POLICY PAPER ON
THE YOUTH PERSPECTIVE
ON E-SOCIETY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The so-called digital age of today depicts a constantly evolving information society that brings new challenges, needs and opportunities, especially for young people. New information and communication technologies have become central for the work of youth organisations as they entail emerging opportunities for young people to participate in the society they live in. Moreover there is a need to acknowledge that youth organisations and young people, being key content providers and users, are not only directly affected by information and communication technology (ICT) developments, but are also largely driving these developments. Therefore it is important to consider the youth perspective when elaborating on an "electronic society" (e-society).

Policy makers,[1] institutions and civil society have increasingly recognised the existing need to discuss the impact of ICT on the participation of young people and youth organisations in decision making processes. This paper proposes a political follow up on the Youth Event to the 1st Council of Europe "Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and New Communication Services"[2] and the Seminar "New ways of youth participation based on Information and Communication Technologies"[3], generating the political debate on the consequences of new media and communication tools and policies on the involvement of young Europeans in society. It is also important to keep in mind the global dimension regarding the development of e-society in order to bridge the gaps between young people living around the world.

The European Youth Forum sees the need to identify three points in the discourse on e-society that are of importance for young people. This includes addressing the digital divide, discussing the efficiency of e-participation tools, and tackling the possibility to promote democracy and freedom of speech through new information and communication technologies. Furthermore this paper aims at putting forward recommendations and proposed actions towards the different stakeholders affecting the role of young people in e-society.

2. DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

E-society is a reality, however no common concept or clear definition of it exists, and there are many interpretations[4] of the term at European and global level. The

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[1]   Examples of bringing legislation in line with ICT developments can be traced in several countries, notably Estonia (the institution of electronic vote) and Finland (the recognition of the right to access to broadband internet).

[2]   0544-09 Final Report, Reykjavik, Iceland 26-27 May 2009 Youth Event to the 1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and New Communication Services

[3]   Council of Europe Documentation - Seminar „New ways of participation based on Information and Communication Technologies"

[4]   For concepts regarding e-society: European Principles for Information Society (http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=6264&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html **)** ; E-Government and E-Governance: Definitions, domain Framework and status around the world (http://www.iceg.net/2007/books/1/1_369.pdf); DPADM/UNDESA Electronic and Knowledge

YFJ will refrain from categorising the entire spectrum of e-society-related concepts, but proposes a set of basic assumptions to ensure the comprehensiveness of this paper. E-society can be described as a reality, which emerged through new information and communication technologies that have the potential to change the interaction and interrelation between the different actors within and between communities[5], and therefore also for the youth sector.[6]

The focus of this paper is on the meaning of these developments for young people and youth organisations. In this context the analysis in the chapter below requires the clarifications of two concepts: the digital divide and e-participation.

The digital divide refers to the inequality of access to new information and communication technologies and Internet. It also describes the lack of digital and source criticism along generational, geographical, socio-economic and cultural lines. [7]

For the European Youth Forum e-participation[8] in the youth sector means the use of transparent online information regarding all aspects of decision-making processes. This includes the agenda setting, preparation, implementation and evaluation of youth policy matters; the implementation of open, transparent, easily accessible and inclusive online communication and consultation mechanisms that facilitate dialogue between all relevant stakeholders in the youth field. The application of a variety of online tools that enhance and do not replace active participation of young people in the offline world, used when considered as the most applicable option in a safe and transparent manner, are interactive tools that need to be distinguished from the rather passive form of "click-participation" in which users are simply adding e-applications and e–causes.

At this point it is important to underline that new ways of youth participation based on information and communication technologies should build on the principles of equality of access, inclusiveness, transparency, right to privacy and freedom of speech.

Governments: Definitions (http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan008633.pdf) ; DPADM/UNDESA Guiding principles for successful e-government (http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan008627.pdf); Council of Europe – Media and information society (http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/)

[5]   On the basis of "Understanding e-democracy developments in Europe" Scoping Paper CAHDE(2006) 2 E, Council of Europe.

[6]   E-governance can be characterized not only through the usage of online administration tools, but also through drawing on e-democracy mechanisms like e- voting and e-participation. Further e-voting can be practiced in form of e-elections, -referenda and -initiatives while e-participation describes a much broader concept. Based on"The role of e-consultation within Participative Democracy" presentation Günter Schefbeck, European e-participation day 04.03.2009.

[7]   For definitions regarding digital divide, OECD glossary of statistical terms (http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=4719)

[8]   "Participation is about having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support, to participate in and influence decisions, to engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society." The Revised European Youth Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2008)

3. YOUTH AND YOUTH ORGANISATIONS IN E-SOCIETY

3.1. Digital Divide

3.1.1. E-accessibility
The digital divide is firstly characterised through a lack of e-accessibility. Access to computers and Internet is a necessity to participate in Europe today, as they are the primary source for information and communication. The inequality of access to hardware machinery, software and devices and to connection to modern communication networks can lead to unequal opportunities for young people. This decreases their ability to access information and knowledge on youth culture, educational programmes, job opportunities, health, political participation, basic human rights and other aspects of the every-day life of young people. Limited access to ICT also brings about limited possibilities of communication in private and public networks, thus seriously constraining an individual's options of expression. On the other hand, accessibility must include the development of user-friendly and target group (youth friendly) oriented websites content/ structures and other e-tools, as well as promotion of open standards and simple but consistent use of copyright terms.[9]

All young people, regardless of their background, place of residence, abilities or other characteristics, should have equal access to ICT, in order to participate in e-society. Hence the YFJ recommends the development of infrastructure that will allow young people to access required hardware and connectivity in public areas, for instance at public libraries, schools or youth centres, as one step towards inclusiveness and equality. The YFJ believes it is crucial to promote net-neutrality, and while acknowledging the need to guarantee critical web-services (Voip, etc.), it should not lead to discriminating other online users. The affordability of computer hardware, software and Internet access varies in different countries but is important for young people all over Europe. There are still too many regions not having high-speed connection at all. Governments should invest resources in improving hardware-related e-accessibility for young Europeans, particularly for those with fewer opportunities; this, in the view of the YFJ is an indispensable step towards better social inclusion.

3.1.2. Digital literacy
Although they are often considered as advanced users in comparison with other age groups, the lack of reflection on the credibility of web content among young people[10] shows that digital literacy training, within the broader context of promoting the development of critical thinking and source criticism, is necessary in order to give young Europeans the possibility to actually use modern ICT so as to constructively participate in society. Young people need to have the possibility to learn to evaluate and judge web content, especially considering the amount of available online objectionable and questionable sites, for example on suicide, self-

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9   For an example of legal copyright tools, see Creative Commons (www.creativecommons.org).
10   Influence of ICT on the participation of young people in society" Institute for Public Policy Research (www.ippr.org).

harm, violence or extreme political positions. As the IT sector is characterised through constant and fast innovation, these developments have to go hand in hand with policies that promote the permanent adaptation, facilitation and financial support of e-trainings for young people.

Digital literacy should be approached as a life long learning process that needs to start at an early age. It is evident that the lack of digital literacy among young people marks a barrier to engage in e-society. Therefore usage of new media and new ways of participation should be an integral part of formal, non-formal and informal education, also raising awareness about the rights, responsibilities, opportunities and risks related to the use of new communication tools and services.[11] Furthermore, it is important to stress that the usage of ICT is complimentary to traditional educational methods and should by no means replace them completely. In particular, to save money never is a good reason for replacing traditional/offline forms of learning and education by e-learning.

As main providers of non-formal education youth organisations are well-placed to support young people in enhancing their skills to function in e-society. Nevertheless, they need the financial and political support in order to have the chance to organise ICT, e-participation, e-democracy and e-campaign training, addressing multipliers in the youth field as well as promoting peer learning in organising activities in which young people share/pass on their ICT skills, if appropriate within the context of their core political agenda.

3.2. E-participation

E-participation potentially offers possibilities to increase participation of young people in society. A variety of e-tools applied by young users exist in order to gather or share information and interact with other individuals or groups. Usage of web-portals, pages and blogs, online-videos, radio channels and casts, e-learning courses, online–forums and social networking, and the participation in e-polls, questionnaires and voting is increasing among young people and youth organisations. Statistics show that less than 10% of the time spent online by 16-25 year olds is spent on civic issues.[12] However, there is a lack of long-term studies on the online behaviour of young people.

Evidence-based policymaking requires up to date research on a fast developing e-society. There is a need to analyse and evaluate the use and side effects of new ways of participation on youth organisations and active citizenship of young Europeans, using interdisciplinary and participatory research tools. Additionally, the e-availability of research results in a user-friendly manner is a cornerstone for policy development. The YFJ calls for the setup of regular inclusive forums for best practice exchange, for facilitating a better knowledge and understanding of e-participation.

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[11]   On the basis of 0544-09 Final Report, Reykjavik, Iceland 26-27 May 2009 Youth Event to the 1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and New Communication Services.

[12]   On the basis of "Influence of ICT on the participation of young people in society" Institute for Public Policy Research (www.ippr.org/)

The YFJ believes that fostering online deliberation, additional to "click participation", so as to move from primarily passive consumption and entertainment to interactive and interpersonal e-communication, is essential. Online media that facilitates a two way process of information sharing is more likely to promote active political participation of young people. Encouraging an e-community of interest aiming at a community of practice in the offline world could foster the democratic participation of young people in society.[13]

Therefore it is important to explore tools and mechanisms that actively engage young citizens and ensure feedback loops on online consultations and other e-participation processes, because e-tools revealing the impact of online participation give young people more reason to access political decision-making processes and could foster a "culture of participation". Additionally, the YFJ calls upon policy makers to promote e-participation programmes, respecting the cross-sectoral nature of youth issues, through appropriate measures. In this context, we encourage the use of popular platforms that are natural for young people and youth organisations.

3.3. Enhancing democracy and freedom of speech

The YFJ is convinced that as long as the digital divide exists at geographical, socioeconomic, generational, gender, cultural or other lines, transition to a mere e-democracy is not desirable. In order to strengthen democracy within e-society, firstly equal access to technology and content for all young people needs to be ensured, and secondly, young people need to be empowered to know how to participate in the e-world.

Moreover it is crucial to provide young people with the possibility to exercise their fundamental rights and especially freedom of speech and expression in e-society, which becomes impossible if they are prevented from using ICT tools freely, due to censorship.

States and other actors should develop common standards in full respect of freedom of expression and information with due attention paid to other related rights and freedoms in the European Convention on Human Rights.[14] Additionally, youth organisations should be supported to use new technologies in order to increase democracy and freedom of speech via ICT tools.

Addressing freedom of expression and speech when using new information and communication technology raises the question of respect for the right to privacy and one's dignity online. ICT tools play a vital role as a resource for young people belonging to a group or minority. Regardless of the group or minority being based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or a cultural identity, ICT tools enable interaction without geographic boundaries. The content that young people are

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[13]   On the basis of Council of Europe Documentation - Seminar „New ways of participation based on Information and Communication Technologies."
[14]   0544-09 Final Report, Reykjavik, Iceland 26-27 May 2009 Youth Event to the 1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and New Communication Services.

sharing online is portable, storable, easily accessible and interconnected private information. Thus nearly all actions can be recorded and threaten the privacy of young people. [15] Additionally digital literacy also includes learning to reflect critically on the information one displays online as content provider.

Therefore the YFJ encourages the development of valuable and socially responsible (technical) applications, respecting the right of privacy and human dignity.

4. Conclusion

This Policy Paper addresses only some relevant elements in the discourse on e-society and its impact on young people and youth organisations. It is clear, however, that an overarching political response to the effects of new information and communication technologies on society is needed. Technological innovation may be unpredictable, but that is why continuous forums involving all stakeholders in the youth sector need to be established and ready to react commonly through elaborating the impacts, setting a common perspective and ensuring the implementation of efficient ICT-tools that promote the active participation of young people in society, and at the same time ensure the respect for their human rights.

Youth organisations see themselves as important actors in supporting young people to function as active citizens, both in the offline and online worlds, and will continue empowering young people to participate in the e-community. At the same time, they will continue looking pro-actively into the future, contributing to the development of an accessible, dynamic, democratic and safe e-society.

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[15]   On the basis of Council of Europe Documentation - Seminar „New ways of participation based on Information and Communication Technologies".