



research summary

children and young people's views on web 2.0 technologies

Introduction

The overarching aim of this project was to gather young people's views about web 2.0 technologies. Such technologies include social media and social software: they consist of online tools which allow users to share, collaborate and interact with one another. These technologies allow and involve interactive use of the internet, rather than mere one-way presentational use. These tools and websites include popular social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo, and media sites like Flickr and YouTube.

The project was interested in young people's personal use of social media, but also in how they might use these tools in a community or local authority (LA) context, for example, to communicate with other young people, organise meetings and events, express their views, or take part in a youth cabinet or similar representative group. The more detailed aims of the research were centred on key research questions.

- What is the extent to which children and young people currently make use of web 2.0 technologies, especially social networking sites, and how do they use them?

- How can web 2.0 technologies help to engage children and young people in expressing their views about their needs, their concerns and the services offered to them?
- What advice would children and young people give to social work educators and practitioners about maximising the benefits of web 2.0 technologies for their clients?

The aim was to produce a report that would provide useful information for LA personnel considering using web 2.0 tools and policy personnel considering future forms of communication within children's services fields.

Methodology

In order to obtain children and young people's views on web 2.0 technologies, semi-structured discussions were held in focus groups. Focus groups were conducted in three LAs: a London borough, a shire county and an urban unitary authority. The participants were all in the 11–19 age group and were youth cabinet (or similar) representatives, and were therefore probably more 'digitally literate' than young people who were not in a similar representative position.

The three LAs were recruited by means of an email request for assistance with the project. These were sent to a youth participation officer, or similar. The LAs, which agreed to take part, tended to have already used social media in some way to canvass young people's views and encourage participation in decision making.

In addition to the young people's discussion groups, four adult LA officers were interviewed by telephone. They were all youth participation officers, though their official job titles varied slightly. With one exception, they were from different LAs to those that provided focus groups. The focus groups and the adult telephone interviews were all conducted between April and October 2009.

Main findings

- The findings indicated that web 2.0 technologies were used extensively by the young people featured in the study (all of whom belonged to a youth cabinet or similar group) for personal use, participation in peer discussions and expressing opinions.
- A small minority of young people did not use these technologies, raising issues about digital inclusion, partly because the technologies required can still be expensive or other barriers to their use. Agencies working to obtain young people's views may need to take steps to address issues of inclusion.
- Much of the use of these tools takes place in informal or peer-supported contexts. Therefore, a good proportion of the development of e-skills takes place outside schools, colleges and youth groups. Professionals working with young people could perhaps make more use of the informal development of e-skills.
- Young people are confident and feel safe when using these tools. 'Cyber bullying' and malicious use of texts did exist but were rare, and the young people either knew how to deal with these things themselves, or who they should turn to for advice and support.

Overall, there is enormous potential for using web 2.0 technologies to collect the views of young people and therefore involve them in civic duties and local and national democracy. Some LAs have driven this forward through, for example, the use of special council-supported websites (and web editors) enabling young people to discuss and share views on particular topics, and sharing this good practice would be beneficial to all LAs.



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