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Young citizens in digital society: Opportunities and challenges of democratic self-confidence

Denmark is a digital society by law and most Danes use digital media extensively, but, we have not yet developed profound innovative strategies for digital information and participation. This paper focuses on the intersecting challenges of being a young citizen in digital society, trusting one's own ability to be informed, and developing fundamental democratic self-confidence. This is framed by a set of equally intersecting conditions based on narratives about the values of digital society, the norms and forms of informed citizenship, and democratic values. An essential question is not solely if young people are motivated to seek information and debate, but also if traditional definitions of informed citizenship and participation in digital society are discouraging for young citizens (Hartley & Pedersen, 2019)?

The paper draws on 16 interviews and a non-representative questionnaire with 256 respondents, both with 15-24-year-old Danes. Informants were selected strategically, and the results from the questionnaire serve as a test board for the interview findings. The study was conducted in spring 2021 in relation to the project *Youth, Trust, Information, and Democracy*. The findings are supported by results from a representative survey (DECIDIS 2017).

The discrepancy between ideals and practices appears to influence discourses about young people as uninformed and uncritical citizens, about the information fatigued youth, and about social media as providers of fragmented and un-curated information (Cammaerts et al., 2014; Amnå and Ekman, 2014; Vromen & Collin, 2010). These discourses are reproduced in youth cultural contexts (Bennett, 2008; Bastedo, 2014), as expressed by a 16-year-old girl who otherwise, during the interview, demonstrates her knowledge about society, democracy, and participation:

In some areas, I feel informed. I do not at all ... you know, I really do not know anything about politics.
(Female, 16)

The study shows that our participants are quite knowledgeable and equipped for participating in democratic processes. Young Danes generally obtain information, ad hoc, via online channels and they prefer and trust traditional news organizations' online channels, even more so from a post-pandemic perspective (UTID, 2021; Schrøder et al, 2021). They are personally engaged in various subjects and have strong opinions, which was also found by Cammaerts et al. (2014) and Mascheroni & Murru (2017), and they are aware of the importance of source critique:

You must consider critical source evaluation. If you get a lot of your information from Facebook, you really must be aware of the sources or what kind of people are sharing. (Male, 22)

Our participants tend to moderate their democratic participation based on a self-perceived information level and their democratic self-confidence is connected to their perception of being informed. One of the consequences of negative discourses about online information access is a lack of confidence in their own

abilities to gain and understand what they consider enough information to be able to participate. It is compelling to ask if this paradox could be one of the reasons why young people with relatively good levels of democratic literacy have such poor democratic self-confidence.