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Executive Summary

I. Context
This executive summary briefly summarises the main findings of a study that explores how the internet and social media influence young people’s active citizenship and participation in the public spheres of democratic societies and how those working with them, particularly youth workers as well as public authorities, can use these tools to engage with all young people, including disadvantaged groups, in an effective and meaningful way.

The study has been commissioned by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) and has been carried out by a consortium of Open Evidence S.L. (ES) and Telecentre Europe (BE).

The EU youth policies and programmes encourage active citizenship and participation among young people in line with Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The EU has contributed with its youth policy and programmes to supporting youth work and non-formal learning, such as the current Erasmus+ Youth in Action programme (2014-2020). Since 2012, following the Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, Member States are starting to introduce measures to allow young people make the most of what they learn outside formal education.

This report looks into the impact of the internet, social media and new technology on young people’s participation alongside new ways of political engagement and interaction and how youth work can educate young people to be able to exploit the new medium to the fullest.

II. Study design
The study objectives were addressed through extensive data collection and analysis, involving different methodological approaches.

The study is based on a literature review of sources related to the general and specific objectives of the study, namely education, youth work and non-formal learning, the internet/social media, development of skills and competences, new media literacy, young people’s active citizenship and participation. The aim of this literary review was to analyse and synthesise relevant literature on the contribution of youth work to stimulating young people’s participation and active citizenship via the internet and social networking.

It further includes an inventory of good practices on capacity building for youth workers in the field of the development of skills and competences linked to new technologies and media literacy as well as on effective learning and teaching methods and tools based on the internet and social media along with increased outreach to young people.

The inventory captures a broad diversity of initiatives stemming from a representative sample of Erasmus+ countries and reflects the diversity of youth work. In addition, twelve case studies, defined in accordance with the general and specific objectives of the study, were selected on the basis of a high degree of maturity, impact and scope and coverage of a range of different learning contexts and funding sources. These in-depth case studies aimed at gaining a more profound understanding of the impact of the internet and social media on young people’s participation and youth work and included 21 interviews with relevant stakeholders.
The analysis was performed using different sources of data and collection methods under a process of data triangulation in order to reinforce the robustness and solidity of the analysis.

III. Youth, the internet and social media

The analysis of the information gathered demonstrates that the technology mediated activities young people engage in essentially translate into an online extension of their offline practices.

As spaces for socialisation, digital media tap into basic needs of young people to connect and interact, which has established the use of digital technologies as the most frequently used leisure activity among young people. Similar to their role as spaces for socialisation, the internet and social media have evolved as venues for civic and political engagement. They opened up a myriad of opportunities for young people to leverage new media to access information, circulate or produce content, investigate, mobilise, engage in discussions or sharing ideas on multiple platforms.

Young people need to be equipped with a number of core competences and skills which are required to fully exploit the benefits of the internet and social media and become active members of society. These skills do not only relate to technical skills that enable them to access, use and produce content, but also skills that enable them to critical reflect and analyse media content. The capacities to participate, collaborate, and express online can help young people to become agents of social change themselves.

This proves particular relevant with view on providing equal opportunities for young people, including disadvantaged groups, in order to reinforce capital enhancing uses of the internet and bridge the participation divide.

IV. Youth work on the digital era

Youth work can play a vital role in supporting young people’s active citizenship and participation. It has the potential to fill gaps in knowledge and skills that occur within the home and school in order to support young people to benefit from their time spent online, be aware of potential risks and have the skills to mediate these.

The inventory of practices and the case studies demonstrate the multidimensional nature of incorporating internet and social media-based tools and methods to help empowering young people and facilitate their participation in democratic society. All initiatives support young people’s mastery of competences related to digital and media literacy through training and practice, which has an important empowering effect for young people.

In particular, they can help in levelling the playing field as regards the capital enhancing activities of internet use and support young people in becoming agents of change, while opening up a pathway to inclusion.

At the same time, participation in youth work activities supports young people to acquire a broad range of skills and competences, such as soft skills, capabilities to work in teams, organisational and conflict management, intercultural awareness, leadership, planning, organising, coordination and practical problem solving skills, self-confidence, discipline and responsibility. Leveraging the opportunities of internet and social media-based tools can further increase the outreach and impact of initiatives: young people can act as multipliers and e-facilitators that transfer their knowledge gained from their participation in initiatives and projects to wider audiences.
Youth work is attributed a great role in providing opportunities for involvement of young people to influence and change public policies and actions which impact on them. In this regard, youth workers and youth work organisations in partnership with young people can act as advocates and work to influence policies and decisions that affect their lives.

V. Conclusions

1. Successful initiatives pathways

The common denominator that we have found in our research is that successful initiatives use ICTs to remove barriers and/or equal the ground of participation, create new platforms and projects shared by broad and multi-stakeholder communities whose outputs and outcomes positively impact on the community. At the same time, they achieve reasonable levels of economic, and particularly, social sustainability.

When addressing inequalities, successful youth participation and youth work usually include measures that aim at levelling the ground so that, according to their means, all players can engage in equal conditions. This essentially translates into young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, being equipped with skills and competences required of citizenship in the digital age that enable a beneficial use and navigation of the internet.

Once individuals are in (more or less) good conditions to be active citizens, what naturally comes is that they coordinate to collectively promote initiatives. The more intertwined these citizens and their respective collectives are, the more resilient, sustainable, scalable and replicable their initiatives are. If basic conditions are a requisite for levelling participation and thus avoiding the unwanted outcomes of the knowledge gap, a tight social tissue increases the possibilities of success of a given social initiative.

Projects that plan ahead in this train of thought, design devices to enable social tissue creation or to strengthen the existing one, but also financial resources, facilitators (such as social workers in general or youth workers in particular), members of the administration or researchers that bring in background and context, etc. contribute to this goal. Not surprisingly, initiatives that enable participants to meet face-to-face are more common at this stage, as they are considered as better weavers of this social tissue.

However, also the building of digital identities are key at this level so that the weaving of the social tissue can go beyond the local arena and overcome barriers of time and space and enter the field of networking.

Being crucial to the strengthening of the social tissue, local leaders and grassroots movements, the role of the government has to be stealth: the government thus becomes a platform that provides context, facilitates and fosters interaction while staying in the background. Attempts of the government to move to the forefront are usually perceived as patronising or intrusive, and may thus have a discouraging effect.

Citizens are usually part of different collectives and collectives usually operate at different levels or layers. Networks contribute to the exchange of knowledge between scattered individuals and collectives which would otherwise act as isolated nodes.

But not only do networks contribute to the articulation of collectives, they also contribute to the diversification of the typology of individuals and collectives involved in a given initiative. Networks become useful instruments to articulate multi-stakeholder partnerships –formally or tacitly– and, if well balanced in their nature, these networks can promote interactions and exchanges between governments, higher
education and research organisations, the industry and civil society organisations (referred to as quadruple helix-like networks) that can help foster innovations that respond to the needs of the society at large.

We have found that the synchronisation of layers is achieved by successful projects through networks. This synchronisation is most of the time achieved by means of online platforms and other digital constructs. The inventory documents many examples of successful collaboration of partnerships and networks that pool knowledge, expertise and ultimately, increase their outreach.

At this point, digital and media literacy become a key aspect for further developments. On the one hand, because networks (either facilitated by digital means or not) have a logic that is much different from industrial hierarchical models. On the other hand, because, when powered by digital platforms, the mere operation of networks requires capacitating a broad range of digital and media literacy skills, which, as elaborated in the report, encompasses a complex constellation of literacies and competences for engaged citizenship.

Programmes such as Erasmus+ have proven to be very helpful in providing resources through basic infrastructures upon which others can build, operate and facilitate their networks. Networks, in a knowledge society, heavily rely on the “gift economy” and the ability to concentrate and distribute information that can be applied locally as knowledge.

If weaving the social tissue was the way to leverage the potential of now equal and individual citizens, institutionalisation is the way to leverage the potential of quadruple helix-like networks.

Many projects aim at raising their goals at the upmost level and seeing them going mainstream. However, only institutions, through regulation and policy-making can realise this aspiration. Most projects do not see their designs mainstreamed, especially during their limited time-spans. Thus, their proxy goal to mainstreaming and institutionalisation is visibility. Successful projects are strong in advocacy and awareness rising, and they do it in two opposite directions.

Firstly, as we just stated, by looking “up” towards the institutions, by showcasing and modelling, by comparing with other related projects. Examples included in our case studies include Simbioza Sola, whose vision of its module of intergenerational cooperation is to get included into the formal curricula of primary and secondary education level, as well as international awareness and acknowledgement.

Secondly, by looking “down” to their communities, by assessing and evaluating their impacts, providing feedback to their citizens. Here, the example of the initiative Have Your Say demonstrates the shaping of discussions around hot topics among young people, giving them the opportunity to influence youth policy and to be active in society.

This double aim –mainstreaming by “looking up” and laying strong foundations for social sustainability– are typical of successful projects. This stage is both the end of the process but also the beginning of a virtuous circle. On the one hand, it aims at creating social infrastructures –policy, regulation, institutions– so that the benefits of the projects can become structural and not temporary, as embedding them in established and stable social structures are the best bet for replication, scalability and sustainability at large. On the other hand, by establishing a dialogue with the citizens and looking for the individual impact, they address –this time with a top-down approach– the socio-economic layer where the whole process began in the first place.
2. The role of youth policies and programmes

The affordances of the internet and digital technology confront policy makers at both EU and national level with several challenges to adapt policies. The importance of youth work within national and European policy is constantly growing and new policy papers, on a European as well as a national level, are continuously assigning new roles and tasks to youth work to foster engagement and active citizenship of young people.

In fact, participation has become the main theme in youth policies and, in general, everything in connection with the young. Policy documents stress the need for young people to participate, the benefits of participation and the consequences of participation in the development of political life. However, as reinforced by the European Commission, participation can be learnt only by participating. Therefore, a shift has to take place from education about participation to active involvement of young people as active citizens.

However, increased emphasis should be dedicated to the fact that youth participation principally takes place outside institutions and formal procedures – which reinforces the benefits of traditional views and actions of youth work. This also calls for an exploitation of multiple and mostly informal methods that are linked to young people’s experience and context, including increased attention to the importance of the internet and social networking as new spaces for socialisation and participation.

Given the merits of youth work in supporting young people to become active citizens and engaging them in decisions and actions that affect not only them, but also their community, greater emphasis and support should be dedicated by policy makers to support the uptake of innovative tools and methods in youth work, which support the development of skills and competences needed to exploit the new medium to the fullest.

Numerous examples reveal that the involvement of governments is essential for the success of initiatives (e.g. in #NichtEgal, the Minister of Family Affairs acts as a patron, and the initiative is supported by many other actors, such as the Grimme Institute or the No-Hate-Speech Movement), but their involvement cannot only be limited to short term funding as has been demonstrated in many initiatives subject to this study (e.g. the initiative Bytes had to downsize its activities due to a lack of funding).

3. Policy recommendations

When we analyse how the internet and social media influence young people’s active citizenship, we see that the sense of ownership of the digital infrastructures and how to use them (skills) for one’s own purposes is crucial. Unlike institutional initiatives, which are often seen as something that belongs to another sphere, initiatives rooted in the community can be owned, hacked, re-purposed. In other words, they allow people to get empowered instead of being dependent of the wills of the government or the elected representatives. Put simply, they become citizens, not just users or beneficiaries of some public expenditure.

However, this empowerment comes not only with the infrastructures, but with the skills and capabilities to appropriate them. Appropriation, which goes beyond the mere sense of ownership, implies that the set of skills is not tool-driven but goal-aimed. What matters is what skills one requires to do what, and not what skills one requires how to operate something. Among the many skills, digital and media literacy competencies are worth being highlighted. As core skills required of citizenship in the digital age, they have enormous practical value, as they facilitate a beneficial use and navigation of the internet. They work together in a spiral of empowerment and do not only strengthen people’s capacity to engage with information as both consumers and producers, but also held to address potential risks related to digital media through
critical reflection. In particular, the communication landscape has become so complex that citizens need skills to grab and understand the ecosystem of meaning in which they are operating, which can include many different contents, media forms and channels people dispose of.

Public institutions can, through their policies and programmes, contribute not only to attracting young people to traditional ways of participation, but enable new spaces and actions by creating the conditions to support bottom-up distributed e-participation initiatives that leverage the internet and social media.

4. Key messages

Digital literacy has become a personal and institutional enabler as important as basic literacy. But, unlike basic literacy, digital literacy includes multifaceted set of skills that goes from the very definition of one’s own identity online, understanding the meaning and veracity of information, the different formats and supports of such information beyond mere text, managing the devices that can process (retrieve, store, create, disseminate) information, to the meta-reflection on how these skills affect one’s lives. Training on digital skills is still far from having been mainstreamed in elementary education plans the way it should.

Among all the different components of what we understand by digital and media literacy, media literacy is, arguably, of crucial importance when it comes to youth and their participation both in democratic institutions and the job market. Their social and cultural profile and environment is one of digital communication and production which performs in many different formats, platforms and spaces.

If digital media has changed the landscape of communication and production, initiatives for civic engagement or empowerment should address this liquid and flexible reality. The concept of transmedia stresses the importance of the ecosystem of meaning that provides a comprehensive approach to a given issue. Policy makers have to take into account not only that media literacy includes the transmedia factor, but also that policies put into practice do have to address the whole ecosystem of meaning of the collectives that a certain policy is addressing. This includes formats, spaces, digital communities and tools, the way they relate is shaped and communicated, or the identification of relevant stakeholders and prescribers, among other things.

All work done in citizen development, social and political engagement and emancipation should be preceded by a thorough analysis of their digital skills and the according levelling measures in this field, as one would do with basic literacy, but should not only be limited to that. Work on the inhibitors of effective usage of digital technologies should precede –or at least be complementary to– any kind of digital literacy initiatives. Beyond literacy, effective usage is the outcome of individual resources, emancipative values and freedom rights. Policies that aim at leapfrogging these issues have a high probability of failure. Digital literacy initiatives per se usually have poor impact. Policies should first target effective usage, then set specific development goals (e.g. civic engagement, employability) and, last, work on the digital literacy skills that are required to reach these specific goals.

Empowerment comes not from mastering new tools, but being able to use them for transformation. Creation, collaboration and distributed decision-making (autonomy on one’s own decisions, sovereignty over one’s own environment) make digital skills not a mere instrument but a transformation tool that provides the outcome with social sustainability. Thus, digital transformation goes beyond individuals: for citizens to deploy all their potential, organisational, institutional and systemic changes are also needed. Institutions need to have digitally skilled professionals, be aware of the ecosystem of meaning in which they are operating or may be having an effect, and
transform and adapt themselves to this new reality and profile of their (young) citizens.

In an always changing society, and at an accelerating path, acquiring new skills is a short-term goal: the long-term goal is advancing the change and being able to control it. Governance over the change –and the institutions that lead it– is the only way to ensure that those who were once excluded can avoid future exclusion.
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