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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.

- Plato (in Quintelier, 2007, p. 2)

It seems that complaining and being worried about young people are millennium-old habits of adults. In modern times, complaints and worries among political leaders, policy makers, media professionals and scholars have been increasingly focused on young people's democratic citizenship. Compared to adults and previous generations, young people vote less, trust politicians less, and consume less news about public affairs; these and other trends exhibit young people's 'apathy', some argue, and testify to a 'crisis of democracy'.

Many of the concerns about young people's democratic citizenship have been related to the use of (new) media. Among scholars, the questions as to whether, how and why the use of the internet in particular might deteriorate or reinvigorate young people's civic engagement and participation have received much attention in a rapidly growing number of studies.

This PhD dissertation includes several new studies aimed at further reflecting on these questions about the internet's role in young people's civic life. These studies, which are presented in chapters 2 to 7, address four major research issues: how governmental agencies or NGOs produce civic content online, the civic nature and potential of content online, whether and how young people do or might exploit the web's civic potential, and the attitudes that underlie young people's civic internet use.

The backgrounds and focal points of these studies are discussed in this introductory chapter. The first section below outlines the contours of the scholarly debate about democratic citizenship in general and that of youth in particular. This debate forms the general background of the literature about the internet's role in youth's civic life, which will be delineated in the second section. The third section

discusses the socio-political context – the Netherlands, from 2007 to 2009 – in which the empirical studies of this dissertation were conducted. The last section provides an overview of the contents, goals and methods of the chapters to come.

Democratic citizenship: duties and rights

The scholarly debate about democracy and citizenship is very old, very extensive, and very complex, and it is not my intention here to discuss this debate in a comprehensive and detailed way. Instead, I will outline some of its main features.

To begin with, the notions of democracy and citizenship have been developed within three main intellectual traditions. First, classic liberalism is focused on citizens' individual rights and freedoms, which they should pursue through rational decisions and should be guaranteed and protected by a minimal state. Second, communitarianism – a response to liberalism's extreme individualism – emphasizes the importance of social cohesion and shared cultural values for the functioning of any political community. The third tradition, republicanism, might be seen as a mixture of the first two traditions, with emphasis on both individual rights and socio-cultural connectivity, and insistence on citizens' active self-governance (cf. Dahlgren, 2007a; Delanty, 2000; Held, 2006; Van Gunsteren, 1998).

Theories within these traditions, especially the latter two, often expect from citizens to accomplish certain 'duties' ('virtues'; 'obligations'; 'responsibilities'). Without detailing how these duties might differ between the three traditions, it is safe to say that, in the practice of current research about democratic citizenship, duties often concern *engagement* with issues, such as the environment, war and peace, and discrimination, and *participation* in activities, such as joining demonstrations, discussing current affairs with friends and family, and voting. Such engagements and activities are generally theorized as duties that 'good' citizens should voluntarily embrace in order to achieve morally superior socio-political ideals in terms of equality, freedom and/or solidarity (Delanty, 2000; Held, 2006; Van Gunsteren, 1998).¹

'Parliamentary' or 'electoral' duties (such as voting, party membership and party activism) have often been called 'political', and such duties have often formed the focus of studies that question whether, how and why citizens fulfill their democratic duties. In more recent research, however, a wider range of 'extra-parliamentary' ('non-electoral'; 'informal'; 'unconventional') activities have been taken into account as well (varying from blogging to 'political consumerism'), and scholars have called these extra-parliamentary activities either 'civic' or 'political' (cf. Dalton, 2007, 2008; Norris, 2003a; Van Deth, 2008). A terminologically relevant

point to make at this point is that, in this dissertation, I will use the term ‘civic’ as a collective noun in regard to both electoral and non-electoral duties, and the term ‘political’ in regard to electoral duties only. The conceptually relevant point here is that the ‘civic’ and the ‘political’ are contested and changing notions, which is manifested in an ongoing debate about what counts as ‘political’ and ‘civic’, what the boundaries are between the ‘political’ and the ‘un-political’, and the ‘civic’ and the ‘un-civic’, and from whose perspective these boundaries ought be drawn (Banaji, 2008; Coleman & Rowe, 2005; Henn, Weinstein & Wring, 2002; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). For instance, ‘is signing an online petition, or responding to someone on a messageboard, civic participation? Is smashing the windscreen of an SUV or the window of a Starbucks coffee shop, or setting fire to a vivisection lab, civic participation?’ (Banaji, Buckingham, Van Zoonen, Hirzalla, 2009, p. 70)

While the discussion about such questions is likely to continue for a while, it should be noted that certainly not all theories of democracy and citizenship have been based on the assumption that citizens must be very engaged and active. Some theories favor a relatively passive citizenry and/or an elitist political authority (e.g., Dahl, 1956; Schumpeter, 1943; Weber, 1921-22/1978; cf. Held, 2006), but the more ‘participatory’ or ‘deliberative’ theories across the different traditions mentioned above depict citizens’ participation and engagement as necessary conditions of ‘strong’ democracy: one with a government that adheres to the will of its citizens, and with citizens who consistently express their will to their government, through non-governmental organizations and individual initiatives, and to each other through conversation (e.g., Barber, 1984; Habermas, 1962/1989; cf. Held, 2006). These theories, therefore, impose a certain ‘democratic burden’ on citizens; citizens must invest energy, time and dedication in their democratic duties, it is thought, if they desire to reap the benefits of a genuine democratic order.

The flipside of this burden, however, is that it is anchored in legal and moral rights that enable citizens to voice their will, and that protect their integrity and wealth in other ways as well. Citizenship is, therefore, a construct that often refers to civic engagements and activities as democratic duties, and to citizenship rights that lay the foundation for a society crowded with democratically dutiful citizens. ‘Good citizens’, then, are people who are ‘aware of their rights, but also their obligations to other people and the wider society. In addition, good citizens participate in voluntary activities of various kinds as well as politics more generally’ (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004, p. 129; in Loader, 2007, p. 9).

One of the most influential theories about citizenship rights in contemporary literature was set out by Marshall (1950). His theory concerns three kinds of rights:

'civil' rights, which are guaranteed through the legal system and protect citizens and their properties; 'political' rights, which enable citizens to participate in activities that concern political power, such as voting; and, 'social' rights, which concern citizens' living standard regarding education, health, employment and other socio-economic fields. In the context of modern globalization and migration processes, a fourth 'cultural' dimension was added later by authors who stressed that socio-political recognition is crucial for citizens' autonomy in culturally diverse societies (Stevenson, 2003).

The rights and duties of democratic citizenship have formed the parameters of a body of literature that has burgeoned about young people (or 'youth') in particular, defined as the group of persons between 15 and 25 years old. Due to 'life-cycle' factors, members of this group (especially teenagers) might be less equipped with the possibilities and motivations to be active and engaged than adults, defined as the group of people older than 25 years old. Young people might, for instance, still be in the process of developing a cognitive ability to form an opinion about complex civic issues, and their opportunities to join public events (like demonstrations) can be restrained by teachers, politicians and parents (Bessant, 2004; Phelps, 2004; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins & Delli Carpini, 2006).²

Nevertheless, perhaps the most ubiquitous normative assumption in current literature is that young people's civic engagement and participation are democratically important and desirable. In fact, it seems that this assumption is the single most important *raison d'être* of the literature about the democratic citizenship of young people. This literature is, in this sense, not 'politically neutral', but grounded in democratic ideals and narratives, and often aimed at solving problems in democracy. Therefore, when scholars find that young people (or others) are democratically 'apathetic', they sound an alarm bell; and it is mainly because some scholars have sounded this alarm bell that the literature about young people's democratic citizenship is booming. As Sherrod, Flanagan and Youniss (2002, p. 173, in Aydemir, 2007, p. 65) say, 'research on the development of citizenship is enjoying a renaissance, fuelled in part by the writings of Robert Putnam (2000), who has argued that we face a civic crisis today in terms of young people's civic disengagement.'

While anchored within general theories about democratic citizenship, the assumption that young people should be engaged and active in regard to civic matters is legitimized with youth-specific reasons. Galston (1995; in Coleman, 2007a), for instance, provides three of such reasons. First, young people's participation enables 'legitimate generational interests' to be articulated. Second, young people

have a duty 'to uphold reasonably just institutions' and a 'communitarian' obligation to match responsibilities to rights. Third, 'political engagement helps develop capacities that are intrinsically (...) important.' The latter two advantages of civic participation and engagement among young people are considered to be more generally rooted in the 'formative nature' of childhood and adolescence (Dahlgren, 2007b; Henn et al., 2002). During youth years, people are taught adult attitudes and dispositions, it is asserted, and they develop a lasting political point of view (Livingstone, 2002; Miller & Shanks, 1996; Niemi & Hepburn, 1995).

Against this background, the big question is whether youth are good democratic citizens; are they engaged and active? The answers are mixed, and depend fundamentally on how scholars (or political leaders and other public figures) conceptualize what democratic citizenship is (see discussion above). In regard to these conceptualizations, Buckingham (2000b) distinguishes between two opposing trends in research and theory about young people's citizenship in particular: a trend of the 'conservative lament' and a trend of the 'postmodern celebration'.

The first camp is mostly concerned about young people's possible indifference in regard to electoral politics. Survey-based studies have often yielded pessimistic conclusions about young people's engagement with and traditional forms of participation within the formal political arena. For example, compared to adults, young people in many Western democracies seem to be less interested in electoral politics, less knowledgeable about electoral politics, less trusting of and more cynical or sceptical about political leaders, less likely to read newspapers or watch news and current affairs programs on television, less likely to be a member of a political party, and less enthusiastic about voting (Delli Carpini, 2000; Mindich, 2005; Niemi & Weisberg, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Quintelier, 2007; Wring, Henn & Weinstein, 1999).

The second camp, waving the flag of the postmodern celebration, is not deeply troubled with young people's (lack of) engagement with and participation within the formal political arena, because young people have assertedly embraced newer forms of participation to express their ideals in regard to particular issues. Norris (2002) calls this process a 'democratic phoenix rising from the ashes' of 'old' politics. She shows that young people in 14 European countries (among which the Netherlands) and Israel are more inclined to participate in new and non-electoral activities (such as signing a petition, 'boycotting' and joining demonstrations) than they are in traditional and electoral activities (such as voting, being a member of a political party, and working for a political party). Her analyses also indicate that young people are more inclined than their parents to participate in non-electoral

activities (Norris, 2003a; see also: Henn et al., 2002; O'Toole, Marsh & Jones, 2003; Quintelier, 2007; White, Bruce & Ritchie, 2000).

It remains unclear, however, why young people might prefer non-electoral variants of participation, and why they feel more engaged with the issues pertaining to such activities. Current literature discusses a number of (partly related) explanations. A first possible explanation is that young people might find extra-parliamentarian activities more effective than electoral activities (Sloam, 2007). Another explanation is that the language and style of politicians might have failed to address the values, interests and experiences of young people, and that young people, due to exclusion qua discourse or policy, turn to alternative modes of citizenship (Buckingham, 2000b; Coleman, 2007b; Coleman & Rowe, 2005; Edwards, 2001). A related explanation is that, in young people's everyday life, 'micro-politics' (regarding 'single-issue' campaigns and lifestyle issues) is more relevant than 'macro-politics' (conventional politics in the formal political arena; Buckingham, 2000a, 2000b). More comprehensive theories assert that the importance of the nation-state and nation-state-based politics is disappearing due to a number of social, cultural or political processes, such as globalization, deinstitutionalization, secularization and individualization (Loader, 2007).

The role of the internet

Research about young people's civic engagement and participation has been connected to additional research about whether, how and why the internet might reinvigorate young people's civic life.³ This internet-related research has been generally based on two premises.

The first premise is that the web is increasingly accessible to young people in developed Western countries. Internet penetration (i.e., the percentage of people that have access to and use the internet) among young people has, in many instances, risen above 80%, which is generally much higher than internet penetration among older groups (e.g., Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). The internet's popularity among young people might be explained by the fact that it enables many social and entertainment activities that can complement young people's everyday life, and young people in particular might like the 'very architecture of the internet - its flexible, hypertextual, networked structure, its dialogic, interactive mode of address, its alternative, even anarchic feel' (Livingstone, 2007, p. 166; Ito et al., 2009; Buckingham, 2002, 2006).

The second premise is that the internet can be accessed to participate in new, more creative and networked forms of civic action and communication that require

less investments and adjustments than most civic activities offline. Internet-based civic participation can be done at preferred places and times, without a formal membership of an organization. Forwarding an anti-racism e-mail, for instance, does not cost as much time and energy as joining an anti-racism demonstration or an anti-racism NGO. Especially young people might benefit from opportunities online, because they in particular might lack the resources (ranging from financial resources to feelings of efficacy) needed to participate in more demanding civic activities offline (Calenda & Meijer, 2009; Kann, Berry, Grant & Zager, 2007).

A multitude of questions about whether, how and why the internet's accessibility and widespread use might lead to increased levels of civic engagement and participation among young people have been studied in divergent ways (Bennett, 2008; CivicWeb, 2007; Dahlgren, 2007b; Loader, 2007; Olsson & Dahlgren, 2010). Methodologically, studies have mainly relied on either survey, interview or content analyses (and sometimes on a combination of these techniques). Analytically and theoretically, studies have focused on how websites are produced by governments and NGOs; on the nature of civic content online; on whether and how people exploit the civic potential of the web; and on the attitudes that may influence how people use the internet (and, in some instances, studies have focused on a combination of these issues). Based on both the methodological basis and the analytic and theoretic focus of studies, it is possible to distinguish between four general strands of empirical research.

First, there are some qualitative, interview-based case studies that have focused on how websites with a civic potential are produced. These studies have yielded reflections about several production-related processes, such as how websites' effectiveness is affected by discrepancies between 'encoded' and 'decoded' meanings of content online, how content online depends on producers' resources in terms of, among other things, finances and personnel, and how websites' goals are intertwined with the broader institutional goals of the organization 'behind the website'. For instance, based on a study of web producer-user relations in regard to a British website, Livingstone (2007) discusses challenges in regard to subject matter, formal composition, mode of address, action consequences of online participation, interface design, and issues of power. In another study, Olsson (2008, p. 510) finds that the producers of three Swedish websites have different access to production resources:

The website www.reklamsabotage.org is produced by a single individual who volunteers in his spare time and who has very limited access to economic resources for

the website. On the other hand, www.ungtval.se is supported by two large media companies. The website is produced professionally or at least semi-professionally by a staff of approximately 20 persons. Finally, www.muf.se can be placed somewhere between these extremes. The website production team lacks access to resources, but the production activities serve as part of the assigned duties for specific people in the organization.

Second, there are qualitative case studies of content online that generally attempt to illustrate how websites have a civic potential. While generally not based on systematic analysis of who uses the internet, one part of this research does focus on the civic characteristics of youth websites specifically (e.g., Bennett & Xenos, 2007; Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles & Larson, 2004). Another (much larger) part focuses on websites not specifically aimed at young people, but produces general claims about the potential civiness of the internet. Especially the self-presentations and discussions on web forums, some argue, resemble an online public sphere where participants exchange rational, critical and reasoned arguments (Albrecht, 2006; Jankowski & Van Os, 2004; Winkler, 2005). Like others, Graham (2009, p. 143) argues that such discussion is not 'exclusively reserved for political discussion forums (...). People talk politics just about anywhere online from reality TV forums to numerous other forum genres.' His analysis of discussions on the forum website of the British reality TV series *Wife Swap* revealed that this forum was a:

(...) communicative space where participants not only engaged in political talk, they also engaged in *deliberative* political talk. It was a space where the use of expressives played a key role in enhancing and facilitating such talk. It was a space where the mixing of the private and public was the norm, a space where participants took personal experiences and life lessons and bridged them to society at large, fostering a more personal and lifestyle-based form of politics. All of this seemed to foster a communicative environment that was about learning rather than winning or convincing. It was an environment that seemed to promote solidarity rather than polarization among participants (Graham, 2009, p. 168).

Third, there are qualitative, interview-based studies about how young people use and understand ICTs in relation to their citizenship and everyday life. These studies often conclude that the internet may be considered, in certain contexts, as a civic resource by young people, but most studies also conclude that young people exploit this resource only partially. There are also studies that focus on the more

specific group of young people who are active in civic life. These studies generally attempt to make clear how the internet can be a valuable civic tool for this group in particular (Bakardjieva, 2005, 2010). More generally, this strand of research might be considered as a critical 'cultural' response to studies that use surveys to measure young people's participation in more 'conventional' activities, leading to rather negative conclusions about young people's civiness (see also discussion above). Some consider these statistics as too 'abstract' and 'cold', yielded with techniques that superimpose unduly narrow and essentialist definitions of what 'good' citizenship means on young people's lived experience (Bakardjieva, 2010; Coleman & Rowe, 2005).

The survey-based studies – which form a fourth research branch – mainly aim to investigate how the internet is used, which factors influence internet use, and how civic internet use is related to civic participation offline. Some of these studies indicate that the internet is mainly used for recreation, and much less for civic action. There are also studies that indicate that civic internet use is 'digitally divided', with groups with less material, social or political resources using the internet less for civic action than groups with more resources (e.g., Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Van Dijk, 2005). The international variant of this digital divide (also known as the 'global divide') is reflected or induced by differences between countries' telecommunications infrastructure, information transmission capacity, and aggregate number of computers with an internet connection. Research has demonstrated how OECD countries are far ahead of other countries in these respects due to economic factors (e.g., workforce proportion in the service sector), policy factors (e.g., competition level in telecommunication markets) and human capital factors (e.g., English-language proficiency) (cf. Chadwick, 2006; Norris, 2001).

Survey-based studies, however, do not have a monopoly on negative conclusions about civic internet use. The digital divide problem, for instance, is widely acknowledged. However, across the four strands of research discussed above, there are differences between studies that focus on the civic potential of the internet and on questions about how the internet might contribute to democracy on the one hand, and studies that focus on the actual realization of the internet's civic potential and how the internet might undermine the health of democracy or jeopardize people's well-being in other ways on the other hand; compared to the former group of studies, the latter group yields less often conclusions that the web can widely and substantially better the lives of young people or adults.⁴

The research about the internet's role in young people's civic life has been expanding at a rapid pace; it has become so extensive that it cannot be discussed in

detail in a piece of text that has the length of the introductory overview provided above. The important point here is that this research cannot be regarded as a completed project. Below, I will briefly discuss which of the issues that have remained unquestioned in the literature will be questioned in the various studies in chapters 2 to 7 of this dissertation. In the next section, however, I will first sketch the socio-political context in which these studies were carried out.

The Dutch context

Western politicians and practitioners have increasingly embraced the idea that young people's civic engagement and participation are in deficient condition, and this idea can be partly legitimized by the results of academic studies (see above). They have, therefore, developed a range of policies aimed at promoting young people's civic engagement and participation. British authorities, for example, have sought to encourage young people's civic engagement and participation with youth councils and educational projects (Sloam, 2007). In Scandinavian countries, young people's civic participation forms a major policy field, leading to experiments with 'e-democracy' and youth parliaments (IARD, 2001). The EU Council conducts a range of policies within the framework of the White Paper on Youth (WPY) – 'a response to the apparent disaffection of young people with traditional forms of participation in public life' (COMM206, 2005).

The Netherlands is another country in which young people's civic engagement and participation enjoy a significant position on policy agendas. Young people are approached as a distinct target group by Dutch politicians and practitioners, who have traditionally conducted and advocated specific policies aimed at young people's health, safety, education, and labor. Young people's civic engagement and participation form a newer policy field, sometimes addressed under the wider umbrella of 'citizenship' ('burgerschap') or 'active citizenship' ('actief burgerschap') (cf. Bürmann, De Groot, Van Dijk & Hilhorst, 2003; Penninx, 2003; Tonkens, Koffijberg & Enthoven, 2006; Van Lieshout, Van der Meij & De Pree, 2007).

Aside from current youth-specific citizenship policies, the Dutch meaning and practice of citizenship have varied substantially in the last century. Since the end of the 19th century until the 1960s, civic duties were mainly organized along so-called 'pillars' ('zuilen') – a term used in regard to a denominational segregation of Dutch society (on an individual and institutional level) between Protestant, Catholic, social-democratic and liberal segments. Until then, Dutch citizens were mostly active within the pillar they were member of, either by supporting leaders of a political party or trade union, or by participating in grass root level associa-

tions (such as sport clubs and community centers). Since the 1960s, however, these pillars disappeared gradually due to improved socio-economic and educational conditions and secularization processes, leading to a change from the 'pacification democracy' of the pillar era to a 'participation democracy' in which more people (especially those with high education) became active in professionalized issue-based (rather than pillar-based) initiatives outside the formal, institutional political arena, such as the women's movement, the Third World movement, and the environmental movement (Hartman, 2008).

Current youth-specific policies carried out by government (partly through formal education programs) and NGOs aimed at promoting young people's dutifulness in regard to either conventional forms of participation or forms of issue-based activities appear to be rooted at least partly in a public debate in which young people are regularly depicted as a group that is increasingly dominated by civically sub-optimal and/or self-destructive individuals. To a certain extent, this debate appears to be informed by bombastic contributions of journalists, public philosophers, and other opinion makers. A book by Meuleman and Van der Veen (2008), for instance, asserted that the 'truth of Auschwitz' is falling to pieces in the minds of Dutch youth, with which the authors mean that Dutch young people's ideas about what is Good and Evil are no longer based on what happened in Hitler's destruction camps. Still more vexing, according to the authors, is that young people might not have embraced new moral ideas - young people 'travel light, and all baggage is temporary' (p. 14). Another book by Wijnberg (2007) speculated that apathy is young people's response to an overload of media exposure; as a consequence of the enormous amount of competing truths available on the web (and elsewhere), the author maintains, young people no longer know what to think of social and political issues.

There have also been a number of academic studies about the civic health of Dutch young people. A recently conducted study based on a representative survey draws an obscure picture. Young people, this study concluded, think that other young people they know are, among other things, preoccupied with their physical appearance (according to 88% of the respondents), new technologies (93%), enjoyments (81%), experiencing 'kicks' (66%), and sex (66%); and that they are spoilt (64%), uninterested in politics (59%), impatient (55%), disrespectful towards authority (49%), and unengaged with their neighborhood (51%) (Lampert & Spangenberg, 2009). Other studies have indicated that Dutch young people score as low on political attitudes (political interest, knowledge, trust, efficacy, et cetera) as do young people in other Western countries (Aalberts, 2006; Nuus, 2002; Qrius, 2005).

Further, surveys of the Dutch central statistics agency – Statistics Netherlands; CBS – indicate that Dutch young people (especially young women and young people with low education) are not very active in various forms of civic participation. For instance, in 2006, 2% of young people was active in or a member of a political party; 6% visited a public meeting organized by the government; 2% contacted a politician or a government official; 8% participated in a demonstration; and 65% did not participate in any of these activities. Further, 29% did not vote during the last Dutch 2006 Parliamentary elections; 12% was member of an environmental organization; 8% was member of a trade union; and 20% was active for a neighborhood organization (CBS, 2009).

Also, earlier studies indicated that most Dutch young people do not consume news via traditional offline channels (television and newspapers). Less than 4% watches the news on the high-quality news program *NOS Journaal* (MiraMedia, 2005); other news platforms, Costera Meijer (2006) argues, are most often used when they present news as a ‘snack’, that is, a short, simple, informal and entertaining unit of information, or when they present news in ‘slow’ forms, that is, conveyed through the lens of an eye-witness.

Has all this ‘bad news’ about youth’s civic engagement and participation induced current youth-specific citizenship policies? There is no way to know with certainty, but such news seems to have sustained and shaped ‘common wisdom’ that youth are not the best citizens a democracy can have; and it seems that it is such a wisdom that has at least partly engendered or legitimized the many current local and national initiatives aimed at promoting the citizenship of Dutch youth.

The Dutch youth sections of political parties, for instance, attempt to promote youth’s participation in campaigns and ‘debate evenings’, and a special ministry of the incumbent Dutch government (Ministry for Youth and Family) tries to encourage youth’s participation in ‘social traineeships’, voluntary work, and decision making processes (Alle kansen voor alle kinderen, 2007). Dutch NGOs such as The National Youth Council (Nationale Jeugdraad) and United Smile also try to promote young people’s participation in volunteering, youth representation, and activities aimed at social bonding. NGOs also organize ‘informal’ debates and festivals to engage young people with issues like the environment, war and peace, and discrimination. They often aim to organize such activities in a style that supposedly fits young people’s customs and wishes. The NGO called Coolpolitics, for example, organizes ‘courses’ during the music festival Lowlands and ‘political debates’ during the Awards ceremony of the Dutch music broadcasting channel called TMF (see for more examples: CivicWeb, 2008a).

In order to promote and facilitate the civic engagement and participation of young people (and other age groups as well), Dutch government and NGOs have exploited a variety of internet tools, such as informational websites, newsletters, online petitions, discussion forums, profile networks, forward e-mails, et cetera. In fact, the government has established a special institute – called ‘Burgerlink’, ‘Citizenlink’ in English – that implements websites and grants awards to promote what it calls ‘eParticipation’. This institution aims, more specifically, to:

[use] information and communication-technology (ICT) as a utility to get citizens more involved in improving the public service, public administration and social cohesion. More and more links are made between governments and citizen communities. Citizenlink differentiates three forms of eParticipation (...): (1) political participation: how to involve citizens in the decision-making process?; (2) policy participation: citizens and governments cooperate together at the implementation and maintenance of policy; (3) social participation: how to reinforce the mutual involvement of citizens? (Burgerlink, 2009)

The internet is deemed especially appropriate to mobilize young people, because Dutch young people are heavy internet users. In 2007, for example, more than 97% of Dutch young people had internet access at home (mostly through a broadband connection); on average, they used the internet about 11 hours per week (Van Rooij & Van den Eijnden, 2007; Duimel & De Haan, 2007). A more recent poll taken in 2009 indicates that 99% of Dutch young people use the internet more than 10 hours per week on average (which is much more than older people) (STIR, 2009). They mostly do so at home, but also from a range of other places. In 2009, 49% of Dutch young people had accessed the internet through their mobile phones (CBS, 2009). Surveys also indicate that young people mostly use the internet for entertainment, simple communicative and social reasons, such as chatting on MSN Messenger and sending e-mails, downloading music, and working on an own webpage (CBS, 2009; Newrulez, 2007). A minority of young people (33% or less) reads news online, visits governmental websites, or downloads official documents (CBS, 2009).

Although it seems that most Dutch young people do not often use the internet in civic ways, the Dutch government has invested in the websites of different civic organizations run by youth for youth, such as The National Youth Council. The Dutch government also creates its own websites, such as En.nl (an anti-discrimination website) and Watvooreikelbenjij.nl (a website aimed at promoting ‘socially acceptable’ attitudes), in an attempt to influence the behavior and values

of young people. Governmental bodies also introduced and subsidize a series of online information portals for youth. The municipality of Amsterdam, for example, funds *Youramsterdam.nl*. Further, politicians like Balkenende (the current Dutch Prime Minister), Bos (Minister of Finance and leader of the Labor Party), Verhagen (Minister of Foreign Affairs), Wilders (MP), and many others have created personal accounts on *Hyves.nl* (an immensely popular Dutch social networking site), they campaign with short movies on *YouTube.com*, they have weblogs to profile themselves vis-à-vis the electorate, and they *Twitter* to keep interested people updated about their daily activities and thoughts.

NGOs that do not directly operate within the formal political arena also target civic issues at young people via the internet. Websites as *Jeugd kabinet.nl*, *Coolpolitics.nl* and *Ikbengeweldig.nl* are used to enthuse youth about all kinds of social and political activities (CivicWeb, 2007, 2008a). The Dutch departments of social movements like Amnesty International and Greenpeace also use websites, newsletters and other internet applications specifically aimed at youth as a distinct target group. There are also online discussion forums that have distinct social and/or political goals. *Islamwijzer.nl*, for instance, aims to function as an ideological anchor for young Muslims who are 'searching for their identity'.

Some of these efforts online might testify to a certain optimism among politicians and practitioners about the concept of 'citizenship via the internet'. In the previous section, I discussed how several aspects of this concept have been investigated in a range of academic studies; in the next section, I will discuss which aspects will be investigated in the following chapters.⁵

This dissertation's contents

The following 6 chapters - chapters 2 to 7 - present a series of studies about the internet's role in the civic life of Dutch youth. Below, I discuss how these chapters interrelate and differ in regard to their focal points, goals and research methods.

Chapter 2 - The internet's civic potential - includes a narrative review essay (Bryman, 2008) about 5 recent books about the internet's civic potential in general and in young people's life in particular. This study was finished in the very beginning of my PhD research period (mid-2007) with the aim of identifying some of the main issues that need more investigation and reflection in order to further the state-of-the-art literature. A selection of these issues was subsequently addressed in 6 empirical studies, which were finished in the course of 2009. These studies are presented in chapters 3 to 7.

The issues addressed in chapters 3 to 7 are, as mentioned, related to the four different thematic focal points in the literature (see above): the production of civic websites; civic content online; the usage of civic web applications; and attitudes that underlie youth’s participation online. Although most chapters touch upon all of these themes, the research goals pursued in the chapters are mostly oriented at 1 or 2 themes only. As shown in table 1.1 below, chapters 3 and 4 are content-oriented, while chapter 3 is also production-oriented; chapters 6 is both usage- and attitude-oriented, while chapter 5 focuses on usage and chapter 7 on attitudes.

Table 1.1: Thematic focal points of empirical studies

Production	Contents	Use	Attitudes
Chapter 3: <i>When ideals meet practices</i>			
	Chapter 4: <i>Affective political marketing online</i>		
		Chapter 5: <i>Beyond the online/offline divide</i>	
			Chapter 6: <i>Reflections on the mobilization/normalization controversy</i>
			Chapter 7: <i>Views from outside the democratic box</i>

Thus, this dissertation does not aim to ‘cumulate knowledge’ about one specific research question. Instead, it includes studies that address a range of issues within the different focal points of the literature. Further, as discussed below in more detail, these studies rely on the different methods – survey, interview, and content analyses – that are predominantly used in the literature.

Chapter 3 – *When ideals meet practices* – presents a qualitative content analysis of the characteristics of 50 Dutch sites that – at face value – exhibit civic potentials. This study demonstrates how the selected sites addressed the importance of their issues, how the sites addressed online and offline activities, and the forms and structures in which the sites’ contents were embedded. This study is combined with a second, interview-based study of how the producers of 15 sites reflect on their target group (young people), goals, and institutional context. The goal of these two studies combined is twofold: generating an empirically grounded understanding of the internet’s civic potential for young people in the Dutch context;

and generating insights into how producers' perspectives and circumstances may and may not translate into content online with an apparent civic potential.

Chapter 4 – *Affective political marketing online* – comprises a qualitative content analysis aimed at demonstrating how emotional appeals engendering anxiety and enthusiasm were constructed on the Dutch youth sites of Greenpeace and World Wildlife Fund.⁶ The goal of this study is to illustrate how emotionality can constitute a salient trait of online attempts to engage young people with civic issues, and to discuss how this saliency poses a host of new research questions.

Chapter 5 – *Beyond the online/offline divide* – investigates whether and how young people combine a range of online and offline civic activities in 'modes' of participation. Using confirmatory factor analysis (N=808), I examine a model with four participation modes in which online and offline activities might converge: Politics, Activism, Consumption, and Sharing. The main goal of this study is to reflect on 'online participation' as a theoretical and analytic construct.

Chapter 6 – *Reflections on the mobilization/normalization controversy* – discusses one of the major controversies characterizing the literature about the web's civic potential: does the internet 'mobilize' participation among not-already-active and -engaged young people and people more generally (mainly claimed in web-based, prescriptive or speculative studies), or does it 'normalize' patterns in civic participation (often concluded by survey-based studies)? I argue that some mobilization claims focus on manifestations online in specific cases and on specific moments, while normalization theses are normally built on assessments of general patterns in internet use. Consequently, case- and moment-specific surveys can be employed to further evaluate the mobilizing or normalizing nature of internet use. Based on such a survey (N=819), and using structural equation modeling, I investigate the role of political interest and political knowledge in the use of Kieskompas.nl and Stemwijzer.nl – two Dutch vote advice applications – among young people and older people during the Dutch parliamentary elections of November 2006.⁷

Chapter 7 – *Views from outside the democratic box* – presents an investigation of youth's internal and external efficacy feelings in regard to the four participation modes distinguished in chapter 5: Politics, Activism, Consumption, and Sharing. I demonstrate how interviewees in 10 focus group sessions conceptualized the presence and absence of efficacy, and how they articulated the significance of efficacy in relation to their activities in the four modes. This study's goal is to reflect on political efficacy as a theoretical and analytic construct often used in survey-based studies. As such, this study does not address 'online participation' per se, but efficacy as an attitude that might underlie youth's participation online and offline.

Table 1.2: Goals and methods

Chapter	Main research goals	Main methods
2 <i>The internet's civic potential</i>	In study: Investigating focal points in 5 books Of study: Reflecting on an agenda aimed at furthering extant research	Narrative literature review
3 <i>When ideals meet practices</i>	In studies: Investigating the characteristics (study 1) and production (study 2) of Dutch sites Of studies: Reflecting on the civic potential of the Dutch youth web, and the production processes that influence this potential	Study 1: Qualitative content analysis Study 2: In-depth interviews
4 <i>Affective political marketing online</i>	In study: Investigating the construction of emotional appeals on the Dutch youth sites of Greenpeace and WWF Of study: Reflecting on a research agenda focused on emotionality in online attempts to engage youth	Qualitative content analysis
5 <i>Beyond the online/offline divide</i>	In study: Investigating how online and offline forms of civic participation converge Of study: Reflecting on 'online participation' as an analytic and theoretical construct.	Confirmatory factor analysis
6 <i>Reflections on the mobilization/normalization controversy</i>	In study: Investigating the role of political interest and knowledge in VAA use Of study: Reflecting on the mobilization/normalization controversy	Structural equation modeling (path analysis)
7 <i>Views from outside the democratic box</i>	In study: Investigating how youth discuss efficacy in relation to their civic participation Of study: Reflecting on efficacy as an analytic and theoretical construct	Focus groups

The different research goals pursued and methods used in chapters 2 to 7 are summarized in table 1.2 above. In an eighth and final chapter, I summarize the key empirical and theoretical conclusions of chapters 2 to 7, and I discuss the more general, overall picture drawn by the different chapters, and some of the limitations of this dissertation in relation to persisting reflection and knowledge gaps in the state-of-the-art literature in general.

It might be considered a strength of this dissertation that it combines different quantitative and qualitative methods to pursue divergent research goals. As such, it is aimed at providing a broad range of explorations and reflections that are relevant to the state-of-the-art literature about the role of the internet in the civic life of young people. Terms like 'triangulation', 'facilitation' and 'complementation' are often easily used to refer to and, indeed, rejoice in a multi-method and

multi-angle approach such as the one applied in this dissertation (Hammersley, 1996).

It should be noted, however, that mixed-method approaches are not uncontroversial. Critics argue that any method is connected to a distinct epistemology and ontology; consequently, critics maintain, epistemological and ontological commitments differ incommensurably between studies that use qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g., Hughes, 1990).

The ‘paradigm war’ between proponents and opponent of mixed-methods is longstanding, ongoing, and most probably never-ending (Oakley, 1999). Instead of trying to resolve it here, I propose to read the chapters to come through a ‘pragmatic’ lens, viewing ‘research methods as techniques of data collection or analysis that are not as encumbered by epistemological an ontological baggage as is sometimes supposed’ (Bryman, 2008, p. 624). Although I would argue that such a pragmatic perspective entails, in itself, conscious epistemological and ontological choices, it does provide a provisional way of reading the following chapters in a manner that is epistemologically and ontologically relaxed.

Before doing that, however, it ought be noted that there is some overlap between the literature reviews provided in some of the next chapters, and between the next chapters and this chapter. This overlap naturally results from the fact that chapters 2 to 7 were initially written as separate journal papers – with their own beginning, body and ending – in reference to the same literature framework introduced here. Further, chapters 3, 5 and 7 are partly based on data acquired for the EU-funded, 3-year international research project CivicWeb (www.civicweb.eu). While the 13 reports I authored or co-authored for CivicWeb are not part of this dissertation, they may be consulted as additional reading about the role of the internet in the civic life of Dutch young people.

Notes

- ¹ Although essentially two different pillars of democratic citizenship, engagement and participation are not necessarily two disconnected duties. One of the conditions that voluntary participation logically requires is engagement; voluntarily doing an activity is based on a feeling or conviction that the activity ought be done. Conversely, engagement does not necessarily require participation. One can have feelings or convictions about an issue without being willing or able to do something in regard to that issue (Ward, 2008). Further, in this dissertation, the terms ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ will be used as defined above, thus the former term in relation to behavioral virtues, and the latter term in regard to emotional or mental virtues. In the literature more gen-

erally, however, scholars have regularly used the term 'engagement' in regard to actions as well.

- 2 Competing or interrelated processes are called 'generational effects' and 'period effects'. Generational effects refer to 'habitual patterns of political behavior [that] are generally acquired during an individual's formative years - in the family, school, workplace, and local community - and these habits gradually rigidify over time, creating persistent differences among successive generations.' Period effects 'can be attributed to a particular major historical event which had a decisive impact upon all citizens in a society at one point in time, exemplified by experience of the Great Depression during the 1920s and 1930s, the end of the World War II, the 1960s student protests, or the dramatic transition to democracy in post-Communist Europe' (Norris, 2003a, p. 9).
- 3 See for general discussions about and reflections on the historical development of this research field and internet-related social studies more generally, see, for instance, Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2005), Livingstone (2005), Miller and Slater (2000), and Wellman (2004).
- 4 Studies that are not about the internet's civic potential have produced some worrisome conclusions about possible negative psychological and social effects of internet use. Wellman, Quan Haase, Witte and Hampton (2001, p. 439-40), for instance, mention the following negative effects: (1) Newbies often experience stress and time pressures after getting computerized; (2) More complex uses of the internet create problems because programs often function badly and much time is required to cope with computer failures; (3) Contact with less enjoyable people, perhaps bringing unwanted information, may depress and alienate; (4) Not all uses of the internet are social. Much activity is web-oriented, seeking information or engaging in solitary recreations. Moreover, many social activities online (such as e-mail) are asynchronous, delaying gratifying feedback; (5) Computerization and the internet can blur the home-work boundary. People bring work home and attend to it rather than to their families, friends, and other activities.

Some other (partly related) web hazards discussed in the literature concern exposure to pornography; promotion of unhealthy forms of sexual intercourse; facilitation of dating between strangers, leading to an increase of STDs; risks of spam, hacking, financial fraud, and other forms of online criminality; increase of anti-social behavior due to online peer-pressure; facilitation of online forms of bullying and harassment; development of exploitative social relationships; recruitment activities by criminal or terrorist organizations; and a narrowing down of information consumption when people tend to consume news that aligns with their own beliefs (e.g., Bugeja, 2005; Genuis, 2005; Hospers, Hartering, Van den Hoek & Veenstra, 2002; Klausner, Wolf, Fischer-Ponce, Zolt & Katz, 2000; Lamb, 1998; McFarlane, Bull & Rietmeijer, 2002; O'Connell & Bryce, 2006; Quayle & Taylor, 2001).

- 5 More detailed discussions of how the studies of this dissertation relate to extant research and theory are provided in chapters 2 to 7.

- ⁶ These websites were not aimed at the full age group of my dissertation (that is, young people between 15 to 25 years old). Rather, considering the websites' contents and the activities promoted on these websites, they appeared to be mainly aimed at teenagers.
- ⁷ VAAs are about electoral politics, and this is why I have preferred to use the term 'political' (and not 'civic') internet use in this chapter.