

# Experimenting with youth-centred e-participation

## The case of the Virtual Council

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### Introduction

This chapter examines opportunities for online societal participation that public authorities in Finland provide for young people. We are interested in the features of such services, the assumptions on participation they are based on, and the experiences and thoughts of young people themselves on using them. Our key concept is e-participation, which construes how citizens can be involved in political processes and interact with policymakers by using various digital technologies and tools (e.g., Khan & Krishnan 2017; Lindner & Aichholzer 2020). We use e-participation instead of digital participation, which points to a wider spectrum of online social participation (e.g., Pietilä et al., 2021a, 2021c), or digital activism, which refers to self-organising online action by Internet users intended to influence societal matters (see the discussion in Özkula 2021). This chapter focuses on the relationship of young people to the institutionally defined e-participation services and practices and leaves aside the question of the more widely understood digital participation. Moreover, we utilise the concepts of user experience and human-centred design from the field of human–technology interaction, from which Jari, Iikka and Kaisa approach the study of youth participation, while Tiina, a political researcher, is interested in the relationship of youth participation to democracy. User experience refers to how users perceive and respond to systems and services, that is, what kind of effect using a service induces in a person, and how a system or service corresponds to the needs, expectations and requirements of users (International Organization for Standardization 2019; Hassenzahl & Tractinsky 2006).

The underlying idea of the chapter, in congruence with the argument presented in the book's Introduction, is that society needs young people's active contributions to be sustainable, and the opportunity to influence decisions concerning their lives is a vital part of young people's well-being (e.g., Rexhepi, Filiposka & Trajkovic 2018). Digitalisation advances at a rapid pace and digital services have become ever-more important contexts for young people's social engagements. Thus, it is important to inquire how we can build e-participation services that are interesting, inclusive, equitable and effective, especially from young people's perspectives. The argument here is not that it should be expected of young people that they be active

specifically in those digital arenas that are provided by public authorities. Instead, we consider it more important that all young people have knowledge of existing means of e-participation, possess sufficient skills to use them and have enough self-efficacy to act when the interest or need arises to influence policymaking.

The chapter also pays critical attention to the assumptions under which young people's e-participation has been studied in the past. Researchers have often expressed concerns about why young people are not interested in the existing channels of e-participation offered by public authorities and how they could be attracted to participate more actively (see the discussion in Banaji & Buckingham 2010). As this book argues, the problem with such thinking is that it tends to work under adult and expert-centred presumptions about participation, lacking a practical sense of what kind of features and practices make digital services user friendly and motivating for young people or difficult to use and non-motivating. Consequently, there is a lack of research on young people's needs – especially those with little or no prior experience of societal participation in official contexts – in relation to e-participation and on how the current digital participation services are able to meet them.

We have engaged dozens of young people in our own research in the development and testing of a new e-participation service, the Virtual Council, initiated under the auspices of the ALL-YOUTH project. The approach to the development of the Virtual Council has followed the practices of human-centred design that emphasise the inclusion of users in the design process. Thus, when collaborating with young people we have paid close attention to what kind of needs and aspirations they have regarding e-participation. We therefore consider the Virtual Council to function as (1) a tool to explore youth e-participation, (2) an object of research around which we have gathered feedback while iteratively developing the service in collaboration with young people and (3) an end result of our design project. Towards the end of the chapter, the user needs and aspirations expressed by young people in the development phase are tentatively reflected in experiences of testing the Virtual Council service in practice.

### **Developing a youth-centred approach to studying e-participation**

The idea of using new media for democratic processes and political participation was framed as novel, modern and highly innovative in the early days of the World Wide Web (Lindner & Aichholzer 2020). The democratic potential of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) was emphasised until the end of the 1990s by both scholars and political decision makers who shared far-reaching expectations that the new media would induce a fundamental change in existing power relations and hierarchies in society, by giving citizens a much greater say in political processes (Hennen et al., 2020, 2; Häyhtiö 2010; Rheingold 1993). The Internet, as an open and easily accessible space for political discussion and information sharing, was held to have the potential to function as an effective remedy

against the perceived failures of representative democracy (the declining levels of electoral activity, political interest, political trust and democratic legitimacy) through increasing direct communication between citizens and political authorities and improving the democratic and deliberative quality of political opinion formation (Hennen et al., 2020, 2; Banaji & Buckingham 2010). These features were, ultimately, hoped to enhance the legitimacy of the whole democratic system.

However, the original expectations of a fundamental reform of modern democracy through Internet-mediated communication have gradually waned as experience of putting e-democracy into practice has accumulated (Hennen et al., 2020). For example, van Dijk (2012, 53 ff) has noted that while e-democracy has significantly improved access to and exchange of politically relevant information, its realisation in terms of supporting public deliberation and community building has been disappointing. He has found no perceivable effect of ICT-enhanced public participation on democratic decision making, and it seems that the new e-democracy practices rarely allow citizens to enter the core stages of decision making and policy execution. The same observation is made, for example, in a UN report on e-participation, which states that the development of the Internet has brought only a modestly growing focus on citizen involvement in policymaking (United Nations 2016). De Paoli and Forbes (2020) also point out that successful e-participation strategies and implementation are still very limited. It is now widely accepted that just building services for e-participation is not enough, and many researchers have argued that the “build it and they will come” approach does not suffice to counteract the overall decline in public participation (159).

We have found in our own studies that young people may not, in fact, know of the existence of e-participation services, and even when they do, the relevance of such services for their lives may be unclear. Moreover, the schools’ democracy education (at least in Finland) does not include systematic teaching and practice of e-participation methods, which makes it understandable that young people are rarely versed in using them. The distinction between e-participation and the more widely understood digital participation and activism is clear: while a large proportion of young people use digital tools competently for social networking, content production and bottom-up activism, e-participation services remain unknown and underused, and there is little common ground between these digital spheres. There is also a clear gap in research knowledge in this regard. The decline of young people’s interest in traditional forms of political participation, offline or online, has been widely lamented (fair or not), while research literature on young people’s use of social media and digital activism is mounting and rather positively tuned (e.g., Córtes-Ramos et al., 2021; Boulianne & Theocharis 2018). Researchers are generally not interested in what factors explain the differences between young people’s e-participation and wider digital participation. This is something we should learn more about.

While research has recognised many problems with the previous forms of e-participation, we think that there are still strong reasons to continue developing it. As this book argues, participating in the affairs of one’s community and society is

an important part of a person's well-being. Furthermore, when considering young people's societal participation, the importance of digital culture and its continuously morphing manifestations simply cannot be ignored. Yet, previous public e-participation services have not been particularly attractive to young people, even if participation through digital means is an increasingly important facet of young people's relationship with democracy. Nevertheless, some basic and well-proven elements of e-participation are already there, and the practices of e-democracy have already changed communication between citizens and governments in many ways, for example, by providing better and faster access to all kinds of public information, e-consultation processes and, to an extent, online elections (Hennen et al., 2020, 3). Studies from Finland also show that voting aid applications and social media are now among the most important channels for young people to seek information about elections and candidates (e.g., Borg & Koljonen 2020). Moreover, many researchers have argued that e-participation does have the capacity to enhance young people's democratic education and participation in political opinion formation both offline and online (e.g., Lindner & Aichholzer 2020).

However, what we should learn from past research debates and implementations of e-democracy is that new technology does not in itself provide a simple and easy silver bullet to solve all issues related to political participation. It is essential to analyse the problems associated with previous implementations when designing new e-participation services and pay attention also to what kind of barriers to participation they may generate. We should also bear in mind that obstacles to offline political participation are often reproduced in the online world. Online participation is not automatically inclusive and equal even if it is affordable, fast, easy and conveniently place independent (Pietilä, Varsaluoma & Väänänen 2019; Serban et al., 2020).

Regarding the prevailing characteristics of existing e-participation services, one in particular must be mentioned, while many other problems follow from it. That is, although public authorities are increasingly interested in utilising digital technology to develop young people's participation (see e.g., STEP 2015), the problem is that e-participation services are still mainly designed from top-down perspectives without engaging intended users in their development. Consequently, the genuine needs of users – like those of young people – are often ignored. Such top-down approach also characterises the agenda setting of institutional e-services. As the authors of Chapter 4 point out, official youth consultation is usually based on the knowledge interests of political authorities. The issues raised on the agenda can then appear very distant from the perspective of young people's lives, making it difficult to see what difference they can make. Many studies have observed that it is essential for young people's participation that the topic at hand touches on their lives in some concrete sense (Pietilä, Varsaluoma & Väänänen 2019, 2021c). Some digital services, such as the Finnish "Nuortenideat.fi" ("Young People's Ideas", Demirbas 2021), do allow young people a chance to influence setting the agenda, yet they too have the problem of rarely managing to generate productive dialogue between them and decision makers. Lack of dialogue and feedback creates one of

the biggest barriers to participation. Young people have also outlined it as one of their user needs (Pietilä et al., 2021c).

The top-down practices of e-participation present a wide range of challenges from the perspective of the individual citizen. An important point is that many young people feel that their skill set is insufficient to even dare to try to (e-)participate, echoing the question raised in Chapter 6 of the book. It has been suggested that e-participation services are usually based on the same kind of ideals of rational communication as in the model of deliberative democracy (Häyhtiö 2010). Such idealistic expectations about the “right kind of communication” may put unnecessary pressure on young people and may induce a feeling that they are ineligible to participate. For example, Banaji and Buckingham (2010) point out that there is a dominant conception in the academic and policy literature in this area that is not so different from the conceptions dominating debates about offline participation before the Internet era. There are

implicit rules about good behavior, implicit constructions of identity, a favoring of certain kinds of responsible or “pro-social” orientations – all of which are embedded in the designs of websites, in how young people are addressed, in the kinds of (limited) participation that are invited, and in the way actual participation on the sites is moderated.

(Banaji & Buckingham 2010, 23)

The development of e-participation services aimed at attracting wider sections of youth should, therefore, be mindful not only of young people’s interest or disinterest in taking part but also of their varying needs, resources, skills and styles of communication. It is also necessary to consider the always lingering question of how the processes and practices of participation can be made impactful and, thus, motivating for young people.

## **The Virtual Council – what, why, how?**

### ***Starting point of the research and development of the Virtual Council***

The research and development of young people’s e-participation in the ALL-YOUTH project has had two main objectives. The first was to develop a new e-participation service that better meets young people’s participation needs. The second objective was to link the new service to societal or political processes in a way that ensures that policymakers and young people have opportunities for real dialogue. To ensure that these objectives are met, the project has collaborated with several governmental ministries, local governments and well-established NGOs like the Finnish Red Cross.

In the development of the Virtual Council service, we have considered it important to use human-centred design (HCD) methods. HCD refers to the planning of digital

services, platforms and processes involving end users as key players in the design process (Ardito et al., 2014; Gulliksen et al., 2003; International Organization for Standardization 2019; Maguire 2001). It can be seen as holding a more holistic conception of the human (which is a generally important idea in this book) in comparison with the other widely used method, user-centred design approach. HCD is characterised by iterativeness, which means that services and tools are developed in several stages based on feedback from end users, and similar rounds of development can be repeated multiple times.

HCD can set other objectives for the service besides the number of users and the frequency or duration of use, although these are also important data that can reflect, for instance, the acceptability of the service to users. Other objectives and indicators may include conditions for the service from the point of view of its quality and user experience. In the context of e-participation, they may be related to issues such as keeping the thresholds for various participatory activities as low as possible to make the experience of participation meaningful and rewarding and to improve the participant's sense of self-efficacy (Pietilä et al., 2021c, 2022). Another important issue is related to who is invited or expected to use the service.

We conducted a series of studies in a workshop setting on the needs of young people in relation to using e-services, before the development of the Virtual Council commenced. The concept of user needs refers to the explication, during the design process, of the necessities, constraints and demands that the user assigns to the service. We incorporated a scenario-based working method in our studies as one of the key means of gathering data (Pietilä et al., 2021b, 2021c). The concept of scenarios in HCD contexts refers to written descriptions or stories of users executing tasks with proposed technological solutions. Such scenarios may include descriptions of problems for which a hypothesised technology, device or service provides a solution. They may be used to convey and illustrate designers' ideas to end users for their evaluation or they can be applied to analyse various ideas for solutions, their potential and feasibility at initial stages. Scenarios can be either highly abstract or very detailed and tangible in their nature (Rosson & Carroll 2002; Bødker 2000). In our case, researchers presented five different scenarios describing various hypothetical interaction features and use procedures of e-participation systems, which were discussed in 17 small groups over the course of six separate workshops (altogether 74 participants from general upper secondary schools and from youth groups outside education, employment or training). The overall aim of the user studies was to systematically acquire information regarding the needs, expectations and preferences that young people have concerning e-participation services.

### ***Identifying young people's e-participation user needs***

We identified four main categories of user needs resulting from the studies (Pietilä et al., 2021b, 2021c). These were labelled as (1) trust and safety, (2) motivation to participate, (3) actual impact of participation on decision making and (4) effective

and efficient use of service (in the sense that the service delivers the functions it promises). Nearly all groups brought up topics related to the safety theme, especially in terms of safe space (mentioned in 14 out of 17 groups). Workshop participants were worried, for example, about the appearance of provocative discussions (trolling) in the Council and argued for the need to use moderators and to establish clear rules for the service for it to feel safe to young people. Anonymity (mentioned in 10/17 groups) was seen in this context not only as an important enabler of open discussion but also as a risk of attracting trolls. The workshop participants suggested that users should register with their real name, but they could also use nicknames so that administrators would still know who the users are. They also recommended that it would be beneficial when someone joins the Council for the first time if they were already familiar with the service either from school, other official channel or advertisements in social media, which would evoke trust towards the service (mentioned in 6/17 groups). For instance, Scenario 1, in which participants were invited to use the service via email, was considered suspicious by some participants:

I am quite skeptical with those... when you need to register [...] and you haven't heard about it before, then hardly.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the needs related to motivation to participate, "personally interesting topic" was seen as one of the main motivators (mentioned in 10/17 groups). However, one test group consisting of young people outside education, employment and training contemplated that including participants in discussions who are not initially interested in the topic could still provide new and worthwhile viewpoints. Competition, gift-cards or monetary rewards were considered motivating, especially if the e-service was initiated by authorities (mentioned in 6/17 groups). However, a material type of rewarding system was considered unworkable if the discussion were to be facilitated by other parties, such as individual citizens. In that case, advocating a common social or political goal together was seen as enough gratification for participation. Finally, according to some workshop participants, there should be an adequate number of users in the service to make it "credible" (mentioned in 6/17 groups).

Having a real impact on decision making was regarded by the participants as one of the most important conditions for participation (mentioned in 9/17 groups). One participant from a high school test group commented:

The first thing that makes such service attractive is how impactful it is.

One way to support young people's e-participation would be to highlight examples of prior successful discussions. However, this would require evidence that decision makers have also taken part in the debate (which does not occur often). Only through such knowledge could young people feel confident that their participation in the e-service really matters (mentioned in 5/17 groups). Nevertheless, many

workshop participants were worried that they do not have enough knowledge of the issues to be able to take part in the discussions. One participant asserted that:

[...] if I do not know and I am not interested, then I won't even try to have an influence, because it seems wrong to try to affect something that [...] I don't know anything about.

Subsequently, to support young people's e-participation, adequate material on the issues should be made available and easily accessible before the discussion starts on the selected topic in the service (mentioned in 5/17 groups).

One of the things the workshop participants appreciated, in terms of the needs related to effective and efficient use of service (through designated, well-functioning features), was the availability of useful search features, such as filtering existing discussion groups based on tags and setting favourite topics or tags to receive notifications from new discussion groups (mentioned in 8/17 groups). The possibility of volunteering for upcoming discussions before they start was also mentioned.

### ***Features of the Virtual Council***

Based both on evaluation of previous e-participation services (Meriläinen, Pietilä & Varsaluoma 2018) and on user surveys of young people (Pietilä, Varsaluoma & Väänänen 2019), we have developed the Virtual Council as an attempt to meet young people's needs in a way that makes their participation as easy and effective as possible. The Virtual Council can be implemented at different levels of governance and phases of decision making to engage young people in planning and decision-making processes or to provide space for sharing their experiences on societal issues. It enables setting up individual "virtual councils" to discuss a selected topic and to formulate a "final statement" based on the discussions to be handed over to the authority or other actor concerned for further action. (See Pietilä et al., 2021c, 2022, about details of the service.)

From the organizer's perspective, the Virtual Council process consists (1) preparing for the Council, (2) inviting participants, (3) facilitating the discussion, (4) creating the final statement and (5) providing feedback to the participants. When a new Council is created, the organiser (usually also acting as the administrator) creates a title and a short description of it, sets the schedule (one Council generally goes on from one to two weeks), uploads background documents to support the discussion, prepares final statement questions for the participants and recruits discussion facilitators. Next, participants are invited via an email that includes the password to the Council; first, however, they need to register with the service to be able to join the discussions, which are carried out using aliases. Participants are asked to answer some final questions at the end of the discussions to summarise their thoughts on the topic. Based on the answers and the chat discussions, the final statement is prepared by the organiser or facilitators, but it can also be prepared by participants themselves (see Chapter 4). Participants can also comment on the



statement, after which the organiser delivers it to any relevant party or parties. Finally, the organiser (ideally) provides feedback to the participants regarding the further use and impact of the final statement.

One of the key elements of the Virtual Council is that it is designed to support young people’s participation in various ways, which includes providing many-sided information on the topic at hand. This feature is essential, given that many young people feel they do not have enough knowledge about societal issues to be able to participate in the public debate, as previously mentioned and as prior research suggests (see the discussion in Chapter 6). Another way to support young people is to recruit several facilitators who engage actively with the participants, ask for their views, encourage them to present their ideas and respond to them promptly. It is also important that the facilitators regularly thank the participants for their contribution. The significance of active and encouraging facilitation for successful e-participation cannot be overstated (we will return to this question in the next section). However, each Council implementation has its own specific content and applications of supported features, as the service can be used for various purposes and different forms of councils. The service hosts a collection of features from which the organisers can choose the ones they find most conducive to each Council.

Figure 2.1 describes one example of the Virtual Council process implementation in which a government official creates a Council and invites participants to it. Each

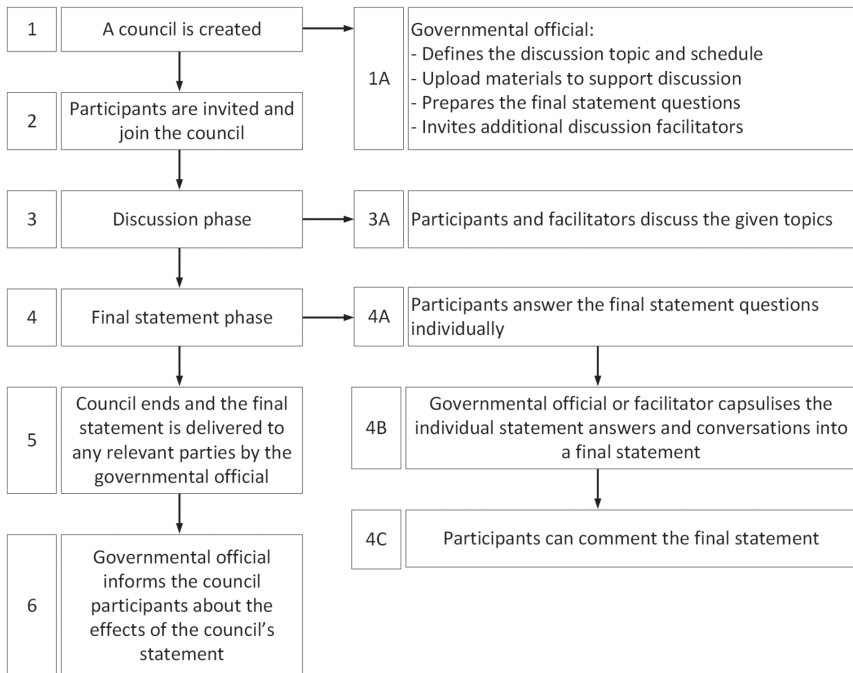


Figure 2.1 A flowchart describing the Virtual Council process.

Council has a real-time textual discussion tool (box 3) with many conventional chat features. The chat includes features such as reactions to individual messages (“Agree”, “Disagree” and “Well argued”) and allows replying to a message, which starts a sub-thread. Furthermore, the service has a section for background materials (1A) to support the knowledge basis of the discussions and a tool for generating the final statement (4). The section enables the administrators (who can be anyone) to upload informative materials that are affiliated with the discussed topic to enable a deeper conversation and the formation of more informed opinions.

The final statement feature enables the Council to generate a written conclusion that reflects the central opinions and viewpoints presented during the discussions. The statement is prepared as follows: all participants are asked to reply individually to a set of open-ended questions after the discussion phase is over and the process is approaching its deadline (4A). The answers are pseudonymised, after which the organiser or one of the facilitators reviews them and writes a summary based on them as the final statement of the process (4B).

### **What have we learned so far?**

Systematic research on practical experiences using the Virtual Council service is pending now that it has been adopted for general use by the Ministry of Justice (we will return to this). However, during the testing phase we have requested feedback from both young participants (Pietilä et al., 2021c) and the organisers of the Councils and have tentatively reflected on whether the service is able to respond to the user needs identified earlier. The following inferences can be drawn from these reflections, which are based on experiences of around 15 Councils organised by our project collaborators (the Finnish Red Cross and several learning institutions) on a range of topics touching on young people’s lives. These are worthwhile to keep in mind for further research.

First, regarding the issue of safety, which was one of the most crucial user needs emphasised by young people early on in the project, the young participants have appreciated the anonymity of the service, the participation of safe facilitators in the discussions (such as researchers and youth workers or volunteers) and having the Councils implemented in cooperation with known, trustworthy collaborators. One of our project partners, the Finnish Red Cross (FRC) Youth Shelters, has found that the rules of fair conduct, designed by young people themselves, have helped to create a safe atmosphere for the Councils so that the young people have felt free to talk about the topics as themselves, not needing to worry about someone judging or trolling the discussions. The participants in the FRC Councils often pointed out that the culture of conversation on adult-led social media platforms tends to be intimidating and allows bullying, which is why many young people may feel scared to participate on those platforms. This same problem, young people’s fear of engaging in adult-dominated arenas of participation, has come up in ALL-YOUTH studies and is also reflected in this book’s chapters (e.g., Chapter 6).

We have likewise concluded when developing the Virtual Council service that the interpretations of young people's lack of interest in societal questions and participation are based on at least partly misplaced assumptions. Many young people are indeed interested in societal issues and are eager to discuss them, as long as the participation arena is perceived as safe and free of harassment. Developers of youth e-participation should pay serious attention to this point.

Second, the participants' feedback shows that easy registration to the Virtual Council service and clear user instructions improved its trustworthiness. On the more negative side, participants pointed out that technical problems (like registration not going through) and missing features (such as notification to users of new messages in the chat) sometimes affected how they felt about its reliability and efficiency. However, in overall, it can be noted that the participants did not expect miracles in terms of the service's technical usability. For them, the most important thing was that the interface of the service is simple enough and that it can be used through mobile devices, as very few young people today use personal computers. The aesthetic of the service, in turn, was preferred to be "youth-like", making it inviting and similar enough to the social media services that young people already use routinely.

Third, regarding why and how they have been motivated to take part in the Councils, the users have mentioned factors such as enjoying the positive atmosphere, learning about interesting topics, being able to give and receive peer support and having the possibility to have a real impact on the discussed topics by when the final statements are delivered to public officials and political decision makers. Small material rewards such as coffee or movie tickets are appreciated as participation motivators, yet they are not considered necessary. Instead, the participants stressed how important the facilitators' role is in keeping the discussion in the Council alive and engaging. They have found it highly motivating when the facilitators encourage discussion, provide further information on the discussed topic when needed and respond to discussants' messages individually, showing interest in and appreciation of everyone's contribution in this way. Such acknowledgement is significant not only psychologically but also because expressing themselves in writing (which, so far, is the only mode of communication available in the service) may not be easy for all participants. It is important to emphasise to the participants that the lack of literary skills is not an issue and that everyone is allowed to come in and express their ideas freely in their own style.

Finally, we want to mention one more point related to both offline and online participation. We have noticed, both in developing and testing the Virtual Council service as well as in ALL-YOUTH studies more generally, that it is often not enough to invite young people to take part (in any kind of event or arena) simply by distributing nice-looking advertisements in public spaces. Young people who are unaccustomed to, or are afraid of, participating in societal forums often ignore general invitations. Instead, they appreciate it when they are contacted personally, which gives them an opportunity to express and talk about their potential

misgivings about taking part in the proposed activity with the inviting party. This phenomenon applies also to e-services. The fact that such services are provided in the first place is not enough to get young people interested and motivate them to come along. Meaningful social contacts and interaction importantly motivate to use e-participation services, like societal participation generally – especially if the service provider is an institution that is unknown to young people at the outset.

## **Conclusion**

Above, we have critically discussed the current state and development needs of public e-participation services for young people and presented the development and testing of our own service model, the Virtual Council. The project has had two main objectives. First, to develop a new e-participation service, based on young people's own views, that better meets their participation needs and aspirations. Second, to link the new service to societal or political processes in a way that ensures opportunities for policymakers and young people for real dialogue and that the final statement prepared by each Council truly reaches (local or national) decision makers. We have collaborated for this purpose with several governmental ministries, local governments and well-established NGOs. We will present a few evaluative remarks on each objective to conclude the chapter.

The user needs we identified at the start of the project point to specific requirements in e-participation services to make them meaningful and motivating for young people. First, young people's experiences of not having enough knowledge to be able to participate in societal discussions suggest that there is a need for clearly articulated supporting material and facilitation on the service so that participants have enough information at their disposal to be able to conduct a productive discussion and form a shared opinion on the discussed topic. Second, the need for a safe environment is affiliated with a need for privacy and conflict avoidance. These needs can be addressed by allowing anonymous participation and providing clear discussion rules and discussion facilitation. Third, the general experience of young people that their voices are not taken seriously by authorities points to the need to involve them more actively in youth e-participation services. Fourth, young people's unfamiliarity with the official political agenda can be translated as a need to base e-participation discussions on topics that have practical value for their lives.

It is possible to say that in many respects we have succeeded when evaluating the Virtual Council from the perspective of these participation needs. Apart from occasional technical problems, which are annoying for users but an inevitable part of digital software development, the young people who have tested the service have expressed their satisfaction that participating in the Councils has been easy, safe, interesting, motivating and educational. Nevertheless, we are aware that the service's existence and its features alone are not enough to inspire young people to use it. Young people need sufficient information not only about the service but also about the experiences and recommendations of their peers so they can become

interested in and dare to venture into the service and perceive it as trustworthy. The well-organised discussion facilitation in the Councils is also of great importance to the user experience on the service, as we have seen. The discussion in the Council remains lively and meaningful for young people when the facilitators know what they are doing. However, if the facilitators are unenthusiastic about their work or have insufficient facilitation skills, the conversation in the Council can remain diluted and the users' participation experience may turn out to be unrewarding, in which case they may be unmotivated to participate again. Moreover, and unsurprisingly, the Virtual Council has not succeeded very well in creating a dialogue between young people and decision makers. The Councils' organisers have complained that, despite their best efforts, (local) decision makers have only rarely agreed to participate in the discussion. Based on experiences so far, it seems that the facilitators have, as it were, had to make up for the absence of – and stand for – the decision makers, which is not the purpose of the service and does not contribute to its societal impact.

The dialogue between young people and decision makers has remained minimal so far, but this can be expected to change in the future and the second goal of the project to be realised, at least in principle. The Virtual Council has transitioned in 2022 to a national online service managed by the Ministry of Justice. The ministry's goal, with the help of the service, is to make children's and young people's voices more audible in decision making, including those young people who otherwise would not be heard or participate in the societal debate. Mirroring the findings of our project, the discussions in the Councils (to be organised as a collaborative effort between the Ministry and interested societal partners) will be supervised by a trained facilitator who oversees the discussions' progress and safety (Ministry of Justice 2022). How the Ministry succeeds in its goal of involving young people in decision making with the help of the Virtual Council service remains to be seen and studied later.

We would like to conclude by presenting a word of caution, noting that recent technological progress and the availability of new digital services have created both possibilities and risks for young people's participation. Digitalisation itself does not solve any challenges with participation, because it is possible that e-participation services end up reproducing the structures and inequalities of traditional off-line participation (Oser, Hooghe & Marien 2013). Additionally, digital services may present new kinds of barriers to participation related to their usability and accessibility (Meriläinen, Pietilä & Varsaluoma 2018) or related to the educational level and to insufficient information retrieval skills of at least some young people. Not all young people are digital natives, as the critical literature has often pointed out (e.g., Ståhl 2017). Therefore, instead of thinking of any single digital service as a silver bullet that solves all e-participation problems, it might be more justified to approach e-participation as an ecosystem of various services. Essential to this thinking is that there should be alternative platforms and tools to meet the varying participation needs of differently positioned and skilled young people as equally and inclusively as possible.

## Note

1 Citations have been translated from Finnish by Jari Varsaluoma.

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