

Make, Share, Care: Social Media and LGBTQ Youth Engagement

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Social media is potentially a very useful tool for grassroots organisations that concern themselves with political action for social justice and/or the provision of community facing support services, such as LGBTQ charities and community groups. Social networking sites in particular offer the possibility of communicating with multiple constituencies and can be used to publicize services, campaign, engage potential sponsors, create peer networks, as well as communicate directly with existing and new service users. When it comes to LGBTQ youth engagement, social media outreach work offers a means to effectively reach its target group. In light of recent research in the US (Mitchell et al. 2014) that suggests a significant difference by sexual orientation among youth in relying on online sources for sexual health information (78% of LGBTQ youth compared to 19% of heterosexual youth), it can be argued that an online presence is an essential dimension for organisations working with LGBTQ youth in any capacity. This article addresses the challenges and possibilities of social media to help generate and support outreach work with young LGBTQ people in the context of youth services. This involves among other things looking at how commercial, mainstream social media platforms are utilized in pragmatic and sometimes dissident ways to fit the needs of marginalized youth, highlighting in particular the praxis of making, sharing and caring online. Thus the article is of interest both for academics working in social media and youth research, as well as outreach support workers in the public and private sectors. Based on our collaborative research project with a community partner, the Brighton/UK based LGBTU [Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Unsure] youth project Allsorts, we examine the ways in which social media are currently utilized by a youth service provider to reach and engage with isolated, marginalized, vulnerable and at risk LGBTQ youth in their everyday campaign work and service provision.

Issues of vulnerability and risk with regard to LGBTQ youth may arise in a nexus of factors such as discrimination, lack of acceptance, social exclusion, isolation, self-esteem and well-being, particularly as they may coincide with economic vulnerability or homelessness. In 2010 Allsorts notes in their Annual Report that

since 2003, five of our young people have taken their own life and one died of HIV-Aids related illness. A third of our young people have attempted suicide. Many more self harm, either directly or through harmful behaviours (unsafe sex, sale of sex, substance misuse). Many suffer homelessness. Some struggle to form healthy relationships. These young people are not destructive. These young people struggle, often completely alone, for years to come to terms with bullying, abuse, discrimination and isolation from their LGBT peers. This has an impact on all of their life. (Allsorts Annual Report 2009-2010)

This reality speaks of different forms of vulnerability as well as giving an indication of the need to address issues of mental well-being specifically.

Charities, social services and health services are in a transitional phase in terms of shaping and being shaped by their social media provision. Currently, however, few digital programs for charities and small organisations are being rigorously evaluated (see Fussell, Sisco and McCorkindale, 2013 and Powell et al., 2010). As early adopters of social media, Allsorts therefore provides a rich case study that engages young people not just as audiences, but also as producers of content for the organisation's media profile.^[1] The 2011 national survey 'Equipped to Engage?' concluded that of over 130 local authorities, only 25% of organisations were using social media in youth work.

Attitudes towards the use of social media may have changed since this study was conducted, but barriers such as lack of understanding of how social media work in combination with restrictive e-policies remain.^[2] Social media initiatives at Allsorts may therefore provide examples of working practices that other organisations, service providers and local authorities may look to for knowledge and reassurance.

In light of this background as well as recent public debates about young people's management of risk in relation to social media – such as loss of privacy, unsafe contacts etc (cf. Livingstone and Brake 2010 and Pascoe 2011) – the study looks at, among other things, the translation of ethical guidelines from offline practice to services offered via social media, arguing that organisations may be influenced by such public debates to take a conservative or very cautious approach, but that this may have negative implications in terms of the aim to engage with hard-to-reach youth. Thus, we need to assess both the challenges of new media technologies as well as the potential for providing relevant support services through digital and online formats.

The area of ICT (Information and Communication Technology)-based interventions in mental health provision is emerging in tandem with the increased uptake of smartphones and social media among young people (c.f. Powell et al. 2010). The aim of the study is thus also to further identify and highlight future social media strategies that can enable such organisations and service providers to utilize social media effectively in their efforts to facilitate good mental health and wellbeing. Allsorts support a diverse range of young people who may have different challenges in their lives and their approach is to take a holistic view on the individual. In the drop-in (group) sessions service users frequently want to talk to staff and volunteers about issues to do with relationships, family and identity. However, in the most recent review of issues raised in a face-to-face setting 'mental health' (12%) and 'relationships' were (19%) the top two most common concerns (Allsorts Annual Report: Year ending March 31st 2013). Support is also offered over the telephone and increasingly via social media, and the observations staff have made about issues frequently raised in sessions or causes for intervention have put the need for mental well-being support at the centre of their social media provision. Further, in relation to digital media praxis as the 'making and theorising of media towards stated projects of world and self-changing', we also critically evaluate the notion of 'low level' microactivism (Hinton and Hjort 2013: 74) as associated with mainstream social media campaigning (often contrasted to a tradition of LGBTQ campaigning deemed more authentic), paying particular attention to the creativity, agency and identity work that goes into campaigns run by the young people themselves.

A critical point that the study to an extent confirms is that young people access and use social network sites in different ways, thus effectively creating multiple spaces rather than all participating in a large single networked space; in this respect there is a divide between Allsorts' digital campaigners and their support service users. Our observations confirm that socially connected positions offline tend to translate into active engagement online. However the study also shows that this division in some instances is being countered, particularly by the 'Transformers' group who with their wide-ranging social media use show a strong indication of bridging the maker – user divide. The multitude of networked space also presents the organization with challenges when it comes to the managing of different Facebook profiles, groups and other social media accounts, currently a structurally complex operation, involving different people, different purposes, different working styles. This energetic, expansive and somewhat straggling phase is expected to be followed by a phase of streamlining (ST, October 2013).

This article is based on qualitative on- and offline research with social media professionals, IT staff, youth workers as well as LGBTQ youth at Allsorts. It was conducted in order to evaluate current

practice and to help develop new avenues to utilize social media to support at-risk as well as more established but still marginalized social groups. Our research project set out in October 2012 with the aim to be mutually beneficial to Allsorts' understanding and development of their own emerging social and digital media practices as well as offering a critical showcase to ascertain insights into the opportunities and challenges of digital social media practices and youth engagement more generally. Over the course of 17 months during which Allsorts staff worked to generate their own practitioner oriented 'Simple Guide to Digital Social Media' for small charities and businesses (launched February 2014^[3]), we took the opportunity to engage in a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews as well as 'long conversations' (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1991) to identify and reflect upon the everyday techno-practices within this charity organization. We also engaged in virtual 'walk through' sessions where we, in conversation with Allsorts staff, reviewed sections of their social media provision. During this phase of our research project, the interviews and conversations involved predominantly Allsorts staff such as the director of the charity, youth engagement workers and social media/IT staff in order to gain a sense of practitioner experiences and their reasoning behind certain practices and developments. Interviews and conversations were held repeatedly throughout this time period and at various project stages, which allowed for a particularly reflexive dimension in relation to our practitioner-academic exchanges. As such, we were given insights into decision-making processes whilst being invited to comment on specific ideas and perspectives. In turn, Allsorts staff were invited to review and comment upon our research findings and interpretations of their perspectives and practices. We also had the opportunity to experience and participate in a number of community engagement events organized by Allsorts, such as their latest young people's conference in February 2014.

The aim of the research collaboration was and continues to be one of fostering further insight into and understanding of digital social media practices to inform and enhance baseline provisions in youth support work. The insights gained into the working practices thus far will be taken forward into the next phase of the research project, which focuses on and engages with service user perspectives and practices more specifically.

About Allsorts

Allsorts is a Brighton (UK) based Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Uncertain (LGBTU) youth charity organization, founded in 1999. The charity works to raise awareness, promote good practice and facilitate the creation of safer and more supportive environments for LGBTQ young people and supports vulnerable, alienated or marginalized LGBTQ young people in Brighton and Hove and the surrounding area. They provide a range of group activities, walk-in sessions and one-to-one support.



Photo by Sam Milford

Their current social media use can be divided into three main areas: support services aimed at LGBTQ youth well-being, youth volunteering activities such as the Young People's Voice (YPV) campaigns and PR / fundraising. In this article we concern ourselves mainly with the use of social media as part of the support provision and the youth-led campaigning. Across these three categories of activities, Allsorts uses a range of social media. These include blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Google+ and Tumblr. Facebook and Twitter dominate in the communication with the support groups. Facebook is also used as a platform for the youth volunteering group's campaign work, often in combination with YouTube. Facebook, Twitter and a blog on the website are used to increase awareness of the organisation, not only among potential service users or youth volunteers but also among potential supporters and other organisations. Rather than using individual Facebook or Twitter staff profiles, staff engage online via a youth engagement profile serviced by an individual member of staff who is employed to facilitate the youth volunteers' activities and support their social media engagement and a communal 'allsorts staff' profile. This arrangement, a common practice among people who use social media as part of their job role, is an example of how organisations pragmatically modify a social media tool to best serve their needs.

Networks within the organization are layered. Sparsely knit networks are superimposed by smaller, more densely knit networks (cf. Rainie and Wellman 2012). This potentially gives the benefit of both types of social networks. The larger, more loosely formed networks – constituting for example those that follow Allsorts on Twitter, or those that are friends with the Allsorts staff profile – allow for maneuverability, offering 'bridges to multiple social worlds' to use Rainie and Wellman (2012: 56). On the other hand, the more densely knit groups are characterized by their organization around articulated identity formations (e.g. theGBTU men's group, theLBTU women's group, the sixteen and under group, the transgender group and the group for bisexual folks). These mirror the offline group activities, a non-public membership-by-invitation structure, and may provide 'bonding, solidarity, and security but at the probable cost of insularity and social control' (Wellman, 2012: 56).

The networks are by and large created and moderated by the organization. They are not cliques of friends based on offline pre-existing friendships and acquaintances. Whilst more generally speaking young people's participation in online communities predominantly mirrors their offline social networks (Quan-Haase and boyd, 2011; Pascoe, 2011), this may radically differ for LGBTQ youth who often use online social networks to reach out to LGBTQ-identified individuals, groups and organisations precisely because they don't have these in their offline lives or locale. Furthermore, we suggest that the use of SNS (Social Network Sites) for outward-facing communication, such as campaigning, the reposting of local community events and other's campaigning material, alongside that of the interpersonal communication works in powerful ways to produce a sense of belonging and a germane online environment for the exploration of identities.

Social media and LGBTQ youth

Today's LGBTQ youth grew up with the Internet. LGBTQ online resources and environments are important sources of information and socialization for them. Previous research (Driver 2005, 2007, Crowley 2010 and Laukkanen 2007) indicates that LGBTQ youth go online and seek out LGBTQ-related content for a sense of belonging and to socialize. These aims remain very much the same in terms of social network sites. 'Youth meet others, flirt, maintain relationships, and break up in these "networked publics" (Ito et al. 2009)', Pascoe (2011: 8) notes, and this is all part of the environment and discourse in which a youth organization operates both offline and in social media. MacIntosh and Bryson (2007) argue that social networking sites are 'constitutive of everyday locations of engagement and signification' for LGBTQ youth. This is reflected in our study: social media are not just an online extension of the activities at the centre. They are interconnected in more complex

ways, as social media are part of lived experience, not separate from it. The social media provision not only mobilizes an interest in the centre's activities but also enhances the ambiance and energy of these activities. Moreover, the center as an inclusive social space remains vitally important. LGBTQ youth, compared to youth in general, have limited use of public spaces or are limited in their expression of identity or exploration of their sexual identity in spaces such as the school environment.

Social media incorporates a large field of online interactive media where users or audiences can contribute to or typically comment on material published by professionals or other users. SNS can be seen as a more specific subcategory of social media that emphasize the networking element or connectedness of its users (Ellison and boyd 2013). Users of social media are also producers of a 'social artifact' (Cooper and Dzara 2010: 101) which is the online persona; a curated expression of the self. As Cooper and Dzara (2010: 101) note, 'For the Facebook user self-revelation is not merely an act of sharing personal details, but is also an active construction of one's perception of who one is.' The mediation of the self often involves a praxis of re-mediating a host of online and offline media from mainstream sources as well as user generated content. Social media and SNS have developed in a direction from mainly featuring forms of self expression through the personalization and adornment of a profile page (like MySpace) to a form of self expression that prioritises social capital, social relations and being networked (typified by Facebook). Further, users of social media are engaged in media making as part of the everyday, from the posting of photos, uploading video diaries, writing blogs or producing cartoons, to more creatively involved artefacts such as visual or audio-visual montages. Ellison and boyd (2013) emphasise how today's social media are a mixture of user created content and user generated content, like re-posts or links to material generated by others: 'Today's profiles are not simply self-descriptive, static text, but rather a dynamic combination of content provided by the user (such as status updates), activity reports (such as groups they've joined), content provided by others (such as virtual gifts that are displayed on the profile or "tagged" photographs uploaded by others), and/or system-provided content (such as a subset of one's Friend network and activities on third-party sites).' (Ellison and boyd, 2013: 154)

Features of SNS that our interviewees have highlighted as major benefits include the ease with which one can move between different modes of communication within the same platform: between one-to-many and one-to-one, between posts that are limited to a particular group and those that have a wider audience, between announcements about activities at the centre and other media content like news stories that are deemed of interest to those in their network. Another feature they have highlighted is how SNS enable communication that is asynchronous (e.g. posts and their comments, direct messages, @replies on Twitter) as well as synchronous (e.g. chat). Hence the same platform, for example Facebook, can be used variously as an engagement tool, publicly facing advertising for the organization, a multifaceted communication tool for 'internal' communication between staff and service users, and among youth. These observations resonate with Whittaker and Gillespie's (2013: 492) conclusion that

central to the definition of social networking is a process of displaying relationships, events and dreams to the community and receiving feedback (Boyd and Ellison, 2008) even if it comes in the form of no responses. In this sense, social networking sites are technologies of both the self and the community.

The notion of an LGBTQ 'community' and how a young person relates to it, is however a concept in flux with both social and spatial factors. As Doolin (2010: 94) discusses in her research on lesbian youth seeking community support, 'who or what exactly comprises social support networks and communities, and how LGBTQ youth utilize the support offered from these sources' should not be

taken for granted, and she warns against the prevalent 'implicit assumption ... that all LGBTQ youth have some form of social support and community and, if not, that they know how to access these resources' (ibid, see also Kath Browne et al.'s Brighton-based project Count Me In Too on marginalization and power relations within the group of people who identify as LGBTQ). As is the testimony of Allsorts, these are concerns also in a city like Brighton, which is widely considered an LGBTQ-friendly place to live, with a lively 'scene' and vocal LGBTQ community. As Doolin (2010: 96) notes, even a highly 'visible community' can remain 'elusive.'

Cooper and Dzara (2010: 101) cite a 2009 study by Pempek et al. that indicated most young people (over 60%) provide open access to their profile and posts in their entirety. However from our interviews we have noted a more active approach to the management of social media profiles, and indeed staff and volunteers at the center give advice on how service users can optimize their settings to suit their individual level of self disclosure. We believe that this change in approach since 2009 among young Facebook users in part has to do with the increasing number of people potentially experiencing 'context collapse' (boyd 2011). This occurs when online networks expand and become more diverse and the bleeding of otherwise separate social circles (family, friends, school, work, etc.) occurs but also when more and more aspects of lived life acquire an online dimension, motivating an individual to have both a 'personal' and 'professional' Twitter identity for example. With these developments it is also increasingly problematic to simply talk about SNS as a 'youth space.' Daniel Miller (2013) has recently highlighted the transformation of Facebook into 'a mode of family interaction', prompting if not necessarily an exodus from the SNS by young people, most definitely a change in attitude towards its usefulness for peer to peer communication and a diversification in the range of SNS used for separate social spheres.

The decision by Allsorts to be relatively hands on in giving advice on how to manage online information shows not only that they take social media literacy seriously, educating young people about areas that otherwise are easy to overlook; it also shows an understanding of the importance for young people to retain control and manage aspects such as disclosure of their sexual identity at a pace and in a mode that is right for them. For many young people, whilst online participation offers a sense of independence and freedom and participation in 'unregulated publics' (boyd 2007), the fact remains that it requires them to negotiate this 'while located in adult-regulated physical spaces such as homes and schools' (ibid).

As found by Powell et al. (2010), mobile phone access is crucial for hard to reach and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. In view of this we note that most SNS have versions optimized for mobile phone access and some also have a way of handling messages and updates sent via the SNS in a way that resembles text messaging. Social media seems to have a real value in that it provides additional ways to communicate – e.g., chatting via Facebook may be more accessible than making a phone call or attending a drop-in session – but we also need to think about its limitations (assumptions about 'digital natives' (Hulme 2009), access to computer or smartphone, phone credit, etc.).

Social media and mental health support

A key aspect of our research is to think about how social media can be used to support young people in their mental well-being. LGBTQ young people often lack support networks in terms of negotiating their sexuality and as a consequence display higher levels of suicide rates, lower self esteem, mental health issues and problems coping with the school environment.

With the aim to evaluate and contextualise how Allsorts is using ICT and more specifically social media in their work to support LGBTQ youth in their mental well-being, we have surveyed existing scholarship on the use of new media technologies in counseling practices and mental health youth work, exploring opportunities for using social media in counseling and mentoring as well as identifying potential drawbacks and risks. The literature (Powell et al. 2010, Richards, 2009, and Richards and Viganó, 2012) identifies benefits such as cost effectiveness, remote access to services, extending the contact beyond appointments, effective ways of sharing information, peer support opportunities, and anonymity. Drawbacks discussed include digital exclusion, difficulties associated with mediated communication, risks around misinformation, issues of trust and credibility. The area of clinical uses of social media for mental health intervention is also under researched, reflected in Anderson and Speed's reflection that in terms of health services more broadly, 'as yet there is a lack of systematic evidence on the clinical outcomes on "social media" interventions' (2011: 3).

Similarly Powell et al.'s (2010: 5) report on the practices among a range of health care practitioners using ICT with young people (11-25 years), which evaluates its impact and value across a section of service users, notes that research on ICT in mental health for young people is an under researched area. Nevertheless they report evidence that 'both social and clinical benefits are possible' although 'difficult to generalise' (2010: 8). Writing in 2010 they also note that though a range of ICT was utilized in a number of different health care and youth work provisions, SNS were much underdeveloped as mental health support tools and not commonly used at all. From this we can conclude that Allsorts can clearly be considered early adopters from a practitioner point of view.

Media technologies are increasingly utilised to extend the contact between service providers and service users beyond the traditional forms of engagement, and various forms of e-counselling practices have developed since the 1990s (Grohol, 2004). In addition to one-to-one communication with mental health professionals, ICT more broadly and SNS specifically offer platforms for peer support networks to form. Many such networks are user-led and spontaneous, and some are initiated by a mental health professional or service provider.

A key feature of online mental health support is accessibility. This includes not just access to information, but access to communication. Access in this context implies that technological, geographical, temporal and knowledge restrictions have been limited or overcome (cf. Sanchez-Page, 2005). ICT also opens up options for reaching the service user(s) with a particularly scheduled timing: a text message at a point during the day the counsellor or mentor knows the young person is feeling vulnerable, or a scheduled post on Facebook to appear on the group members' feed in the evening time when they are more likely to be reading it, rather than during the day when the member of staff is in the office writing it. This is a strategy implemented by Allsorts, and as the platform generates feedback about how many have read a message posted in a group, for example, they can further elaborate on finding the best timing. It should also be noted that with increased access comes increased expectations and new cultures of engagement. It is therefore important to be very clear in the communication with audiences about staff availability, when and how quickly one can expect a response. If a structure is set up it needs to be sustainable in this respect.

Another concern in regards of access is the risk of digital exclusion. We should seek to nuance exactly what that may mean to particular socio-economical groups, ethnic communities' groups, age group or to individuals with particular circumstances as we seek to better understand the potential of social media to engage with hard to reach groups. Here more work remains to be done for Allsorts. Whilst digital exclusion is important to address, for the organisation these concerns are primarily understood through a comparison to the limitations of only offering the on-site youth support work. However, it is worth pointing out that Allsorts has recently set up a Young People of

Colour outreach programme.^[4] Further, they maintain a range of both online and offline modes of engagement. This approach appears significant in light of Mowlabocus et al.'s (2014: 17) recent observation from a study of digital literacy and the use of social media in health promotion, that 'online outreach work ...operates most effectively when it is conceptualised as one element within a more expansive outreach programme that also includes offline methods of engagement'.

Multiple facets of Allsorts' use of social media – moments of (productive) tension

Much of the public as well as academic discourses surrounding social media, in one way or another, grapple with questions pertaining to 'empowerment' through the technological, audiences as 'producers,' (out)reach, in/exclusion, boundary setting/transgressing and safety on/offline. In particular, when it comes to working with marginalized, vulnerable LGBTQ young people, these notions translate into everyday practices that shape and are shaped by technological possibilities as much as economic limitations, socio-cultural perceptions and opportunities for intervention. Allsorts – as a youth-led LGBTQ project and small charity organization – engenders a particular yet dynamic set of social media practices that allow insight into the tensions and opportunities generated by social media engagement more generally. This section highlights and considers the most pertinent points raised in interviews with Allsorts youth support and engagement workers as well as the Director of this charity.

Questioning empowerment and linearity

During its early years, Allsorts' strapline used to be 'From Crisis to Empowerment.' This was based on the idea of crisis intervention and the subsequent 'empowerment' of young people to deal successfully and positively with the challenges presented by being LGBTQ. However, as Director Jess Wood points out, Allsorts does not use this strapline any longer. Their thinking about intervention and 'recovery' is more complex than a simple model of 'empowerment' may suggest:

We are always troubled by our mental health funders [inasmuch] they want us to impose a linear journey of progress on our young people. ... [Rather] it's an oscillation, our young people work in circles and spirals. ... Empowerment reifies something that cannot be quantified. ... Our work is dynamic – dynamo means energy: we are constantly throwing opportunities at them that – realized – may become another building block for mental health. (JW, October 2013)

Importantly, Wood notes, if something else happens that throws the young people back into crisis, that is fine: 'We just want to ensure that they are not victims' (JW, October 2013). The services provided are there to prevent them from being locked into distress and crisis.

The challenge of dealing with crisis intervention, mental health and issues of well-being is met with a kind of mental and technological pragmatism at Allsorts that nevertheless does not underestimate the diversity of a multi-faceted young L-G-B-T and Q population. If 'empowerment' signifies a somewhat too linear journey in relation to mental health and well-being, it should be similarly questioned in relation to new media use in general and social media practices in particular. Herein lies a tension between the practitioner rhetoric of technological opportunity (if not determination) and practitioner experiences that, nevertheless, speak in more nuanced and indeterminate ways about the actual and potential benefits and challenges of social media practices and youth engagement as demonstrated below.

Young service users, young staff members and youth volunteers inspire the incorporation of social media at Allsorts. Their recent self-evaluation exercise of social media use, in order to produce a good practice guide for other small charities and business organizations, has provided them with the

opportunity to critically reflect on their everyday practices and social media strategies. In this context, part of Jess Wood's thinking presents what could be deemed a generational perspective on new media use: 'my generation [now in their 60s] are the digital immigrants, the young generation are the natives' (ibid.). However, setting up such generational boundaries in relation to ways of thinking about social media consumption can be perceived as reductive. We are critical of assumptions around youth access to social media and expect there to be variations within the target group in terms of social media literacy.^[5] As Sam Thomas, a youth engagement worker in his 20s and responsible for social media development at Allsorts, explains: 'To some extent this [techno-illiteracy affects] my generation as well ... we didn't have Facebook at school and I keep asking my 15 year old brother about things.' Given the speed, economy and infrastructural demands of technological change, developments across the social media sector in particular cannot necessarily be interpreted as providing a *natural* habitat for the young.

When is *free* not for free? Media practices for a sustainable future

Still, the advantage of coming from a relatively 'de-skilled' position, Wood explains, was that the Allsorts team could focus on what they wanted to achieve: '[generally] people are still negative about how superficial social media are. But it really isn't. If you take it back to basics you'll see [social media] as democratic, universal, making education and learning accessible' (ibid.). Therefore, for Wood, a salient aspect of digital social media is that they are free: 'enabling those who need it most – small organisations and charities' In her view, 'charities that do not have a digital social media strategy in place should not be founded ... digital social media constitute a revolution equivalent to printing'. In many ways, small charities such as Allsorts that depend on (short-term) funding and grants are by definition vulnerable and constantly under threat, especially in economic terms. Despite its growing success over the past ten years, Allsorts is no exception here. Wood points out that in relation to its overall LGBTQ provision, the charity 'will be struggling in two years time [when the current funding stream runs out] It's a declining picture [nationally], not an expanding one'. Her concern is that soon only major cities will be able to generate funding for LGBTQ centers and support groups.

In this context, although enthusiastic about the free aspects of social media use and potential/actual reach, Wood and Thomas are clear about the fact that digital social media as such cannot absorb or compensate for the decline in funds available: 'in two years time, it will be a questions of how we will sustain our digital social media presence' (JW, ibid.). As such, what kinds and how digital social media are being integrated into current Allsorts practices is a reflection of this projection. For example, in relation to the possible introduction of Live Chat (in the context of one-to-one support work), Sam Thomas explains the thinking in the group: 'If we set this up as a service and people become dependent on it, we'd let them down if we cannot sustain this' (JW and ST, October 2013). If and when all the public funding is gone, Wood intends to possibly take Allsorts into a voluntary model with a few part time staff and trained volunteers. Efforts would then focus mostly on what is being considered core business: 'helping young LGBTU people in distress ... so that they can walk into a room with other young people. The [virtual] campaigning would become secondary—getting a wedge in against homophobia' (JW, October 2013).

Local-regional-virtual: the shaping of on/off-line support networks

What begins to emerge here is the importance of local/regional networking and outreach on- and offline and the continuing importance of face-to-face encounters and support. As much as digital social media have changed the face of Allsorts activities over the past two or so years (Wood estimates that one third of Allsorts activities/services are mediated through social digital media), it is

evident that the specific locality of the charity continues to matter and that social media use is developed and guided in order to enhance existing network and support activities, rather than to replace face-to-face encounters, group activities and workshops. Since engaging with and through digital and social media, Allsorts has become more outward facing, expanding its audience locally, nationally and internationally (the latter more specifically to exchange [practitioner] experiences and best practice) (Lewis, May 2013). Still, 'local business' is their 'core business' (JW, October 2013). In the light of this, it is useful to consider the different levels and types of on-/offline engagement in order to critically evaluate the productive moments and creative production in relation to audience/youth engagement, outreach and (peer) support. In Sam Thomas's experience, 'a lot of the young people hear first about Allsorts through digital social media' (ST, October 2013). According to Wood, the Allsorts Website becomes more and more redundant in this context (JW, October 2013).

Digital social media provide a range of different platforms that are being utilized in differing ways and used for various purposes as they are shaped by and shaping the more specific cultural, social and economic means and positions of LGBTQ youth. Generally speaking, Facebook is utilized for 'easy communication' as youth worker Meg Lewis points out (ML, May 2013). During the induction process young people are invited to join Facebook if they are not already members. In Lewis's experience, Facebook offers communicative means that are 'much easier than anything else.' Using Facebook, young people contact Allsorts to ask for help; make disclosures through the inbox (in private messages); send random messages; ask for dates/details of activities and group meet ups. Allsorts member groups set up corresponding Facebook groups to accompany their offline group meetings. The running of multiple groups also has practical reasons. For example, the under 16 Facebook area is kept separate to comply with the age of consent. Here, members can put photos up that over 16s cannot access (ML, *ibid*). In Lewis' experience Facebook 'works [particularly] well with under-16s as school finishes at 4 pm and they have one more hour during which they can contact myself and [youth worker] Ben. ... Before Facebook this was problematic as they couldn't answer their phone whilst at school or they had no [phone] credits left' (*ibid*).

At the same time, as Facebook has come of age, it is being perceived as 'too mainstream' by various Allsorts groups. Jess Wood stresses that 'some groups don't engage with it [much] because it is too mainstream and public – with parents and [straight] friends being on it as well' (JW, October 2013). Caution is issued by Allsorts itself in relation to the Facebook use of its members in order to prevent accidental disclosure/outing through this portal. Sam Thomas points out that, in his view, it is particularly gay men who engage with Facebook most (in/beyond Allsorts): 'to connect with other gay men – especially if they are not out ... there are a lot of established [more informal] discussion groups [available on Facebook]' (ST, October 2013).

Media making = making lives livable

The Facebook mainstreaming of/through a more established gay male online culture sits in contrast to social media practices engendered by, for example, the Allsorts Transformers group. At this stage, trans-youth may be considered one of the potentially most vulnerable groups at Allsorts and in society more generally. According to Jess Wood, they are about ten or more years behind in acceptance and opportunities compared to the situation surrounding LGBTQ (young) people. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the Transformers group is one of the most active Allsorts groups, also in respect to social digital media use.

The Transformers ('tag-formers' for the under-16s; an eleven to 13 year old trans group is under development), in response to particular kinds of marginalization (there is also an awareness of not/mixing much with other Allsorts groups in relation to potentially coming out as straight, which

can be quite a big disclosure to make, according to Meg Lewis), champion in particular the use of the social networking and micro blogging platform Tumblr. Sam Thomas puts it this way: 'If you want to encourage young people to write about their experience and share it – then use Tumblr. If you want to convince people about something and raise awareness – use a Facebook campaign and tweet about it' (ST, October 2013). At this stage, according to Meg Lewis, 'trans young people at Allsorts have a strong desire to meet other trans people', rather than mixing with other groups (ML, May 2013). The use of Tumblr is facilitated by and for the members of the trans group themselves, rather than through the Allsorts communication team, and seems as such appropriate and inspiring for the current purpose and need of the group. Social media campaigns with a focus on visibility are potentially more problematic for members of the trans group, especially for the under-16s and those who live a stealth life. Yet as Ryan Gingell, Trans Youth Engagement and LGBTU Support Worker who leads on trans* digital and social media at Allsorts, notes, social media with an emphasis on visual communication and more open-ended structure seem to speak to the trans group (RG, December 2013). The Allsorts team is therefore there to help the young people understand the implications of being out on the scale that social media can involve. In this context, according to Jess Wood, are face-to-face experiences with someone 'like you' – in combination with online image use: 'to see people like me ... people I can identify with ... to see the reality... normalcy' (JW, October 2013).

The established and administered social media structures of Allsorts allow for and encourage the creative extension of social media use. In fact, there appears a productive tension between 'safety/user-regulation' as well as e-policy and a user-informed/inspired development of digital social media production. Sam Thomas, with particular reference to outreach and LGBTQ youth driven social media use muses about the potential future inclusion of Grindr in the Allsorts repertoire, providing to some extent a response to the limitations of more established, if not to say heteronormative, social media platforms such as Facebook. As Grindr appears to be increasingly used as a platform for socializing in addition to dating, such a move would potentially further connections with social media hangouts some of the young people choose to engage with in order to flag the support and work Allsorts offers young LGBTQ people in the local area. If Allsorts decides it is important to have a presence on Grindr, a location-based service for men who have sex with men, this will pose new challenges particularly around the issue of boundaries. However research on health promotion outreach on SNS and working practices among health workers are currently emerging (see Mowlabocus et al. 2014) and valuable insights about praxis may be gained from this.

Pragmatism prevails at all times at Allsorts and this means that old and new media platforms and means of communication are utilized in combination to cover as many bases as possible. This is illustrated especially through the practices of the support workers. As Meg Lewis explains, sometimes parents ban their children from using Facebook for a period of time as a form of punishment. In such instances young people may call in on their mobiles to find out what's going on. In some instances, when under-16s are in care, social workers advise against a Facebook profile because of the potential traceability: in such cases Allsorts facilitates 'access with pseudonyms ... otherwise we go back to the telephone' (ML, May 2013). Meg Lewis herself, alongside other support workers, likes to follow one-to-one support sessions with a check-up via text. In Lewis' experience, vulnerable young people who have moved away from the Brighton area and experience internet access problems find texting a good way to stay in touch with support workers.

Reaching out and/or networking the networked

Digital social media have changed and are changing the way in which Allsorts works and is perceived in and around Brighton. Thomas points out that more young people come to the drop-in from further afield now compared to years ago, for example, as far as Kent (further along the English

South East coast, but still relatively close in proximity to Brighton). In relation to Allsorts' online campaigning work, they do get 'Likes' from around the world (ST, October 2013). Although Allsorts has arguably managed to somewhat extend its reach geographically (not one of its core objectives given the financial limitations discussed above), the really hard to reach do not necessarily live further afield, nor can social media necessarily bring them closer to the centre of support. An interesting, if not entirely surprising picture emerges: Allsorts as an organization is based on a hierarchy of staff, volunteers and service users. Traditionally, volunteers have been recruited from outside the organization, but there is some fluidity between the two categories. According to Sam Thomas, there is more or less a 50/50 gender-divide, including a few trans/questioning volunteers. Still, 'the men are more likely to come forward [to lead], the women you have to push' (ST, October 2013). Amongst the over-16s, 'more men are accessing the group than women and amongst the Transformers, there are more trans men than women' (ML, May, 2013). Lewis points out that online demographics and practices appear to mirror the offline demographics.

In relation to considering digital social media for outreach purposes to engage those who are hard to reach, it appears that they are rather used by those who are already well networked. Sam Thomas therefore considers social media as complimentary to existing services and audiences (ST, 2013), rather than a simple means or answer to reach the very hard to reach constituencies. The economically hard to reach may not be able to access social media, according to Jess Wood: 'Brighton is a damaged city ... a city full of distress, much more so than its appearance suggests' (JW, October 2013). Homelessness and the sex worker scene, especially in relation to young gay men, are big challenges and notoriously difficult to tackle from a youth work perspective. On the other hand, Wood's theory is that some of the geographically more difficult-to-reach LGBTQ young people in rural areas of Sussex get reached through social digital media, 'but we cannot evidence that' (ibid.). The issue of remote access to services shows a tension between previous and new ways of working in the organization. Safety of the young person is also a priority at Allsorts. For this reason the organization has a well established and longstanding induction protocol to follow. In practical terms this means that for a young person to join any activities (also online) they need to visit the centre to be given the information in person and sign a form. This practice may have several benefits, but in terms of outreach work in the digital realm, it creates an impediment.

Given the context outlined above, the following section addresses more specifically the support provision of Allsorts in relation to mental health and well-being, particularly in relation to the impact of digital social media practices.

Mental health and well-being: fostering resilience through communicative media praxis

Most young people involved with Allsorts would not identify as having mental health issues, according to Meg Lewis. Instead, 'most can identify with positive well-being and emotional well being' (ibid.). Nevertheless, the young people seeking out Allsorts are vulnerable in a number of ways and to various degrees. As Allsorts youth worker and trained counsellor Ben Dew explains: '[It is] inherent in [being] LGBTU and growing up [It] makes you to some extent vulnerable'—either by having to negotiate more obvious hostile environments and being the victim of homophobia and bullying, or through more subtle experiences: for example, 'when the environment is not aligned to who you are' (BD, August, 2013). Dew explains that, generally speaking, most LGBTQ people experience over time some mental health issues at some point – or at least a sense of discomfort and dis-ease. In relation to Allsorts more specifically, he notes that there are 'quite a high number of young people with mild learning difficulties like Asperger's Syndrome. That's an added layer of vulnerability ... Trans young people are [also] an incredibly vulnerable group' (ibid.). Working mostly with young men, in his experience young people even with mild mental health issues can turn to

alcohol and drugs. There are also concerns regarding subtle sexual exploitation to quite obvious sexual exploitation: 'Unfortunately that's the way the gay scene is ... [and this is] true to most cities' (ibid). Being situated in Brighton, UK, Allsorts youth workers and counsellors are in a position to refer young people to a wide range of specific support services in relation to sexual exploitation, drugs and alcohol abuse. The uptake is nevertheless relatively low.

At this stage it is productive to evaluate Allsorts' digital social media practices more specifically in relation to their mental health and well-being services. This allows us to examine more generally the ways in which a supportive LGBTQ community may be engendered in and through its digital media communications. As will be illustrated next, the (productive) tensions within and through social media use in this context echo a number of fault lines already identified in the previous section in relation to experience and shaping of on/off-line practices, sustainability of services, depth, breadth and types of engagement, accessibility and reach as well as opportunities for peer support and mentoring.

One of the key features emerging from Allsorts' digital social media practices in relation to supporting good mental health and well-being is that of confidentiality rather than anonymity. We argue that one of the strengths of Allsorts' social media practice ethos stems from the fact that it counters many current initiatives that use new media technologies exclusively in their counseling practices and youth work and regard the anonymity of service users as an absolute priority. Allsorts diverges from such a practice in their choice of combining meeting house activities with social media activities. Interviews with youth workers and counsellors evidence that there are currently still perceived shortcomings in the use of social digital media as platforms for counseling purposes, given the lack of visual and embodied communication more traditionally relied upon in their therapeutic practice. Due to the size and funding scale of Allsorts as a charity organisation, current practices focus on frontline services and crisis intervention. Dew explains the nature of their work is therefore less counselling oriented than 'solution focussed work ... Dealing with the immediate problem' (ibid). Regular off-line workshops for young LGBTU people focus on 'affirmative work' and confidence building (ML, May 2013) – hopefully increasing their resilience levels to cope better with difficult and adverse situations and encourage a care of the self. One-to-one sessions with youth workers and counsellors are more specifically mental health oriented and, for example, make use of motivational interviewing techniques (ibid.). Arguably, at this stage, the use of digital social media is still relatively restricted and restrictive in relation to mental health work. Nevertheless, it can and does aid the possibility of quick intervention in conjunction with 'in-house' work and the use of more traditional media like the telephone. As Ben Dew explains, Facebook can become a tool in one-to-one intervention, 'if [there is] something significant [going on]—and it's a judgment call what makes it significant' (BD, August 2013). He remembers a case where he had done a lot of off-line one-to-one work with a young person who eventually left Brighton. The connection was kept up over the phone; 'however, sometimes they have no credit or they cannot speak because the parents are around ... [so this young person] just posted a message on Facebook' (ibid). Normally, Allsorts staff are quite bounded about getting involved in posted messages on Facebook: 'but, because this message popped up saying "I feel really depressed and down", I answered it immediately and we got into a chat. ... So, we will do it [get involved on Facebook]. On that basis' (ibid). Interestingly, it is in his persona as therapist that Dew still struggles with Facebook: 'It doesn't feel quite right and real. ... There is obvious stuff [missing] around reading body language ... the subtlety around how people speak ... I'm interested in Gestalt, the discrepancies of what people say and what shows in their bodies ... losing that is problematic.'

Other barriers to engage more in-depth through social media may seem more mundane but are nevertheless relatively common in relation to media literacy in the widest sense. As Ben points out: 'I cannot touch-type, which slows me down ... it doesn't have the same flow. I'm always worried I'm typing too slowly. I'm not used to it, I've been talking to people [face-to-face] for years' (ibid). Dew refers to a general increase in e-counseling practices (i.e. an online intervention through Skype chat function or email). 'I realize a lot of things are moving that way ... in my own experience when I was going through hard times – I received emails and letters that were incredibly supportive' (ibid). We argue that the combination of on- and offline support systems in relation to mental health and well being can provide a particularly successful strategy for organisations that are working locally/regionally and find themselves particularly vulnerable in relation to sustaining funding levels and therefore available staff/hours and training opportunities. There are clearly still questions around loss and gain in relation to the type and quality of on-line support that can be made available and indeed generated by a community itself. What the case of Allsorts demonstrates in relation to Facebook activities thus far is that the platform and its uses create a 'safe space [for young LGBTU people to talk about their concerns' (ML, May 2013). As such, according to Lewis, it supports mental health and resilience building even though counseling as such happens elsewhere.

Facilitating peer support: managing expectations

Peer support and social digital media praxis is not without its (productive) tensions either. From an Allsorts staff point of view (which is arguably limited in the way in which staff members aim to keep their roles bounded), 'You do see people making supportive comments [on Facebook], for example when someone has split up with a partner' (BD, August 2014). According to Dew, young people get in touch with Allsorts because they want to meet other young people, socialize and access support. Facebook activities are an opportunity to do so. Not surprisingly then, off-line spats and arguments can find their way onto Facebook, providing an opportunity for 'senior' young people to step in and intervene. Staff intervention is motivated at times when ground rules are ignored or broken. Staff draw on their experience from working in youth environments to filter out the stream of conversations they get exposed to whilst staying attuned to prompts that do warrant intervention and regularly challenge statements they 'overhear' when necessary. Here there are clear parallels between SNS and offline life. Staff rely on the e-policy that states that 'the key principles in digital and social media use are the same as in any professional youth work interaction' and beyond this make judgment calls or consult a fellow youth worker. Overall encouraged by the use of social and digital media by the young people themselves, the team is currently discussing the possibility of introducing a (peer) mentoring programme of which social digital media could be a part: for example, 'offering every so often ten minute conversations – Facebook chat – Somebody you know you can talk to' (ibid.). Arguably, there are challenges about how to enable, support and inspire peer-related matters and how to manage off- and online practices to generate a safe and creative arena within very restricted financial means. The careful management of expectations is important here. This is true in relation to how and what extent social and digital media are being utilized, tested and experimented with by staff, volunteers and services users. There is no 'one fits all' recipe and the charity is arguably doing well in interpreting and judging the notion of (good) mental health also as a question of social and communicative well-being. At this stage staff and volunteers are becoming increasingly aware of the potential impact the use of social and digital media can have on their time and activities management. Their thinking is directed towards increasing rather than duplicating their outreach efforts through these means. However, it is also clear that their off/on-line efforts ought to be seen as an ongoing exploration of opportunities and challenges, which some members of the team are more enthusiastic about and able to embrace than others.

Campaigning and creativity: the young people's voice

Social media has brought a 'shifting dynamic' in terms of communication and information sharing. As van Dijck (2012:142) points out, 'agents of different nature...and varied size (individuals, groups, collectives, societies) are building a connective space for communication and information'. However, most of the mainstream SNS are not LGBTQ-friendly by default. In fact, as Cooper and Dzara (2010: 102) argue, 'while Facebook can be seen as multiplying options for networking among LGBT individuals, in other ways it may be seen as perpetuating the hegemonic discourse by its creation of a structure that does not permit total flexibility in self-identification', by which they mean the heteronormative constrictions in options available for gender identity and relation status.^[6]

In addition to the social media use within Allsorts that predominantly aims to either disseminate information about activities and services or to enter into dialogue with services users (either one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many) discussed above, social media is used as their primary domain for a more politically orientated vein of work that is the young volunteers' group, The Young People's Voice (YPV). Young LGBTQ people's lives remain challenging in different ways and within different socio-cultural spheres: in family life, in school, in early working life, in contact with health services and so on. The Young People's Voice (YPV) is an expression of the LGBTQ youth community's desire to respond to and work to change social and cultural factors that they identify as negative pressures on their lives.

The YPV is a division within Allsorts that is made up of young volunteers (aged 16-26) and is supported by an LGBTQ Youth Engagement Worker, Sam Thomas, who is also the lead on the organisation's social media provision. There is a core group of about 10 people on average and the main purpose of their activities is to campaign on a particular issue – they run four campaigns per year. In addition their work also contributes to publicising Allsorts as a 'youth-led' organisation. They cannot simply be categorised as an LGBTQ rights campaign group, as their communication just as often pertains to issues of awareness raising (education) and LGBTQ youth well-being. The volunteers thus straddle these categories in their approach to challenging attitudes and policies on the basis of equality, inclusiveness, diversity and social justice. Campaigns have addressed numerous topics, including the effects of transphobia and discrimination on trans youth lives, coming out, diversity within the LGBTQ community spectrum, and their annual event 'LGBT Children, Young People and Families Day' aims to 'educate and celebrate LGBT identity and community.' The tone and ethos of their user-created content (UCC) chimes with the user-generated content (UGC) on their timeline / wall; it is about celebrating LGBTQ lives and 'positive images from around the world' whilst also negotiating marginalization and challenges in the LGBTQ youth community. The media content generated here also works to boost the social media provision across the whole of the organization. It contributes in significant ways to the social media environment and gives the organization an identity as one that is inclusive and actively working towards the well-being of all LGBTQ youth. In other words, the way material is re-circulated across the organisation's different profiles and pages works to augment the liveliness of their social media presence taken as a whole.

Volunteers are recruited mainly from outside the organisation, but some of the youth who are attending or have been attending support groups also get involved in the YPV activities. An event, like the Brighton Pride march or Trans Day of Remembrance, is often at the heart of a campaign, but the main objective is not so much to drive footfall to the event or drum up financial support; rather it is the awareness raising agenda that appears to be the main aim and motivation. From this perspective, it makes sense that the group's main presence is in Social Media.

Sam sees his role as being about empowering others to engage; he facilitates group meetings and administratively supports the dissemination across social media. The Allsorts Youth Engagement profile on Facebook was set up in 2009 and has served as the main platform for disseminating the YPV campaigning output. Its timeline serves as a semi-public archive of its activities, media products and network connections. More recently the YPV team has raised their ambitions with each of their campaigns and now often set up their own Facebook profiles or pages as well as a website for each of their individual campaigns. This indicates a successful trajectory in terms of developing youth leadership, with young volunteers increasingly taking ownership of the campaigns, but it also shows their empowerment in terms of having developed and practiced their social and digital media skills.

In interviews with the youth engagement worker we have asked whether the group thinks about their activities as activism, but they would not use that terminology – they say campaigning: ‘raising awareness of particular issues’ (ST 2013). Yet their engagement goes beyond the ‘clicktivism’ (Drew 2013: 172) associated with social media and its assumption that social media activism aims mainly to make the ‘participants feel good because they have taken a stance, but in fact may have done very little’ (Hinton and Hjort 2013: 74, see also Rintel 2013). To an extent, the group sees themselves as supporting other young people on a very local basis in that they ‘support from a distance’ (ST 2013) the groups at the centre by campaigning on issues that they have identified as being of direct relevance to their respective constituencies; bi-awareness, transphobic violence etc. It may not be entirely helpful to set up hierarchies of authenticity when it comes to understanding contemporary political advocacy using SNS. Our observations suggest that in the case of the YPV, their engagement is rooted in the lived experience of the young people at the centre as well as in a more international context through their participation in online culture.

Further we would argue these activities are framed within a discourse of ‘identity work’ and ‘trajectories of visibility.’ The content, style and message of these campaigns should also be understood in the context of an abundance of casual homophobic and sexist discourse in social media, typically homophobic or sexist jokes that go viral. These may typically initially be about negotiating an ‘ingroup’ identity or belonging but travel as ‘memes’ and implicitly contribute to a wider normalization of hegemonic gender roles and homophobia. In short, groups or individuals asserting homophobic and sexist attitudes is as much part of young people’s experience on social media as it is in school corridors or hanging out spaces. Pascoe (2011: 15) notes the ‘affordances’ digital technology and social media have given to ‘the homophobic harassment that is so common offline among teenage boys’. Young people’s social media campaigns may thus be understood as offering resistance by way of insisting on the possibility of a non-homophobic stance using the same media platforms.

The modality of their engagement is what we describe as ‘make – share – care’. This environment resonates with Jenkins’ (2006: 3) notion of ‘participatory culture’:

A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creation, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another.

It is important to note however that the volunteers in the YPV group are on average very involved with social media – and highly social and digital media literate. As Sam comments, ‘We’re very fortunate that we get volunteers [who] are particularly savvy around using Photoshop and various other... software to create these campaigns’ (ST 2013). In this sense these young individuals

approximate what Leadbeater et al. (2004) have described as ‘the professional amateur;’ they take the creating, disseminating and communicating they do within the remit of the campaigns as seriously as a paid job. This is an analogy to attempt to describe their dedication and labour in terms of time spent on planning, executing and publishing content. Another way to describe their level of engagement is to put it into proportion to the ‘average’ Facebook user. In this respect some of the current core members of the group can be categorised as so-called ‘power users’ (Hampton et al., 2012) who contribute much more content than the typical user. This is an indication not just of their creativity but also of a particular ease with social interaction – a fact that concurs with research that shows it is predominantly those who are ‘least socially excluded’ that benefit from online provision of or extension of services. In this sense the volunteers and the service users emerge as quite differently positioned in relation to notions of empowerment, self-image etc.

The divide we describe here is somewhat different from the established notions of a ‘digital divide’ with dividing delineations perceived as mainly being about access to technology, often linked to socioeconomic status (or age). Most users have internet access, albeit sometimes intermittent, via a computer or mobile phone. However social and cultural affordance appear to determine the level of active engagement in the social media sphere. As Quan-Haase and boyd (2011: 846) have noted, ‘Even if the “digital divide” is closing, a new “participation gap” has emerged.’ As Hinton and Hjort point out, ‘creating content not only involves creativity but also time, emotion and various forms of capital (social, cultural and sometimes economic)’ (2013: 60). Our observations suggest that the hybrid of on site and online, that typifies Allsorts building of social media engagement, to an extent alleviates the participation gap described by Quan-Haase and boyd but that it is possible to conclude that the gap is manifested in the stratification of levels of social media engagement.



Facebook count down calendar to the Allsorts Children, Young People and Families Day, February 2013.

The UCC produced as part of the YPV campaigns fits with Burgess’s (2007 cited in Hinton and Hjort 2013) term ‘vernacular creativity,’ which emphasizes how the content and its context of production as well as circulation is ‘characterized by the vernacular and everyday’ (2013: 61). Gauntlett (2011: 162) has emphasized both the political and emotional value of ‘making and sharing your own things,’ which in the online digital environment means not just circulating products manufactured by the mainstream media industry. The count-down calendars (see Figure 2) created by the YPV group in the lead up to an event typify this in that they use common desktop publishing tools to create

designs for Facebook posts that aim to generate buzz around the event. The group has also recorded and edited vox pop style videos for broadcasting online, using a simple but effective thematic organisation on topics such as ‘what does coming out mean to you?’

However, the platforms used by young people are far from an open creative web. On contrary, they have very set structures (as well as terms and conditions), prompting and directing users to express themselves in particular ways that directly or indirectly serve their business aims. Commentators debate whether SNS are merely ‘instrumental’ in relation to social activism or if they ‘change the dynamics of activism’ (Hinton and Hjort 2013: 72). We would argue that in the case of the campaigns that the YPV have produced that both the global nature of the internet and the vernacular culture of SNS have impacted the dynamics, direction and style of the campaigns. What we see emerging is local mobilization that draws on a much wider context of LGBTQ agendas and digital output. For young people it is a question of situating their ‘voice’ both in a local and global context; their travels online put them in contact with a host of international gay rights trends, yet to engage their more immediate audience they need to mould their strategies to speak to their local environment and concerns of their peers.



Facebook ‘AllsortsofStars – I am:’ campaign 2012

Looking at their 2012 campaign ‘[AllsortsofStars – I am:](#)’ for example, we can see how local and international perspectives are merged. The campaign features photo-collages of portrait images of members of Allsorts against a rainbow graphic design with various parts of their identities highlighted in text (see fig Y). This rhetorical device is emulating a US campaign for trans visibility entitled ‘I AM: Trans People Speak,’ which also focuses on communicating the diversity of transgender communities and utilises the same listing of identity ‘labels’ as the YPV campaign.

Although the whole of the ‘I AM: Trans People Speak’ is nationally and culturally specific, and its production values very different, something about its intent and address has struck a chord with young people, who have translated this into their own language, and thus the message becomes meaningful in their local context. For example, their linguistic repertoire is much more ‘quirky’ or playful than that of the original videos. It can be argued that this seamless organisation of material from across the globe is a distinct characteristic for the SNS era of social engagement. The young people’s reworking of already existing media texts into new content for a local audience indicates that their sense of connectedness is both enabled and conditioned – ‘engineered’ to use van Dijck’s

(2012) term by the social media platform. The media making is here a making of community through the shaping of an 'enabling / empowering' discourse; one that positions queer lives as entirely possible.

Our study also suggests that young people resist the protocol and conditions under which they express themselves as dictated by the SNS provider. Facebook, for example, is a closely surveilled and managed space and users are increasingly up against restricting limitations. The youth engagement profile, for example, does not align itself with the desired constitution of a Facebook profile or the company's terms and conditions that stipulate that each individual is only allowed a singular authentic profile, by which is implied a particular match between each profile and an individual (see Facebook terms point 4.2). Their profile represents a team of people rather than an individual whilst nevertheless enlisting some of the processes of self-presentation, of editing and packaging 'the self' through the assemblage of personality attributes to communicate to others an identity. In this respect it both enlists and resists the conditions of engagement as stipulated by the company.



One of the Allsorts participants at an IDAHOBIT 2012 campaign in Brighton

A profile is different from a page in that it simulates a more individual form of interpersonal communication rather than the more public form of communication that typifies organisations, companies or public figures who set up a Facebook page to communicate with a wide audience. At the time of writing the profile has 26 public images, the majority of which are group images. They mainly depict young volunteers at various events such as the Brighton Pride, or IDAHOBIT. An IDAHOBIT 2012 picture features a group of young people holding up hand written signs with messages that aim to draw attention to societal changes that would improve the lives of LGBTQ people, like 'we believe schools should have gender neutral toilets.' The posting of this image illustrates the merging of 'traditional' or non-digital praxis with digital cultures. The photos work to give a sense of 'who' the profile is, a group of young people with whom the audience can identify with or align themselves to politically. Some have settings that are recognizable as 'local' such as the Brighton seafront. They signal how active the group is, what type and level of political action they identify with, its affiliations and broadly speaking sets their 'agenda'. And lastly they work to authenticate the ethos of the YPV as a youth led initiative.

Conclusion

Pullen comments on the imaginations that the internet and online social network sites offer gay people, stating that 'we are living in a world where the discursive potential of an "imagined gay community" (Pullen 2007) seems vividly real through online interactivity and identity affirmation' (2010: 2). Questions remain however about to what extent and on what conditions LGBTQ youth can

be part of such imagined community, and questions remain about the differences in online resources and presence between the L, the G, the B, the T and the Q. Our study indicates a gender difference in terms of the levels of activity on social media as well as identifies a participatory gap along established fault lines of socio-cultural capital. Acknowledging this we would still suggest that with the contextualizing notion of a particular – in this case local – social media network being LGBTQ friendly, also ‘peripheral others’ (Ellison and boyd 2013: 162) take on a significant meaning and the multi-layered networks serve different purposes in a given moment whilst overall underpinning a culture of care.

The study identifies that social media are not built primarily with outreach objectives in mind. Community organisations like the one discussed here make pragmatic use of them, which involves a range of customised praxes that best serve their needs yet are inevitably shaped by the platforms’ fundamental structure—their DNA. This also means that reaching the hard-to-reach requires strategies that go beyond creating a social media presence. Social media can indeed be used to engage vulnerable or underserved LGBTQ youth, but it is in the work that goes into creating an environment that is relatable and meaningful to them that such opportunities lie. In this respect, we note that the existence of established offline strategies for creating such environments cannot be underestimated as a resource that informs the online praxis. Yet we also note some less compatible working practices.

An area that emerges as significant in terms of learning from the work of the organisation is how their perspective is one that is not just focused on the individual but rather relates the mental well-being of the individual to a more collective and social well-being. Different aspects such as counseling, crisis intervention, peer support, confidence building activities, and community activism inform one other. Their commingling across the social media platforms and different sub-networks appears unruly at times, but such is the nature of social media. Though practically structured at a micro level, the Allsorts social media youth engagement ethos in the main thrives on a make-do approach. Their co-mingling across the social media platforms and different sub-networks appears unruly at times, but such is the nature of social media and the organisation’s make do approach is guided primarily by the needs of service users as they change over time. The strength in this approach is the multiple social roles it allows the young people to inhabit and how it recognises the value of the connections within the group(s) as a resource in itself.

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