Young

Beyond apathetic or activist youth: 'Ordinary' young people and contemporary forms of participation

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What is This?

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Beyond apathetic or activist youth
'Ordinary' young people and contemporary forms of participation

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Abstract
This article addresses the changing nature of participation for young people. Our analysis is framed by the fragmentation of traditional institutions and the increasingly unpredictable nature of life trajectories. As a result, the identification of a crisis in young people's engagement has become a recurrent theme in the literature, alongside a burgeoning interest in new forms of (sub)cultural participatory practices. We argue that there is further complexity in the reshaping of participation in times of social change, especially for a broad 'mainstream' of young people who are neither deeply apathetic about politics nor unconventionally engaged. Drawing on a research project with 970 young Australians, the article suggests that many young people are disenchanted with political structures that are unresponsive to their needs and interests, but that they remain interested in social and political issues and continue to seek recognition from the political system. At the same time, their participatory practices are not oriented towards spectacular antistate activism or cultural politics but take the form of informal, individualized and everyday activities.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly accepted today that many young people in a globalized world cease to see the relevance of state-based politics or state-oriented activism and are no longer finding meaning in or opportunities for traditional modes of affiliation and participation. Responses to this issue have been varied. On the one side, a powerful international debate rages about youth disengagement from political and civic life, as evidenced by conventional measures such as low voter turnout and reduced membership in associations. Schools have introduced programmes to ensure that students gain basic concepts of civic knowledge in order to ensure that new generations of young Australians become more actively engaged in civic life. On the other side, critics point to new modes of participation exemplified by the anticorporate globalization movement and the growth of virtual communities, and it has become more common to look at spectacular examples of new activism amongst youth as evidence of a gen-erational shift towards unstructured and postmodern politics. However, there is an important question to be asked about the ways that 'ordinary' young people, those who are neither deeply apathetic about participation nor unconventionally engaged, might be reflecting and acting upon social and political issues.

This article focuses on young people's current perspectives on and practices of participation that do not easily conform to either traditional or radical para-digms. It draws on Ariadne Vromen's (2003: 82–83) definition of participation as 'acts that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically con-cerned with shaping the society that we want to live in'. In this way, it works in the tradition of recent research that broadens our understanding of participation beyond formal and electoral politics, acknowledging that conventional poli-tics often marginalize youth, and moreover, that forms of engagement amongst youth are changing. It investigates the participatory activities of 'ordinary' young Australians and demonstrates that while there has been a shift away from formal participation by these young people, this has not necessarily led to either full-scale disengagement from politics or a widespread turn towards sub-cultural or postmodern activism. Instead, our research suggests that these young people are disenchanted with traditional politics that is unresponsive to their needs and interests, but that they remain interested in social and political issues and continue to seek recognition from the political system. In this way, their relationship to politics cannot be characterized as straightforward apathetic disengagement. At the same time, their participatory practices are not oriented towards spectacular antistate activism or cultural politics but take the form of informal, individualized and everyday activities. The article paints a complex picture of young people operating outside traditional spaces of political en-gagement, but simultaneously expressing a desire to be recognized by and meaningfully participate in these more conventional sites where formal political change is effected. It also demonstrates that participation may be occurring in more informal and everyday ways even amongst youth who are not especially politically radical or inclined towards subcultures.

APATHETIC YOUTH OR SELF-ACTUALIZING CITIZENS?

Recent international debate about youth participation focuses on the concern that young people are not sufficiently engaged with politics and are not well informed about the role of citizens (see, for example, Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Harris, 2009; Keeter et al., 2002; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). One of the national goals for Australian schooling is that when students leave school they should 'be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life' (MCEETYA, 2009: iv). Progress against these goals is monitored through a National Assessment Program (NAP), in 2007, which surveyed 7059 Year 6 students from 349 schools and 5506 Year 10 students from 269 schools across Australia (MCEETYA, 2009). The results of this survey were disappointing, revealing that proficiency in civics and citizenship knowledge and understanding (that is, of Australia's government system) had only very slightly improved from the relatively low levels of understanding of formal political processes reported 3 years earlier (MCEETYA, 2009). Most significantly, this report found that young people who had opportunities to be involved in democratic processes at school had the greatest knowledge of civic processes.

The civics and citizenship goals were expanded in the 2008 statement of the national goals of Australian schooling to include a more inclusive and social understanding of citizenship. The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) states that young Australians should be 'active and informed citizens' who are 'committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice and participate in Australia's civic life' and who 'work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments' (MCEETYA, 2008: 4). This statement also included the goal that young Australian's civic engagement would include 'the knowledge, skills and understandings to contribute to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' (MCEETYA, 2008: 4). The broadening of the expectations of young Australians' participation and engagement in civic life sets a new agenda for Australian research on young people's participation and reveals an awareness of the diversity of practices that contribute to civic life, including but not restricted to formal politics.

Over the last decade, there has been strong interest in identifying, rectifying or explaining youth disengagement from politics. The trend is not limited to Australia, as research in other countries (for example, the UK) has demonstrated that young people are less likely than older people to be interested in formal politics, to vote, to affiliate with a political party or to exhibit high levels of political knowledge (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Policy, curriculum and professional development recommendations and initiatives to address these problems have proliferated. Example include the Australian Government 1997–2004 school-based programme *Discovering Democracy*, the UK 1998 Crick Report, the European Commission's 2001 White Paper on youth, *A New Impetus for European Youth* and the Foundation for Young Australians' *Putting the Politics Back into Politics* report (Arvanitakis and Marren, 2009).

Such recommendations, and the research on which they are based, identify a 'civics deficit' on the part of young people, but, as many youth researchers note, this is not always placed within the wider context of the impact of social change on the domain of citizenship and politics (see Siurala, 2000; Vinken, 2005). It is helpful to view young people's disengagement from formal political processes through Bauman's work on social change. He refers to 'the widening gap between the outer limits of institutionalized control and the space where the issues most relevant to life are … settled' (2001: 203). As many other writers have pointed out, nation-states have lost much of their control over matters that have significance for the lives of their citizens, which means that politicians are not able to authentically represent the interests of their citizens (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Giddens, 1992). Public institutions are also seen to be increasingly impotent in translating private sufferings into public issues (Bauman, 2001) and society itself is no longer experienced as a bounded community to which one can have an ongoing sense of belonging. Opportunities for participation have been radically altered as the space of the public sphere is diminished through the processes that have accompanied de-industrialization, such as privatization and deregulation (Bauman, 2001), and collective identifications are replaced through processes of individualization (Beck, 1992). Citizenship as a state-defined status is challenged by the globalization of markets, trade, communications and movements of people (see Faulks, 2000). This has delegitimized the authority of states and reduced people's faith in their efficacy.

In their comprehensive overview of the field, Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel (2007) demonstrate how these broader social changes affect youth political participation, illustrating how individualization within education and work has led to weaker mechanisms of political socialization, and how job insecurity and neo-liberal ideology alienate young people from the political system. At the same time, young people's own forms of identification are becoming less fixed, long term and singular as they grapple with the individualization of the life course and the shift away from structured pathways to adulthood. The challenges of establishing economic security in conditions of globalization and deindustrialization also emerge as a significant barrier to participation, as young people's overwhelming priority is to take charge of their livelihoods and to focus on study and work in unprecedented ways (Andres and Wyn, 2010; Lagos and Rose, 1999). These developments have also had an impact on young people's approaches to formal politics, as there is little reason to have faith in the state's capacity to protect their rights, politicians do not demonstrably listen to their concerns and they find themselves increasingly targeted by civic education campaigns or regimes of responsibilization that construct them as inadequate citizens (see Harris, 2006). From this perspective, it is not surprising that young people's political participation is declining, and scholars argue that disengagement is a logical response to these conditions.

However, a concurrent emergent direction in research on youth participation is to explore the new ways young people are coping in these socioeconomic conditions by becoming 'self-actualizing citizens' (Bennett, 2003) or 'everyday makers' (Bang, 2004). In other words, while they are disengaged from governments and party politics, they are personalizing politics by emphasizing their own behaviour in terms of taste, lifestyle, consumption and leisure. Conditions of insecurity, risk and individualization lead to transient and self-expressive participatory practices. According to Henk Vinken (2005: 155), young people are developing a 'new biography of citizenship', characterized by 'dynamic identities, open, weak–tie relationships and more fluid, short-lived commitments in informal permeable institutions and associations'. Theorists such as Ronald Inglehart (1990) have argued that this is part of a broader generational shift from 'materialist' to 'post-materialist values', such that young people have become more focused on quality of life issues. This has reshaped activism as well, so collectivist, hierarchical social movement politics has diminished in popularity with young people, but new, more individualized forms of activism such as computer hacking, culture jamming, brand boycotts and recycling have emerged. As W. Lance Bennett (2003: 3) argues,

> Living in these disrupted social contexts, young citizens find greater satisfaction in defining their own political paths, including: local volunteerism, consumer activism, support for issues and causes (environment, human rights), participation in various transnational protest activities, and efforts to form a global civil society by organizing world and regional social forums.

The most obvious example of the latter is the creative activities of the decentralized anticorporate globalization movement.

Consequently, there has been a flourishing of research interest in these emergent and more broadly defined forms of political participation, especially those coalescing around youth (sub)cultures and antiglobalization activism. For example, there is a body of work on new protest cultures and the use of information communication technologies and new media in creating alternative activist strategies (Cammaerts, 2007; Clark and Themudo, 2006; Juris and Pleyers, 2009). In this kind of research, young people's antiglobalization activism is often regarded as crystallizing all that is new in contemporary protest politics. There has also been considerable interest in the ways youth music subcultures, including hip–hop, punk, straightedge, riot grrrl, rave and skinhead, operate as political communities or provide opportunities for alternative modes of political and social expression (Harris, 2005; Pfaff, 2009; Simi and Brents, 2008). Young people's consumer activism and antimaterialist lifestyle cultures have also been scrutinized as new kinds of social movements (see, for example, Hetherington, 1998, on New Age travellers, and Micheletti and Stolle, 2008, on political consumerism). These research foci have emphasized the need to understand how young people are increasingly becoming moral and political

citizens through 'emotional, expressive and aesthetic forms of engagements' (Siurala, 2000: 4) that allow for loose commitments and individual processes of identification in times of insecurity, unpredictability and self-fashioning of the life course.

A picture of youth participation has thus emerged which depicts young people as disenchanted with representative politics, with some forging new forms of cultural/subcultural participation or alternative activism. What has been less studied, however, are the youth who do not fit easily into either of these categories: as the deeply apathetic or the alternatively engaged. For example, there are many young people 'in the middle' who continue to value rational, discursive participatory forms, even while they do not currently feel represented or heard. There are also many who are not World Economic Forum street-partygoers, cyber hacktivists or hip–hop artists, but are engaged in more modest and unaffiliated forms of 'new' participation. Our research is an investigation of these youth in the middle. It follows the call by some theorists to attend not just to young people's disavowal of old forms of participation or their new (sub)cultural participatory activities but to also look at their 'everyday life' (see, for example, Siurala, 2000: 9).

DATA AND METHODS

The project sought the views and experiences of young Australians aged between 15 and 18 years, at the stage of their lives immediately prior or just on the age of majority which occurs at age 18. We have focused on this younger age group because we were interested in documenting the experiences of people below or just reaching the legal definition of citizen. This is particularly pertinent in the Australian context because voting is compulsory from the age of 18, with enrollment commencing from the age of 17, which means that young people around this age are especially attuned to issues regarding meanings of participation. Periodically there is a consideration by the Australian federal government of the possibility of lowering the voting age to 16, which adds to the importance of understanding the experiences and attitudes towards engagement by this age group. At this age, their understandings of their 'place' in society, the ways in which they belong and their perceptions of their responsibilities and rights at this stage are likely to foreshadow the ways in which they see their relationship to society in the following years. While people of all ages are grappling with the socioeconomic forces that challenge traditional notions of participation, we are also interested in this age group because young people are often at the forefront of change, as they forge identities and ways of living in response to the conditions of their generation.

The study on which this article is based was funded by the Australian Research Council 2005–2008 to investigate young people's attitudes towards and practices of participation in Victoria, Australia, with a focus on understanding the

extent of their connection to society. The project commenced with the establishment of a Youth Advisory Group who met with the researchers to advise on research design. This resulted in the development of a 'mixed method approach', generating qualitative and quantitative data that would inform our understanding. A survey was administered in 2005–2006 across three physical and one virtual research sites: a regional Victorian town centre (Shepparton), one outer suburb of Melbourne (Melton), one inner-middle suburb of Melbourne (Monash) and online. These data were intended to provide a profile of the attitudes and behaviours of the sample populations. Follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 randomly selected survey participants, providing a more holistic picture of how young people understand their civic role, their priorities and the ways in which they connect to politics and society. Eleven of those interviewed were from Melton, seven from Shepparton and two from Monash. Interview participants' ages ranged from 15–18 years, with the majority being 17; 14 were female and 7 male. Four participants had one or more parent born overseas. Nine hundred and seventy young people aged predominantly 15–17 years completed the survey: 815 from the three local government areas and 155 online.

The three local government areas were chosen for their contrasting features, providing a snapshot of the lives of young Victorians in different locational and socioeconomic circumstances. Shepparton is approximately 200 km north of Melbourne's central business district. It sits in the Goulburn Valley in one of the state's most productive agricultural and horticultural regions. It is a key regional town with a growing, although also ageing, population, and has been deeply affected by the recent drought. On the most recently available Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (2001), Shepparton is ranked within the top third most disadvantaged local government areas in the state.

Melton is located 40 km west of the central business district. It is a rapidly growing community that promotes an urban–rural lifestyle. It has a number of major housing estates and offers large, affordable housing as well as hobby farms. Unlike the other two areas, it has an increasingly youthful population. Melton is ranked in middle third grouping of disadvantage.

The Monash local government area is 20 km southeast of the central business district. The area is large, diverse and fairly prosperous, with a highly skilled and highly educated population and a higher than average level of home ownership. Of the three sites, Monash has the greatest ethnic diversity: 40 per cent of residents were born overseas. On the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, Monash is in the least disadvantaged grouping of local government areas.

In each of these areas, respondents were recruited from government and non-government schools and from local youth services. The virtual cohort was recruited through notices on two not-for-profit media and arts organization web sites created by and for young people, Vibewire and Student Youth Network,

and these respondents completed the survey online. This method of recruiting participants enabled us to recruit young people who were still at school and to include a small subset of those who were disconnected from school or who had left (whom we reached through youth groups). Our goal was to achieve a diversity of participants who were in the 'unremarkable middle' with regard to participation. We make no claims to representativeness of the sample in relation to all youth in Australia. We are satisfied though that the sampling technique has enabled this study to represent some of the diversity that exists within the young population of Victoria, particularly in terms of socioeconomic status and urban/rural location. As we have noted, much of the research to date has investigated profound youth apathy with regard to party politics or new, spectacular (sub)cultural forms. Our research is an attempt to include a 'middle' group of young people who do not fit easily into either of these paradigms. We follow Karen Nairn et al. (2006) in focusing on the 'excluded middle' who are often neglected in polarized representations of young people as either 'trouble-makers' (in this context, the apathetic, self-interested generation) or 'achievers' (those developing exciting new participatory styles).

The sample was slightly overrepresented by males and those attending a non-government school, including both independent and Catholic schools (see Table 1). A large majority (87 per cent) of the respondents were born in Australia, and a little under half had at least one parent or guardian born outside of Australia; 90 per cent of respondents described themselves as Australian, 45 per cent indicated that they had ethnicities other than Australian and 3 per cent were Indigenous. The class status of the participants was difficult to as-certain, as is often the case with research on young people that uses measures

Table 1 Profile of survey participants

Characteristic	%
Male	62
Female	38
15 years old	32
16 years old	51
17 years old	13
Other age	4
Clayton	51
Melton	18
Online	16
Shepparton	15
Catholic school	59
Independent school	19
Government school	19
Youth group	4
1 or more parent born overseas	46
Indigenous	3

of socioeconomic status based on reported parental occupation and education, as ours did. However, it was apparent that at least half of the parents/guardians from all the areas were reported to be university educated or had completed Year 12, and at least half of the fathers were in skilled work. Interestingly, in spite of the distinctive features of each of the local areas and the diversity within the sample, very little differentiation was found in the participants' responses by location.

The survey asked young people to respond to questions about their social worlds, their communities and their political and civic activities and concerns. The interviews enabled these areas to be explored in greater detail. The survey data were entered into SPSS for analysis. In our use of a mixed method approach, we have given equal weighting to the qualitative and quantitative data. In this discussion, we provide an overview of the survey data, drawing on the interviews to contextualize, personalize and enliven the quantitative data. Unless otherwise stated, quotations have been chosen because they capture most effectively views expressed by a majority of interviewees.

ORDINARY DISENGAGEMENTS: APATHY OR MARGINALIZATION?

In the following discussion, we explore the ways the young people in our study complicate the debate about disengagement, considering first their political and social concerns, and then showing that while they disavow many conventional participatory forms and have little faith in electoral politics to deal with these concerns, this is in large part because they do not feel heard in conventional political forums. Thus, while they expressed disenchantment with formal politics, they could not be characterized as apathetic or as simply rejecting rational, discursive participatory democracy. In fact, they continued to value political processes that listened to young people and expressed a desire to be heard by those in power.

Political and social concerns

Survey participants were asked about key issues today for them as young people and key issues for Australia and globally. They were offered a list of the same 20 issues to rank according to their level of concern. This list of issues was constructed through consultation with the Youth Advisory Group referred to above. There was very little differentiation in responses across the dataset, although young women expressed higher levels of concern than young men about all the issues named. Their rankings were as follows:

Personal Concerns for Young People

1. Getting a good job in the future
2. Doing well in studies

3. Health and well-being
4. Being independent/having freedom
5. Lack of money

National Concerns

1. War/terrorism
2. Environmental issues
3. How governments are run
4. Getting a good job in the future
5. Poverty in Australia

Global Concerns

1. War/terrorism
2. Environmental issues
3. Poverty in other countries
4. How governments are run
5. Health and well-being

It is evident, then, that young people share common social and political concerns and that these demonstrate an understanding of key problems of our times. Their personal concerns illustrate the barriers they encounter as they negotiate both a current and future 'place' for themselves without predictable pathways or safety nets. In open-ended answer sections of the survey, as well as in interviews, they expressed considerable anxiety about doing well enough at school to secure a good future. Further, a strong sense of anxiety about futures that could not be predicted or controlled also inflected their national and global concerns (war/terrorism and the environment). These are issues that transcend the boundaries of national governance and reflect their experience of living in a 'runaway world' (Giddens, 2002) where threats to livelihood, security and life itself are ever present and insufficiently managed. Some interview participants made direct mention of the inability of the national government to deal with important issues. For example, Andy aged 18, from Melton, felt that the war in Iraq had become uncontrollable, saying: 'you're never going to fix that, from an individual like it's just impossible even, you know, like it's going to be hard for John Howard [Prime Minister at time of interview] can't really do much about that'. Similarly, Kwame aged 17 from Melton, was frustrated that the federal government had done nothing about species protection, saying 'they didn't want to know anything about it, when it was, when they first should have started doing something about it because of the whales getting killed. Like they're extinct, some whales, some species.' Significantly, a concern about 'how governments are run' featured in their top five rankings both nationally and globally, which suggests some disenchantment with the ways such threats are

dealt with at the level of state politics. We conclude that these young people are relatively well attuned to the major issues of deindustrialized, globalized times, and that they are engaged insofar as they express political and civic interests. In this respect, they provide evidence of a 'middle' group of youth who are disenchanted with electoral politics but continue to hold political views and care about political and social issues (see also Delli Carpini, 2000).

Taking part and being heard

How does this translate into participation or action on such interests? Consistent with the international research findings on youth engagement in conventional politics, we found that only a small number of the cohort was participating in traditional political activities. Only 10 per cent were regularly or even occasionally engaged in political activities, conventionally defined. Contacting a politician was their least common political practice, with only 13 per cent stating that they did this 'a lot' or 'some of the time'. A large majority (88 per cent) 'seldom or never' discussed political and social issues with government representatives (although as we shall see later, only 16 per cent said that a lot of the time they discussed political issues with no one). Furthermore, very few were members of political parties, political organizations or trade unions (see Table 2).

Table 2 Membership in groups

Membership in Group	%
Sports club	51
Online group	29
Youth/student group	23
Band	19
Religious group	18
Union	7
Political organization	4
A political party	3
Other	9

There was almost no variation across these areas with regard to this pattern of disengagement, with the small exception of membership in political organizations, which was slightly higher (7 per cent) in Shepparton, the regional centre, than in the other two areas. It would be easy to conclude from these findings that these young people are indeed apathetic, as they appear to have no interest in political participation. However, by taking the lead of Kathy Edwards (2007: 539), amongst others, who calls for a shift in focus from 'the deficiencies of youth' to 'barriers that can precipitate young people's disenfranchisement', it becomes possible to interpret these results more carefully in the context of the impediments faced by youth in attempting to engage, thus revealing a more complex relationship to formal politics than simple indifference.

Some further survey responses as well as the follow-up interviews shed a clearer light on the barriers that these young people experienced that contributed to their disengagement. One of the most prominent barriers was a perception that young people's voices and issues were not heard or taken seriously. For example, we surveyed the young people about where they felt they 'had a say'. Interestingly, a large majority did not feel they had a say in their local councils (83 per cent) or in their electorates (83 per cent).[1] Young women were less likely than young men to feel they could have a say in both arenas. When we explored this issue in more detail in the interviews, their responses revealed that young people perceive politicians as reluctant to listen to youth. This is consistent with a great deal of evidence that young people feel excluded from electoral politics (Manning and Ryan, 2004; Wallace, 2003). While policy and research interest has focused on young people's political apathy, it is also important to note that political structures, processes and debates marginalize young people (not least by legal age requirements for political and other citizenship rights) and are primarily structured around adult interests and needs (see also Edwards, 2007).

A lack of confidence that adults in local councils or those representing their state or national electorate would listen to young people's concerns was a recurring theme in the interviews. For example, Heath, aged 18, from Melton, described his friends' frustration at attempting to resolve issues of gangs and graffiti by talking with the council:

> I've had friends that went to the local community and stuff like that to talk about the graffiti that is around the community and the different gangs that are around. Not in my community but at the school community. So they've thought that the only way to deal with that is to go straight to the local government. … They went there and they said that 'yeah we'll think about it' but nothing has been done … I think it is an unproductive way to go about it because it just doesn't really — well in theory it would be the best place to go to have a whinge — but I don't think they really listen.

Young people's lack of engagement in formal political processes is thus at least in part motivated by a feeling that even if political processes are effective, politicians are not interested in hearing or acting on their concerns. It is no wonder then that politics is perceived as something for adults only: for example, when asked whether she felt she could have a say in political matters, Mandy, aged 17, from Melton, said 'It feels like it's an adult world at the moment'.

Formal politics and discourses versus the everyday

A related barrier experienced by these young people was that of discursive legitimacy and the need to translate their political concerns and activities into forms recognizable to political authority. Disengagement is thus also a consequence of a gap between 'real' politics and its official language and young people's 'everyday' concerns and their informal discursive and practical repertoires.

Manning and Ryan (2004: iv) point out that there is a considerable difference between conventional political discourses and young people's expressions of concern regarding local manifestations of social and political matters in their own lives. Similarly, Henn et al. (2002: 169) write that 'young people tend to think of "politics" merely as what goes on in parliament rather than "things that affect my life" and to discount their own political involvement and activities'. Young people are given very little language with which to conceive of their everyday issues as belonging to the same arena as politics. For example, Thomas, aged 18, from Shepparton, identified drinking, drugs, the impact of new workplace legislation and differential treatment of young people by welfare services as key concerns for youth. When asked if he would like to talk to a politician about these matters, he said,

> I don't know because … I don't really understand [politics]. More to the point,
> I can't even explain why I don't understand it … The thing is probably if I wanted
> to understand it you'd get more involved into it but me just being a tradesman
> I don't really pay attention or not as much as an adult would.

Both age and class are introduced here as ways in which exclusion from politics occurs, but Thomas individualizes his experience and interprets his lack of understanding of political discourses and processes as a personal failing and responsibility. Others also expressed concern that they lacked the appropriate language and knowledge to discuss political issues of relevance to them. For example, Adriana, aged 17, from Melton, who was a Year 12 Politics student, stated that 'young people sometimes feel embarrassed and that their opinion doesn't matter', and that even though she thought that talking to a politician about her concerns was a good idea, she herself 'would only like briefly know what to say'. Even when young people make efforts to articulate their concerns in 'political' language, there is a perception that politicians are too embedded in modern processes to understand the issues of the late modern world that face young people. For example, Andy, aged 18, from Melton, said: 'they're [politicians] not around in this era like what we're in, so I suppose it's hard for them to understand … they don't know how to go about it and what it's like because they haven't been brought up like today's children'.

Thus, while these young people were clearly disengaged from formal politics, this is in large part because they feel marginalized. Rather than resigning themselves to apathy, however, they still sought recognition from formal political forums and expressed a desire to 'be heard', that is, to participate in rational, discursive forms of democratic deliberation. In this respect, they are not rejecting traditional political apparatuses or participatory modes but in fact seeking inclusion. For example, Sally, aged 18, from Monash, identified 'local councils and members of parliament' as those who should theoretically hear the concerns of their constituents, but said 'we're young, people don't listen to us'. Similarly, Shelley, aged 18, from Shepparton, said that young people

never 'got the chance' to talk to politicians, stating 'I think they think because we're still in school, that we're just children so we shouldn't have a say'. And Kwame, aged 17, from Melton, said the reason young people were not heard in politics was 'just pretty much our age really, they don't care what we have to say'. These young people felt strongly that the problem they have with politics is not a matter of insufficient civic knowledge or indifference, but that young people are disregarded and excluded from the spaces and discourses where matters of the common good are debated. Thus, they are making a strong claim for a place within conventional political structures and a language with which they can bridge the gap between formal and everyday politics.

ORDINARY ENGAGEMENTS: EVERYDAY AND INFORMAL PARTICIPATION

As we see, these young people expressed little interest in participating in conventional politics through conventional political forums because of a lack of faith in formal politics and the institutions of the state to listen to or act in the interests of citizens, and especially to facilitate the participation of young people. However, as we now proceed to discuss, they continued to struggle to find ways to be heard and make change both within and outside of state politics in relation to their social and political concerns. Their participatory activities in this regard were more likely to be informal and localized, reflecting their preference for sociality-oriented and individual modes of action. At the same time, they were unlikely to use subcultural or new social movement participation or new styles of protest activism to act on their concerns. Here we discuss young people's involvement in everyday and informal participatory strategies. First we draw attention to the kinds of activities in which they are engaged that are consistent with Vromen's (2003: 81–82) definition of participation as those acts intended to 'shape the society that we want to live in', and demonstrate how these are illustrative of less formal political techniques. Then we look in particular at the role of political discussions and the Internet in providing opportunities for these young people's everyday, unspectacular modes of participation.

The 'informalization' of political and social action

Smith et al. (2005: 441) suggest that a broad interpretation of participation is necessary to capture young people's citizenship practices today, because they are more likely to be involved in informal socially constructive activity than formal, organized types of participation (see also Roker, 2008; Vromen, 2003). This observation is borne out in the findings of this study. Many of these young people were developing a range of individualized and informal strategies to address their concerns, even while they simultaneously expressed a desire to have those in power listen to them, respond to their actions and expressions

and effect more formal political change accordingly. We asked them about the political activities they participated in, and as we see in Table 3, conventional modes of political activity were for the most part eschewed as they focused instead on personal strategies to create social change, including modifying one's own behaviour, having discussions with friends and family and using expressive and aesthetic techniques.

Table 3 Everyday participatory practices

	A Lot/Some (in %)	Seldom/Never (in %)
Recycled	75	25
Donated money to a cause	67	33
Signed a petition	37	63
Discussed political/social issues	37	63
Made a statement though art, writing or music	37	63
Listened to political music	28	72
Youth council/Students' Representative Council (SRC)	26	74
Made a political/social statement online	20	80
Contacted the media	18	82
Gone to a rally	18	82
Boycotted a brand	16	84
Contacted a politician	13	87

In terms of taking actions to shape the society they want to live in, their most common activities were recycling and donating money to a cause, both of which were practised by a majority of the cohort. Following this, over one-third was involved with signing petitions, discussing social and political issues and making statements through art, music and writing. Over one-quarter listened to political music. Young women were significantly more likely than young men to have engaged in all these activities apart from discussions and listening to political music.

These young people's 'ordinariness' is highlighted in their everyday, self-managed strategies for effecting political and social change. Recycling is a personal, mundane act that has immediate results and engages the participant directly in their political agenda without mediation. As we have seen, many respondents felt strongly about environmental degradation and thus it is unsurprising that their political energies were focused on individual strategies for environmental protection. Donating money to a cause is also an uncontroversial, ordinary act that also reflects young people's position as consumer–citizens who are perhaps better able to make their views heard through economic rather than formal political means. However, these young people were not involved in 'stronger' forms of consumer politics such as brand boycotts. Similarly, few had attended a rally, thereby eschewing more 'spectacular' forms of protest politics. Elsewhere in the survey they were also asked about different

'youth scenes' in their areas, and it is worth noting that while some were aware of youth subcultures devoted to political activities that were active in their communities, only 10 per cent of them said that they themselves were involved in these.

While the next cluster of activities (signing a petition, discussion of political/ social issues, making a statement through art, writing or music) was practised by only 37 per cent of the cohort, we suggest that these results are still important, given the relative youth of the respondents at which to be engaged in any kind of political activity (the majority being only 16 years old), and also the over-representation of young men in the sample (43 per cent of young women had signed a petition and 40 per cent had made a statement through art/writing/ music, so had the sample been equally gender split, the overall percentages would likely have been higher). Again, petition signing and discussions are both simple, personal and everyday ways to express political views without requir-ing funds, collective or party engagement or a relationship with formal political apparatus. Art, music and writing are evidently also personal, expressive and aesthetic means and require only everyday materials for their execution. As one survey participant wrote: 'whenever I feel like I need to say something im-portant I write a song about it and get me and my band to play it'.

For these young people, participatory activities were for the most part con-fined to the realm of the everyday and the informal. Vinken (2007: 53) argues that such individualized strategies are consistent with the dynamic life course model that young people now follow, which emphasizes 'self-organization, individuality, self-confrontation'. We would suggest that these young people are indeed shaping participation around these values, but at the same time opting for modest and mundane acts that are not as frequently recognized as the spectacular practices of youth subcultural activists. We now look at two examples of these kinds of mundane practices to deepen our understanding of their turn away from both the formal and the spectacular. We focus here on their involvement in political discussions and the Internet, as these have emerged from the interviews as important to young people in particularly strik-ing ways.

Intimate discussions and ordinary discourses

As noted, having discussions and 'being heard' are rated highly by young people as participatory strategies, and we asked them with whom they discussed social and political issues (Table 4).

A majority discussed political issues with parents, friends and in class. This preference for political discussion within personal networks and spaces of trust and belonging is echoed in other research. For example, in the UK research by Russell et al. (2002), young people were the cohort most likely to have had such discussions with friends and family, but the least likely to have voted. Several of our interview participants underscored the view that informal, peer-to-peer discussions were more interesting and effective than engagement with

Table 4 With whom respondents discuss social and political issues

	A Lot/Some (in %)	*Seldom/Never (in %)*
Parents	58	42
Friends	56	44
In class	56	44
Other family members	44	56
No one	29	71
Someone else in the community	20	80
Online	20	80
Organization/group I am in	19	81
In the media	18	82
Government representatives	12	88
Other	17	83

formal, adult-centric political processes. For example, Chiara, aged 17, from Melton, considered that it was important in political discussions 'to actually get young people involved with young people. I think that works. To me, when young people come and talk to us, I listen more than when old people come.' This perspective is consistent with the new life course model identified by Vinken (2007: 53) that emphasizes participation through 'interactivity and connectedness with intimate circles'. We also asked the respondents where they felt they could have a say, and where they wanted more of a say. Their responses (see Table 5) also make clear that everyday and informal political discussions are valued by young people because they are grounded in networks where they already feel comfortable and where they are heard.

Table 5 Having and wanting 'a say'

	Where I Feel I Can have a Say		*Where I Want More of a Say*	
	A Lot/Some (in %)	*Seldom/Never (in %)*	*A Lot/Some (in %)*	*Seldom/Never (in %)*
With my friends	95	5	62	38
In my family	89	11	65	35
In my classroom	83	17	63	37
At my school	76	24	64	36
At work	44	56	47	53
Online forums	40	60	36	64
In the media	21	79	42	58
In my local council	17	83	38	62
In the electorate in which I live	17	83	35	65
Other	22	78	30	70

Interestingly, these young people wanted more of a say within those familiar and intimate circles and spaces where they already feel heard: with family, within schools and classrooms and with friends. It is unsurprising that they did

not seek more of a say within electorates and councils, given their lack of faith in politicians to listen to or act on their concerns.

The Internet as an informal participatory space

Our second example of unspectacular and everyday participation is these young people's use of the Internet. Much has been made of the ways that the Internet has facilitated new styles of protest and has been instrumental in the creation of a dramatically different generation of activists (Castells, 2007; Clark and Themudo, 2006). However, what has been less explored is how ordinary youth use the Internet to 'have a say' in a broader and more mundane sense, and thereby express social and political concerns and share views with others, especially peers. Leisure and spaces of sociality are becoming increasingly important in creating both a sense of social belonging and a site for peer-to-peer politicization for young people (see Pfaff, 2009). In looking at these young people's use of the Internet, we can consider how this functions as a space of expression and engagement in generating a sense of participation in community.

Ninety-four per cent of survey participants had Internet access at home, 69 per cent enjoyed spending time doing computer-related activities, 62 per cent felt 'comfortable and like they belonged' when online, and outside of school it was also the place they most regularly spent time with friends. For some, the Internet offered a virtual forum for the expression and debate of social and political concerns: in other words, it filled the space once occupied by civic associations, political groups and other participatory organizations where young people of a previous generation were able to join with others and engage in democratic practice. For example, Sally, 18, Monash, who was concerned about 'immigration, and definitely the greenhouse effect and about water, our drought is really a big issue' found it helpful to discuss these issues with other young people from different countries in a chat room:

> I like to go into these debating forums, and those are really good because they've got people from all over the world, so we can see how they do it like in England and all that, we're still seeing some very good input on homosexual and gay marriages. That was really interesting.

For others, the Internet was a valuable place to socialize with friends and meet new people, as well as to express opinions and try out forms of public identity. Social networking sites, particularly MySpace, were mentioned by interview participants as important places where they could connect with their peers and build networks, if not a community, of both local and distant others. Research has shown that young people overwhelmingly use social networking technologies for the purposes of staying in touch and communicating with their friends (Boyd, 2007). However, Danah Boyd (2007: 13–14) suggests that social network sites are simultaneously places where young people 'write themselves and their community into being' in view of an audience, and that they do this

online because they have very little access to real public spaces (p. 19). She says 'their participation is deeply rooted in their desire to engage publicly' (2007: 21). In other words, these kinds of youth communities can be understood to some degree as 'counterpublics', where even though the content of the sites is usually personal rather than related to matters of the public good, the intention is to occupy a public space for community engagement. This has been particularly valuable for young women (Harris, 2008). This less political, more sociality-oriented use of the Internet was discussed by several of the interview participants.

Chiara, a 17-year-old from Melton, had a MySpace page which she used to extend and consolidate her social network as well as share information about youth issues with her peers. She saw her blog as a form of peer-to-peer political engagement. As noted above, she considered that it was important 'to actually get young people involved with young people', and saw sites such as MySpace as a vital tool in this process. Like Sally, she described the value of online social networking for the discussion of political and social issues amongst young people, noting that 'My Space is such a young thing. Even people reading your blog, whether they care or not, it sticks in their heads …' and says that she uses it to 'inform (people) of little issues … My Space is a great thing. I checked my blog history the other day and it's like 400 people have checked my blog … The internet is a great place. You can go onto forum sites, read what other people have written.'

For these young people, the Internet functions as a space for social connection and self-expression. We could tentatively suggest that some young people are developing sociality-oriented ways to connect with and create a sense of a community with whom they can share political and social concerns. They used the Internet for leisure, but also to 'have a say', especially with their peers, with whom they can make shared social and political meanings out of their individual circumstances. While there is considerable debate about the extent to which the Internet has changed young people's political participation (see, for example, Castells, 2007; Livingstone et al., 2007; Vromen, 2008; Xenos and Bennett, 2007), much of this to date has focused on the use of the Internet by political parties or civics education attempting to attract youth, or its role in new activism. We would argue along with Coleman (2006: 258) that the Internet is also important to young people as a space of everyday participation because it is used as an intimate, social, unregulated youth space. For many 'ordinary' youth, the Internet is valued as an informal place for having a say in the public sphere — a mundane participatory act — because self-expression and sociality are its guiding principles.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have investigated the experiences of some young people 'in the middle' of debates about youth participation. While there are significant

and well-founded concerns about youth disengagement from electoral politics, conclusions about this phenomenon have tended to position young people as lacking knowledge and interest regarding politics; in other words, as apathetic in their outlooks. Our study demonstrates instead that many young people have social and political concerns, but eschew traditional participation because they do not feel heard. Rather than rejecting representative politics wholesale, however, they continue to value recognition by the state and continue to appreciate rational, discursive, deliberative democracy. The research also illustrates how they take up more individualized and everyday practices in efforts to shape society. In doing so, they are part of a shift to modest and 'ordinary' political practices, what Mandy calls 'do(ing) my part', that is consistent with the conditions of insecurity, risk and individualization that are redefining possibilities for citizenship more broadly. However, they are by and large not participants in emergent activist and protest cultures, but opt for more ordinary ways to act on their political and social concerns.

These young people complicate the debate about contemporary youth participation because they are neither deeply apathetic nor at the vanguard of new political styles that draw on subcultural capital. While some young people (like many adults) have no interest in representative politics, many would like to be heard by politicians and be included in the processes of deliberation within traditional structures of politics that currently marginalize youth. And while some are forging new and spectacular protest techniques, others still act on their concerns in ordinary, individualized ways that must also be included in the debate about new participatory styles. These diverse and sometimes contradictory experiences suggest that a broad-ranging and careful response to the complex issue of contemporary youth participation is required. This may be particularly important for some groups of young people who are not well understood by current frameworks around youth participation, and are currently not reflected in the ways in which school students' civic participation and knowledge is assessed by the NAP. For example, our research has highlighted that young women have higher levels of concern regarding social and political issues, and are more politically active, broadly defined, but also feel more excluded from conventional modes of participation. Centring the experiences of ordinary young women may not only provide insight into the significance of gender to participation but could also help us understand the problem with representative politics as well as the partial solutions offered by individualized, expressive and sociality-oriented participatory action for youth more broadly.

Lasse Siurala (2000: 9), amongst others, has argued that is what is required is a dual strategy that addresses both the marginalization of youth from formal politics and takes seriously their everyday acts to shape society. He says 'we should develop new forms of participation which would revitalize the interest of young people into democratic decision making processes, and also sensitize ourselves to the emergent forms of participation, new ways of developing and expressing identities'. In doing so, we can attend to the ordinary ways that young people are both disengaged and engaged with politics. Such an

approach that attends to the complex interplay between marginalization and everyday, individualized political participation could open up new possibilities for a non-adult-centric redefining, reinvigorating and reinscribing of politics for and by ordinary youth.

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Note

1 Australia has three levels of government: local (municipal/town), state (provincial) and national. 'Council' refers to local government and 'electorate' can mean local, state or national electoral boundaries but typically denotes the latter two.

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