

Citizen calling. Or not. An exploratory study of young people's use of new media to engage with crime.

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In this white paper, we examine the enablers and the obstacles to young people's participation in government-sponsored attempts to hear their voices using new, digital media. We base our account on 'Citizen Calling', a British pilot initiative of the Hansard Society in cooperation with the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee 'where young people can have their say via mobile phone' (Hansard Society, 2007). In brief, the Hansard Society coordinated a text-in service, with the aim of listening to the voices of young people concerning crime in their areas. Upon receipt of a message, the system sent a 'missions' to young people, who were asked to send further information, discuss the issue on the website, further elaborate. A website was set up to support the phone component, where participants could registry and further debate the issues raised, by them and by others. Our account is based on reports (questionnaires, focus groups) from young people's engagement in, and attitude towards, the experiment, based on mobile phone and website interactions. The 'young people' in question were University of Chester first year students, in fact studying Criminology degrees. Down the academic corridor, the objection is heard, loud and clear: why look at young people, allegedly the digital natives, the connected, the included? Any why mobile phones, their weapon of choice? And why, oh why middle class youth with an interest in the issue? The answer rests, we believe, with their responses. These specific 'young people' displayed expected easiness around the technology and a sophisticated understanding of how it functions (or how it does not, as it turned out). Far from unquestioning, however, they have a distinctly sceptical attitude towards new media, the belief that they are in fact rather elitist, and a healthy distrust of however-mediated political authority. In short, they demonstrate that in the best of cases, as this clearly was, digital inclusion is not a smooth dash, rather a deceptively impervious terrain that needs negotiating, by all actors involved.

This goes, in many ways, against the grain of received wisdom. There is increasing attention, by academics and policymakers, to what can broadly labelled as 'youth voice'. This entails the understanding that young people need to be actively listened to and socialised into politics at a relatively early age, at a time when their engagement, behavioural and cognitive, with public affairs is rock bottom. Nowhere is this debate more intense than in relation to 'new media', such as internet and mobile communication technologies (Carpini, 2000). New media are slick, fashionable, portable, convergent. They are desirable, and desired, by the digital natives tribe. In relation to the *digital natives*, new media appears to provide the tools for a rapprochement between young people's cognitive engagement with an increasingly complex social reality, and distance from traditional institutional politics (Howland & Bethell, 2002; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2004). In short, new media are increasingly seen as a viable solution to youth disengagement / disenchantment. Parliaments, government departments, political parties, NGOs and sparse politicians all make attempt to harness the *digital* to re-connect. In Britain, this list include Scottish institutions (Macintosh & Whyte, 2001; Seaton, 2005), communication watchdogs (Coleman, Griffiths, & Simmons, 2002), political parties (Graeme, 2006), the Parliament (HoC Modernisation Select Committee, 2004). However, in the same breath, most studies agree that new media are neither a necessary, sufficient, nor an expedient or intuitive way to restore the place of generation M's voice in the democratic choir (EPRI, 2006). We take here this critique further, and ask: are new media fully inclusive? Do they provide a usable channel for a loud, clear voice?

Before we go into a few results, a short note on method (more will be available form the authors on the day). The research aimed to assess Criminology students' perceptions of the Citizen Calling exercise, based on a questionnaire (n = 98) analysis of student texts sent to the consultation and two focus groups (8-10 students). First year students were asked by their instructors to participate in the consultation, as a class exercise. Both the questionnaire and the focus group topic guide included items regarding procedural aspects of the experiment, students attitudes to it, in general, and to similar methods of interacting with political institutions, more in general. In addition, we elicited responses /reflection regarding both the enablers and the barriers to the use of new media, on the part of the said insertions, to hear young people's voices.

Overall, the large majority of the students (about 97%) actively took part in the experiment. Participants largely sent text-only messages (84%), with a minority sending images (11 %), and one video. Not surprisingly, given the cost structure of different texting options, most students stuck to traditional text messaging. In relation to the topics discussed, students texted messages concerning topics close to young adults' experience. These include youth and crime (26% of all messages), local crime (25%), causes of crime (17%), and youth stereotypes (15%). Surprisingly, however, the content of the messages submitted to the consultation rather more often concerned general young people experience than issues related to student life. Favourite combinations were youth crime

and its deterrence, the media, youth stereotype and 'hoodies', local and young criminal behaviours. Some messages described.

Overall, a majority of participants (57%) found the experience problematic, for a number of reasons. Primarily, problems were of a technical nature, related to the reception of undecipherable messages, or to the failure to connect, via WAP technology, to the website provided via hyperlink in the response message. However, only 15 per cent of all respondents were able to view other's people's comments, and a scant 8 per cent were actually able to follow up the mission. Of those who managed to get online, about two thirds found other people's contributions 'interesting', while one third finds them 'neither useful nor interesting'. None of the respondents thought that the contributions were useful. Overall, therefore, the apparent lack of practical engagement with the experiment results from technical difficulties all thorough the process, not only dues initial lack of WAP connectivity. That only a minority of views were thus represented on the website only compounded the problem.

The results from responses focused of the *process* taking part in Citizen Calling, however, are in contrast to reports on the aims, usefulness and ultimately results of the consultation. Overall, about two thirds of students claimed that mobile phones are a useful tool to express their views to the Parliament. Most praise the 'expediency' of the medium to connect with politics, namely its 'easyness' (31% of all respondents), accessibility (24%), speed (20%) and overall convenience (7%). A minority (all at 3 %) also esteem the anonymity of the medium, it allowing a process of two-way communication, efficiency and modernity. Overwhelmingly, however, those characteristics that make mobiles popular with young people also shape their understanding of the medium to connect with the political process. One main theme, highlighted in several contributions, regards the wide availability of mobile among the British public, making them a suitable tool to engage. In particular, the popularity of mobiles among youth is noted. Partly, the fitness for purpose of the mobile as a means of consultation rests on its zeitgeist, being a modern medium that 'plays an important role in today's society' (ID 58). This ease of use also depends on the nature of the medium, which lowers the barrier to participation. While from a bottom-up viewpoint, 'people who normally would find it difficult to express their opinions now can.' (ID 62), it also allows government to reach down to 'a wider range of people, particularly younger groups who tend not to vote' (ID 70). In other words, 'accessibility' via mobile technologies travels both ways. While most agree that such easiness rests with the digital natives, quite simply, 'it's no effort for us to send a text' (ID 74), to 'express their views without feeling pressured or uncomfortable, nervous around others' (ID 78). In the focus groups, discussants **strongly supported** the idea of using mobile telephony as a means of communicating their views to parliament. Positive responses were based on the recognition that mobile telephony is widespread, **convenient and easy**:

'It's a good idea. Everybody has mobiles. You always have them, they're always on you. It only takes a few minutes to send a message.'

'It was a good way to communicate with that [mobile phone] because otherwise your thoughts on young people and crime are just going to be your thoughts. You might share them with friends but they're not going to get any further than that so I think it's a good way of communicating and maybe something would be done about what we think and change things.'

Some discussants first suggested that, as well as ease and convenience, the experiment also enabled **anonymity and security**: they could send messages about anything they liked in the knowledge that they would not be identified and that the system neither posed personal risk nor provoked embarrassment:

'I think it's more convenient for the younger generation because not everybody's going to listen to the news, read newspapers, write letters, get in touch with local MPs and get involved in discussions in the community. For the younger generation it's a hell of a lot more convenient if they want to put a point across. So in that respect it's quite good.'

'It's probably better to do things like this [express your opinions about youth and crime] in person but it's not as easy as texting.'

Regarding the obstacles to online consultations, these are again largely to do with the nature of the medium. Primarily, respondents were concerned about technical failure (15% of all participants). Worries were also expressed concerning cost (9%), the limited word count for a meaningful contribution (8%) and the expressive limits of a textual medium (7%). Unlike for the enablers of mobile consultations, some of the obstacles identifies are of a political nature. Some respondents claim that it all well to speak, but will politician listen (7%); others argue that sum message can be misinterpreted (6%), when young people bother to engage at all (4%).

In the focus groups, students also expressed a number of **important reservations** about the process as a whole. These included a certain degree of cynicism about the **motives behind the experiment**, uncertainty about its ultimate value and questions about whether mobile telephony represented the best vehicle for expressing views:

'I just thought it might have been a publicity stunt. I just thought it was another way of the government trying to connect with young people and they just can't because everybody in parliament well they're older than us, they're normally fifty, they're white, they're men and desperate for votes so I thought it was maybe a publicity stunt to kind of get people who are affected by crime, and that's everybody, just to get in touch so they thought like politics was cool maybe.'

'Is it just the Big Brother thing where they just want loads of people's numbers to like track us or something or is any good actually going to come out of it?'

'It was convenient but the only thing I thought is that it's just a number I'm texting. I don't know if I'm texting the government or not. They said it's them but I could be texting anyone. I've got not proof about it, no proof that my view was going to be listened to but if it is what it is then it's a good way [of gathering young people's views] but you don't really know who you're texting.'

In relation to a second issue, discussants suggested that there were bound to be **problems of volume and problems of interpretation**:

'The problem I thought was like if its sending text and everyone sort of agreed it was convenient so all of us did it how many of them are they actually going to read, you know, how much notice of our views are they actually going to take?'

'It's one thing listening to it [i.e., receiving and reading the messages] isn't it, but it's another thing doing something about it so are they actually going to take it in and do something about what we're saying or are they just going to read it and put it to one side?'

'You send one message to two people and they might both read it in completely different ways.'

'I mean I'm not sure how they'd understand a lot of the messages – vowels missing and short-hands – it'd take ages to read them, you know interpret what they said. It's hard sometimes when you get just one message. How are they going to cope with hundreds or thousands or however many they get?'

So whilst the members of the discussion groups expressed positive views about the use of mobile telephony to communicate with Parliament they also suggested that it raised as many potential (and real) problems as opportunities. Overall therefore, enablers appear to be chiefly technical, obstacles both technical, communicative and political.

Finally, and interestingly, cross-examination suggests that people who experienced problems are as almost as sanguine about mobile phones as people who reported no obstacles related to Citizen calling ($\phi = 0.02$, sig. $p > 0.8$). This is to say: people who had a negative experience are only slightly less likely to consider mobile phones as a useful tool to express their voice. This may be interpreted as a capital of trust in the process despite one negative encounter. It may be possible that other aspects of the consultation, for instance having been asked to participate in the first place, attenuate the frustration of the failure in the experiment. The last question asked respondents on what themes they would engage again using the same medium. About 11 per cent claimed that they would engage in no other online consultations using their mobile. As one respondent put it, it is 'not a good way of expressing views to parliament so I wouldn't talk to them on any topics via mobile phone' (ID 15). The vast majority, however, opted for future use with respect to a variety of themes. One in four mentioned one topic, one in four two topics, while the rest mentioned at least three topics they would like to see discussed using mobile technology. Crime, again (66%) and education (53%) top the chart, predictably given the nature of our sample. Immigration is also favoured (46%), followed by environment (31%) and housing (21%). In the 'other' category, a few respondents chose health and the NHS.

Form focus group evidence, there was almost unanimous agreement that the Citizen Calling experiment heralded a positive step in providing a platform for young people to express their views to parliament. On the other hand, as we have noted, the young discussants in our groups expressed serious reservations about the value of text messages and about the adequacy of the technology on which the Citizen Calling experiment was based.

However, the experiment had more impacts than the immediacy or convenience of expressing opinions. For some discussants it had provided **an occasion for debate** with their peers on young people's problems in general, and youth offending in particular. As one discussant remarked:

'It sparked a right debate about young people – we've been talking about it nearly all week.'

In this way, the Citizen calling experiment had rippled beyond its technological boundaries: discussants had found themselves holding conversations about young people and crime over coffee, in the pub, and at home. Because they had been drawn into a situation where a variety of different views had been expressed and, to a limited extent, were available via the Citizen Calling web site, they had enjoyed an **opportunity to reflect on a troubling social problem**.

On the other hand, the degree of suspicion and mistrust about the motives behind the experiment appears to confirm the view that there remains a significant disconnection between young people today and mainstream political institutions. In particular, the discussants suggested that there is a world of **difference between expressing a view and having anyone listen to it** or act upon it. This was felt to be especially relevant to the use of mobile phones (see section 1.3 above).

After looking at the evidence, from an admittedly select pool of respondents, we would like to close this paper by reiterating the questions we posed at the beginning: are new media fully inclusive? Do they provide a usable channel for a loud, clear voice? If anything, our first, preliminary results suggest that any experiment of this kind needs to transmit a sense of confidence that the views expressed will be heard and taken on board. Future iterations of this new media participation strategy may iron out some of the technological problems but widespread support is likely to emerge only if young people feel confident that it is more than a gimmick.

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