

Virtual Communities and Local Youth E–Democracy

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E-DEMOCRACY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

E-democracy, digital democracy, and e-government are all phenomena that are developing together with ICT sector growth and rapid public-service development processes. Governments, at least in the Nordic countries, have strongly supported change in the Information Society and in electronic services. From a broad perspective the change is not only about transferring the services onto the Internet and making them reachable via different network infrastructures: it is more a question of profound strategic change in public-sector services overall, and a new kind of “virtual” citizenship. Support for traditional political participation will come from technology, online information, 24 hour discussion groups, and local virtual arenas such as municipality web sites. (Grönlund, 2003; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000).

Participation, voting, and especially, youth empowerment are important activities for building up the Information Society. Voting rates have declined during the last few years in both local and government elections in Finland. Similar results have also been reported from other European countries (Macintosh et al., 2003). Surprisingly, large groups of young people have totally rejected participation in political elections. This has been seen as a strong sign of the possible destruction of the welfare state, and also a major threat to Western democracy. Participation in elections of people from all social groups, from different geographical areas, and from all age groups has been seen as the most powerful way of committing citizens to the costs and delivery ideology of Nordic welfare-state services.

The traditional decision making in the public sector has been strongly in the domain of the professionals, and it has been implemented in top-down official hierarchies. Elements such as formal politics, administration, and civil society are all in the process of transfor-

mation. At the same time, emerging technology enables citizens to obtain and actively use all kinds of public information. Information Society rules and regulations have to be rewritten quickly, especially as young people start using the participation channels actively. Today’s youth is familiar with virtual realities in the form of avatars or different kinds of virtual features, and knows how to remain unidentified if necessary.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Virtual communities have recently aroused interest in research and in the literature. These communities are characterized by the fact that their members meet and interact mostly through the use of computer-mediated communication. It is important to see how virtual communities are located at the boundary between formal organizations and social groups that exist, despite the absence of procedural and institutional authority.

There are different interpretations of how people act in virtual communities. On the one hand, they are said to do just about everything people do in real life; on the other it is claimed that virtual communities are likely to change our experience of the real world. People believe that the members of these online communities leave their bodies behind and migrate to a virtual realm. Such communities are characterized in the literature by four central features. Firstly, most of the members will never meet face to face, yet nearly all of them carry an image of their community in their minds. Secondly, the communities are supposed to be sovereign and free from the interference of outsiders. Thirdly, they and their members seem to carry the idea of horizontal comradeship, although most of them are unequal and the members exploit each other. Finally, they are believed to be limited, although even the largest ones have bound-

aries with other communities—meaning people belong to several communities at the same time (Slevin, 2002).

When public-sector officials started to build up virtual arenas for young people, they also started to support a new kind of interaction and new kinds of processes and relations between young citizens and adults, including parents, teachers, and politicians. How do you recognize trust and psychological group dynamics, and how do you support all the different dynamics in the virtual world of youth? Earlier research has emphasized the critical role of trust in most arenas involving social interaction, e.g., communication, commitment, and collaboration (Blomqvist, 1997, 2002). According to the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995), trust may be the most effective means of decreasing social complexity. It has also been identified as critical in the evolution of virtual collaboration (Järvenpää, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998) and virtual communities (Castelfranchi & Tan, 2002).

Face-to-face interaction, as well as character and cultural similarity, are known to build trust naturally. Virtual arenas and collaboration between asymmetric actors make the natural evolution of trust challenging. Castelfranchi AND Tan (2002) list four potential types of trust in computer-mediated interaction: trust in the environment and the infrastructure, trust in one’s own agent and mediating agents, trust in one’s potential partners, and trust in the authorities.

THE VAIKUTTAMO CASE

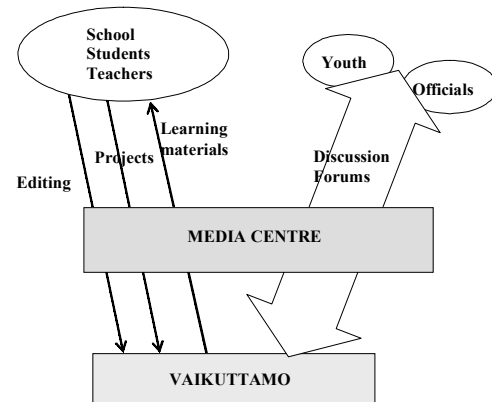
A New Kind of E-Democracy Community for Young People Based on Locality, Learning, and Influence

The following case is an example of a virtual arena for youth built up by the public sector. The objective of the Vaikuttamo project is to encourage young people to express their opinions on the local matters that concern them. The development team was the first in Finland to create an active Web-based arena and virtual community (www.vaikuttamo.net) to serve the local youth e-democracy. The case study shows how Vaikuttamo was developed and why it has succeeded well in this challenging field.

Background

Vaikuttamo is a part of a project called “Students as a Local Influence,” being carried out in the region of Hämeenlinna, southern Finland. It is primarily aimed at young people between 13 and 20 years of age. The size

Figure 1. The structure of Vaikuttamo



of an average youth age group in the city of Hämeenlinna is about 620 (December 31, 2002 statistics), which means the target audience of Vaikuttamo totals about 3,700. The main contributors are local schools and the Media Centre, which is coordinating the project. The Media Centre is funded by the European Union and its aim is to promote know-how related to information technology in the region of Hämeenlinna. The parties involved and the procedures adopted in the project are presented in Figure 1.

The project started in autumn 2001 and the first version of www.vaikuttamo.net was published on March 27, 2002. Vaikuttamo was awarded the prize for the best e-learning project of 2002 in the Eschola contest, and received the quality award for virtual schools from the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education in April 2003.

Goals

The goals of the project are to promote young citizens’ willingness to participate in and develop their own environment, to strengthen local e-democracy, and to create a virtual culture of action between community officials and young people. A further aim is to develop information technology-based working procedures in schools in order to promote learning.

Vaikuttamo enhances young people’s knowledge of local democracy and offers different ways of contributing. Students know their own rights and have a chance to influence local matters. In particular, they become acquainted with electronic contributory channels, their operational principles, and netiquette. They are able to take a critical stance towards the information presented in different media, they can use the software and hardware needed to generate information, and they are able to utilize the media to present their own matters of concern.

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