to be non-judgmental and not talk down to people because no one wants to listen to someone talking down to them or not respecting them or, like, the different places they're coming from."

Some key points

1. In the online survey, 35 out of 46 young people thought that government agencies should use social media to communicate with young people and put forth a variety of reasons about why social media should be used. Reasons included:

    *   Social media is convenient and accessible for young people.

        "Because it's accessible and youth friendly."

        "It would provide easy access to a very large proportion of this age group, as social media represents a significant form of communication to them."

    *   Governments should engage with young people via the mechanisms young people use.

        "Because that's where we are! We are comfortable communicating in this way."

        "Use Facebook and allow youth to have a say – keep us up to date with what affects us!"

    *   Governments should use emerging technology; otherwise, their engagement with young people may be compromised.

        "It is such a common form of media in the current time and if departments don't start getting on board, they are going to lose contact with that age group."

        "You've got to create a page that enables two-way communications."

2. Two focus groups unanimously agreed that government should use social media to engage young people; however, young people in one of the focus groups did not express interest. One survey participant also had no interest in being contacted by government stating, "Who cares what they have to say?"

3. Concerns were expressed by several young people regarding governments' use of social media. These are important for government agencies to consider when developing social media initiatives to connect with young people. Concerns included:

    *   privacy issues, such as the degree of access government agencies may have to young people's personal information

        "Only on a one-way level – Centrelink should not have access to an individual's profile, but should be able to deliver general updates/reminders via liking their page etc."

    *   that social media is meant to be a 'social' space

        "Because we don't want to see government things when we want to connect with friends etc."

    *   that social media may or may not be appropriate depending on the nature of the topic being discussed.

        "It depends entire[ly] on what they are trying to communicate. When it comes to personal information or advice I would prefer a more personal approach."

        "Only supplementary to other traditional forms. Need to ensure that there is a variety of communication channels."

Case Study: Banyule Youth Services

This case study illustrates how Banyule Youth Services' (BYS) use of social media has:

- worked through some ethical dilemmas
- assisted its youth workers to provide ongoing support to young people (e.g. through the use of 'professional profile pages')
- enhanced youth participation and the promotion of activities, events and services to young people.

The primary goal of BYS' use of social media is to effectively communicate with young people and promote its service.

Social media has also allowed BYS to build a strong reputation or 'brand' with young people, as well as efficient tools to easily evaluate their engagement and processes.

In developing its social media strategy, BYS first launched a youth-specific website in April 2010 to act as a central point for information provision (both about what the BYS offered for families and young people as well as other key agency service information). The website also contains event and activity-oriented information.

BYS began its use of Facebook around this time. Its first 'friends' were young people known by a BYS youth worker in her working role. BYS also sent out a lot of friend requests and began to build a list, doing lots of promotion – initially by a large competition/sign up at the 2011 Youth Festival – and then through competitions with weekly prizes such as movie tickets, iTunes vouchers, etc. BYS also connected with other service pages that were popular with young people. Initially, BYS started off as a 'person' – the only Facebook option then available – rather than a 'page' as it is now.

As a 'person', BYS could send private messages to young people, create sub-groups based on interests, programs and activities, as well as see the news feed from their 'friends'. The key benefits were being able to address arising issues and respond directly to apparent personal support issues, as well as interact easily with program groups such as their Street Art participants who are 'high needs'.

However, ethical issues also arose. As a Facebook 'person', BYS was able to see the communications of the young people they were friends with, when it was likely many young people did not often think about the ramifications of adults and others seeing this sort of activity. Because of these ethical concerns, it moved to being a 'page', which has restricted access to information from people's personal accounts.

BYS has grown its Facebook page through a series of strategies. The biggest growth came through tying it into an underage event and letting people know that if they 'liked' the BYS' page they could access photos of the event on Facebook. BYS notes that this works best by giving a short timeframe for photo availability. Issues, such as staffing after hours (i.e. following the event) need to be considered if this strategy is adopted; however, it is a great promotion and engagement tool.

Online promotions have led to higher attendance at events and programs. Posting photos also generate lots of comment, views and sharing. Various program 'groups' (Street Art, Photography group, Youth Blog project etc...) are used as the main tools of communication for logistical information as well and a place young people can ask specific questions. Since its change to being a professional page, BYS has found it does not get as many posts on local issues or civic engagement – these tend to come more through their email now.

Part of BYS' strategy has also been to create professional profile pages for key staff members who have a lot of direct contact with young people. This allows BYS to personally contact young people by private message when required and vice versa, and disseminate information about groups and activities.

BYS has a broad organisational social media strategy and a series of guidelines for the Youth and Community Partnership team's (Y&CP) use. These are constantly being updated and BYS is writing a more comprehensive Y&CP Communication strategy.

BYS has now developed a communications portfolio, which means a youth staff member has allocated hours to oversee the communications strategy and an administrative assistant uploads new information weekly to the website and Facebook page. BYS has regular 'social media catch ups' every six weeks so the whole team can track engagement levels and develop ways to improve.

BYS promotes its Facebook page at programs and events, through visits to schools, and via its outreach program. Young people also learn about the page through Facebook networks, other organisations, the BYS website, Council website and email signatures.

BYS aims for meaningful engagement with young people. It wants honest and realistic feedback from young people and a two-way engagement where possible. BYS conducts regular focus groups with young people to try to improve reach and engagement.

Challenges BYS has experienced regarding their social media use include:
*   safety concerns and other risk factors
*   differing levels of social media knowledge across the team
*   reduced ability to engage with young people on personal support issues, such as bullying, due to the change from a 'person' to 'organisation' page.

To address the differing levels of knowledge of social media among staff, internal training was provided. In addition, the establishment of youth worker professional pages has allowed youth workers to continue to engage with young people using social media around personal support issues. BYS youth workers get lots of messages, questions, and requests for catch-ups and sharing of information.

Facebook is now BYS' primary means of contact to facilitate and arrange programs and one-on-one support. BYS considers its use of social media to have had the following benefits:
*   increased communication with young people
*   increased community awareness about who BYS is
*   better evaluation, service and health promotion, and individual youth support
*   helped BYS stay in tune with youth culture and opinions
*   allowed BYS to gain local knowledge about various topics
*   increased accessibility of BYS for isolated young people
*   assisted information sharing with other agencies/organisations.

Youth participation principles and social media

As the research participants have indicated, social media may be a tool for youth engagement and participation. As such, established principles of youth participation have been adapted in this report and provide a basis for government, services and organisations to develop a social media approach in relation to young people.

The following information builds upon existing 'youth participation principles' originally developed by YACVic and the Office for Youth for the 2004 series *Taking Young People Seriously*. These youth participation principles were developed following extensive consultation with young people and youth service providers and were seen to encapsulate the core elements of what youth participation work should achieve.

Throughout the *Taking Young People Seriously* series, these principles provided the framework for designing best practice models of consultation with young people, of young people's participation on boards and committees and of supporting young people's own actions in creating change.

The report recommends that social media strategies developed by organisations and government to engage young people are modelled on those principles to be:

• empowering
• purposefully engaging
• inclusive.

Below is a set of principles of youth participation, which have been adapted for use in a social media context. The questions under each principle are intended to guide organisations and governments to develop a social media youth engagement strategy that is in line with the principles of good youth participation. It is envisioned that the framework will also be helpful for organisations and governments already using social media to reflect upon existing policies and practices to ensure that their use is empowering, purposefully engaging, and inclusive for young people.

## Empowerment: young people having greater control over their lives through participation

Will young people's engagement with you through social media potentially increase their agency and enhance their wellbeing?

Will young people engage in a meaningful dialogue with you through their participation?

• How will young people know that their perspectives are being heard and valued?

• Are young people contributing to the agenda?

Are you using the social media medium to its capacity – to improve your participatory practice and create an empowering dynamic with young people?

Are you creating a safe space for young people to use online, thereby fulfilling your duty of care?
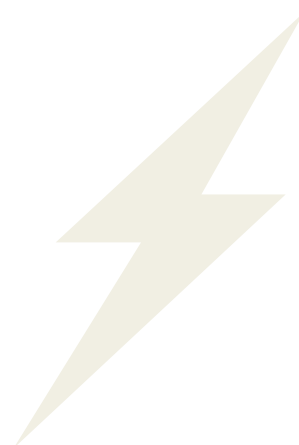
Purposeful engagement: young people taking on valued roles, addressing issues that are relevant to them, and influencing real outcomes

What is your motivation for engaging young people with social media?

- How does it match the aspirations of young people themselves or how is it different?

  Considering and interrogating your motivations will help to avoid tokenistic engagement.

- Will this process give young people valued roles?

- Will it be addressing issues that young people deem as relevant to them?

- Will young people see that their engagement influences real outcomes?

Why do you want to engage young people through social media?

- Is social media the best tool for that purpose and what form of social media will best suit that purpose?

  Social media is best used when we go beyond simply getting a message to young people, and instead engage in a meaningful exchange.

Inclusiveness: ensuring that all young people are able to participate

Social media can be a useful tool to engage young people who face barriers to other opportunities to participate, such as physical access, social isolation or time to be available for face-to-face engagement.

However, the use of social media should not be seen as a substitute for all other forms of engagement – instead it should be one engagement tool to complement others. In some cases, face to face engagement is more suitable and barriers to physical access will still need to be addressed to ensure young people's participation.

Remember that not all young people use social media confidently or have ready easy access to social media.

Do the young people you should engage with have ready access to social media and might they need some support in using it confidently?

Recommendations

Organisations/services and governments

1 Use the good practice principles on pages 44–45 as a guide to develop social media strategies or initiatives to engage young people, and to examine and assess any current strategies or initiatives.

State Government

2 Support an initiative to develop expertise in the use of social media for youth services and organisations working with young people. Consider opportunities for young people to be directly involved in the development and delivery of this professional development.

3 Recognise and showcase examples of young people doing innovative, positive activities through social media, such as those examples included in this report. This will celebrate young people's achievements and provide examples for services and organisations to develop effective engagement strategies.

4 Make greater use by all departments of Youth Central, the Victorian Government's web-based initiative for young people aged 12-25'[87] so more young people can engage in the development of policy and programs by the State Government.

Local government

5 Support the development of the expertise of youth services (and other relevant local government services) so they can better use social media to engage young people.

6 Build the capacity of young people to use social media to undertake activities that create community, strengthen connectedness and create positive change in their communities. Peer led skill development opportunities both on-line and face-to-face would be optimum.

Youth services

7 Undertake professional development to improve the capacity of staff to engage young people through social media. Seek opportunities to hear from young people directly about the use of social media.

8 Embed social media engagement into position descriptions and workplans to ensure adequate time and resources are allocated to this task.

9 Ensure clear guidelines relating to the use of social media as an engagement tool exist within organisational policies and procedures.

10 Consider the functions of the various forms of social media when choosing the medium that best suits your purpose in engaging young people.

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