



DigiGen

ICT and Civic Participation

Horizon 2020 Grant Agreement number 870548

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Phases (Tasks)

- In the first phase, we produced netnographic research (online observation, content and 65 interviews in total) conducted between September 2020 and April 2021 in Estonia, Greece and the United Kingdom, comparing the reasons and the means by which youth engaged in online civic participation, focusing on online movements mobilising for racial, social and environmental justice (see Karatzogianni et al., 2021).
- In the second phase, focus group discussions were organised as digital storytelling workshops with young people involved in the production of online political discourse with the aim of identifying how they are affected by the online environment of their choice and key strands in youth ideological online production. Within the workshops, a digital tool (PowerPoint) was used for the co-production of relevant material (photos, screenshots of relevant online content) to inform on the motivations, causes and means that young people find appropriate and meaningful for what they perceive as civic participation (as digital citizens) (see Karatzogianni et al., 2022a).
- In the third phase, we critically assessed digital citizenship in educational systems and in national digital citizenship documents (multimedia included) in the UK, Greece and Estonia, focusing on the inclusion and promotion of digital citizenship (see Karatzogianni et al., 2022b).



Results from Phase 1 - netnography

- In the first phase in the three countries, we focused on dominant strands of civic participation, focusing on online movements mobilising for racial, social and environmental justice. In Greece, we collected primary data of youth mobilising against gender-based violence and against police brutality, in Estonia we focused on online youth activism regarding LGBTQ+ and Black Lives Matter (BLM), while we focused on anti-racist civic participation BLM Leicester and environmental civic participation Extinction Rebellion (XR and XR Youth) in the UK. In the latter case, we also interviewed older participants to find out how they were mentoring the youth in these organisations and their own experience of adolescent political education and ICT use development.
- In Estonia, speaking out for the marginalised is seen as a matter of responsibility and the only way forward to a better society, leading to other people becoming more informed and changing their minds. Reasons for political engagement are linked to personal experience of discrimination that informs a person's capacity for empathy, as well as cultural discourses surrounding social justice.
- In Greece, there is mistrust of political parties and governmental organisations and there is interest to do some things, not to change the world, but first to change everyday life. Activation and politicisation are triggered by personal experiences linked to the ways (multiple) gender identities are treated in a specific social context, but also in society at large.
- In the UK, there is adoption of new more effective approaches to environmental activism, anger about police brutality and fight for equal rights, because of widespread inequality: 'people relying on handouts to feed their children in a rich country'.
- Estonia is different to Greece and the UK, because participants are speaking out for the marginalised, but might not be themselves marginalised, and are less worried about issues of privacy and surveillance. Similarities include that their civic participation is linked to personal experience of discrimination and injustice and there is similar use of commercial platforms. Greece is different to Estonia and UK, because there is far more distrust to political parties and commercial platforms, and ICT is seen as less of a space for organisation and strategy. A similarity here is that politicisation may be triggered by personal experiences. UK is different to Greece and Estonia, in that there is organisational and communication innovation, there is heavy reliance on pre-existing networks, and there is more systematic mentoring for the younger activists. The UK is similar to Estonia, in that there is anger about inequality, racial, social injustice, and with Greece in terms of a certain level of distrust of police and government.
- Overall, we found that participants who are active members of civic society organisations which are robustly organised (decentralised or hierarchical) utilise specialised types of platforms for different activities and are mindful of internet safety and surveillance issues, while those that are members of less organised movements rely on more commercial and general platforms to organise, communicate, coordinate, and publicise their activities.



Results from Phase 2 – digital storytelling

- There are clearly common political concerns by the 12 young people who participated in the digital storytelling workshops. These concerns include political polarisation, violence, and securitisation be it racist (UK and Greece), gender-related (Greece and Estonia), or emerging environmental consciousness (Estonia).
- These issues echo the topics discussed during the previous research phase (see Karatzogianni et al., 2021). The Estonian participants identified challenges such as time constraints, fear, and lack of confidence, focusing more on themselves and their motivations and having their voice heard to improve society in the fight for more justice and against LGBT and racial discrimination, while in Greece and the UK, they chose to speak about violent events involving structural, institutional racism, gender-based violence and problems relating to media visibility, misinformation and police violence.
- This is in continuation with findings from the first phase, where Estonian participants were less mistrustful of government and the media establishment in general, in comparison to the Greek and UK participants, who perceive that they live in a much more polarized political environment, where misinformation, hate speech and securitisation is more widespread.



Results from Phase 3 – policy docs

- In the last phase of the DigiGen 'ICT and Civic Participation' study, we critically assessed over forty policy documents relating to digital citizenship from Estonia, Greece and the United Kingdom.
- We found that overall, there is a tendency to reduce digital citizenship to technical ICT competencies or at best digital competencies that focus primarily on using e-governance and other digital services as part of one's everyday life as a citizen.
- We recommend a more involved definition of digital citizenship competencies that focuses on the use of digital services, the Internet, ICT tools and social media as part of not only living one's life as a citizen but also as part of political participation, civic engagement and expression of personal political agency. Ideally, digital citizenship competencies should be more than the sum of their parts (e.g., more than digital competencies plus ICT skills plus media literacy).



Factors impacting negatively and positively on digital citizenship (results for EU Policy use)



- Digital deprivation, because digital citizenship is not possible when access is a problem, as it is for 5.4% of school-aged children in Europe (23.1% of children and young people are digitally deprived in Romania, while such percentage is only 0.4% in Iceland), with Children that cohabit with low-educated parents, in poverty or in severe material deprivation are those most affected. Hence measures to boost the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights principle 20 on access to essential services should include access to digital infrastructure and services as a pre-requisite for digital citizenship.
- Education and socio-economic standing of the family: The education of parents and caregivers, because those most affected are in families with low-educated parents, in poverty or in severe material deprivation. The EU Child Guarantee (adopted in June 2021 and now in the implementation phase through national action plans) is essential to bridge the digital divide and prevent digital poverty for children and their families. The national action plans on the Child Guarantee should include a stream of actions to for structural support to families as a key environment to empower children and youth as digital citizens.
- Low digital engagement and low digital confidence are two country clusters with a particular West-East divide. Whereas in Belgium, France, Germany and Spain, the percentages of digitally disengaged children are relatively low, in Eastern Europe, such percentages are high, together with being bullied, and a low level of home possessions also increases the likelihood of being digitally disengaged. The fact that overall digital engagement and digital confidence are important is also reflected in the way qualitative research in Greece shows more appetite for physical, political participation rather than online, as it is more evident in Estonia and the UK.
- Exclusion of younger children, especially when there is limited range of functions in digital affordances. For example, when younger children are denied access to things such as a class-chat in schools. Chat functions can allow children from an early age to develop the ability to learn how to participate in an online group community, provide a sense of belonging and help develop online writing skills that are crucial when interacting with elected representatives or community organisations. Also, in youngest children (age 5-10), they can be deterred if they experience things like harassment and trolling and digital surveillance.
- Directly relating to adolescents, they could be more encouraged and supported to build confidence to combat their fear of participating politically online, and more attention may be given during their education toward allowing for the time to do so (see Karatzogianni et al., 2021; Karatzogianni et al., 2022).



Positive and negative practices for children or young people as users of ICT



- Young people are aware of threats in the online world (considering responsible behaviour online (e.g., in Estonia).
- Learning to see the Internet as a tool to inform yourself, whether in a school-related context or only out of children and young people's own interest (Germany).
- A sense of possibility to learn additional things about social issues beyond school requirements is shared by children (Greece).
- Children link digital responsibility to how to behave online (Norway).
- Some young people are aware of some threats online, and most digital education has focused on safety online (Romania).
- Showing video clips helps students develop their thoughts on a topic and develop a greater sense of responsibility (Norway).
- Awareness of internet safety is raised by drawing attention to hate speech and cyberbullying, and children are reflecting on this (Germany).
- Children have a strong foundation in being critical of sources, and schools focus a lot on looking at multiple sources for information, especially if they are not sure if the information is true/correct or not (Norway).
- Online dangers (phishing, frauds, lack of knowledge regarding in-App purchases). Yet, some teachers also worry that students may become too clever in the online world (... and start to hack!).
- Blurred lines between school and leisure for both students and teachers. Leisure is considered the opposite of education. School closures during COVID and online schooling challenged the amount of quality leisure time.
- Health (physical): headaches and 'digital fatigue' from losing oneself in social media. Teachers and families worry about too much screen time and deterioration of health and fitness.
- Misunderstandings in communication between friends via chatting.
- Uncritical use of social media, distorted perception of sociability, sexuality and fame, comments on social media can be challenging), being bullied and excluded from groups.
- Loss of concentration and challenges in separating computers as a learning and gaming devices. Poor connection between leisure use and developing creativity.



Good practices for parents to enable civic participation

- Parents should be encouraged to use different styles of mediation in relation to Digital Technologies (DT), e.g., regulating screen time, offering co-use and active distractions through other activities and strengthening the general communication in the family about DT.
- Support to parents should be organised to provide them with the knowledge and suggestions of ways to approach this in parental education.
- Parents should be (more) aware of their function as role models for children.
- Learning-by-teaching can occur for *all* family members – not top-down only.
- Parents need easily accessible, evidence-based information.
- Parents need to be encouraged and enabled to cooperate with other persons in relevant systems (e.g., school).
- Interventions should comprise participatory co-creation of clear rules in the family.
- They should avoid the situation of a 'lonely child'/excluded child
- Interventions should ensure children's right to participate in the digital world in general, as many families have no access for various reasons (e.g., digital deprivation)
- In the digital world, children's rights in different spheres of their life must be ensured as well (e.g., private, family, school)
- Support for parents who experience insecurities and tensions in their parental mediation practices relating to digital citizenship.
- Families should be cautious about sharing private information – e.g., through practices like sharenting.



Good digital citizenship practices for educators for the use of ICT for students under 18



- Lack of teacher's knowledge leaves some civic participation activities out from the classroom (Estonia).
- Hardly any education on digital citizenship and political engagement related to ICT (Germany).
- Social and civic education is taught in the 5th and 6th grades, but no digital citizenship and participation references exist (Greece).
- Children report having a lot of lessons and discussions in school about being critical of sources and about fake news (Norway).
- There is basically no education about digital citizenship, European digital values, datafication, no holistic picture of what the digital entails (Romania).
- Social media is of great importance for children and young people already in the 4th and 5th grades; in this context, only some children receive education about personal data protection and the dangers of hackers (Germany).
- Discussions with teachers and parents are limited to issues of internet safety and sometimes privacy; no discussions on possibilities for further participation (Greece).
- Covid-19 has increased the isolation in separate social bubbles, increased cyber-aggression and hatred online, distorted perception of sexual-objectification of women (Romania).
- Teachers believe they need to teach students to be able to use digital tools in the modern world, both technically but also in terms of privacy (Norway).
- Children perceive digital competencies and digital skills as a necessary means for professional development, not as an enhancement of one's civic responsibility (Greece).
- Teachers try to explain how algorithms work and what happens if you, for example, send a nude photo on Snapchat or write something nasty in a comment section of an online newspaper (Norway).



In relation to industry

- Overall, in relation to industry practitioners, results point to the fact that ICT use enhances everyday communication and maintenance of friendships, even in extraordinary circumstances, such as the pandemic. Gaming and in general 'screen time' help strengthen one's digital competencies (e.g. practising a language, reading coordinates, logical thinking, hand-eye coordination skills), which can have an enabling effect for digital citizenship.
- Children and young people may develop an interest in politics, obtain information through digital platforms (Twitter, YouTube or creating political memes), and influence the development of normative guidelines/moral codes of conduct, for example, when gaming, as they learn how to deal with conflicts online. This is why the governance architectures for digital gaming, or other social environments that allow children, would need to consider that through them, children and young people can be trained toward enhanced or reduced political behaviour, as future digital citizens.



United Nations

- In terms of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, overall, the results of our research show that polarisation in the political culture and the malfunctioning of the digital environment (e.g., dis- and misinformation) are significant triggers that inspire and challenge young people who want to 'do something about it' and have a voice in their communities.
- This problem links to Goal 4 as it involves education (i.e., ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all); attention to the consumption of news Goal 12 (i.e., to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns); and Goal 3 as it involves adolescents (i.e., to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages).



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DigiGen



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870548.

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