

Abstract submitted to

ECREA 2022
9th European Communication Conference
Rethink Impact
October 19-22, 2022

Gitte Stald
IT University of Copenhagen
stald@itu.dk

Sustainable democracy in digital society. Young Danes, information, and democratic engagement

As far as I know things do not work in countries without democracy. Someone always fucks up things. So. I am simply for democracy.
(Woman, 24)

The argument in this paper triangulates three points: young citizens must be seen as bearers of future sustainable democracy (Mascheroni & Murri 2017; Cammaerts et al., 2014); informed citizenship continues to establish a vital element in the foundation of sustainable democracy (Bennett 2008); sustainable democracy depends on the collective ability to allow new forms of information and informed citizenship, and to support young generation to develop democratic self-efficacy (Cortesei et al, 2020). To support the argument this paper analyses the discrepancy between young Danes' own perception of their informed-citizen level, and their reflections on democracy.

The paper draws on 16 interviews with 15-24-year-old Danes and a questionnaire with 256 respondents. Both were conducted during spring 2021 in relation to the project *Youth, Trust, Information, and Democracy*. The study focused on questions about perceptions of information and democratic literacy, including consequences of the Covid-19 lockdown. These findings are supported by results from three representative surveys conducted among Danes from 15 years (*Democracy & Citizenship in Digital Society* (DECIDIS), 2015, 2016, 2017).

The term *Sustainable Democracy* is used to describe development of new democracies by learning from established democracies or an actual connection between sustainability goals and democratic ambition. In the context of this paper, however, the term is used to frame the challenge of sustaining democracy while also innovating the idea, foundations, and practices of democracy in alignment with societal development and the experiences and life-practices of young people.

Our informants believe in democracy and claim Denmark to be the best possible democracy, but almost all feel underinformed, without influence – and they are apologetic about it. At the first encounter most of our informants claim that they know little about politics and democracy and that they 'only' get their news and information, casually, by algorithmic default, through social media (Schofield Clark & Marci, 2017; Stald, 2020).

It is as if they know what you are interested in because they can see what you like and then it pops up on my screen. So, if I am not interested, I am not informed.
(Woman, 24)

When we deep into the data, however, even the least confident informants demonstrate knowledge and opinions about a relatively large pool of international, national, and local topics and issues. The pivotal point is the prominent perception of politics and democracy as something that takes place elsewhere, with/among someone who know more, who have more authority. But, in many cases the informants talk themselves into a realization that politics and democracy is also relatable for them, in their everyday life. This is a vital element in sustaining the foundations of democracy.

*To be self-assured, daring to stand up for yourself and, well, do something about what you stand for.
If you want to change something you must do something instead of watching from the sideline.*

(Woman, 24)