

## Summary notes

# The Voiceless Generation: What does youth civic engagement look like in the digital age?

*14 June 2016, 11am – Council Room, Trent Building – The University of Nottingham*

### **Dear workshop participant,**

Thanks for your contribution to the workshop, which was generously supported by the University of Nottingham's Governance and Public Policy (GaPP) Research Priority Area. We hope that you found the discussion interesting and insightful. Please find below a brief summary of the event – hopefully it captures the main points, but please get in touch if you think we're missing something!

As mentioned, the workshop marks the beginning of an investigation into youth civic engagement (or lack thereof) that is both *academic* and *civic*. On 21 June we presented some findings from the preparatory research and the workshop at an academic conference in Oxford, and we will also be presenting at York and Cambridge in the coming weeks. We will make our research publicly available, and we will be holding further meetings in the Autumn.

The research is also informing the development of Gada, an app designed to encourage and facilitate civic engagement among young people. A prototype is in its final stages of development and will be tested with different stakeholder groups after the summer. We hope that you can be among them.

Sadly, the EU referendum seems to suggest that young people are still removed from traditional forms of civic engagement- but the impact of this decision is likely to lead to more engagement. This is an opportunity that should not be missed and we hope that we will work together towards this shared goal.

With best wishes,

Ansgar, Elvira and Mattia

## 1) What is civic engagement?

- "Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern"
- Institutional civic engagement → explicit aim/goal; driven by cohesive groups; starts online but culminates offline
- Cultural civic engagement → implicitly driven by networks of individuals; can happen entirely online; can trigger institutional engagement; happens as part of the wide network of cultural interchange

## 2) What are the main barriers to civic engagement among young people?

### Lack of awareness

- Young people are unaware that there are issues that you could engage with: they need to have learnt about the issues that exists and the idea of taking charge
- Private school kids can be very politically engaged because they are exposed to the political issues, while public school kids don't get exposed to issues, as a result they are not engaged

### Exclusion

- Racial and class barriers: a sense that civic engagement 'is for white guys in suits'
- Institutional paternalism and the dominance of experts cuts people off the debate
- Formal intuitions seem daunting: engaging with formal business of Parliament is off-putting

### Irrelevance of public discourse

- Public issues are defined by adults, and they differ from the ones that define young people
- Young people do not have control over issues that dominate policy – which become different at different stages of life, e.g. control over budget
- Issues are framed by an institution - top down vs bottom up

### Lack of trust in institutions

- Voting does not change things because politicians are all the same; protests lead to nothing
- Fear that engagement will be manipulated by those in power

### Fear of exposure

- Penalty for engaging – i.e. oppression by police at protests or fear of personal backlash
- Asking people to engage personally means asking them to put themselves outside the 'group', exposing themselves to being noticed by people who don't agree with their perspectives
- Social media is unpredictable: opinions can go viral, people don't want to be judged and scrutinised
- There is in politics always the element of self-protection, avoid doing things that could threaten themselves.

### Ageism

- Old men that don't take younger people seriously:
- The composition of the House doesn't reflect wider population, esp. in terms of age: Youth Parliament & Youth Select Committee attempts to engage with younger people

### Lack of infrastructure

- Participation is a process that has to be maintained: cut-backs in funding threaten to reduce engagement activities

### Feeling of disempowerment

- Disillusionment that doing the petitions or protest march has no significant effect: 'I'm just one person, what can I possibly achieve? I don't matter compared to the crowd'

- No sense of community is stopping engagement: people feel isolated, alienated and insignificant – would rather focus on the more ‘tangible’, influenceable things that affect them directly

#### Lack of engagement culture

- If no ‘seed’ is planted for doing civic engagement at young age, then there will be no engagement later either.
- Political education + *Critical thinking* skills need to be taught in schools [problem of qualifications focused schooling]

## 3) What is the most effective way to generate interest in civic matters among young people?

### ENGAGING IN THE COMMUNITY

#### Face-to-face and grassroots engagement

- Probably the most effective way to generate interests is to go out and show people, as well as word-to-mouth.
- Need to promote that personal interaction and you need to relate to the people driving the civic engagement movements, to feel that *they* come from where *I* come from.
- Involvement in neighbourhood: enable people to take some decisional power

#### Engage with specialise groups

- Use existing groups, created for other reasons, ad bridge for engagement
- Could be community groups or interest-based groups

#### Role models

- There is a need for positive **peer role models**, **front line champions** and **case studies** young people can relate to.

### COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE

#### Communication strategies

- Need to offer communication strategies to all entry point and levels
- Generally, communication strategies have to be simple and direct
- Trust, hope and knowledge are central concept for designing effective strategies for youth engagement
- Asking young people is a good approach: get them to explain the problems they face
- Need to have young people deliver the message to get young people to engage/feel that it applies to them.

#### Show benefits of engagement

- Show how engagement will benefit young people personally and individually: e.g. reducing social isolation, opening new networks, connections and acquisition to transferable skills. It should be clear to the young person why to join.
- How am I benefiting if I engage on civic activities? How can the group support me? Will improve my CV? Young people need networks and support.
- People under 20s may rely more on personal benefit and those over 20s on social benefit.

#### Marketing design

- Participation marketing is a crucial factor, especially when it is driven and co-design by young people.
- The platform for that marketing is also important: internet access is not universal, other mediums are important.

## CREATING ENTRY POINTS

### Recognise levels of engagement

- There are different levels of engagement, a spectrum, and a continuum: a young person can be engaged, alert, aware but not necessary 'on it'
- Need to accommodate the desires of people with a political personality and those who do not: offer different entry levels.

### Create entry points

- Smart phone apps can be a leveller, it can level off the relation between users and authorities; it can connect and bridges a generation of native internet users with the authorities
- Social media can be a catalyst to empower young people
- Entry levels available for everyone, opportunities for everybody: we need to provide a model that is engaging and provides **entry points** and bring equal opportunities to people

### Physical space in the communities

- Having the **right space** facilitates civic engagement: new initiatives to facilitate access to libraries for young people, where talking is allowed and access to internet very easy

### Virtual spaces and progressive engagement

- People go through a process of becoming more engaged: You care about things that you know about
- Getting information through social media friend connections is more likely to lead to more engagement with an issues because the people talking about the issue are friend. (a form of 'make it personal')

## CREATING SUPPORT STRUCTURES

### Combine online and offline

- Offline and online activities complement each other. Technology provides opportunities that may appeal more to young people but should not replay human contact, it should be a trigger.
- E-petitions work as low-entry level

### Political/organisational structures

- Structures are needed to generate interest among young people earlier on and campaigns to bring awareness about the importance of caring about your community and to share the political motives of local parties
- Those structures can come from schools, youth clubs, community groups and local government
- Work at strategic level to convince council/organizational boards to get things embedded in organizational structure

## 4) Why hasn't the internet 'revolutionized democracy' and how can social media better support civic engagement in the future?

## THE INTERNET'S CONTRIBUTION TO DEMOCRACY

### Value of internet

- Access to news and such things
- Civic engagement is more accessible – e.g. tweet an MP instantaneously
- Internet makes basic participation easy: signing a petition releases guilt because you felt like you've done something

### Maybe the internet has already changed democracy

- There is more information sharing -> this leads to off line group actions like vigils and flash mobs
- Democratization due to ease of making and sharing videos, e.g. US police brutality reporting; Snapchat from Orlando attacks being sent in real-time to inform about situation

#### **Internet embodies democracy**

- Everyone is equal online, equal ability to post online, making connections is easy
- No limiting points of view that you can find
- If you do/don't speak up is your own choice

#### **Identity-shaping**

- Internet gives people the opportunity to show they care even about things that are peripheral to their life (and that they therefore can't take time off to travel to Westminster for)

#### **Open Information**

- Phone is main channel to news, the news is from social media
- Easier access to 24/7 information on all issues
- Different perspectives are heard, not just traditional media organizations

## **INTRINSIC WEAKNESSES OF THE INTERNET**

#### **Information overload**

- Information overload: news comes to you through feed, and it combines good and bad quality information
- Information stream is so fast that there is no time to stop and think and meaningfully engage.
- False information: lies that spread become 'truth' because they are repeated, no 'editing' process on the internet
- Spread of information, but not of participation – gap between the two

#### **Shorter attention span**

- Short attention span: as soon as the petition has been clicked on other things have appeared to pull away the attention
- Quick 'clicktivism' is like a kind of civic engagement 'fast food'
- Impact of a petition fades out in the fast flow of information if not connected to immediate community (friends/family)

#### **Internet encourages simple/shallow engagement**

- A lot of online petitions do have follow-up calls for off-line engagement, but people choose not to go beyond 'tick the box', at which point they say 'I did my bit'.

#### **Concerns about the technology**

- Need to look at the drivers of the media host, e.g. Facebook makes money from advertising how does that influence their policy towards social control?
- Found out about issues of media control by Facebook, via post on Facebook (– ironic?)
- Platform take-down policies can be problem
- Algorithm practices need to be visible (transparency is necessary)
- Platform enables democracy but there are problems of confirmation bias, seeking views that you agree with

## **IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENTS**

- Add 'rate my MPs' option
- Add 'action' button for more practical activity etc. - press button and it'll link you to a means of taking action rather than doing nothing (GG note: a 'write to my MP button' on FB would be amazing!)
- Content that shows 'who is on the other side' of the communication gives more engagement

- Need for a process to be able to filter from anger to action
- Emotion needs to be harnessed to lead to action
- Feedback needs to be immediate to be able to catch the first emotion that grabbed. [editors note: danger of demagogue populism]

## ON GADA

- Point of technology is to make an entry point for those who don't want, can't engage in a traditional way
- Informed; interacting; organising actions: you can do all of these on social media but no such media is designed for civic engagement & drawbacks to using them