Abstract

This paper examines the ways nine teenage Australians—identified as being ‘at risk’ of social exclusion—are using online networks to participate in society. The research finds that online networks provided the participants with valuable opportunities for social inclusion. These findings are contextualized in relation to current Australian Government education and social policies which, on the one hand aspire to support young people’s social inclusion, and on the other restrict their ability to use online networks in public and private spaces because of safety and health concerns. This study contends that by defining and understanding the social value of young people’s online network use we can move toward a policy framework that not only addresses potential online risks, but also supports equitable digital inclusion for young people.
Introduction

The central idea behind the network society thesis is that contemporary social, political and economic practices, institutions and relationships are now organized through and around network structures (Barney, 2004; Castells, 2000). Manuell Castells provides three core reasons for this: first, economic agendas strove for the globalization of capital, production and trade; second, societal changes were mobilized by demands for individual freedom and open communication; and third, the development and proliferation of information communication technologies (ICTs) enabled and strengthened these changes. Castells (2000, p.187) has contended: “Inside the networks, new possibilities are relentlessly created. Outside the networks, survival is increasingly difficult.”

The notion that the internet is best understood both technologically and metaphorically as a “network of networks” has been long established (Dutton, 1996, p.392). Since the beginning of the world wide web, users have been connecting to the internet to communicate with one another, to buy and sell resources, to learn and teach, and to play and entertain. However, it is more recently—since around 2003—that a variety of public online spaces have emerged that enable more active internet use by supporting users to create and distribute content. Most of these online spaces operate through network structures.

In this paper, rather than focus on specific kinds of online environments that enable new forms of user participation, I instead focus more broadly on online networks that require membership. I define an online network in this paper as an internet-based environment that requires membership for participation whereby membership facilitates a relationship through which resources (both
material and immaterial) can be mobilized. By focusing on the aspect of membership in this definition, rather than on the specific technical features of different online platforms, I aim to shift the focus away from the technology to focus instead on human-centered concerns. In this paper my primary interest is to consider: why did the young research participants choose to join online networks?; and did their membership and participation provide meaningful opportunities for them to participate in society?

It is understood in this paper that online networks can be private or public, open or closed, small or large, commercial or non-commercial, free or restrictive. It is also understood that the technological features of an online network do not pre-determine use: the same online network can be used differently by individual members depending on their ICT capabilities (defined as access, knowledge, skills, support and literacies), while the collective use patterns of a network will likely influence the way it is defined and developed over time.

The use of media and ICTs to develop and maintain professional, social, economic and cultural networks and to engage in social practices is well established (Haddon, 2004; Jenkins, 2006b; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992; Wellman, 1999). But Barry Wellman finds that “networked individuals” are growing in prevalence and significance—particularly in wealthy industrialized nations—due largely to the proliferation of ICTs such as the internet and mobile phones (Wellman, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2007). These ICTs now “form the necessary infrastructure of everyday life” and they are increasingly used to build, grow and sustain networks (Barney 2004, p.178). The increasing ubiquity of these ICTs impacts particularly on the way relationships and social networks are created, mediated and maintained and, consequently, on the way that societies change and develop.
In recent years young people’s uses of online networks—including email, chat, social network sites, virtual reality environments and communities of interest—have received considerable attention from academics, policymakers and journalists. A study of young Australians aged 8–17 years (n=1003)\(^1\) found that while young children aged 8–11 years, spent 30 minutes per day online on average, for teenagers aged 15–17 years this increased to just under two and a half hours per day (ACMA, 2007). What young people used the internet for in a three-day period varied significantly with age. The key activities carried out by the older group of teenagers (aged 15–17 years) included, spending 45 minutes per day on communication activities (such as emailing, messaging or chatting), 25 minutes on homework, 23 minutes playing online games against others, 24 minutes on social network or user-generated content sites and 14 minutes viewing audio-visual content. This suggests that for older teenagers the internet is used for diverse purposes but, on average, most of their time online is spent using online networks that they have voluntarily joined.

Participation in society has been defined in relation to young people as “the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives” (Hart, 1992, p.5). When participation in society takes place online it is clear that the community “in which one lives” in a physical sense may become less important. Instead, we can more broadly understand participation in society as the process of engaging with decisions which affect one’s life and the lives of others.

\(^{1}\) This study combined a quantitative national survey with qualitative media time-use diaries.
However, rather than a consensus regarding what new online network practices tell us about the way young people are participating in society, paradoxical claims continue to be made. On the one hand, recent Australian and international research provides qualitative evidence of the civic (Blanchard, Metcalf, & Burns, 2008; Coleman, 2008; Rheingold, 2008; Vromen, 2007), cultural (Byrne, 2008; Ito, 2006; Williams, 2006) creative and educational (Jenkins, 2006b, 2007; Ondrejka, 2008), self-expression and social development (boyd, 2007, 2008; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Livingstone, 2008), and health opportunities (Beattie, Cunningham, Jones, & Zelenko, 2006; Blanchard, Metcalf, & Burns, 2007; Dutta, Bodie, & Basu, 2008) that are provided by young people’s use of online networks. On the other hand, quantitative and qualitative research finds that young people’s uses of online networks can be risky, dangerous, and in need of supervision, monitoring and even constraint (for example: Fleming, Greentree, Cocotti-Muller, Elias, & Morrison, 2006; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007b; Muir, 2005; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2007; Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007b). In between, other research finds that the prevalence of both risks and opportunities online mean that a balance must be sought between complete online freedom for young people and some adult control (Byron Review, 2008; Livingstone & Bober, 2004; Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007a).

But rather than seeking this balance, it is now evident that when an online network becomes popularized by young people in Australia, the first response of some State Education Departments is to block its use in all state schools.2 For example, since 2006 in Queensland, state school students have been unable to use web-based email, popular social network sites including MySpace, bebo, Tagged and Facebook, content-sharing network sites such as Flickr and

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2 In Australia a ‘State School’ or a ‘Public School’ refers to one which is fully funded and administered by the state government. In Australia 67% of students attend state schools (ABS, 2007).
YouTube and popular blogging sites such as LiveJournal and Blogger (Author, 2008a).

Furthermore, in 2007 the Federal Australian Government launched NetAlert, a policy package that included a major national advertising campaign that provided alarming information about the way young people were allegedly being bullied, stalked, harassed and were taking risks online (Author, 2008b). This advertising campaign was supplemented by a range of internet-filtering packages that were offered free to every Australian household and library. These filters provided a diverse range of options for parents and librarians to block and monitor young people’s internet use, including their use of popular online networks (see Author, 2008b).

In light of these conflicting tendencies—whereby online network participation is seen by some academics and policymakers as enabling and empowering, and by others as requiring supervision, monitoring and even constraint—this paper examines the online network use of nine teenagers considered ‘at-risk’ of social exclusion. Elsewhere I have written about the academic literature that examines the online risks and benefits of young people’s online network use (Notley, 2008a) and I have examined the online risks and safety measures taken by the nine research participants discussed in this paper (Author, 2008b). Here I focus exclusively on investigating whether the research participants’ online network use has a social value; I do this by adopting the policy concepts of social inclusion and digital inclusion.

**Social Inclusion and Digital Inclusion**

In Australia, social inclusion was first embraced as a policy concept by the incumbent Rudd Labor government during its 2007 election campaign (ALP, 2007) and it has since been assigned its own Ministry (Gillard, 2007). While related, social exclusion is different from poverty (which exists “when people’s income is so inadequate as to preclude them from having an acceptable
standard of living”) and from deprivation (“an enforced lack of socially perceived essentials”) (Saunders, Naidoo, & Griffiths, 2007, p.11). Instead it exists when people “do not [or can not] participate in key activities in society” (Saunders et al., 2007, p.11).

Because the social exclusion/inclusion concept focuses on the ways people are excluded from participating in key activities in society, it has been used to contribute to context-specific analysis of what Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen refers to as “the relational causes of deprivation” (Sen, 2000, p.51). For Sen, social exclusion is a caused by capability deprivation, with causation operating through a diverse range of attitudes (for example, based on racism and gender divisions) and on specific forms of exclusion (for example from access to technology, labour or credit markets). This means that for social inclusion policies to be effective, they must be concerned with the capabilities people require to participate in society in ways they have most reason to value and with the barriers that impede people from developing their own capabilities (Sen, 1999, 2000). While the sort of participation people are likely to value is unlikely to fall into neat, separate categories, it is generally understood that social, economic, civic, and cultural activities will be included.

Social exclusion has provided a framework for core governmental policies of EU member states since the early 1990s (de Haann, 1999; Silver, 1994). Since this time there has been an increased interest in understanding the role of ICTs in combating social exclusion and mediating social inclusion. As a consequence, in the UK, social inclusion has been used for some years to develop a concept of digital inclusion. For instance, in 2004, a committee of government, research and non-government agencies argued the need for a governmental ‘Digital Inclusion Unit’ and outlined the issues and specific socio-demographic categories that would need to be considered in
designing a comprehensive national digital inclusion strategy (Bradbrook & Fisher, 2004). The UK government subsequently published the report ‘Inclusion through Innovation’ in 2005 and funded a team to implement the report’s recommendations. The UK Government-funded Digital Inclusion Team defines digital inclusion as: “The use of technology either directly or indirectly to improve the lives and life chances of disadvantaged people and the places in which they live” [emphasis original] (Digital Inclusion Team, 2007, n.p.).

The concept of digital inclusion differs from that of the digital divide because it moves the focus away from technology access to instead emphasise technology use (see Notley and Foth 2008). In this way the concept connects with Henry Jenkins’ (2007) notion of the ‘participation gap’ where the difference between what people are and are not doing with ICTs is the focus. However, digital inclusion also differs from the participation gap concept because it is specifically concerned with ICT use that supports participation in society, rather than use more generally. The Digital inclusion concept has provided EU researchers, policymakers and civil society organizations with the opportunity to engage in an ongoing debate about what the term means, why it is important and how it should be addressed in policy and practice (Bradbrook & Fisher, 2004; Fresh Minds, 2007; Ipsos Mori, 2008; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007a; Selwyn & Facer, 2007; Social Exclusion Unit, 2005). The Australian Federal Government has not yet articulated a policy concept of digital inclusion; however, this is probable given its recent adoption of a social inclusion policy framework. Drawing from the work of Amarty Sen, digital inclusion can be understood as the ICT capabilities people require to participate in society in ways they have most reason to value. The concepts of social inclusion and digital inclusion are used in this article as a way of connecting young people’s ICT access and use with their ability to participate in society in ways that they value.
Methodology

In 2006-07 I carried out research with three groups of young people aged 12-18 years who were located in a rural, suburban and an urban site within the State of Queensland, Australia. This research was focused on investigating young people’s online network knowledge and use. I spent two weeks living in each location to carry out this research; however, this followed on from more extensive field trips to these locations over a two year period as part of a broader study that examined young people’s ICT access and use in Queensland (see Hartley & Notley, 2005; Notley & Tacchi 2005).

In the rural and suburban research sites the young participants were found to have very limited knowledge of popular online networks. The research identified that this was the result of a number of factors including a lack of internet access at home and in the local area, restricted and censored internet access at school, a lack of personal peer networks for whom online networks played an important role, and a lack of enabling learning environments which supported and encouraged online network use (Notley, 2008b). Because of low levels of online network knowledge and use in these locations, it was not possible to consider the social inclusion value of the participants’ online network use across the three case study sites. For this reason, this article presents research findings from the urban research site only; this site was located within a non-mainstream high school. Network knowledge and use among the participants at this school was found to be broad and extensive.

Each of the nine research participants at the urban site completed a questionnaire survey that examined their internet access and use, and each engaged in an in-depth interview with the researcher. Staff members at the school were also interviewed. Participant observation and
informal discussions took place around formal (in-school) and informal (out-of-school) uses of the internet during the two week period; this was used to support analysis and to triangulate research findings. Research data was analyzed using ethnographic data analysis methods involving the use of data coding to develop research themes as described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995).

The Research Context and Participants

Research was carried out at Greenland High School\textsuperscript{3} which was attended by students who were studying for O level or A level matriculation. All of the students at Greenland School were unable to attend a mainstream school for a range of reasons that included homelessness, mental health issues, pregnancy, drug abuse, family illness, distress, and truancy. This meant there was substantial evidence of high levels of disadvantage and social exclusion among the student population.\textsuperscript{4}

The nine research participants were aged between 15 and 18 years (mean age 16). Eight of the participants were female and one was male. Six of the participants had home internet access (five broadband). All of the participants used the internet on a daily or weekly basis. The participants had, on average, been using personal networks such as email and chat for several years—sometimes for more than five. All of the participants were using online networks for group socializing: a number had become skilled network users through their use of online game networks in their early teens, while for others this was a more recent occurrence through their

\textsuperscript{3} This is not the real name of the school.
\textsuperscript{4} A report providing evidence of high levels of disadvantage and social exclusion among the student population was provided to the researcher during the research period. However, to maintain the anonymity of this research site, a reference to this report has not been included here.
introduction to social network sites. In the following section a brief summary of the online networks most regularly used by some of the participants is provided. These summaries are derived from what I refer to as ‘network ecology narratives’.

**Network Ecology Narratives**

Combining the research data, ‘network ecology narratives’ were created for each of the nine participants. I use the term ‘network ecology narratives’ to refer to a holistic understanding of online network use; that is, an understanding that is developed by identifying the ways in which online network use was impacted by and impacted upon the broader life of the research participant. The ‘network ecology narrative’ concept used in this paper extrapolates from David Altheide’s (1995) concept of an “ecology of communication” where new ICTs are understood to create new modes of communication that change and mediate social interactions (see also: Hearn & Foth, 2007). Altheide established that there are three dimensions to the ecology of communication: an ICT, a communication format, and a social activity. Altheide’s concept is useful here because it establishes that ICTs impact on the flow of information between social actors, organizations and governments and thus they alter the way power is constructed, maintained and challenged. In this way, Altheide’s concept can be seen to connect with Castells’ (2000) articulation of the network society, discussed earlier in this paper, where networked information flows are understood to reconfigure participation and power.
The participants’ online network use was found to be primarily mediated by four factors: their social networks and whether they were reliant upon or extensively used online networks; personal interests; needs, both transient and ongoing; and ICT capabilities (Figure 1). Network ecology narratives were used in this study to: illustrate the development of each participant’s online network use over time; identify the ways in which online network use interacted with and supported offline needs, relationships, interests and ICT capabilities; and to highlight specific impediments or barriers that prevented or inhibited effective network use whereby networks are used to obtain social benefits (material or immaterial). Below, five of the nine research participants’ network ecology narratives are briefly summarized to illustrate the diversity of online networks that they employed and the ways in which their use of these online networks related to their offline lives.

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5 All participants’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity.
**Gemma, 18:** Had been using online networks for at least four years, starting when she first began playing the multi-user domain game (MUD) World of Warcraft. She used three different online journal networks—Livejournal, Deadjournal and VampireFreaks—because her different friendship networks used these different networks. Online journals networks allowed Gemma to keep up-to-date with what her geographically close and distant friends were doing and how they were feeling. Gemma was also an avid user of parenting and mothering networks—Bub Hub and Alternativeparenting.com—and, as with all of the participants, she regularly used personal online networks such as email and chat for communicating with friends and family.

**Lalita, 16:** Felt that her introduction to online penpals while growing up in a small remote rural town was the impetus for her current prolific use of online social network sites. Lalita used both MySpace and bebo on a daily basis and had become the moderator for a parenting group she established on bebo. Through these groups she had become a vocal advocate for the rights and needs of teenage mothers. She had also been a regular user of Bub Hub, an online parenting network, for more than two years, and she sporadically used a number of yahoo e-group networks for parenting and social support and to exchange household and baby goods with people living in her area.

**Angela, 16:** Said that social network sites MySpace, bebo and Tagged provided her with a way to express how she was feeling and to open up dialogue with people about the things she was angry about. Angela often had antagonistic public and private arguments with family, friends and acquaintances on MySpace but for her these online arguments merely reflected her life offline. Social network sites had also provided her with a way to meet new people with whom she felt she was likely to have something in common and they helped to stay in contact with her fragmented
and dispersed offline social network. Angela was one of the few research participants who had met up with people that she had befriended on MySpace. She claimed that she always did this wisely by taking friends with her and she stated she had met some good friends this way.

**Nathan, 17:** Used a wide range of online networks: IT-focused networks for learning how to configure ICT hardware and to learn about and access different software; fanculture networks to support his long time interest in Star Trek; personal network MSN to communicate with friends; and more recently, social network site MySpace to link up with his new peers at school. A year prior to the research, Nathan had uploaded his own Star Trek inspired video productions to YouTube. This was not an altogether positive experience for him; he had been chastised repeatedly by another YouTube member who then found Nathan on another Star Trek network he actively participated on and continued his vitriolic comments there. As a result, Nathan was now wary about uploading his own creative content online. Despite this, online networks had played a very significant role in Nathan’s life when he stopped attending high school to care for his ill mother for a number of years and he believed they would continue to play a role in shaping his personal development.

**Lisa, 15:** Used MySpace to communicate with friends and to listen to and find out about music and bands. Sometimes these interests had led her to unexpected places, such as becoming an advocate for animal and human rights via interactions with musicians like Pink on MySpace. Lisa did not consider herself to be highly digitally literate but she felt comfortable that when she needed to know something about one of the online networks she was using, her offline social network would provide her with advice, whether face-to-face or online through MSN chat.
The nine participants’ network ecology narratives, five of which are very briefly described here, indicate that each of the nine participants knew a significant amount about the diverse ways online networks can be used. Mapping the participants’ online network use produced a ‘long tail’⁶ that showed that just a few networks were popular among all (email, MSN chat and MySpace) until the commonality of network use petered off and became quite individual. In the following section the social benefits of the participants’ online network use is examined, using the framework of social inclusion.

The Social Inclusion Benefits of Online Network Use

Initially, this study had planned to assess the way online network use impacted on different forms of participation in society—social, economic, cultural and civic. However, the research findings from Greenland School complicated these categorizations by showing that they are not always distinct from one another. For example, online network use that was social was also found to foster economic benefits, while participation that was civic was also found to have been cultural and educational. For this reason these different forms of participation in society are discussed here together under the broad rubric of ‘social inclusion benefits’. The issue of meeting strangers online is also briefly discussed, in relation to social inclusion benefits.

Many of the online networks that were used by the research participants connected them with their offline social networks, including those that were dispersed and fragmented because of physical distance. For example, Andrea had experienced anger and depression about feeling

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⁶ This phrase was reputedly coined by Chris Anderson (2005) in an article in Wired magazine to describe new online market strategy that understands the value of niche market needs. It has been used since this time to refer to internet usage where some internet sites attract large audiences but far more attract small audiences.
uprooted when her family moved country while she was still in high school. Her most valued use of the internet was her ability to sustain relationships with overseas family and friends using email, instant messenger, social network sites and internet telephony. Through these different online networks she connected most frequently with her overseas relatives including her grandmother, who helped motivate her to move through a difficult period in her life. Andrea used social network sites such as bebo and MySpace to connect with her overseas cousins and to meet new people with whom she could relate in her new urban Australian location; she also used YouTube to support a shared cultural experience with family members across time and place by sharing video links with them. In this way, online networks were used by Andrea to hold her fragmented social network together; knowing this access to support was readily available provided her with a sense of security. “It’s [online networks] a way me to contact my friends and family... Because they are far away, instead of like talking face-to-face, it’s computer-to-computer.” (Personal Interview 21st March 2007)

danah boyd (2008) found, through her US-based qualitative research, that young people predominantly used social network sites such as MySpace to connect with offline friends rather than to meet new friends and that these sites provide digital networked public spaces where young people can freely hang out together. A need for digital public spaces may arise, boyd claimed, because access to offline public spaces such as the mall or park was restricted or because the ability to physically “hang out” was limited by geographical distance and a lack of mobility (boyd, 2008, p.120). All of the nine research participants at Greenland School used MySpace, blogs, MSN and other online networks to stay in touch and spend time with their far-flung and close-by friends. However, most also used social network sites and other online networks to find new friends and acquaintances. The point at which a ‘stranger’ became an
acquaintance or a trusted friend to the research participant was often difficult to define because this was affected by complex personal experiences and relationships.

For example, when Lalita became ‘friends’ with her boyfriend’s friends on MySpace (many of whom he had met through playing online games and had not met offline), this would be defined by many researchers\(^7\) as interaction with a ‘stranger’. However, Lalita’s boyfriend’s long-term relationship with these people (often spanning several years) provided her with evidence that they could be trusted and that it was safe for her to communicate with them. The strength and validity of their relationship with her boyfriend had been rendered visible to her in a number of ways through the public or semi-public conversations and interactions they had engaged in with him on MySpace and other online networks.

Similarly, when people in the Star Trek BBS online community came to Nathan’s rescue when he was being cruelly mocked in public forums over some creative content he had posted on YouTube, he was provided with reasons to trust the people who defended him and, coupled with his ongoing interactions with them through these online forums, he felt he could move some of them from his MSN ‘acquaintances’ friends list to his ‘good friends’ network. In addition, the three mothers in the group—Gemma, Eva and Lalita—had become acquainted with other young mothers through the online network, Bub Hub. Some of these acquaintances had later become friends through events for parents that were organized through and promoted on this network. All of the nine participants stated that they had made new, close friends through the use of online

\(^7\) It has been common practice in the UK, the US and Australia to define interactions with a stranger as those with someone the participants has not physically met before despite this not necessarily capturing anything meaningful. Pew Internet & American Life Project have more effectively defined strangers in relation to teenagers as “someone with no connection to you or any of your friends”, and then asked respondents if they felt scared or uncomfortable as a result contact as one way of assessing risk (Smith, 2007).
networks and most (seven) had met up with friends made online. The research findings emphasized that there was no simple binary between ‘friends’ and ‘strangers’ online. Instead, new relationships were mediated through complex ties and relationships that were then often articulated via “public displays of connection” (Donath & boyd, 2004, p.71).

While social network sites were found to be particularly important in terms of developing new relationships with friends’ friends, many of the interest-based online networks used by the participants were not at all associated with existing relationships. In most cases, interest-based networks supported the participants to develop or join a new social network based on shared interests rather than on existing relationships. Lisa’s use of online band networks to stay informed about music and the interests and beliefs of musicians she likes and Nathan’s use of a Star Trek fan website network to meet people who share a love of all things Star Trek connect with a long history of peer-to-peer fan culture (see Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Jenkins, 2007). Through peer-to-peer networks, fan cultures support what Henry Jenkins (2007) has called a “participatory media culture”. A participatory media culture Jenkins defines as, “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (p.3). Jenkins argues that there is evidence to show that participatory cultures have proliferated online, particularly among young people and they provide many of the skills and cultural competencies required for full online and social engagement by supporting “peer-to-peer learning, a changed attitude toward intellectual property, the diversification of cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace, and a more empowered conception of citizenship” (Jenkins 2007, p.3).
Certainly all of the participants were engaging with online networks in ways that were inspired by popular cultural interests. Many of the participants shared links to media content with family and friends; some appropriated music, films and TV programs to create a sense of self-identity on their own network profiles. These media and cultural practices supported shared experiences between the participants and others that took place across time and place with far-flung family, friends, acquaintances and strangers. By sharing cultural content online Andrea was able to maintain strong relationships with her overseas family, Nathan was able to meet people who shared his love for Star Trek and Lisa, Gemma and Josie were able to develop their own personal communities of interest based on cultural affiliations (to goth and punk subcultures) and personal tastes (for example, by identifying with an obscure animation series hosted on YouTube).

But many of the research participants at Greenland School were also engaging with interest-based online networks that were not associated with popular culture. The most striking example of this was Lalita, Gemma and Eva’s extensive and rewarding uses of online parenting networks. None of these participants knew one another when they began using parenting networks but each had used a common network—Bub Hub—as a key source of information and support during their pregnancies and after they had given birth. All of these young women had learnt about offline events to support parents through Bub Hub and they had all made new friends through these activities and through their online and subsequent offline engagement with other mothers. In this way Bub Hub had become an important form of social support for these young women.

Similarly, Barbara Ley’s (2007) ethnographic study of users of an online mothering network website, Coming Up Roses, found that members gained social capital through forms of participation that were similar to that Lalita, Gemma and Eva were engaged in. Ley found that
the Coming Up Roses network “enhanced members’ abilities to access information, seek and give support, form social ties, and develop a sense of safety and security” (n.p.). Ley found that while specific information needs may have instigated initial participation on the Coming Up Roses network, members had developed an “architecture of commitment” where the social and emotional benefits they gained from active participation had built a strong and enduring network that was able to dynamically evolve. In some ways a similar, but more fragmented relationship had been developed through the more commercially oriented Australian-focused parenting networking, Bub Hub, for Lalita, Gemma and Eva. All three of these research participants had made enduring friendships through this network and all felt they could return to it when they had specific parenting related needs.

In addition to Bub Hub, Gemma had also regularly used an alternative parenting network website—Alternativeparenting.com—designed to support the information needs of parents following an ‘alternative’ lifestyle. However, rather than feel a close bond and commitment to this community as Ley (2007) described the women using Coming Up Roses had, Gemma imagined that she would have little in common with the people she communicated with on this network and had no desire at all to meet any of the other members offline or to even communicate with them online beyond the subject of parenting: “I don’t think I would really get along with them as people. I just get along with their parenting style. So talking about parenting stuff is fine but I don’t really talk about much besides that.” (Personal Interview 14th March 2007)

In this way Gemma believed that a single common interest or need was sufficient cause to for a fruitful exchange. Unlike Ley’s “architecture of commitment”, Gemma’s use of this parenting
site was purely functional: she was aware she had something to give to other members and that they had something to give her, but she felt no enduring commitment to the network or the members per se. Instead, Gemma felt that she would use the AlternativeParenting.com network while it was beneficial and she would finish using it when it was not. What this example tells us is important: online networks can fulfill young people’s short-term information and communication needs in ways that their offline environments may not be able to.

After several years of using numerous online parenting networks, Lalita found that she had acquired significant expertise in terms of understanding what was on offer and what she liked and disliked about different groups. Recognizing a gap in terms of the information circulating through these networks, Lalita decided to create her own Australian-focused teen parenting group on bebo. This form of active participation on an online network supported her to have a “public voice” (Rheingold, 2008) while it simultaneously developed a diverse range of skills and literacies that were social, technical and critical. For example, Lalita had learnt to become a moderator, an editor, and a group leader in the process of creating her own online network. She learnt about group dynamics, maintaining an audience, and producing content. All of this knowledge Lalita had learned independently through online activities that remain highly marginalized in the Australian formal education system. Without home access school provided Lalita with her only opportunity to spend time online. Lalita was aware that most, if not all of the networks she was active on, were banned on EdNet, the Queensland Education Department internet-filtering system: “It’s stupid. They ban everything that’s interesting.” (Personal Interview 23rd March 2008)
As for civic participation via online networks, despite the fact that all of the participants initially claimed they were not politically or socially active on issues that mattered to them, three of the nine participants had carried out more traditional forms of civic engagement, such as writing letters (emails) to politicians or government bodies. All three of these participants viewed this kind of action as having limited potential. While Nathan got a response back from his email to his local MP about the state of his local park, he was dubious about whether this MP would really take any action. Josie had emailed her local MP about public transport but would have preferred face-to-face communication where she could be assured of a response. Gemma had emailed the Queensland Health Department about her poor experience of the public hospital system and she had written to the Department of Transport to complain about pram-unfriendly train stations, but felt that she had received “stock standard responses” from both government departments. None of the participants had directly engaged with government bodies using online networks other than email. Some of the participants were hesitant to do this because of a lack of trust in government bodies, but others were very keen to hear about opportunities that existed. None of the participants knew of any online networks that could support genuine two-way direct dialogue with government bodies.

In terms of the economic benefits of online network use, Nathan used online forums to learn how to build and repair computers and to get faster and cheaper internet access, Lalita used Yahoo! egroups like e-cycle to exchange household and baby products, and Josie used a network that supported artists to sell their work online (deviantART). These experiences all provide evidence of the different ways young people can benefit from online networks in monetary terms. Economic benefits can be understood more broadly as well. In recent years, the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) has given prominence to the ‘participatory web’ because it
considers that user-created content is now integral to a rapidly developing online business model that capitalises on the social networks, creativity and knowledge of its users (see: OECD, 2007). This business model, the OECD has suggested, may signal important changes in the way many businesses operate in the future. In this way many of the skills the nine research participants gained through their online network use may support them in years to come—to find a job, to learn new skills or to market an idea or product.

Finally, all of the participants had gained substantial educational benefits from their online network use that supported formal school learning as well as informal learning interests and needs. Using online networks Lisa was able to draw from the pool of knowledge within her online networks to create an assignment on animal rights and to get feedback on her ideas for this assignment from friends; Josie was able to learn how to market her artwork online; Nathan was able to learn advanced IT and creative content production skills; Lalita was able to learn about countering discrimination and to acquire the internet skills required to her to do this online; Sophie received critical feedback on her poetry and learnt that her writing moved people; Gemma, Lalita and Eva learnt about parenting methods and skills. One relevant point that should be noted here: Greenland School’s openness to students using online networks within the school environment had supported these benefits and had at times allowed the participants to channel the educational benefits of informal online network use into their formal education curriculum. This could not have happened in most state schools in Queensland because of the highly restrictive Ednet internet filtering system.
It is clear from the research that the participant’s online network use provided them with opportunities to participate in society in ways that were social, economic, cultural, civic and educational. In this way online network use had supported all of the participants’ social inclusion.

**Supporting Social Inclusion through Online Networks: A Way Forward**

Participation in society can only be understood through a wider lens that defines the notion and meaning of citizenship. In *The Wealth of Networks*, Yochai Benkler (Benkler, 2006, p.272) wrote that “we are witnessing a fundamental change in how individuals interact with their democracy and experience their role as citizens.” For Benkler, new tools for communication and the networks they sustain offer citizens the ability to move beyond the consumption of information and instead become “participants in a conversation” (Benkler 2006, p.272).

Stephen Coleman (2004; 2008) connects with and advances this claim when he states that not only have ways of engaging with civic society changed, so too have young people’s ideas about what sort of participation is valuable and desirable. Coleman suggests that one way for governments to support civic participation is to engage with young people’s organic and autonomous online participation and to “not exclude everyday political experience, such as the negotiation of feelings and sensitivities, the governance of spaces and relationships, and the many intersections between popular culture and power that affect life and lifestyle” (Coleman 2008, p.204).

As this article has highlighted, some state government education departments in Australia have opted to ban and ignore students’ popular uses of online networks; by doing so, young people are forced to learn about the risks and benefits of online activities in informal ways. We know that
young people are already interacting online and that for older teens in Australia most of this interaction takes place through networks. If online networks are used by a majority of young people then this encourages the question: whose responsibility is it to ensure that young people have the necessary capabilities to use them in safe and effective ways?

With the social inclusion benefits of young people’s online network use increasingly evident, it is important that the Australian government considers how social and educational policies and programs can mitigate online risks—including a risk that a lack of access, support, skills and use may contribute to the further social exclusion of some young people. But rather than only focus on risks, education and social inclusion policies must also recognize the value of online networks that support young people’s social inclusion, particularly for those young people ‘at-risk’ of social exclusion.

**Conclusion**

While there remains a great deal for researchers, educators and policymakers to learn about how new forms of online network use can be translated into opportunities for young people’s social inclusion, it is clear from the research presented in this article that significant opportunities do exist. The research presented considered the online network ecologies of nine teenagers living in an urban Queensland environment and identified that online network use provided all of these participants with valuable opportunities to participate in society. The research also highlighted that the participants valued the social benefits they gained from their online network use.
These findings are significant in that they highlight the social inclusion value of young people’s online network use; however, it is essential to point out that the nine research participants discussed in this chapter can not be considered representative of a larger youth population. Instead, the eight young women and one young male discussed in this paper represent technology ‘early-adopters’ in Australia who are in many ways experimenting and leading the way in their uses of ICTs. Thus, while we can only perceive these young early-adopters of online networks to be representative of themselves, their experiences provide insights regarding the possibility for social and educational policies to pro-actively support young people to develop their ICT capabilities in ways that have meaning to them and to therefore facilitate widespread and equitable digital inclusion for young Australians.

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Bio
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