Electronic Democracy and Young People

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This article examines action to address young people’s apathy to the democratic process and politics in general, by considering possibilities for using information and communication technology to engage young people. The article describes two e-democracy systems in use in Scotland, which provide young people with opportunities to participate in and understand democratic decision making. The systems are designed to allow young people to deliberate issues of importance to them. The Highland Council initiative involves young people in the design of a web site for their youth parliament with online debates and Internet voting. The Young Scot initiative is a national youth portal, including an e-democracy channel. The emphasis here is on content management and moderation of e-consultations for young people. Research indicates that democracy is best taught by practicing it and that many young people are comfortable using new information and communication technologies. These ideas form the basis of both projects.

Keywords: e-democracy, e-consultation, young people, citizenship

This article focuses on the concept of electronic democracy for young people based on innovative projects undertaken in Scotland from 2000 to 2002. First, we outline the motivation for using information and communication technologies to engage young people. We discuss the political rationale in general and in relation to Scotland. Our initial e-democracy work with young people is based on an e-consultation for the Scottish Executive known as the Youth Summit. This set the scene for our work with other youth initiatives across the country. We review two examples of our work in progress. Highland Youth Voice is our first example and considers the constraints and opportunities for involving 14- to 18-year-olds in the design of a suite of e-democracy tools to support the work of this youth parliament. Later, we look at a second example, an e-democracy channel of a national information portal for young people in Scotland (Ur’say for Young Scot). Here, we focus on content management and discussion moderation issues that have arisen from the first of 20 e-consultations to be conducted on behalf of various organizations over a period of 1 year. We conclude by briefly considering the prospects for e-democracy and civic education for young people.

BACKGROUND

The involvement of otherwise disenfranchised young people is becoming increasingly important to policy making, not just because young people are the “voters of tomorrow” but
because they already are citizens. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has provided impetus to the development of a “rights culture” around children and young people (Mathews & Limb, 1999). Similarly, the increasing global reach of liberal democracy, coinciding with generally decreasing levels of democratic participation in the United States and Europe, has led to significant curricular developments in citizenship education (Patrick, 1995). Studies of young peoples’ attitudes to political practice (e.g., Bentley & Oakley, 1999; White et al., 2000) have meanwhile shown widespread disregard for conventional politics but also widespread dissatisfaction with their lack of involvement. A theme that emerges strongly from these studies is that the style of political communication is at least as important as the substance. Despite active interest in and engagement with a variety of issues, many young people are “turned off” to adult politics by dislike of party structures, the style of debate, and the formality of communication. Nevertheless, studies of how young people use media (e.g., Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) show that they have very broad media literacy.

In the United Kingdom, it is clear from the increasingly low turnout at elections that traditional democratic processes do not effectively engage people, especially young people. In the recent 2001 general elections to Westminster, the average total valid vote as a percentage of the electorate was 59.4% as compared to 71.5% in 1997 (see http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/, consulted August 23, 2001). However, the turnout of 18- to 24-year-olds was estimated at only 40%. The situation is similar in other liberal democratic countries. The U.K. government’s consultation paper on a policy for electronic democracy (United Kingdom Cabinet Office, 2002) stresses the need to better engage young people and highlights that more than 80% of 16- to 24-year-olds have accessed the Internet at some time. There is an opportunity to build on young people’s generally strong uptake of the Internet as a medium for entertainment and learning and use this as a lever for democratic involvement. That cannot be achieved by technology alone however. Young people’s feedback from previous consultations we have been involved in indicates that their overriding concern is that their comments should “make a difference” (Macintosh, Davenport, Malina, & Whyte, 2002).

Our work in Scotland aims to enhance the involvement of young people in the democratic process by better understanding their views, experiences, and aspirations and then representing this information to allow its more effective uptake in the planning, development, provision, and monitoring of services and policies. There is great potential for young people, central government, and local authorities to explore ways of breaking down traditional barriers. Against a backdrop of widespread disillusionment among young people, Scotland has shown increasing interest in developing strategies to involve them through consultation and participation.

HIGHLAND YOUTH VOICE

Highland Youth Voice is an initiative of Highland Council to encourage young people living in the Highland region of Scotland to participate in democratic decision making about their own lives. Youth Voice members, aged 14 to 18, are elected to an assembly through schools and youth forums, by young people of secondary school age (11 to 18). The assembly meets over 3 days, twice a year, when most of the work takes place in thematic work groups. Between these meetings, activities are coordinated by an executive committee and undertaken by members according to their work group.

Motives for forming Youth Voice came from two complementary directions:
• To give young people an early and positive experience of citizenship, educating them about democratic methods and process, through their participation
• To involve young people in decisions that affect their lives, fulfilling legal requirements to do so and also, hopefully, improving the quality of their lives.

In 2000, we designed a web site to enable online elections for the first set of Youth Voice members. The web site included a discussion forum where young people could share views on issues ranging from transport to sexuality. Evaluations of this web site led to the decision to design a new web site, with expanded functionality, to support Youth Voice. (The original site is available at http://itc.napier.ac.uk/e-voter/version1highlandyouth/default.asp, and the current version is at http://www.highlandyouthvoice.org, consulted July 22, 2002.) The new web site is based around a suite of e-democracy tools and young people were involved in the design process from the beginning.

Highland region is a large (25,748 square km) and sparsely populated area (averaging eight persons per square km), making communication, particularly face-to-face meetings, a problem for Youth Voice. Thus, the web site serves as a communication tool for Youth Voice members between meetings. It also serves as a communication tool between Youth Voice and all young people in the region: It facilitates their involvement and extends participation opportunities to them. To this end, the web site enables three types of activity:

• Communication about the progress and activities of Youth Voice
• Online discussion of issues affecting young people in the area
• Online elections, every other year, for Youth Voice members

Each set of activities is covered by a section of the web site as described below.

**Web Site Content**

*Highland Youth Voice news section.* This contains news items covering actions and events, a list of achievements to date, minutes of meetings, current policies for each of the work groups, and members listed by the school or forum they represent. The section is part of a newsfeed, in that it can be updated by members and staff through simple web forms, located in a password-protected “Members’ Admin” section.

*Your Voice section.* This is an online policy-debating forum consisting of a series of threaded discussions, divided into debates. Young people need a valid user ID and password to take part, and these are distributed through schools and youth forums. Although contributions to discussions cannot be made without these, any visitor to the web site can read the comments made. The subjects for debate arise out of the work groups at Youth Voice meetings or are part of consultations initiated by local or national public bodies. Accordingly, the results feed back into Youth Voice policy and action and may also influence the policies of statutory bodies. Each debate is accompanied by background information provided by Youth Voice and two expert witnesses who take part in each online debate. Their comments are differentiated from young people’s to distinguish their different roles. After a debate is closed, feedback is provided about the outcomes: who the young people’s contributions have been passed on to and any action taken. The debate, including the complete comments and any background information provided, is then publicly archived on the web site.
Elections section. The elections section enables online voting for Youth Voice members, which takes place every other year. The electoral process is explained, and nomination forms may be downloaded. Candidates statements are posted on the web site, ordered by school or forum. Each school chooses between holding a paper ballot or using the online-voting tool. If the school opts for the latter, students can vote using any Internet-enabled computer during the voting period (5 days). Students are issued a five-digit personal identification number, which with their user ID achieves appropriate security and accountability. The progress of voting (in terms of the percentage of students per school that have used their votes) is shown as a “thermometer” graphic during the voting period. At the end of the election, the results are displayed on the web site.

Development Methods

Evaluation of previous web site. The initial specification for this project was based on an evaluation of the web site used in 2000 to support online elections of the first set of Youth Voice members. Questionnaires were distributed in certain schools to get students’ reactions to this web site. They did not reveal any consistent usability problems but requested a site that was more visually attractive to young people. Following this, we attended two Youth Voice meetings. Through workshops conducted with the web development group (one of the work groups), a picture of the sort of site they would like was formed. Information about their preferred visual styles was gathered through discussing and viewing their preferred web sites. The site’s structure and content were outlined using scenarios as a basis for discussion.

Development of current web site. To design a suitable site for a specific target audience, an iterative process of prototyping and testing should involve members or representatives of the target audience (Liddle, 1996). The involvement of Youth Voice members has been instrumental in improving the design and in encouraging their ownership of the web site, hopefully extending this enthusiasm to their peers (Tudhope, Benyon-Davies, & Mackay, 2000). An HTML prototype of the web site was developed and used as a basis for discussion with the web development group and members of the Youth Voice executive committee. This was an iterative process. Detailed discussions took place at meetings, with some online communications and refinements between times. The group’s primary concern was to achieve their desired look and feel: bright colors on a black background, with suitable graphics. Satisfied with this, details of structure, implementation of function, and language used were revised in line with the group’s preferences and objectives. The web site was then rolled out on a modular basis, as each section became more dynamic and functional. Prior to and during the launch process, the web group helped to debug the site, communicating via e-mail.

Use of prototypes as a development method. Prototypes have proved an essential tool in this project, acting as objects around which the web group, ourselves as the developers, and Youth Voice staff could build, negotiate, and share understanding. This is particularly important given the range of technical experience of those involved. Some members of the group were enthusiastic and knowledgeable about technology, whereas others were more interested in the tasks the web site could facilitate, while being less comfortable with technical details. These discussions also enabled what Tudhope et al. (2000, p. 372) called “double-loop learning”: Users were learning about the system at the same time as developers were.
studying user requirements. Furthermore, the developers learned about the nature of Youth Voice and its members from weekends spent at the organization’s major assemblies.

The difficulties arising from this evolutionary prototyping method surround possible proliferation of user requirements: “creeping specification.” Asking the web group on a regular basis about what they want risks a long wish list that cannot be fulfilled. The web group, however, has shown remarkable understanding of this issue. Their objective seems to be that the web site is popular and serves its purpose, rather than that its purpose is extended to increase its popularity (e.g., by inclusion of entertainment). In negotiating development priorities, it has been helpful to identify where certain functions are already well covered by other sites and linking to those.

**Participatory Design Challenges**

Although the participation of young people throughout the project was, without doubt, advantageous, a series of constraints accompanied the advantages.

*Access and communication.* Secondary schools have a busy curriculum, and young people value what free time they have, either within or outside school. Understandably, it took high motivation to spend time on the project between meetings, particularly if access to the Internet was problematic. Young people also go through major changes during this period of their lives, particularly in their choice and use of media (Center for Media Education, 2001). Initial enthusiasm can quickly wane between meetings, overtaken by more immediate concerns. This is one factor in the high turnover of Youth Voice members, about 33% per year. The other factor is age. Because members can be elected up to their 18th birthday, theoretically serve 2 years, and leave before their 19th, many members are unable to serve their full terms. New members replace them, but we do not necessarily have access to their e-mail addresses, if they possess them.

In developing the web site, the very nature of the project—engaging young people spread across 25,748 square km—was a problem, severely restricting face-to-face meetings, with telephone conversations only occurring between the developers and Youth Voice staff. The web group mostly communicates between meetings using an e-mail list, but some group members have better access than others, while others frequently change Internet service providers and/or e-mail addresses. Although every secondary school in Scotland has Internet-connected PCs (Scottish Executive Media and Communications Group, 2001), the amount and quality of access available to students varies widely. In some schools, 6th-year pupils may have free, unsupervised access during free time. Other students may have to book restricted and supervised time slots. These access opportunities differ in context and quality, as well as number and duration. Added to this, only about half the web group has access to Internet-enabled PCs at home. So those with better access, and (in this case) better appreciation of the technology, can be more involved in development than others. This has risks in terms of the more active part of the web group being less representative of the target audience overall, which could lead to usability problems being overlooked.

*Usability.* The target audience for the web site includes all young people in the Highland region between age 11 and 18. It also covers the full range of learning abilities, including three special needs schools. The web development group is limited as representatives of the total user group, most obviously by their age, 14 to 18. Some technical usability problems are
detected through testing with less technically confident users, and the web site is available in
a text-only version for those using screen readers or otherwise browsing with images turned
off. The web site also fully supports text scaling for partially sighted users.

The main usability problem that occurs is in text added through the newsfeed or the dis-
cussion forum. The Youth Voice elected members’ involvement with statutory and
nongovernmental organizations can lead to the inclusion of subject specific terms and jarg-
on. There may also be the temptation to adopt a pseudo-political tone, especially in the
debates. This use of language has been identified as potentially alienating young people from
the political process (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001). The importance of young people using their
own voices also has implications for the realism of the web site. A pseudo-political tone in
the content or “computerese” in the instructions risks presenting the site as a tool that is sepa-
rate from young people’s lives, rather than encouraging experience of the site as a medium
through which they can deliberate and communicate (Smith, Macintosh, & Whyte, 2002).
This detracts from the sense of engagement necessary to make using the web site an enjoy-
able experience (Laurel, 1986). It also detracts from the social element of communicating
(through the web site) with one’s peers. According to Rafaeli (1997), this element of social
interaction can strongly influence the level of engagement experienced. For young people to
voluntarily use the discussion forum, they also need to feel comfortable with the social con-
text implied by the web site. Light and Wakeman (2001) discussed users’ perceptions of
social context when entering text into online forms. The target recipient of information
should be clearly identifiable, with “language and structure that are sensitive to the user’s
relationship with the producer” (p. 349), specifically avoiding loaded terms such as submit.
Web site instructions have been carefully chosen to adopt a straightforward but friendly tone
(e.g., send rather than submit). The web group is helpful here, in correcting terms that may
contain implications or alternate meanings among their peers.

Other usability problems surround the web development group’s priorities and tastes,
compared to those involved in developing a highly usable site for this target audience. For
example, many web sites designed for young people include large amounts of animation.
Because moving images are generally considered distracting unless they serve a clear pur-
pose, a compromise was reached, where we agreed that more multimedia would be intro-
duced later to illuminate issues under debate. Animation can also be a problem due to
the proliferation of updates to browser plug-ins, which are not always installed, particularly on
school computers. Bandwidth issues are also relevant because high-speed access is unavail-
able in many rural areas. Thus, to maximize availability, the site needs to be “state of the art,”
not “state of the technology” (Gayeski, 1997).

There were also worries that young people’s emphasis on presentation over functions
could cause problems. However, there is some evidence that the traditional human–computer
interaction practice of prioritizing function over form may not always be advantageous.
Experiments by Kurosu and Kashimura (1995) and Tractinsky, Katz, and Ikar (2000) indi-
cate a strong correlation between users’ judgments of the interface’s aesthetics and its per-
ceived usability, possibly influencing performance. That young people experience the web
site as attractive and likeable is particularly important in this project as its long-term success
depends on the web site being used, voluntarily, in young people’s spare time. The aesthetics
of the web site are also important as a facade to Highland Youth Voice itself. A well-designed
façade, in the architectural sense, should give a positive impression of the web site and those
who commissioned it (e.g., Kapor, 1996). For many school students, their first contact with
Youth Voice may come through the online elections. Whether the school votes on paper or
online, the web site will be a valuable resource for surveying candidates and comparing their
manifestos.
UR’SAY FOR YOUNG SCOT

On May 16, 2002, Scottish First Minister Jack McConnell launched the new online youth information portal for young people (12- to 24-year-olds) living in Scotland (www.youngscot.org, consulted July 22, 2002). The portal is designed to consolidate and expand on an existing range of services provided by the Young Scot organization and to develop a range of useful interactive applications for young people. Originally established more than 20 years ago, Young Scot provides a wide range of information and services to young people, including handbooks, newsletters, free access to advice, and retailer discount cards. In addition, the new web portal provides a number of “channels” on local and national cultural and sports events, news, health advice, competitions, and special offers. Portal content necessarily includes material drawn from a broad spectrum of established and recognized third-party sources. Material is drawn together in a consistent “house style” intended to be relevant and accessible for young people.

As a partner in this new initiative, we are creating online materials and moderating the discussion for the Ur’Say channel. Our work includes creating portal content, developing new models for online facilitation and moderation, and developing democratic participation and consultation models with young people. With support from the Scottish Executive, the Ur’Say channel is a registered members’ discussion forum, designed to engage a wide range of young people with contemporary issues and to facilitate constructive discussion on a series of topics. Each forum has a single, time-limited theme. Appropriate support material specifically aims to encourage young people to think about each issue and respond, both to each other’s comments and, importantly, to the online support materials. Following each debate, the discussion is analyzed to provide a short report to the relevant statutory or voluntary organizations with an interest in the findings. Organizational responses are then returned to the forum to inform young people on outcomes and to create an archive of support material for each consultation topic.

Content Development

The Ur’Say discussion forums on the Young Scot web portal aim to facilitate dialogue between young people on contemporary social and political issues of relevance and significance to their lives. As such, the Ur’Say channel is more than a simple bulletin board or cyber-place to hang out and perhaps offer an opinion. Each topic requires an appropriate level of support in line with the channel’s aim. First, all e-consultations are framed by three key electronic documents:

- A basic contextual introduction, providing core information on the consultation, its timescales, any organizations involved, and potential outcomes
- A “behind the scenes” briefing, giving accurate and credible facts surrounding the debate, supported by the key choices, questions, and dilemmas that frame the discussion, and challenges for the future
- An “expert panel,” consisting of short witness statements from key organizations directly involved in dealing face to face with the ideas and helping to form a bridge between abstract discussion and real world challenges

In developing these documents, content managers necessarily have to be strongly focused on the target audience. Implicit in creating written content is that most preexisting political materials lack both interest and credibility for most young people. The writing style is key to maintaining and stimulating use of the forum. However, this represents a dilemma because
difficult and dense material condensed for online reading can amount to little more than bullet point lists without significant intellectual challenge for the users.

Accordingly, the creation of online content for Ur’Say is guided by two simple principles: that it should be both relevant and accessible. Gathering and presenting the content involves a sequence of filter tests. First, writers look for accurate and credible sources of information relevant to the discussion topic: There may be readily available sources and contacts through the organization that has asked for the consultation or members of the expert panel. Using these sources, content developers edit a package of text- and image-based materials for presentation in the support documents or for moderators during the online discussion. Second, developers filter the material for direct relevance, looking for elements that have everyday significance to young people. This may be in the form of anecdotal evidence from young people’s everyday lives or statistical material from existing opinion polls of young people’s attitudes toward the topic. Third, developers assess the language used and ensure that any unusual terms have alternative descriptions and phrases where necessary and create explanatory sections on difficult political or issue-based concepts. As a result, it is possible to present to the forum clear, readable, and challenging social and political discussion materials, which are consistent with the wider portal content.

Participation and Facilitation

Once young people are registered as users of the service, they are able to investigate the consultation materials. They can access the electronic documents described above and can navigate between them and the messages as they choose. Young people can post messages to the consultation forum in two distinct ways: as either a new thread or as a reply. New threads usually signify the start of a new line of conversation in discussion: Perhaps, a new theme has emerged, or a radical idea has been presented to the forum. A reply is posted in response to a thread or to someone else’s reply.

We moderate the messages posted to the forum on a 24-hour postmoderation basis. This role involves three key aspects, each mutually supporting the others in achieving the overall aims of the channel. The moderator maintains the public terms and conditions of posting to the site and has the right to remove from view those messages that contravene the terms of use: for example, a post that might be considered libelous. Second, the moderator promotes discussion online by responding to questions, linking different ideas, or correcting inaccuracies or misleading information. Third, the moderator reads and analyzes the content of each message, interpreting and characterizing it in line with emerging online comment analysis principles. Alongside this qualitative analysis, the database software used by the web portal provides useful demographic information without revealing the individual user’s personal data. This includes data such as gender, date of birth, postcode, and so forth and helps to build a profile of the young people who have participated. When a discussion closes, the moderator uses all these sources of information to create a formal consultation report for delivery to the appropriate public or voluntary body. This may be a single organization or a partnership, who is likely to simultaneously use other methods to consult young people. The formal consultation reports profile the young people’s online interactions (i.e., what they do) and the views they express (i.e., what they say). The development of such formal reports is fundamental to completing the cycle of consultation because the report—and any responses or outcomes it subsequently promotes—contribute to an online archive of material available to the membership and other organizations.
A Sample E-Consultation

One of the first e-consultations to be conducted was on formal education for young people in Scotland, part of a wider consultation in which the Scottish Executive sought the views of teaching professionals, parents, support staff, local authorities, and young people. Recognizing falling population and changing demographics and learning cultures, the executive wanted to examine options for change over the next 10 years. Material to support the e-consultation was based strongly on the information provided from the Scottish Executive and provided a focus for discussion around three key areas:

- Reflecting on individual experiences of the education system
- Considering the process and content of education
- Examining what support and resources are required

The expert panel received witness statements from three key organizations: the Scottish Executive, the Scottish Youth Parliament, and a voluntary organization, Generation/Youth. Each organization provided its own unique perspective as to the significance of the debate and its potential impact.

Over the course of the 52-day debate, 58 messages were received from 108 participants (as part of a live group debate, some messages were posted by single users representing small groups). Relatively few participants chose to directly express positive elements of their school experience. Rather, supportive sentiments and ideas were found within critical comments or personal anecdotes. There was a much more focused response to the challenges and problems experienced by young people at school. Four clear areas of commonality emerged from the discussion forum:

- The teacher-pupil working relationship
- Working time and term structure arrangements
- Learning assessment techniques
- Subject specific issues

The moderator’s daily analysis of messages involved the use of an emerging complex grid methodology based loosely on Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of cognitive educational objectives. Bloom categorized stages of learning/understanding within an educational context. Although there is no scope here to detail the approach, it has provided a useful starting point for considering participants’ understanding of the issues presented in the forum. Each message was classified according to a range of options, based on its content and its position in relation to the debate, as in for, against, or neutral. This provided the facility at the end of the debate to analyze the message database according to the classification scheme, identifying (for example) how messages that synthesize diverse ideas to present an argument develop in relation to other message types. The analysis complements other ways of analyzing the extent of online interaction, such as analyzing thread depth (e.g., Wilhelm, 1999). Interesting and cumulative exchanges occurred between participants, and the associated interaction data suggested a strong level of considered response to both the material provided and other users’ ideas.
Commentators (e.g., Hagen, 2000) have argued that civic education can help reinvigorate public discourse and so strengthen participation in the democratic process. However, the definition of civic education is open to debate. Civic education for democracy, according to Barber (1985), can take at least three specific forms. The first of these is formal education in citizenship, which includes teachings on a nation’s constitution, legal system, and political practice. He argued this is least useful for strong democracy. The second is private sphere social activity, in which the focus is on debate affecting local issues. However, he was concerned here about the parochial tendency of such education and it not extending outwards to national issues. The last form is participatory politics itself, which he argued is the only completely successful form of civic education for democracy. “The politically edifying influence of participation has been noted a thousand times since first Rousseau and then Mill and de Tocqueville suggested that democracy was best taught by practicing it” (p. 235). That is the underlying principle of the e-democracy systems we have reported here, one that we endeavor to extend to the design process itself. Young people’s participation in design for the Highland Youth Voice project has encouraged ownership and usability. Moreover, it has given developers an understanding of the needs and preferences of the participants and their peers. However, there are constraints that also may apply more generally. Young people are not homogenous, and participation may only attract technophiles who are nevertheless more interested in appearance than function. Differences in access to the Internet, at home and in school, particularly in rural areas, act as a barrier to participation in design, as well as to the use of the resulting system. Accessibility involves further issues. Our experience with the Ur’say Young Scot project illustrates the effort required to ensure that once they have found an e-democracy site, young people comprehend the background material they are presented with and feel motivated to take part in discussion of it. Online facilitation for e-consultation entails additional effort to steer the target audience toward considering a policy agenda presented in the form of background materials.

The design of e-democracy systems is critical to the success of engaging young people and also educating them about democratic decision making. Young people are becoming used to using technology to give “push button” reactions, for example in chat rooms and discussion boards. However, these are normally used for less serious exchanges or posting one-off statements, rather than sustaining a debate. Our research is necessarily both technologically and socially based. On one hand, it aims to transform/redesign current technology, for example discussion forums, so that they are capable of supporting sustained debate. On the other hand, our research is also directed toward exploring the conditions that allow these tools to be used to greatest effect. There is a need to demonstrate how and when discussion transcends the mere exchange of opinion and indicates that young people have “listened” to the arguments and incorporated them in their posted responses.

Both projects outlined here are ongoing. Youth Voice is holding the second elections to their parliament using Internet voting in Autumn 2002. This will result in a new set of members and consequently a new web development group, which we will support to take ownership of the web site. They will be trained to produce and manage content and moderate the online debates. This will enable us to investigate further the role of participatory design techniques in developing e-democracy web sites for young people. To date, the Ur’say project has completed two e-consultations with four others running; by the end of 12 months, we will have developed and moderated a total of 20 consultations. The young people’s contributions to these consultations will provide important empirical data that will allow us to define further and validate our framework for evaluation and analysis of e-consultations.
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