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Abstract

E-participation describes the utilization of ICT means and social media in order to further develop citizen participation in the information society. Especially the youth is using respective applications and platforms quite naturally for communication and interaction. In an ongoing e-participation pilot project in a Swiss municipality an e-participation platform has been developed. After presenting a general overview of the topic the project including its initial situation as well as lessons learned are being presented.

Keywords: eparticipation, youth, participation, edemocracy

1 Introduction

An increasing citizen engagement is one of the major current trends in many European societies. This general trend can be understood as a form of Open Societal Innovation, which "refers to the adaptation and subsequent sustainable use of appropriate open innovation approaches from business, adapted and utilized by state and society to solve societal challenges" (von Lucke et al., 2012). Thus, citizens are involved more and more in political opinion and decision making processes, beyond elections. In democracies like in Switzerland the so called "Direct Democracy" is well established and institutionalized, many other countries have established instruments such as referendums, initiatives, plebiscites, or petitions during the last couple of years as well. In a recent study David Altman has analyzed 200 states and developed the Direct Democracy Practice Potential (DDPP) in order answer the question to what extent direct democracy has been achieved in current politics (Altman, 2015).

Already in 1969 Arnstein discussed "citizen participation" in her seminal paper; she developed the broadly cited "Ladder of Citizen Participation" (Arnstein, 1969). The different forms of (Non-) Participation have been adopted to fit into different settings since

then. Teran and Drobnjak introduce further concepts of participation levels (Teran & Drobnjak, 2013).

In 1992 Hart adopted it to the needs of children and young adults; nowadays, this model of children's participation is one of the most widely used models of participation in the context of younger citizens (Hart, 1992). Hart's report has been published by the UNICEF International Child Development Centre: Through UNICEF the United Nations are fighting for the rights of children and the youth. In 1990 the "Declaration of the Rights of the Child"[1] came into force, which have been ratified by 196 countries worldwide as of today (March 2016). In Switzerland, UNICEF has launched the program "Kinderfreundliche Gemeinde" (child friendly municipality) which offers the municipalities an assessment program regarding its child related activities in different areas such as administration and politics, school, health, child and youth protection. Several Swiss municipalities received the according label of a "child and youth friendly municipality".

Participation, be it for adults or children and adolescents, utilizes a number of Offline formats depending on the level and the purpose of participation according to the participation ladder. In the information society the utilization of ICT means can be seen as an additional chance to implement participatory processes. eDemocracy and eGovernment can be understood as umbrella terms which comprise several ICT-supported activities in modern democratic societies. Meier presents a comprehensive and structured overview of respective services (Meier, 2012).

Consequently, supporting participation processes by means of ICT is referred to as e-participation: "eParticipation involves the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes, mediated by information and communication technologies (ICTs)" (Sanford & Rose, 2007). It is important to mention that e-participation shall not imply that existing traditional processes have to be replaced by ICT-supported processes but that means of ICT either complement traditional Offline participation processes, transform them where applicable, or introduce new and innovative e-participation processes. Several authors have analyzed the research area of e-participation and thus provide comprehensive overviews, e.g., (Sanford & Rose, 2007) (Medaglia, 2012) (Susha & Grönlund, 2012).

In this paper we want to bring together the development of e-participation on the one and youth participation on the other side. So far the body of existing research in the area of youth e-participation is rather limited; two Swiss studies focus on youth participation (Rothenbühler, Ehrler, & Kissau, 2012; Wittwer, 2014). As a result it can be said that there are only a very few e-participation projects in Switzerland, among others, easyvote.ch, which focuses on voting, and engage.ch, focusing on youth parliaments. In both studies also an in-depth discussion of the understanding of youth (e-) participation can be found. It is also known from previous research that young people engage

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[1] See http://www.unicef.org/crc/

themselves more likely in political processes of participation if they have a personal interest and if they are affected personally.

Therefore, we will introduce a concrete ongoing project in a Swiss municipality as a case study in order to demonstrate how youth e-participation might could look like and what the benefits and challenges as well as success factors are. After presenting the initial situation we will present the procedure of the project as an example including first results and preliminary lessons learned.

2   The Youth e-Participation Project

2.1   The Initial Situation

In Switzerland direct democracy has a long tradition and is – figuratively speaking – part of the Swiss society's DNA. Also the support of the youth is a highly important issue on all federal levels. In order to enable children and adolescents to participate in democratic processes even before they reach the legal age – which is 18 as in most other countries as well – the national government in 2011 passed the federal law on the Promotion of extracurricular Youth Welfare[2] which shall support and stimulate respective youth activities. Furthermore, different instruments such as so called youth parliaments or youth commissions have been introduced in many cantons as well as municipalities including bigger cities.

The municipality of Grabs is situated in the Rhine Valley and has around 7000 inhabitants[3] and thus can be considered as a medium sized municipality as the average size of Swiss municipalities is around 1500 inhabitants.

Mid 2013, the municipality's commission for youth decided to put a focus on children and adolescents participation (youth participation) (Fernandez, 2014, 3). Also in 2013, Grabs was one of ten pilot municipalities of a program in the canton of St. Gallen which promoted physical exercise in combination with securing the ways to school. (Zihlmann, 2013) In addition, Grabs participated in the Swiss UNICEF initiative „Kinderfreundliche Gemeinde" as well (Regli, 2013). As one result of the analysis it has been identified that Grabs offers structural prerequisites for youth participation – a youth commission, a special youth association - but lacks in respective processes.

Based on an input by a university the local council decided to intensify the municipality's efforts to integrate the youth more into political processes. Therefore, a project group has been established in Feb. 2014 in order to prepare a respective project. From the very beginning all concerned stakeholders have been involved in the planning process: Representatives of the youth, youth work, school administration, school teacher, local

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[2] https://www.admin.ch/opc/de/classified-compilation/20092618/index.html (Kinder- und Jugendförderungsgesetz, KJFG)

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grabs

council, the responsible cantonal agency, and researchers from a University (Fernandez, 2014).

2.2 The Project

In a first step the project group discussed possible formats for the planned youth e-participation. Based on five scenarios developed by the project group a questionnaire was developed. In May 2014 420 students from the local school between the 4th and the 9th grade (approx. 10 to 15 years of age) participated in the survey. As the poll was done through the school as part of the regular classes close to 100% of all students participated. The scenarios have been an idea exchange, a discussion forum, Feedback functionality, a municipality game, and an information platform. As a result, 76% of the students said that they prefer the idea exchange. Furthermore, the students were asked which device they would prefer. More than 50% voted for the Smartphone, second was PC and Notebook, fourth a tablet computer.

Based on the results the project group elaborated the scenario of the idea exchange in more detail; a detailed proposal was developed and a SWOT analysis has been applied. The cost and options of an implementation have been estimated as well.

In the following we summarize the most important basic functionalities of the planned platform.

To access the platform a user needs to have an ID. Consequently, it can be assured that only the youth living in the municipality will be able to access. The IDs are being issued through the central school administration. All content is only visible for registered users.

The basic mechanism of the idea exchange has been designed twofold: First, users should be able to post ideas as they have it anytime. Second, the municipality's administration, the local council, or the editorial team should be able to post ideas and issues. User can "Like" postings as well as comment.

It was agreed that postings shall be published "as is" without any moderation beforehand. An editorial team was set up to review the entries on a regular basis. The team members comprise youth from the municipality lead by a volunteer who is actively involved in the youth work. The editorial team is being coached and advised by a coaching team on a weekly basis lead by the youth worker responsible for the municipality. A first draft of a process model has been developed accordingly.

An organization sheet was developed in order to document the different involved stakeholders and groups including their competencies, duties, and rights. The basic and overall idea of the project was to delegate as much as possible to the youth themselves. Adults shall only intervene if absolutely necessary.

In August 2014 it was decided to develop a website targeted for the use on Smartphones. This decision was made as native Apps for several platforms would have been too costly to develop and to maintain.

This approach has been chosen based on the knowledge and experience of the project group in combination with the students' survey during class. Although the approach has been chosen pragmatically it corresponds with a study which was not yet available at that time.

In the study young people in Switzerland have been asked how they would like to participate in their municipality. First, the real social network, comprising friends and family, was mentioned (49%). Second, through school (40%), and third through a Smartphone or Tablet App (32%). The fewest would like to be active in a youth or local parliament (10% each) (HTW Chur (Hrsg.), 2014, 83). Through these findings the chosen approach has been confirmed empirically subsequently.
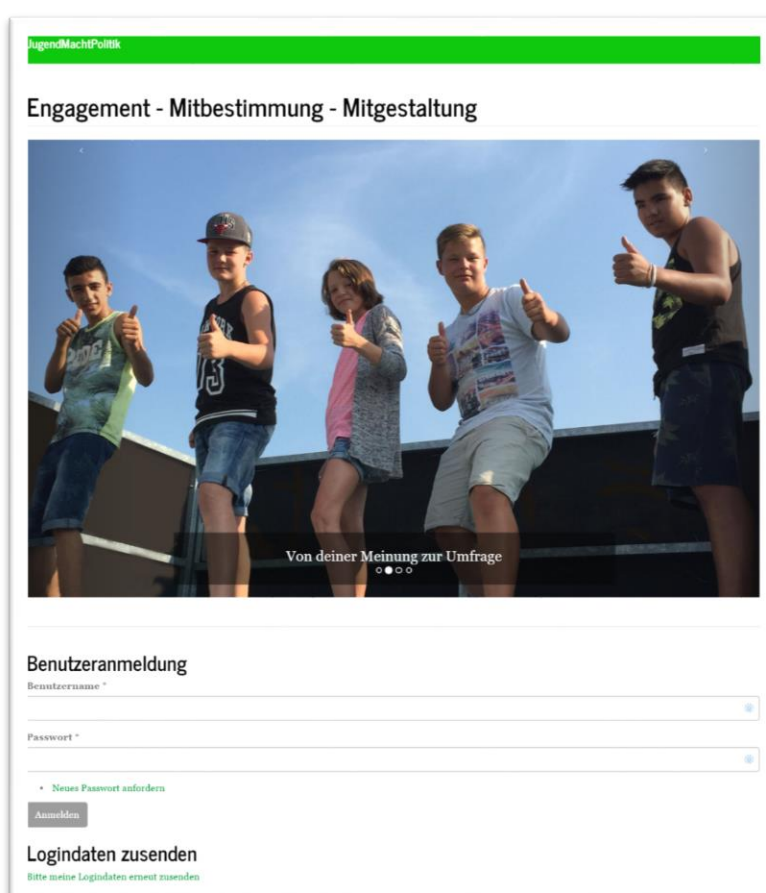
Figure 1: Screenshot of the (mobile) webpage jugendpolitikgrabs.ch

It was decided that the application shall be implemented by students of a nearby school providing vocational education ("Berufsschule"). The students of the respective class all have been in their last (fourth) year of their vocational training in the IT area. The mobile website was developed in the first quarter of 2015 as part of a regular class. The teacher joined the project group accordingly.

The mobile website was intensely tested by the members of the project group, changes have been applied by the students accordingly.

In mid-August 2015 the application was rolled out. All students from the local school from the 4th grade and up got their personal ID including an initial password through the school. The initial, first phase lasted until mid-October 2015.

To promote the platform a video was shot by the involved youth[4].

During the setup process of the project the project group decided to apply for additional funding for the project at the Federal Social Insurance Office (FSIO) based on the federal law on the promotion of extracurricular youth welfare. The project proposal was accepted in June 2015. With the additional funds, among others, especially the accompanying research will be funded.

First Results

The activities on the platform have been observed by all involved groups. Observations have been captured weekly based on an evaluation sheet provided by the accompanying researchers. The sheet comprised three areas of observations: observed activities, changes, and reasoning or possible explanation. The two researchers observed the activities on the platform as well. Intermediate results have been analyzed and discussed in November 2015 within the project group. Intermediate results also have been discussed with the Federal Social Insurance Office (FSIO) in Feb. 2016.

During the first phase of ca. eight weeks 40 ideas and topics have been captured on the platform by a total of 25 identified different authors. Entries got up to 15 feedbacks (comments) each.

Two topics have been posted by the editorial team. The very first entry addressed a planned swimming lake in the municipality. The youth was asked about their ideas. The second topic was about typical local idioms used by the youth which have been collected and voted for through the platform. The editorial team started rather slowly to moderate the discussions through inputs and questions, etc. The posted ideas can be clustered into the following groups: swimming lake/ pool, nature and environment, school, sports complex, infrastructure projects, playgrounds.

One idea addressed the issue of an increased protection of the environment. This idea was picked up already, some further actions have been initialized, for example, a workshop took place in the beginning of March 2016 in order to further discuss concrete activities.

The local idioms with the most votes have been produced as t-shirts and are being sold now in the municipality.

Based on the captured observations from the first phase as well as the course of the project in general and its discussion within the project group we will summarize some of the findings and lessons learned in the following.

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[4] See https://youtu.be/ZKnjZgMjn4c (in German only)

As youth participation was already a topic of the local council the idea of an e-participation project was a logical next step. Without these preconditions it might be much more difficult to convince the necessary stakeholders.

It seems to be a crucial success factor that all affected stakeholders have been integrated into the project from the very beginning. For example, the editorial team feels taken seriously in terms of real participation.

To involve the school also can been seen as a crucial success factor as otherwise it might be difficult to reach all students. Addressing the issue of participation in class might stimulate participation. Furthermore, as the platform was introduced through the school also parents take it more seriously.

A clear organizational structure helps to clarify the role of each stakeholder.

It is crucial to give a feedback concerning the posted ideas and issues. Users want to know what is going to happen with their ideas. Here major challenges occur: First, only a minority of ideas can be followed up, and second, when following up on an idea through the municipality's administrative processes take their time, e.g., budgets have to be planned for the next period, etc. A respective process model has to be further developed during the further course of the project.

Furthermore, it can be seen as crucial as well that participation has to be a mix of virtual as well as physical participatory formats. Even the so called Digital Natives or Millennials like to attend face-to-face formats.

Although it was decided to post contributions "as is" without a moderation beforehand no posting had to be deleted because of offensive language, insults, or alike.

Overall evaluation after the first phase:

Strength

Strong personalities are being involved into the project. All participants are open to innovative forms of participation. The culture of a mid-sized rural municipality supports the utilization of existing social networks.

Weaknesses

The emerging complexity has to be managed carefully. The youth might have the expectations that their ideas have to be realized for sure. As the youth culture is rather fast moving compared to administrative processes sustainability might be an issue. Without a rather quick feedback the youth may lose their interest. Technical limitations of the platform might hinder youth to participate more intensely.

Opportunities

The platform offers new ways of participative processes for the youth, it raises the understanding of political processes and contributes to the education of future citizens. Clear processes and roles enable a joined development by all stakeholders.

Threats

Participation as a term sounds too abstract and high level to many stakeholders and might be even deterrent. As the idea exchange is just one platform which the youth is using it might be hard to keep their attention and interest to participate.

3 Further Steps

So far, the platform is running and is being used in its current form.

It is planned to revise the technical platform by adding and changing several functionalities based on the experiences made. Based on the second version of the platform a second phase of observations will take place.

The platform shall be become a sustainable component in the municipality's political processes.

The involved researchers will conduct several interviews with all involved stakeholders in order to capture feedbacks systematically. Insights will be analyzed and compared with existing findings from the (scholarly) literature and existing studies. From a research point of view it will be discussed in how far ICT and social media stimulate youth participation as such.

Based on the concrete experiences of the project as well as on further findings from the literature the researchers will develop guidelines which shall enable other municipalities to implement youth e-participation.

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