Chapter 3

Digital and mobile tools and tips for youth eParticipation

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How are youth participation habits and trust in politics changing and what has technology to offer? The project EU[th] – Tools and Tips for Mobile and Digital Youth Participation in and across Europe presents its first findings and the newly launched digital toolbox OPIN.

CHANGE IN THE FORMS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Young Europeans do not seem to be the biggest fans of voting, either during EU-level elections, or during national ones:

> 72% of 16/18-24 year-olds do not vote but more than 50% of 65+ year olds do … the level of youth absenteeism remains surprisingly high, and the gap between youth and other age groups changes marginally. Youth prove to be worryingly absent from national elections. (Deželan 2015)

However, voting – a rather traditional form of political participation – is not the only expression of civic engagement. While in Germany, for example, the satisfaction with democracy and trust in institutions are slowly increasing (Shell Deutschland Holding 2015: 173-82), the general interest of young Europeans in politics is stable at a low level (EU 2016: 248-9). Also, civic engagement in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and volunteering – other traditional forms of participation – are losing interest for youngsters (Shell Deutschland Holding 2015: 195-6) or not increasing (EU 2016: 254-8).

Practice and research show that "we are witnessing a diversification of the range, forms and targets of political expression" (Deželan 2015: 29). The latter addresses especially the technological change in political participation through digital and mobile media. It is observed that, in general, interest in political action is increasing, and only the traditional forms of expression are shifting. For example, 59% of 12- to 25-year-old Germans have been taking part in unconventional forms of political participation, such as consumer boycotts, online petitions and demonstrations (Shell Deutschland Holding 2015: 199-200). Online tools are seen as introducing new opportunities for a low threshold of engagement of young people: in 2014, for example, half of young Europeans had used the internet to contact public authorities (EU 2016: 250-1).

THERE IS NO ONLINE WITHOUT OFFLINE

eParticipation can be defined as interactive online decision making in action (IJAB 2014a: 4). Hence, eParticipation should not be seen as an alternative to face-to-face participation, but rather as a complementing element offering new tools and opportunities for initiators of such processes, and also for civil society itself. The experiences from projects like Youthpart and Youthpart #lokal show that, for ensuring targeted outreach of online participation, offline activities are essential (IJAB 2014b: 8). Especially on the local level and/or for young people with less experience in eParticipation processes, offline activities help one become active (EU[th] 2016) and not see online tools as an obstacle (IJAB 2014b: 8) to participation.

EU[th] – TOOLS AND TIPS FOR MOBILE AND DIGITAL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN AND ACROSS EUROPE

Two out of three teenagers own a smartphone (Mascheroni and Ólafsson 2013: 14). The widespread use of smartphones indicates a need to consider the implementation of not just digital but also mobile tools in participation processes. However, using just online or mobile tools is not sufficient to ensure the motivation of participants and the facilitation of eParticipation processes. The research and innovation project EU[th] – Tools and Tips for Mobile and Digital Youth Participation in and across Europe looked into providing an answer to these challenges. The project developed a digital and mobile eParticipation toolbox, as well as tips and support for anybody interested in becoming an initiator of eParticipation processes.

The EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme is supporting the project EU[th] to address challenges to young people's participation and to foster their trust and engagement in politics. EU[th] aims to contribute to increased youth participation by providing user-friendly and comprehensive tools and support, one of these being the digital and mobile eParticipation toolbox OPIN. Since EU[th] is an innovation project, its experiences and findings could contribute to further reflections on these themes.

Usually, there are three kinds of actors involved in public participation – whether it is youth or adult participation, online or face-to-face participation. First, there are the participants who discuss or introduce their opinions, then the decision makers who wrap up the discussion and third, those who facilitate communication between the participants and decision makers. Of course, participation projects can be created and run from the bottom up, but in most cases it is not the participants who start a participation project, organise the gatherings, moderate discussions, etc. It is usually an organisation in between, the so-called initiators, who take on this role. For youth participation this is mostly administrations or youth organisations. OPIN aims at supporting both: participants and initiators.

We strongly believe that young people or people in general have great ideas that can help solve their local problems. However, setting up a participatory project is a different thing – it requires knowledge about and experience with public participation in general and with youth eParticipation in particular. A badly planned participatory project will most likely fail, no matter how dedicated the participants

are. Young people, youth organisations and administrations should not be afraid to get active and set up their own participatory process. With some support, anybody is capable of running such a project. Accordingly, in EU[th] we develop tools and tips for eParticipation to:
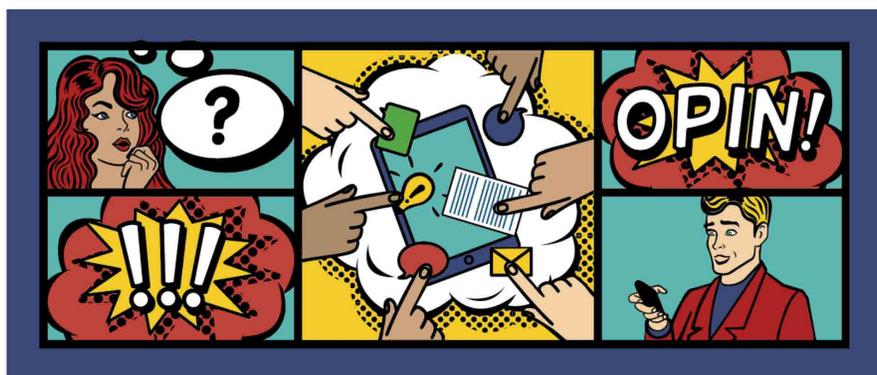
- ▶ offer participants appealing digital and mobile participatory engagement tools;
- ▶ support initiators in planning and implementing their individual eParticipation project.

These are available in the toolbox OPIN – a digital online platform where individual eParticipation projects can be hosted.

Making eParticipation tools appealing to youth

The project EU[th] puts a lot of effort into the development of a visual design that is attractive to young users. OPIN was designed with the help of the International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany (IJAB) and the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA), which both have long-standing experience in working with young people.

Figure 9: OPIN.me toolbox landing page visual

Besides visual identity, usability is decisive in making a digital tool appealing. EU[th] has a set of ongoing pilot projects testing the tools for functionality and usability. For instance, young people from the European Students' Forum *(Association des Etats Généraux des Etudiants de l'Europe* – AEGEE) in France, Italy and Slovenia have given feedback on the sitemap and website structure in order to help OPIN improve its usability and design.

The functionality – or utility – of eParticipation tools is indeed a big challenge, as current participation projects are often unique in their fields. For instance, available staff resources can vary greatly, leading to differing organisational structures in terms of roles and responsibilities for co-ordinating projects, activating networks, facilitation, etc. Also, the structures of the projects are diverse: some are based on a competition model (participants' ideas compete for funding), while others are based on continuous issue management. This may change in the future, when

eParticipation becomes more widespread and has clearer standards. Currently, however, the youth eParticipation landscape is rather diverse. There are differences in the size and duration of projects, the aim of participation and communication structures, the involvement of different target groups and network actors, etc. Local conditions, it seems, require very specific project structures and tools.

Moreover, it is simply too expensive to create individual tools for each eParticipation project. OPIN thus strives to keep a balance between predefined participation project structures and eParticipation tools that are still sufficiently flexible. The solution to this is the workflow principle.

Workflows – Modular eParticipation tools

The software behind OPIN is Adhocracy, developed by Liquid Democracy e.V. It is embedded in the OPIN platform, offering several participation tools. When a group decides to use OPIN for its participation project, it can register on http://opin.me and an "instance" is set up on the platform. This instance does not include all the digital tools that are, in principle, available on the platform. Instead, only those features needed in the specific case are visible to the user. However, the activation of features does not take place feature by feature, but rather in bundles, according to the overall aim of the participation project. These bundles are called "workflows". So far, three workflows are available on OPIN:

- ▶ idea collection: users can enter ideas on a topic (for example how to improve local youth centre activities), comment and vote on the posts;
- ▶ collaborative text work: texts can be uploaded, and sections can be commented on and voted on by users;
- ▶ mobile polling: a mobile app to quickly gather young people's opinions on a given question.

The first two workflows have been the most in demand at Liquid Democracy since 2011 and have become the basic participation features on OPIN. The integration of mobile polling was the first big update to Adhocracy in EU[th]. The app was developed for another European project (FlashPoll, funded in the EIT/ICT scheme 2013-15) by Alfstore. The response from the users to the app was very positive, as it is a way to quickly interact with participants by using mobile phones, so it was decided to integrate it with Adhocracy.

In the future, more workflows will be developed. Currently, the focus lies on workflows that enable the combination of online and offline participation. For each workflow, some basic features are provided by default and additional features can be activated if the initiator asks for them. This modular structure enables the quick and cheap set-up of individual eParticipation projects.
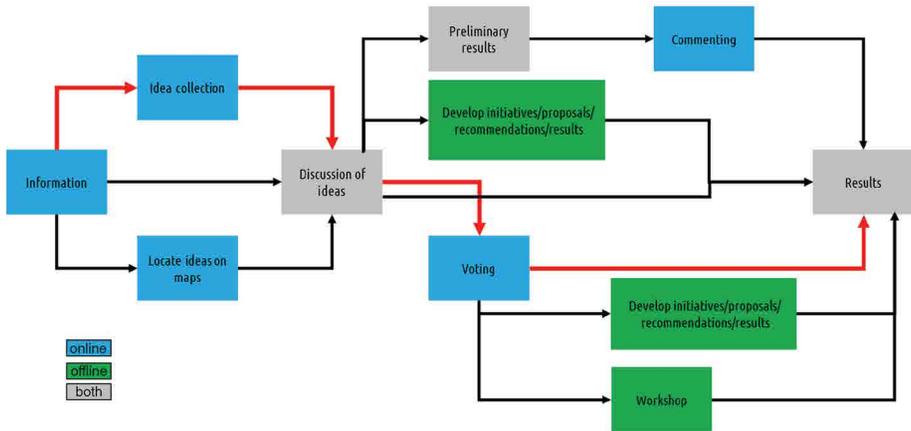
Defining the right workflows with the right features

Workflows and features will be amended, improved and enriched during the EU[th] project. In order to identify the workflows that cover most applications, comprehensive research is being carried out by the nexus Institute, in which youth eParticipation

projects in Europe are analysed with regard to their design and structure. The following questions are considered: what is the aim of a eParticipation project? What steps are being taken to achieve this aim? The analysis will provide structural insights on the most frequent requirements for workflows and which features should be developed.

The research is ongoing. However, Figure 10 shows the results for the workflow "idea collection", which map the average process elements of participatory projects that aim to gather ideas from participants. The most frequent element combination is marked in red.

Figure 10: Idea collection

We can see that the phase of "idea collection" follows an "information" phase, but it could also be replaced by "locate ideas on maps". The results are discussed afterwards in an offline event or using an online platform. The collected ideas are voted on using online tools and results are produced for both online dissemination or face-to-face lobbying work with decision makers.

Based on an analysis of completed eParticipation projects, these schemes visualise genuine participation structures and mechanisms. Such generalisations allow the identification of the most useful workflows and addressing them as a priority while creating innovations. It also provides an overview of the variety of strategies that can be used in digital participation projects in practice and indicates the need for support in even more complex situations.

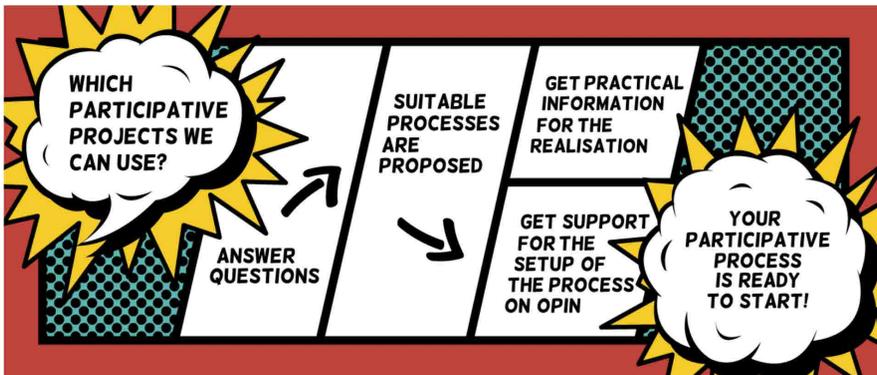## Guiding initiators to put workflows into practice

On the OPIN platform, initiators do not have to choose from the workflows themselves. A Decision Support Tool is available that activates a suitable workflow according to the initiator's needs. The initiator has to fill in a short query on the aim of the planned participation project and the workflow is chosen automatically (Figure 11).

The idea behind the Decision Support Tool is to empower people without extensive competences to become initiators of participatory projects. We hope that by providing a tool that delivers individually adapted participation schemes for successful digital youth participatory projects we will increase the quantity and quality of youth eParticipation. This would be a real innovation in the landscape of participation in

general, and youth eParticipation in particular.

In general, modular planning, that is a free choice between modules, is preferable to an automatised set-up of a process. However, only people with experience in public participation actually have the knowledge to reasonably combine available modules. Considering that people without extensive competences in eParticipation may not always know how to combine modules and steps in the process, the main challenge here is how to establish predefined processes that can produce good participation results. On the other hand, practice has shown that participation projects only work when they are adapted to local conditions, such as available resources and group size. Full modularity would enable such an adaptation. But if non-professional initiators make use of this full modularity the risk of creating participation schemes that do not lead to successful participation is very high. The Decision Support Tool thus offers half-modularised, adaptable propositions for shaping a participatory project. By entering some basic data on local conditions and specifying the aim of the process, the user can influence the automatic set-up of the project structure.

Figure 11: Graphic of decision support tool

The Decision Support Tool not only leads to an automatic set-up of an instance, it also delivers a basic version of a project management plan. The main steps of the youth eParticipation project are listed chronologically and practical advice is given on how to put into practice what the software provides technically. This is supported by eParticipation guidelines developed by the Danish Board of Technology on the basis of available publications such as the well-known standards published by the Austrian Council of Ministers (2008) or the quality criteria for public participation published by the German-based network for public participation (Netzwerk Bürgerbeteiligung 2013). These publications formulate general standards for the organisation of participative processes (for example transparency of the process, traceability of results, room for manoeuvre, balanced information, equal opportunities) that ensure a high quality for the whole process. Furthermore, we also refer to youth-specific standards for participatory processes, such as those developed by the Participation Workers' Network for Wales (2014) and Save the Children (2005).

These guidelines are structured along the main phases of a participation project:

▶ idea phase;
▶ preparation phase;

▶ participation phase;

▶ dissemination and communication phase.

Guidance and best-practice examples encompass topics such as resource planning, communication strategies, privacy and data protection, moderation and many more.

The guidelines are developed on the basis of long-standing experience in facilitating participatory processes, as well as on the basis of the results from workshops with end-users to make sure that pitfalls, barriers and challenges are addressed comprehensively.

THERE IS NO FUTURE WITHOUT EPARTICIPATION

Even though eParticipation in general is still developing, it is clear that it is not replacing offline participation. Rather, it enriches it and helps adjustment to changing participation patterns, providing necessary technological solutions relevant for today's realities. eParticipation of young people can only be successful if all stakeholders are involved in the process and trust in politics can be encouraged by demonstrating the impact of young people's input. Increased usage of mobile devices clearly indicates the need to develop responsive software for participation in decision making.

Through its first year, the innovation project EU[th] has gathered the experiences of other online participation projects and its own "living lab" with five pilot projects. The results were fed into the development of guidelines for successful eParticipation processes and identification of the most-needed software solutions.

The development of OPIN has followed a participatory and iterative approach. New versions of the software are released as quickly as possible to be tested by real end-users. Their feedback is included in ensuing development cycles to make improvements and identify new needed features. This procedure has been repeated twice, leading to three launches of OPIN, starting in March 2016.

With the additional support of the Decision Support Tool and eParticipation guidelines, the project follows the motto "Have a professional eParticipation process without being a pro!", creating a better environment for more active youth involvement in decision-making processes.

The project has had two years full of actions and findings to be shared with the eParticipation community[21] and its initiators. In autumn 2016, an open call for 10 eParticipation projects was launched, providing the possibility of using OPIN.me with the support of EU[th]. Public administrations, youth and youth work organisations at any level from 49 countries were invited to apply with their eParticipation idea, use the OPIN toolbox, obtain support and implement their projects in the course of 2017. Projects were assessed through different aspects, most importantly ensuring the link between participants' input and the impact on decision making.

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An Open Summit for the eParticipation community to sharing EU[th] experiences is due to take place by the end of 2017. EU[th] pilots and 10 open call projects will present their achievements and practice. Space for networking and envisioning the future of eParticipation developments all over Europe will be encouraged through the invitation and participation of various stakeholders.

ABOUT EU[th]

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