Social networking sites (SNS) have become an important arena for LGBTQ politics, community organisations and wider culture. They are used for campaigning on particular issues, for the circulation and finding of information and political news, for debate, for connecting with like-minded people who share similar interests or concerns, for awareness-raising activities as well as a publishing platform for a range of vernacular creative outputs ranging from political satire to the celebration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) subcultures.

Sonia Livingstone (2004: 11) argues that attention to content creation as a key area of digital literacy is ‘crucial to the democratic agenda’, positioning digital and social media users ‘not merely as consumers but also as citizens’ and a recent study by the Pew Research Centre purports that SNS users are ‘much more politically engaged than most people’ (Brenner 2013), which stands in contrast to debates questioning the authenticity and ulterior aims of digital civic engagement and activism. You are familiar, I’m sure, with terms such as clicktivism (Drew 2013) and slacktivism which mark a dissatisfaction with departures from previous forms of political communication.

LGBTQ persons were among the earliest adopters of SNS (Hammack and Cohler 2011). Yet at the same time we need to be aware that SNS, such as Facebook for example, are carefully managed and surveilled spaces of civility and users are
increasingly up against restricting limitations that make them seek out alternative SNS. Hence among young LGBTQ audiences, social media use is currently diversifying.

These factors combined present us with a rather complex picture in terms of the type, depth, conditions and extent of use in relation to activism and cultural resistance.

This paper is contextualised by widely held notions of young people as apolitical and concerns about a decline among young people in terms of civic engagement – discussed by Buckingham (2000), Kimberlee (2002) Marsh (2007) and several other commentators.

Put differently it is contextualized by profound and global changes in forms of political expression and participation that are intertwined with but not limited to the digital realm. The case study I hope will exemplify some processes of creative citizenship and online political expression.

The paper is further contextualised by the changes and continuities in the repertoires of political expression and activism brought by the digital realm. I will highlight some connections to traditional aesthetics of protest as well as some notable changes.

Against this background my paper will investigate the nature of LGBT political discourse and activism as it occurs in social media. It aims to understand the political applications of social media from the point of view of LGBTQ young communities. In addition, my research aims to understand the congruence between the aesthetics of digital and social media forms of LGBTQ activism and the resonance of these ideas amongst the public.
In contrast to the technological deterministic view that access to computers in itself will increase democracy and equality (Marwick 2013, see also Baumgartner and Morris 2010 on social media and political engagement of young adults), I argue that we need to look at how users negotiate – and sometimes subvert – the values and norms that technologies incorporate in order to make pragmatic use of mainstream platforms and technologies in working towards agendas of increased sexual democracy and gender equality.

In this paper I will look at some larger scale social media campaigns and compare and contrast these with some DIY media production within grassroots LGBTQ youth communities with the aim to: give some insight into the exploitation of digital and social media for political advocacy by younger generations of LGBTQ identified people. So the focus is on online civic publication rather than the use of SNS for the coordination of civic activities.

My main methods include discourse analysis of publicly available material on SNSs in combination with community based participatory action research, together with the Brighton based LGBTU youth organization Allsorts.

The aesthetics of protest are at once the medium and the message of collective action because they communicate the ideas and demands of activists whilst simultaneously attempting to ensure that such ideas resonate with the public. Traditionally activism has deployed banners, placards, flyers, stickers, badges, clothes, visual and performance art, but how does this aesthetic
language translate into the digital realm?

2. If we look at my first example from one of allsorts’ campaigns to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, we note a traditional or analogue mode of communication – the placard – being used in an online campaign. The visual language of the placard, its handwritten using a marker pen, signals a very personal address as well as a nod to a tradition of grass roots aesthetics. Looking at the placard more in detail we can note how it is also drawing on the widely familiar symbolism of the closet, signaling perhaps an intent to resonate with a wide audience. The photograph of the girl holding the placard works as a digital message when posted on Facebook etc whilst also alluding to a link between offline DIY campaigning activities and the FB campaign. As one photo among several, using the same style, it contributes to the notion of a critical mass and its situating online, as a digital artifact, allows for both a potentially wider and a more long lasting engagement with it [you can look at it for as long as you want for as often as you like]. As a digital image it is of course also open to further annotation or alteration once it is shared among SNS audiences.

3. By contrast if we look at one of the largest LGB rights digital campaigns to date, the US based HUMAN RIGHT CAMPAIGN social media campaign of 2013 we can note how it is lacking the obvious connection to previous forms of campaigning in its
expression– instead privileging a symbolic visual language that is much more abstract and uses an iconic form of representation. This flat visual style is familiar to us from the realm of marketing and branding.

4. A red version of the HRC logo was promoted and circulated as a comment on two marriage equality cases in the U.S. Supreme Court was hearing arguments in, on Facebook and Twitter asking supporters to replace their profile picture with this one, to show their support. HRC themselves claim Facebook saw a 120 percent increase in profile photo updates.

5. What is clear is that millions of people shared the logo, and it also gained a lot of celebrity endorsement. It follows a pattern of other successful viral campaigns [it gets better etc]. Although the court cases were quite complex the campaign message was condensed to an issue of human rights and thus also universalized – we can conclude it resonated with a much wider audience than the LGBT community.

6. It also spurred a host of vernacular creative responses – as exemplified here by two of the many, many memes that were created using the logo as the template or canvas and circulated across SNS. These memes raise some interesting questions about types of engagement and motivations to partake in online campaigning –
humour and display of playfulness – seem to be key aspects as is the impetus to deliver novelty – also known as the ‘oh my god factor’ (Thorson 2014: 209).

It is perhaps also indicative of the 'openness and sharing' culture – that if a media artifact is open not just to be commented on but to manipulation, editing, re-mixing and the like it may invite such further engagement.

7.
But online digital campaigns are not without their critics. Rintel (2013) has written about the popular culture critical responses which he terms ‘snarkivism’ – and here is an example of one such meme.

Looking at the conversations and interviews from my fieldwork however, I note that the people active in the young peoples voice group do not call their activities activism, – they say campaigning; or use terminology such as ‘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).

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 young people who seek support from the centre at their drop ins, counselling and other services – 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.

8.
In my research with the young people at Allsorts I’ve found plenty of examples of pragmatic use of the formal communicative conventions of the platform. Here is one where they have utilised the feature of the status update to creatively combine text and image by producing a widget that if you post it in your status field it will incorporate your profile picture in a political statement.

9.
like this

10.
The final example I’d like to look at here is the Allsorts of stars campaign which illustrates how the remediation of web material work alongside the material created by the young people themselves and how a local grass roots campaign [this is a collaboration between two youth groups – Allsorts in Brighton and the stars peer project in Dorset] mirrors the idea of a imagined global community (see Anderson, 1991). 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. This rhetorical device is emulating an US campaign for trans visibility entitled ‘I AM: Trans People Speak’ [featuring actress Laverne Cox and other successful individuals] which also focuses on communicating the diversity of transgender communities and utilises the same listing of identity ‘labels’ as the YPV campaign. [show video]

The use of the hashtag indicates the aim to build momentum around a particular cause or topic across both twitter and FB. As noted by Zappavigna, the hashtag enables users to ‘affiliate with a copresent (Goffman, 1963), impermanent, community by bonding around evolving topics of interest’ (2012: 800). Further, the campaign aligns itself with online popular culture through the aesthetics of the meme. On the one hand in each of the ‘memes’ or posters, the person is engaged in giving an account of oneself, to use Butler's term (2005), highlighting the narrative aspect of identity formation, but yet on the other hand they are very playful in their evoking of the multiple ‘selves’ we enact in our online and offline lives. And it aims to humorously subvert how LGBT folks are often stereotyped, by de-prioritize sexual identity.

11.
What we see in this example is a rather seamless organisation of material from across the globe presented alongside the campaigns and posts that the young people create themselves – their curating of political material as well as creating and publishing their own I would argue is a typical feature for the social media era of civic engagement and activism. The young people’s reworking
of already existing media texts into new user generated content for a local audience indicates that their sense of connectedness is both enabled and conditioned by the social media platform.

12.
Although the whole of the ‘I AM: Trans People Speak’ is nationally and culturally specific, and its production value very different, something about its intent and address has struck a cord with the young people and they 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. The playful trying out of different ‘genres of political expression and their suitability across multiple social media platforms’ that Thorson associates with the segments of youth she calls ‘entrepreneurs of political talk’ (Thorson 2014: 204) is clearly engaged with by the young peoples voice members.

For the young people participating in producing campaigns using their creativity and artistic and media technology these activities reinforce pre-existing social bonds as well as allows for an expansive notion of community.

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 on 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 the 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.
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Web:
http://www.allsortsyouth.org.uk
http://www.transpeoplespeak.org/