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Session: Politically Engaging the Generations Online

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Children, Youth and the Online Public Sphere

I am very pleased to represent the Center for Media Education in this session on politically engaging the generations online. The Center for Media Education has a long history of tracking media trends for children and youth, and for informing and advocating for communication policy based on research findings. A national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to creating a quality electronic media culture for children, their families, and the community, CME has been the leading force in expanding children's educational TV programs and fostering safeguards on the Internet and television.

I will address three central points about using the Internet to engage children and youth in the public sphere: the vast potential of the net for civic purposes, the necessity of preserving a civic sector for youth in light of growing commercialization, and the importance of privacy.

First, we believe that the Internet is a wonderful vehicle for young people to become involved in civic issues, and we think it is imperative to create and preserve civic space for and by children on the Internet. We must also strive to ensure equal access to the Internet for all children.

Communication technologies can be expedient to invigorating democratic values, especially among children and youth who are avid users of traditional and new media. They are early adopters of the new computer-based technologies. There is an abundance of youth-related

content and activities presently available through the Internet. New sites for young people spring up daily, involving youth in gaming, entertainment, shopping, chatting, and more.

In addition to the highly visible commercial sites on the Internet, less visible are the "civic media" projects for youth. These include nonprofit Web sites and services that emphasize community building, collaboration, and participation. Some are organized along gender, racial, and sexual-orientation lines, and are designed to encourage the development of personal and political identity among youth. Many projects are community-based, inner-city initiatives, providing important links between the virtual and real worlds. Some are the only means available in low-income communities for overcoming the barriers to technology. Some sites take advantage of the boundary-less nature of the net and connect children from around the world to promote dialogue and action on international issues.

Through these sites it is clear to see that young people have a wealth of ideas and creativity to contribute for envisioning the future of democratic societies. The Internet, with its growing accessibility and ease of use, is an excellent venue for youth to take the role of content producers. Youth produced content offers a direct line to their voices and facilitates the conceptualization of children and adolescents as active agents for positive social change. Beyond that when young people are involved in the production process they become active learners.

The Junior Summit (www.jrsummit.net) is one site that provides a space for young voices on a range of pressing issues. It involves young people between the ages of ten and sixteen in the design and creation of information technologies, and provides children with a platform to effect real change. And because we are living in an increasingly global society it is structured to be inclusive of children from around the world--the digital rich and poor. It currently offers the ability to communicate in 9 languages. The site emphasizes the importance of consulting the voices of young people about future uses and designs of technologies--because they are the ones who will be living with the framework we create. As the first generation to grow up with the new electronic technologies, they can bring valuable insights and perspectives.

Unfortunately, there are no assurances that such services, scattered across the World Wide Web and often undertaken by undercapitalized organizations and well-intentioned individuals, will be sustained over the long run. Strong commercial forces are already defining both the range of content and the nature of its distribution in the expanding online world. In the process, nascent noncommercial and civic services could become increasingly overshadowed by commercial interests, or could disappear from public view altogether. This leads to our second point--preservation.

It is urgent to act now to preserve electronic civic space. The Internet could rapidly become little more than a shopping mall/entertainment center. But, it should also be a town hall, a library, an art gallery, a park, a studio for producing creative ideas.

It is imperative to support ways for making sites and projects that promote citizenship more visible and more appealing and user friendly for young people who are used to ever more glitzy commercial sites. To compete with the commercial sites, they will have to be, in the words of one young person addressing the issue, "absolutely trendy".

It will take a major commitment to funding to ensure a viable civic sector on the Internet and beyond that into the coming era of converging technologies. Mechanisms must be put in place to incorporate a civic sector for children, youth, and adults in the new communications environment, along with a commitment to promote and preserve its accessibility. The civic sector should be as easy to access as the commercial sector.

Finally, even more than for adult users, privacy issues are a central concern when children are using the Internet. We have to continue to find ways to protect children's personal information when they use the Internet at home and at school, not only from predators, but from marketers.

On April 21, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) goes into effect. CME played an important role in formulating this law which protects children's privacy on the Internet by regulating personal information that can be collected about children under the age of 13. Parents can visit our kids privacy Web site to learn about how COPPA works (www.kidsprivacy.org). There is now a need to monitor sites to make sure they comply with COPPA.

In addition, safeguards should be extended to children over the age of 13, and to adults. Legislation is pending to protect students from online marketers in schools, such as ZapMe!, a business venture that offers schools free computers and satellite broadband Internet access but obligates school to use software that collects personal data about their students. The Student Privacy Protection Act was recently passed as an amendment to part of a larger education bill, H.R. 4141, which will go before the full House later this year.

To conclude, I want to draw from a fascinating exchange between Spiros Tzelepis, a 14 year old from Greece and world-famous linguist and political activist, Noam Chomsky. This was posted on the Junior Summit site and is a wonderful example of how the generations can come together online--how the young can have access to some of our greatest thinkers and how some of our greatest established thinkers can have access to some of our promising young people. Spiros wrote to Chomsky asking for his thoughts about the future of the Internet. Chomsky's reply referred to the Internet as a "terrain of struggle" and pondered whether it will retain the free and open character it had when it was in the public sector or if will it be taken over by private power and used for domination and control. Chomsky ended his response by saying, "That's an important question for the future, but it's a question for action, not speculation." This task force has the power to move that action along for the preservation of a vibrant electronic civic culture for our children.

Thank you for inviting the Center for Media Education to contribute to this Task Force's work.