



Federal Ministry for
Family Affairs, Senior Citizens,
Women and Youth

*Think, learn and act across
generations – our future society.*

Third Civic Engagement Report

Future of civil society: Youth civic engagement in the digital age

Central findings



Preface

Dear readers,

Digitalisation is shaping our lives in many ways. Reaching for our smartphones first thing in the morning and sending one last e-mail at night have become normal for many of us.

Digitalisation is also changing voluntary civic engagement. Neighbourhood help is organised digitally, digital tools support fundraising, and club newspapers turn into digital newsletters. Roughly 30 million people in Germany are involved in civic engagement efforts.



How are civic engagement and participation changing for young people in particular in the age of digitalisation? What does digitalisation mean for civic engagement organisations? And how can we connect analogue and digital civic engagement efforts even better in the future?

The Third Civic Engagement Report addresses these questions and many more. For the first time, it provides an overview of how participation and civic engagement are changing as a result of digitalisation and the potential this creates. This monitor provides you with its summary including informative results. I wish all the readers many new insights and plenty of inspiration for personal engagement efforts.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dr. Franziska Giffey".

Dr Franziska Giffey

Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth

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Introduction

Our current age in the context of digitalisation is characterised by global, social and economic upheavals. Civil society is also undergoing major changes. But how exactly is civic engagement in Germany changing? What are the benefits, but also possible challenges of the opportunities for volunteering in the digital age? How can we promote and strengthen the voluntary commitment of young people, who are decisive for the future of civil society? In accordance with its mandate, the Third Civic Engagement Report focuses on current developments that are changing engagement in light of the digitalisation of all areas of life. It directs particular attention to the commitment of young people between 14 and 27 years of age.

By resolution of the German Parliament of 19 March 2009 (Printed paper 16/11774), the Federal Government is called upon to submit a scientific report by a newly appointed independent commission of experts in conjunction with an opinion of the Federal Government once per legislative period. The reports, which each highlight a new focus area of civic engagement, serve to support sustainable civic engagement policy. They are intended to stimulate political discourse on current developments in the field of civic engagement and to provide the Federal Government and other actors with recommendations

for action. The First Civic Engagement Report, “For a culture of shared responsibility” in 2012, was a comprehensive review of the situation, focusing on the civic engagement of companies. In light of demographic change, the Second Civic Engagement Report, from 2017, examined the contribution of civic engagement to local development. This Third Civic Engagement Report continues the discussion started in previous reports with a focus on the developments in (youth) engagement in a digital society.

The condensed version of the Third Civic Engagement Report is structured as follows: This introduction is followed by a breakdown of the key statements of the Third Civic Engagement Report.¹ Five sections follow the introduction, each reflecting the central findings of the five thematic chapters of the Third Civic Engagement Report: Section 1 of this Engagement Monitor is dedicated to defining some key terms of civic engagement and digitalisation, and examines the areas of conflict in which engagement is currently taking place. Section 2 presents the civic engagement of young people between 14 and 27 years of age based on the youth survey of the Third Civic Engagement Report.

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¹ This Engagement Monitor presents selected topics and findings of the Third Civic Engagement Report. It therefore does not fully reflect the report and the views of the commission, but instead summarises the key aspects in a way that is easy to understand. In the interest of clarity and readability, this monitor does not contain references; these are mentioned in detail in the Third Civic Engagement Report.

“How can we promote and strengthen the voluntary commitment of young people, who are decisive for the future of civil society?”

“What are the benefits, but also possible challenges of digital volunteering opportunities?”

Section 3 deals with new forms of engagement and engagement-related practices. The focus of Section 4 is on how civic engagement organisations such as associations, foundations or social enterprises deal with digitalisation. Section 5 examines the role of digital platforms for the civic engagement sector. Finally, Section 6 opens up

perspectives for democratic coexistence in the age of the digital society based on the current change in civic engagement. Section 7 gives a condensed presentation of the central recommendations for action as a basis for concrete measures to strengthen digital commitment and digitalisation in the civic engagement sector.

Key statements of the Third Civic Engagement Report

A relevant proportion of young people's civic engagement today takes place through digital means. Existing forms of engagement are not replaced by forms of digital engagement, but rather supplemented.

Young people's civic efforts still mainly take place in clubs or associations: according to the Third Engagement Report survey of youth and young adults, 64.2 percent of those surveyed named clubs and associations as the organisational framework for their civic engagement. However, regardless of the forms of organisation in which young people are involved in society today, an increase in the use of digital media and tools for engagement can also be observed. Accordingly, 43.2 percent of the respondents can be described as digitally involved people who perform their civic engagement partly, predominantly or even completely via digital media. In addition, a quarter of young people find their way into civic engagement via the internet.

Digital means expand not only the forms, but also the contents of engagement. Moreover, digitalisation itself is becoming a matter of civic engagement.

Many people involved in civic efforts are aware that we live in a society shaped by technology, which makes organising digitalisation their concern as well. According to the Third Engagement Report youth survey, around 29 percent of young people involved in civic engagement pursue the goal of making the digital world a better place. Data protection, the fight against hate speech or generally living together in a digitalised world are among the new topics of engagement.

For civic engagement organisations, digitalisation represents a structural change. This structural change is met with highly varied reactions from these organisations: some of them primarily see challenges, others primarily potential.

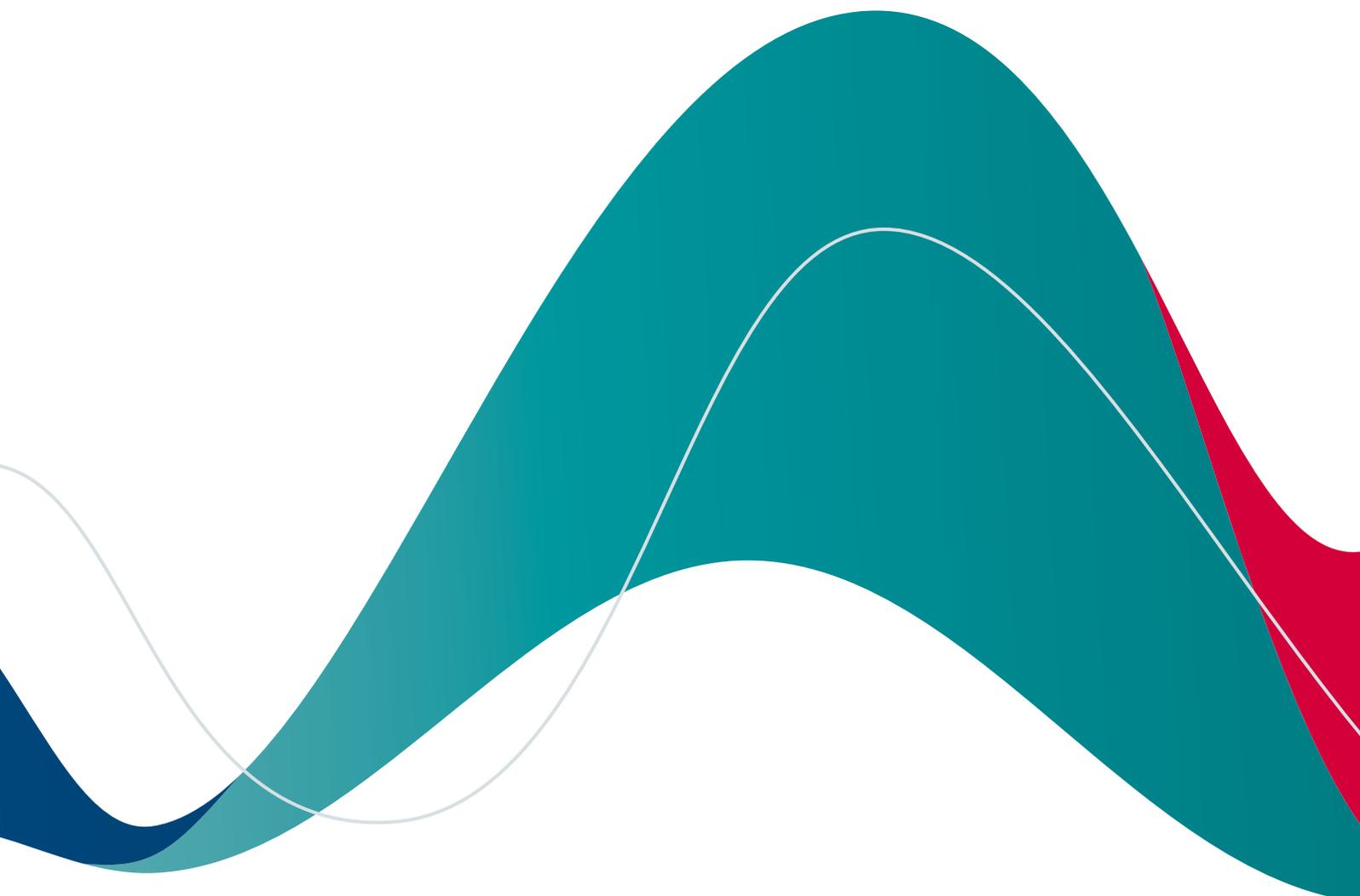
In contrast to new digital forms of engagement, established engagement organisations such as associations, foundations, social enterprises and cooperatives are part of a historically grown sector and therefore perceive digitalisation as a structural change. It provides great potential that can facilitate the work of engagement organisations, for example in public relations, personnel and programme development, recruiting of volunteers or funding. However, due to a lack of resources and skills, digitalisation is becoming an additional challenge for some organisations and carries the risk of inability to use its potential or of losing touch.

Digital platforms are becoming increasingly important in the engagement sector. A uniform, universally valid platform logic cannot be identified at present. Rather, there is a range in the working and financing methods of engagement platforms.

The engagement sector is characterised by a coexistence of internationally established platforms alongside smaller, local and engagement-specific platforms. The latter offer functions that support specific elements of engagement efforts, for example collecting donations or finding volunteers for charitable projects. While social media seem almost indispensable for organising and networking in civic engagement, engagement-specific platforms fulfil functions which are no less important. Business models and legal forms are currently as diverse as the handling of automation algorithms on the various platforms.

There are signs of a development towards a digitised civil society. Civil society actors are increasingly and actively shaping the process of digitalisation in society as a whole.

In the context of digitalisation, an increasing variety of activities in civic engagement as well as a growing range in the use of digital tools can be observed. Regardless of organisational forms, civil society actors see the design of digital infrastructures and tools not as a purely technological task, but as a social one. In the open-source and civic tech communities, civil society actors develop and test alternatives to private-sector digital services and thus also their skills to help shape a digital society.



1

Engagement in the context of social developments

For the expert commission of the Third Civic Engagement Report, the report of the investigative commission “The Future of Civic Engagement”, from 2002, is decisive for the understanding of civic engagement. According to it, civic engagement is voluntary, takes place in public spaces, is community-based, serves the common good and is not aimed at material gain. The concept of engagement itself, as well as engagement practice, is subject to numerous tensions that reflect a great thematic and organisational diversity and the practised pluralism of society. Civic engagement is not free of conflict; it is always integrated in a framework of individual and collective values, standards and interests, which may also compete with each other.

A central and well-known area of conflict persists between civic engagement and gainful employment. These tensions are particularly evident in the controversy surrounding the monetisation of civic engagement, which was the subject of the Second Engagement Report. The increased emergence of social enterprises that develop business models from a charitable idea adds a current dimension to this debate. Since people may also gain personal advantages in the context of their efforts, such as making helpful contacts or improving the preconditions for a job or a scholarship irrespective of monetisation, a further area of conflict arises between orientation towards the common good and acting for individual benefit. The question of the demarcation

between state responsibility – for example in the area of services of general interest – and the specific tasks of civic engagement is also a recurring theme. The First Civic Engagement Report of 2012 demonstrates that shifts in boundaries are mainly related to changes in state organisation, as in the case of the suspension of conscription and its consequences for social services. In practice, however, it becomes clear that state action and civic engagement can also go hand in hand, as is the case in the “blue-light” sector or with the Federal Volunteer Service. An increasingly important field of tension is emerging between civil and uncivil engagement and between civil and uncivil online communication.² As engagement becomes digitised and is communicated through social media, the likelihood that people involved will encounter and have to react to uncivil communication increases.

In the context of digitalisation, the Third Civic Engagement Report primarily deals with the tensions that exist between institutionalised and non-institutionalised political and social action. Non-institutionalised action for the purposes of the The Third Civic Engagement Report is defined as informal engagement that takes place outside formal, long-term organisational structures such as an association or a party. The difference between institutionalised and non-institutionalised action is thus less in the goals and forms of action than in the respective degree of organisation. From a current perspective, modern

2 Uncivil engagement refers to activities which are not in accordance with the German constitution and legal order. The authors of the Second Engagement Report argued for a binding understanding of engagement based on human rights and clearly distinguished it from the non-eligible engagement of extremist groups. The Commission for the Third Civic Engagement Report endorses this normative understanding of engagement.

democracies rely on both forms of political and social action. However, the relationship between institutionalised and non-institutionalised action has repeatedly realigned in recent decades. Until the late 1960s, socio-political participation was predominantly equated with participation in elections and involvement in political parties, trade unions and associations. Accordingly, spontaneous and non-institutionalised forms of participation had to struggle with legitimisation issues. Since then, non-institutionalised political and civil society action has gained in recognition and become more natural.

A second area of conflict, particularly relevant to the Third Civic Engagement Report, exists between civic engagement and the modes of access to said engagement. In the expert discussion, great potential for social integration is ascribed to civic engagement on the one hand, while on the other hand relevant studies repeatedly reference social inequalities in engagement. Research so far has confirmed that people from strata with fewer resources are significantly less likely to become socially involved than those with higher incomes and better education.

Finally, the term digitalisation as used in the Third Civic Engagement Report denotes a multifaceted development that starts in technical translation processes and gradually permeates all areas of society, thus also affecting areas of conflict. Two perspectives appear to be particularly relevant for the Third Civic Engagement Report: the digitalisation of the existing engagement sector, and newly emerging digital engagement efforts. The digitalisation of the engagement sector refers to the establishment of digital infrastructures and the use of digital tools, in other words the transformation of communication forms and procedures. In contrast to this, digital engagement refers to organisational forms and patterns of action which only arise through dealing with digital infrastructures, services and data, in other words fundamentally new types of engagement in this context.

In order to give equal consideration to both perspectives, the expert commission sought dialogue with numerous representatives from the field of engagement in the process of creating the report. Guests included spokespersons from clubs, associations, and activists as well as youths and young adults involved in civic engagement. The aim of these discussions was to find out which experiences, spaces for organisation and effects are associated with digitalisation for those active in various fields of engagement. In addition to the scientific findings collected in the report, these discussions provide an important additional source of knowledge, as voices from the field can describe some needs, problems or experiences in a particularly pointed way. The report reflects the polyphony as well as the diversity of methods and perspectives in the five sections on various aspects of engagement in an increasingly digitising society.

2 Engagement of young people in the digital age

Initiating a call for donations for a good cause, inviting people to the next meeting of the association's members via social media, drawing attention to socio-political issues with an online video, signing a petition – the possibilities to get involved via and/or for the internet are manifold today. The question of what role digitalisation processes play in the civic engagement of young people in particular is especially relevant for two reasons. On the one hand, children and adolescents adopt media innovations particularly quickly and hardly distinguish between being online and offline. On the other hand, the young generation is also helping shape the future democratic and participatory state of society through their digital life practices and values.

So far, there are only few meaningful studies dealing with the civic engagement of young people in the digital age. For this reason, a dedicated youth survey was conducted as part of the work on the Third Civic Engagement Report. The study covers the content, forms and organisational methods of youth engagement. It also identifies the relevance and role of social media in young people's engagement activities.

Personal interviews were conducted with a total of 1,006 adolescents and young adults on their civic engagement. The results of the study clearly show the high importance of civic engagement to young people today: 63.7 percent of all respondents stated that they had become involved for a social cause in the last twelve months. Although engagement still takes place most often in traditional organisational or club-based settings (64.2 percent), it is nevertheless becoming apparent that young people are increasingly acting outside traditional structures and setting up informal groups (30.3 percent). Many of those involved also appreciate the possibilities of the internet to contribute: just over one in five (21.9 percent) is active in groups organised online.

Irrespective of the structural framework of engagement, the way young people have become accustomed to dealing with digital media is evident in the question of what role the internet and social media play in their engagement activities. As many as 43.2 percent of the respondents involved in civic efforts can be described as digitally involved people who perform their engagement partly (26.1 percent of all committed people), predominantly (14.4 percent) or even completely (2.7 percent) via digital media.³ This indicates that a relevant proportion of young people's civic engagement takes place through digital means.

³ All other respondents who make little or no use of digital media for their engagement are described in the Third Engagement Report youth survey as "hardly digitally involved" (56.8 percent of all those involved in civic engagement).

Areas of engagement

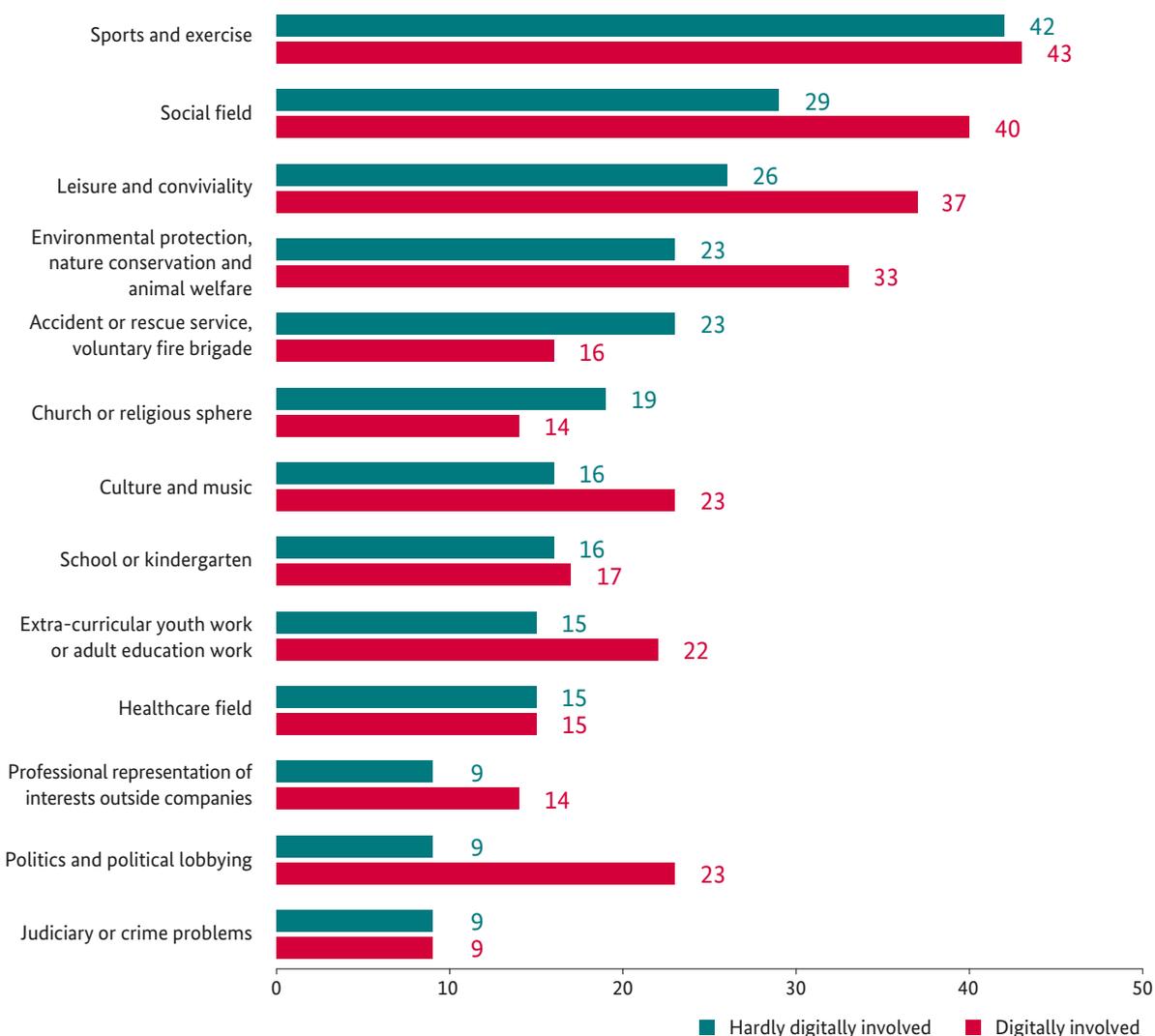


Figure 1: Areas of engagement (Response: “Applies”, multiple answers possible. Basis: those involved, n=639, slight variations in case numbers due to individual missing answers. Source: Third Civic Engagement Report 2020), figures in percent

When comparing the fields of engagement of the digitally involved and the hardly digitally involved, interesting differences appear. For example, in many fields such as culture and leisure, but also politics and environmental protection, the digitally involved are disproportionately represented, while in the fields of church involvement or rescue services, there are significantly fewer digitally involved people. In addition, according to the respondents, digital media are also very suitable for informal engagement with a topic: at 40 percent, the proportion of people working in self-organised groups is almost twice as high among

those who are digitally involved as among those who are hardly digitally involved (22.6 percent).

There are also differences between the two groups in terms of motivation: “fun” and “conviviality” occupy the top ranks for the hardly digitally involved, while for the digitally involved, “doing something meaningful” and “making a difference for society” occupy the top ranks of the answers. Moreover, they attach greater importance to flexibility and self-determination in terms of time than those who make less frequent use of digital media for their engagement efforts.

In general, social media fulfil an important function in engagement: 58.1 percent of those surveyed, they are important for organisational purposes. The respondents see the advantages of social media and the internet for engagement above all in being able to decide more freely for what cause (72.7 percent) and when (71.9 percent) to become involved. A large proportion of those surveyed also stated that the internet and social media are opening up completely new areas for social activities beyond their home communities (65.3 percent). More than a quarter of the young people involved in engagement efforts (28.7 percent) use the internet and social media because they cannot otherwise find suitable opportunities for engagement locally. Online-based engagement opportunities seem to have a substitute function especially for a part of the young people in rural areas, enabling them to engage individually according to their personal interests as well as their time and social resources.

Looking at concrete activities of young people on the web, the most popular activity among all the young people interviewed is sharing general posts (62 percent do this at least several times a month), followed by general expressions of opinion on the internet and social media (52.7 percent) and the sharing of content on their own profile (49.7 percent). Even with explicitly political or social content, sharing interesting posts ranks first (37.8 per-

cent), followed by expressing one's opinion in forums or chats (29.1 percent), sharing content on one's own profile (28.1 percent) and publicly commenting on the opinion of others (27.3 percent). These activities, which explicitly address political or social content and which can certainly be regarded as relevant to engagement, are proportionately much smaller than the activities mentioned above, such as the sharing of general posts or sharing content on one's own profile.

When asking young people about their political and social activities on the internet, the digitally involved achieve the highest participation rates, as is to be expected, but political and social online activities are also found in groups who stated that they hardly use digital media for their activities or are not involved at all. Those who had not yet been involved participated in such activities as sharing interesting posts with political and social content (21.4 percent), publicly commenting on the statements of others (16.2 percent), publicly sharing something on their own profile (15.7 percent) or expressing their own opinion on political and social topics in forums or chats (15.2 percent). Participation in political discourse on the web and the pursuit of corresponding communicative online activities thus do not necessarily hold the status of civic engagement in the self-assessment of young people.

Reasons for internet use in engagement

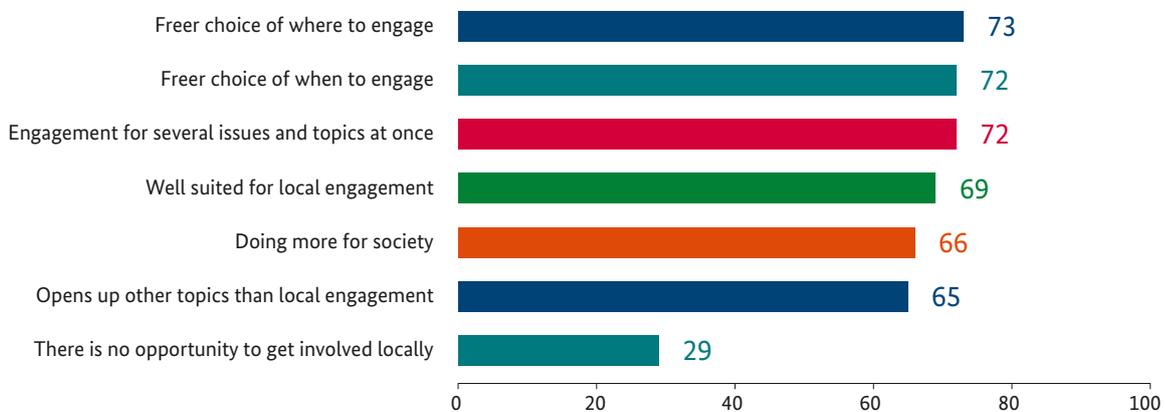


Figure 2: Reasons for internet use in engagement (Answer: "Mostly applies"/"Fully applies". Basis: those involved, n=436-440, slight variations in case numbers due to individual missing answers. Source: Third Civic Engagement Report 2020), figures in percent

Political and social activities on the internet

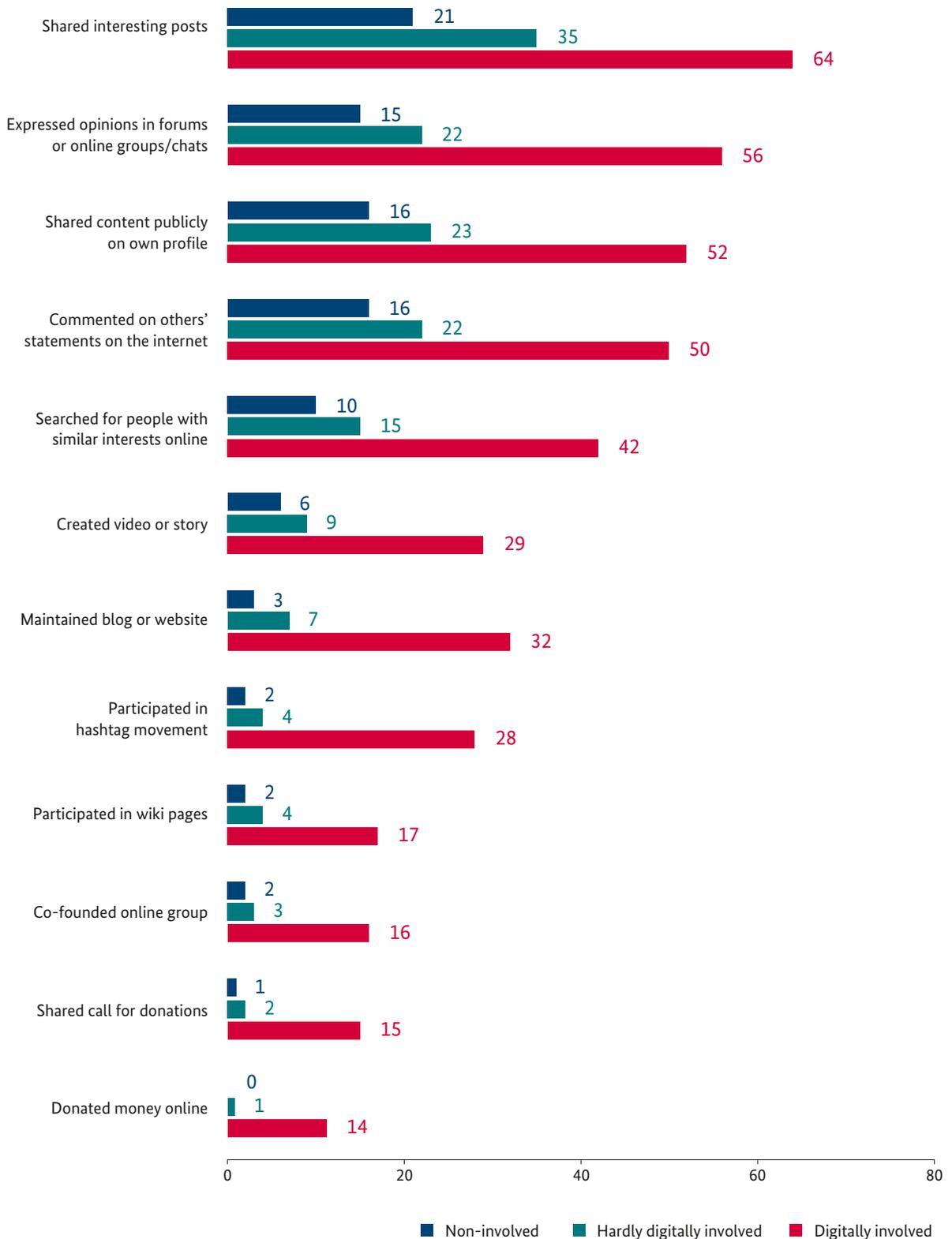


Figure 3: Political and social activities on the internet (Answer: “Daily”/“Several times a week”/“Several times a month”. Basis: all respondents, n=1,001–1,004, slight variations in case numbers due to individual missing answers. Source: Third Civic Engagement Report 2020), figures in percent

Accordingly, some of the young people do not perceive their digital political communication as civic engagement themselves and may also underestimate their potential to influence social developments. The positive self-perception of one's own knowledge and skills when it comes to social contexts, issues and opportunities for influence is not only an important basis for

political participation, but also for civic engagement. According to the Third Engagement Report youth survey, the digitally involved are the only group to rate their own political skills and their personal influence on political processes above average. The hardly digitally involved range at an average value, while the non-involved range even more clearly below average.

Assessment of political self-efficacy

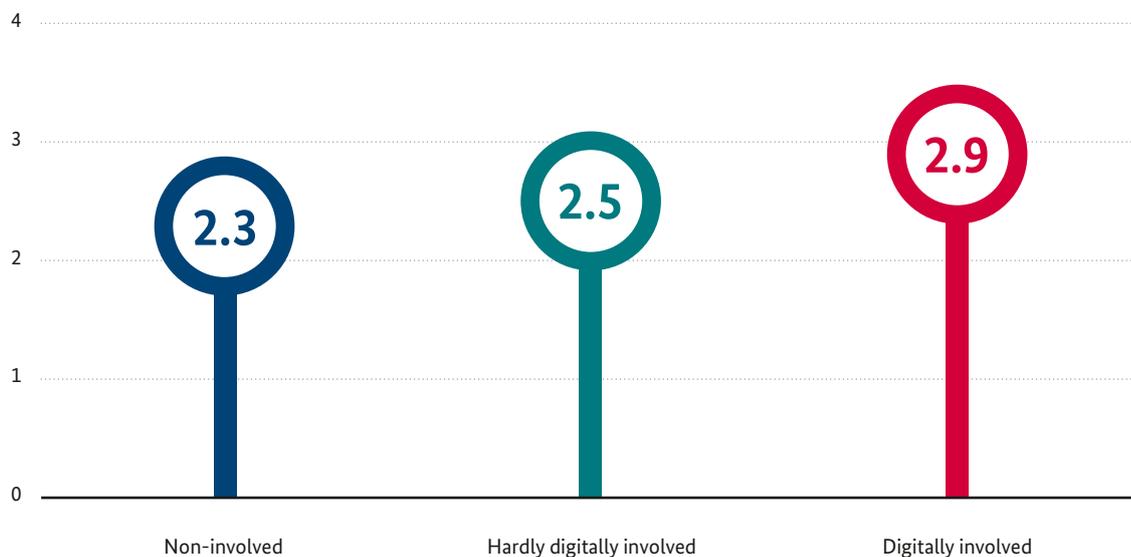


Figure 4: Assessment of political self-efficacy (average of the answer scale 1 "Does not apply" to 4 "Fully applies" of four question items. Basis: all respondents, n=987, slight variations in case numbers due to individual missing answers. Source: Third Civic Engagement Report 2020), figures in percent

In light of these different perceptions of self-efficacy, the Third Engagement Report youth survey also provides insights into education-related inequalities of engagement, which are continuing rather than diminishing in the area of digital communication: At 47.2 percent, young people who attend lower secondary school are less frequently involved in civic engagement than young people who attend secondary modern school (61.1 percent) or higher secondary school (73.2 percent). This displays a clear education-related gap. The extent of this gap in engagement

is also reflected in the lower participation of young people from the lower secondary school level in political and social issues on the internet. While there are hardly any differences in general media use, young people from higher secondary schools comment more often on articles with political and social content (33.7 versus 18.6 percent), express their opinion on political and social topics more frequently in forums or online groups (36.6 versus 17.6 percent) and share content with political and social topics with third parties more often (42.7 versus 27 percent).

3 New forms of engagement in the digital age

One click here, one click there – and an online petition is signed or a call for donations is shared on social media. At first glance, this action has little in common with the long-term nature and obligatory character of traditional engagement. New digital forms of engagement are mostly selective, fast and often individualised. It is therefore not surprising that in the last 20 years, online engagement and participation have often been hastily dismissed as slacktivism.⁴

However, new forms of engagement are not necessarily ineffective, nor does it make sense to pit the new against the old. New variants of engagement by no means replace established forms, they rather find their place alongside them. Young people naturally combine both forms of engagement. Whether it comes to sharing engagement-related content on social media, crowdsourcing, participatory mapping or civic tech – civically engaged people utilise the varied opportunities of digital information and communication technologies in innovative ways.

Public sharing of content and publicly reacting to said content shared by other users on social media are probably two of the most basic and widespread digital engagement practices. Sharing on social media can be understood as an extremely simple and low-threshold form of engagement, for example when it is used to represent political concerns, organise protests or calls for donations, or to refer to charitable projects. It is achieved by publishing links or producing one's own short texts, pictures and/or videos, so-called micro-blogging. Other users can react to content shared on social media, for example by clicking the *Like* button on Facebook or by commenting on the post. In addition, social media offer the possibility to share posts by other users with one's own network of contacts. This way, the post public attention exceeding the specific contact network of the user who originally published the post.

4 The term, which is made up of the verb "to slack" and the noun "activism", is used mostly in a derogatory manner, but not exclusively so.

However, digital commitment goes far beyond the use of social media. Indeed, digital infrastructures also enable completely new forms of collective processing and discussion of social issues and problems. One such engagement practice, for example, is so-called citizen sourcing, a form of crowdsourcing⁵. It means that political institutions – such as parties or ministries – mobilise citizens to address or deal with specific public problems. On many occasions, an app or a website serves as an interface. Local authorities in particular use it as an innovation and management tool to make the collective problem-solving capacities of citizens available by digital means. For instance, it can be used for concept competitions regarding political measures, in which citizens can articulate suggestions for current problems. Another use case consists in reporting platforms where matters such as deficiencies in urban infrastructure can be reported by citizens. An example of the latter is *Maerker Brandenburg*.

Participatory mapping is a practice relevant to engagement that originated back in the 1970s, but is now seeing more widespread application through digital tools. This method enables citizens to support the creation of maps with their knowledge and concerns. In contrast to the traditional top-down approach in which the creation of maps is reserved for a specialised group such as planners or engineers, participatory mapping attempts to collect and combine the local knowledge of various population groups. This way, the participatory approach to mapping tries to democratise information, in other words to make information available to all citizens. *Wheelmap* is one example of participatory mapping. The initiators of *Sozialhelden e.V.* intend to create a map of accessible places that makes everyday life easier for people with limited mobility and at the same time encourages social actors to make more places accessible.

In addition to practices and formats relevant to engagement, digitalisation also changes the topics of engagement and the ways and means of handling them. Digital society turns co-designing digital society itself into a theme, for example in the area of internet policy. Recently, wide-ranging debates have been sparked surrounding the internet, particularly regarding modern copyright law and the plurality of opinion on the web. The topics of ancillary copyright, net neutrality or the regulation of algorithms have also led to internet policy initiatives. In order to actively contribute to these topics, young people involved have been organising within the framework of new event formats such as *TINCON* or with the help of online platforms such as *OPIN*.

Digital networking with like-minded people and the possibility of anonymity provided by digital media make it possible to deal with even highly personal issues, which otherwise might only be discussed in the private sphere of experience. For example, young people share their experiences and sentiments regarding gender diversity, which can in turn inspire digital engagement. An example of this is the *Trevor Project*, a self-help project by and for LGBTQI* youth⁶. Through anonymous exchange, it provides young people with an appropriate and safe space on the web to deal with matters of sexual orientation, their own identity and individual crises in a safe setting. Young feminist movements working for more inclusion and diversity in the development of technologies also provide contact points for mutual learning and spaces for networking on the internet.

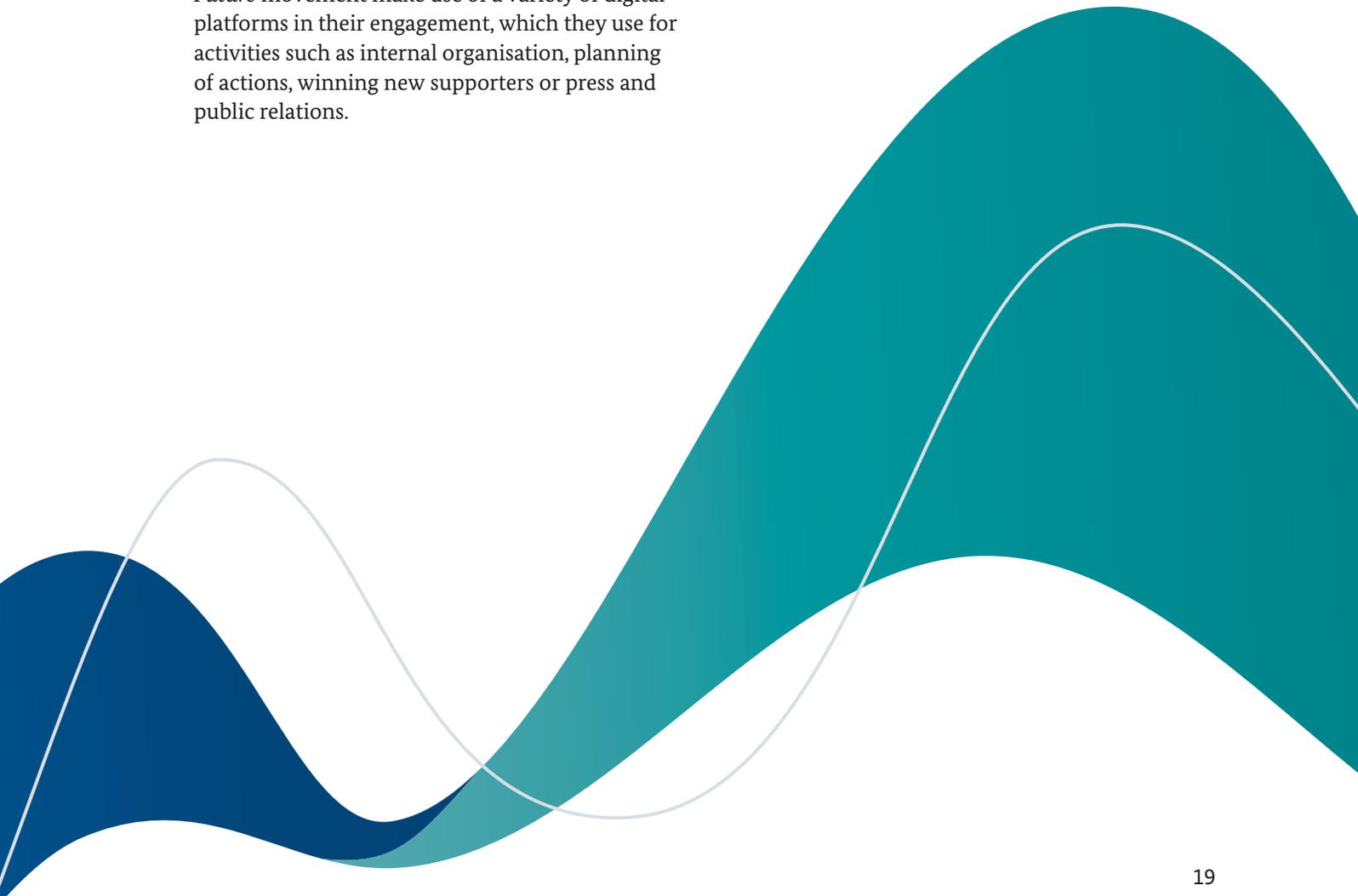
5 Crowdsourcing is an example of how digital infrastructures in particular also enable entirely new forms of collective problem solving. The term refers to a form of division of labour which, by means of digital media, calls upon a basically unlimited number of users to participate collectively in a specific work task or problem solution. In the context of engagement, crowdsourcing allows forms of cooperation and collaboration that can be much more selective than classic analogue forms.

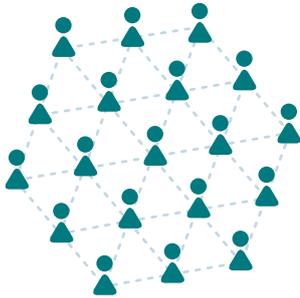
6 The abbreviation LGBTQI* stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex.

Furthermore, civic tech projects make digital infrastructures and tools the subject of their engagement. Civic tech refers to technologies that are developed by civil society. In the context of the *Jugend hackt* (“Hacking Youth”) programme, for example, young participants develop technologies and concepts for a better future with the support of volunteer mentors. Results range from air pollution meters and train delay overviews to apps for avoiding food waste.

Taking the *Fridays for Future* movement as an example, it becomes apparent that in young people’s engagement today, familiar issues in society are addressed in a new and more radical way by young people adopting them as their themes. Initiated by a single young woman, Greta Thunberg, a global movement of young activists became networked within a short amount of time, sharing a common concern: climate protection. The opportunities of social media have contributed significantly to the scope, the speed of emergence and networking, and the visibility of the movement. The activists of the *Fridays for Future* movement make use of a variety of digital platforms in their engagement, which they use for activities such as internal organisation, planning of actions, winning new supporters or press and public relations.

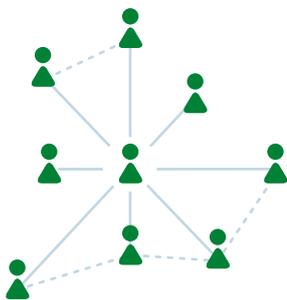
As the examples show, changes occur not only in practices and content, but also in the forms of organisation of civic engagement. Although organisations of permanent nature such as clubs and associations continue to play a central role in engagement, there is still a noticeable increase in engagement in more flexible forms of organisation such as swarms, networks and communities.





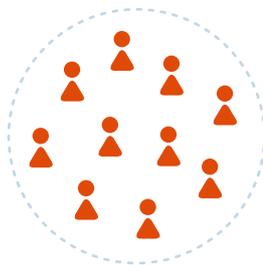
SWARM

In this context, **swarm** refers to mostly uncoordinated collective actions of individuals. For instance, citizens can independently support protest actions, donate money to charity or boycott products for political reasons. While each individual action is transient in itself and may be of minor importance, the collective accumulation of such actions is potentially very powerful.



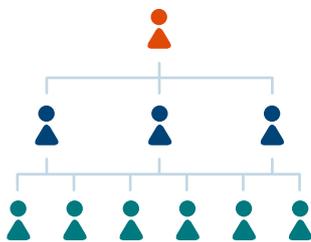
NETWORK

In contrast, engagement in **networks** appears to be more organised and more stable in time than swarm activity. Furthermore, there are often (loose) relationships between the members of a network. A widespread form of network-based engagement is crowd-sourcing, also known as citizen sourcing as described above. In this form of digitally facilitated division of labour, an (in principle) unlimited number of users participate in the solution of a task or problem.



COMMUNITY

Digitally facilitated forms of community are also emerging as another type. Shared values and possibilities for identification play a crucial role in this context. Digitally facilitated **communities** are not built on tradition and origin. Collective identities can arise, for example, through shared interests, the belief in a central idea (for example in open-source software) or shared political goals, and can develop social effects with the help of digital media.



ORGANISATION

Formal organisations are the established form for structuring engagement efforts. They typically have their own legal form, their own rules and regulations, and access common resources based on a division of labour. Examples of engagement organisations primarily consist of associations, foundations or charitable limited liability companies (gGmbHs). A detailed discussion of engagement organisations can be found in the following section.

4

The digitalisation of the engagement sector and its organisations

A large part of civic engagement in Germany takes place in organisations like associations, foundations, social enterprises and cooperatives. The engagement of young people is no exception to this. In contrast to new digital forms of participation, engagement organisations often exist over a long period of time. They therefore perceive digitalisation as a structural change. This structural change provides great potential for facilitating the work of engagement organisations, for example when it comes to public relations, personnel and programme development, recruiting of volunteers or funding. However, digitalisation also poses an additional challenge for some organisations and some potential remains unused. So how do engagement organisations deal with the opportunities and challenges of digitalisation, how do they shape the digital change?

In order to gain a better understanding of how the organised engagement sector deals with digitalisation, a qualitative study among engagement organisations was carried out as part of the Third Civic Engagement Report.

In this study, 61 associations, foundations and social enterprises (gGmbHs and gUGs) were interviewed about their approach to digitalisation, their general challenges but also their commitment to digitalisation. The findings of the study show that in the heterogeneous engagement sector, the way digitalisation is handled also varies greatly. These different ways of dealing with digitalisation can be illustrated and described in more detail using five different types of engagement organisations: active thought leaders, dynamic facilitators, high-resource organisers, pragmatic users and reluctant sceptics.

“How do engagement organisations shape digital change?”



ACTIVE THOUGHT

- Legal form:** Social enterprises, foundations and associations
- Personnel:** Primarily full-time, occasionally volunteers
- Digitalisation of the organisation:** Organisations are digitised
- Motivation:** Development of concepts and political demands
- Challenges and obstacles:** Political regulations, data protection, financial resources
- Attitude towards digitalisation:** Proactive



DYNAMIC FACILITATOR

- Legal form:** Social enterprises, foundations, clubs and associations
- Personnel:** Frequently carried by volunteers, partly full-time staff
- Digitalisation of the organisation:** Use of digital tools for education and facilitation
- Motivation:** Multipliers for digitalisation
- Challenges and obstacles:** Media-savvy staff, suitable tools
- Attitude towards digitalisation:** Proactive

Figures 5 and 6: Active thought leader and dynamic facilitator types
Source: Third Civic Engagement Report 2020



Active thought leaders include social enterprises, foundations and associations, which are usually carried by full-time staff. They use the potential of digitalisation and proactively address digitalisation issues as topics. They contribute to the political discourse on digitalisation by organising events, conducting lobbying talks or publishing discussion papers on the digitalisation of civil society. Organisations of this type are themselves digitised and they are united by a strong commitment to the cause.

Dynamic facilitators are united in their desire to promote the topic of digitalisation through educational services, either in schools, in extra-

curricular educational institutions or in the local community. They are mainly concerned with the everyday hurdles of digitalisation, such as dealing with hate speech, training senior citizens in the use of the internet or supporting other organisations involved in digitalisation issues.

Most of the high-resource organisers are associations. They have full-time staff and usually dispose of additional resources that enable them to implement digitalisation requirements and to realise potential. Their main concern is to digitise their own association in order to maintain and develop their own work. Large organisations often go through complicated coordination processes,



HIGH-RESOURCE ORGANISER

Legal form: Associations

Personnel: Member organisation with full-time superstructure

Digitalisation of the organisation: Establishment of bodies and structures for digitalisation

Motivation: Optimisation of own organisation and members of the association

Challenges and obstacles: Managing digitalisation processes, media-savvy staff

Attitude towards digitalisation: Proactive



PRAGMATIC USER

Legal form: Clubs

Personnel: Almost exclusively members and volunteers, few full-time staff

Digitalisation of the organisation: Use of digital tools for administration and publicity

Motivation: Optimisation of own organisation

Challenges and obstacles: Funding, time, media-savvy staff, suitable tools

Attitude towards digitalisation: Pragmatic



RELUCTANT SCEPTIC

Legal form: Clubs

Personnel: Almost exclusively members and volunteers, few full-time staff

Digitalisation of the organisation: Digital tools for administration

Motivation: Issues other than digitalisation are perceived as more pressing

Challenges and obstacles: Time and financial resources

Attitude towards digitalisation: Responsive

Figures 7, 8 and 9: High-resource organiser type, pragmatic user type and reluctant sceptic type
Source: Third Civic Engagement Report 2020

because subdivisions of an association can deal with digitalisation processes differently at the local or regional level.

For the pragmatic user type, digitalisation is a means to an end, used for example to make membership administration more efficient. These organisations mostly do not have a creative approach to digital topics. They include clubs that only rarely have full-time support and whose commitment is focused on the club's purpose, such as the promotion of culture, the organisation of a sport or the integration of refugees.

Finally, there is the type of reluctant sceptics. It almost exclusively subsumes clubs, which work mainly on a volunteer basis and usually at regional level. They are united by a certain scepticism regarding digitalisation, which they perceive as a challenge compared to the other types of organisations. Especially where the people involved have little digital affinity and therefore systematically overestimate the risks of the new opportunities and underestimate the potential, organisations may not be able to utilise supporting options. In particular, shortages of time and money, but also a lack of skills mean that organisations are at risk of losing touch with digitally active target groups and involved individuals.

These five types of organisations display two fundamentally different approaches and ways of dealing with digitalisation in the engagement sector: Some organisations perceive digitalisation as a challenge that is difficult to grasp, while others are already actively implementing the potential of digitalisation for the common good.

The part of the organisations that perceive digitalisation as a challenge would benefit greatly from targeted support. For these organisations, the range of digital infrastructures and the variety of commercial as well as open-source solutions are very confusing: The Third Engagement Report organisation survey revealed that the 61 organisations surveyed use 125 different tools in a wide range of areas of their work such as membership administration, accounting or communication. Additional research on digital infrastructures for engagement has resulted in a database of more than 215 services offered.⁷ Due to incomplete IT knowledge and skills in the organisations, it is often unclear which software is suitable and usable for the work of one's own organisation.

In addition to financial requirements, many engagement organisations depend on the knowledge and time resources of their active staff and volunteers, who generally want to concentrate on the core content of their engagement rather than on the digitalisation of their organisation. Although crowdfunding and engagement platforms are becoming increasingly relevant to the engagement sector, many organisations make little use of them. The same applies to data that is generated in the course of organisational work. Moreover, there are major uncertainties in handling the General Data Protection Regulation.

However, not all engagement organisations see digitalisation as a challenge. The part of the engagement organisations that is already actively implementing the potential of digitalisation for the common good is involved in a wide range of social activities on digital issues. As important multipliers in the engagement sector, these organisations should be supported in their activities, for example through specific funding lines. Being digitalisation experts, they can continue to contribute to the development of regional and topical competence centres. The advisory, networking and advocacy services of such competence centres would support the long-term, low-threshold promotion of digitalisation in the engagement sector.

⁷ Annex 2 of the Third Civic Engagement Report provides an overview of the identified services and digital infrastructures used in the engagement sector. At this point, the report does not recommend any providers, but primarily points out application areas and potential of digital infrastructures.

5

Civic engagement and digital platforms: “platformisation” of engagement?

Digital platforms are becoming increasingly important for the engagement sector.⁸ One of the many functions they support is the facilitation and coordination of civic engagement. Variants can be short-term online volunteering (for example *onlinevolunteering.org* by the *United Nations*), skill-based engagement (for example *youvo*) or also traditional volunteering (for example volunteer database of the *Aktion Mensch* campaign). Platforms entail their own criteria for evaluation, classification and selection. They moderate, select, curate and determine the terms of use of their members. In the scientific discussion, the idea of platforms as neutral facilitating entities is therefore largely rejected.

The engagement sector is characterised by a coexistence of internationally established platforms alongside smaller, local and engagement-specific platforms. While social media seem almost indispensable for organising and networking in civic engagement, engagement-specific platforms fulfil functions which are often no less important. In addition to the described placement of volunteers in public welfare-oriented projects, engagement-specific platforms provide features that support other elements of engagement. Examples include fundraising or the provision of digital tools for online collaboration, such as real-time document editing, but also task planning, scheduling, and the organisation of surveys and votes.

For commercial platforms, the use of data represents a central source of income. Platforms in the engagement sector tend to reject the monetisation of data. The high standard of European data protection as well as the respect of engagement platforms for the privacy of users make the storage and use of transaction data a sensitive issue of trust in the relationship between operators and users. Instead, engagement-specific platforms try to establish themselves in the engagement sector with different and highly varied (and sometimes precarious) financial business models.

The data-sparing approach of the engagement specific platforms on the one hand is data protection-friendly, but on the other hand it also ignores potential, for example when the evaluation of anonymous data could contribute to the support of an engagement goal. This is demonstrated, for example, by the work of the non-profit association *CorrelAid e.V.*, which, with almost 1,000 volunteer data analysts, offers free data analyses specifically for the charitable sector. *CorrelAid e.V.* helps organisations use their data to make internal processes more efficient, get to know the target group better or better allocate resources.

⁸ Platforms can be understood as computer-based infrastructures for the development and provision of digital services or applications. They provide a digitally generated space for exchange between individuals and organisations in which the facilitation between participants is usually but not necessarily algorithm-based. Irrespective of their size and objectives, platforms create new forms and opportunities for encounters that would most probably not be possible without them. Platforms are therefore also referred to as intermediaries. In this role they differ fundamentally from the information offered by a conventional website or digital programmes.

Platforms are both the subject of processes of order formation and regulation through various forms of governance and are themselves actors in these processes. Through their core features, namely the facilitation of exchange relationships and the compilation of information flows, platforms shape and expand social, political and economic opportunities for action and organisation.

As an object of governance, platforms are regulated by state and non-state forms of standard setting. Due to the increasing functional diversity of platforms, various legal regulations are relevant here. The issue of responsibility in the event of any legal violations by platform users is of particular interest for the Third Civic Engagement Report. At present, in line with the e-commerce directive, platforms are understood as neutral facilitating services which are not liable for the statements and actions of their users. In the course of the revision of the e-commerce directive and other relevant legislation, the exemption of platforms from liability could be further limited and a system could be developed that relies more on shared responsibility between platform operators and users.

Charitable purpose law is also relevant for platforms in civic engagement. For many platform operators and other organisations in the engagement sector, the conditions for recognition of charitable status represent a hurdle. For example, platforms are often not recognised as charitable because they only provide facilitating services and thus do not correspond to any recognised statutory purpose of the tax code.

Besides formal legal instruments, users also contribute to platform governance. This is achieved, for example, by criticising the business conditions of major international platforms. There have been organised protests, for example against the restriction of freedom of expression, for more transparency in content regulation, for better data protection or more effective rules against discrimination and hate speech. In the area of civic engagement, however, there are also individual platforms that actively involve users and their ideas in the design of the infrastructure.

In principle, it is precisely the diversity of platforms in the commitment sector that opens up potential. Globally active platforms serve as multipliers and interfaces to a broader public. The field of specialised platforms is dominated by facilitating functions, which play a driving role in the development of digital infrastructures. This includes crowdfunding and the project-related placement of volunteers. It is desirable from a division of labour perspective to maintain the diversity of large and small, international and regional platforms, and to create supporting framework conditions for this purpose. When different platforms refer to each other, they increase their respective reach.

6

Civic engagement undergoing change: perspectives on democratic coexistence

The ubiquity of digital tools and their intuitive and simple operation as well as the constant (further) development of digital technologies are giving rise to new forms and types of civic engagement. There are signs of a development towards a digitised civil society. For the new forms of engagement, which are undergoing a kind of real-life experimental testing, it is evident that formal organisations such as associations continue to be important – especially for the long-term stabilisation of engagement structures. Recent examples such as *Fridays for Future*, however, indicate that flexible structures are also capable of generating a high level of media attention and reach in society, at least for a limited period of time. Young people are actively involved in shaping new spaces of experience in engagement, albeit in varying degrees according to educational background. For instance, more and more young people in higher secondary school are taking part in hashtag movements such as *Fridays for Future*. Yet it is not only the type of school and education that cause the social inequalities in (digital) engagement described above. Lower levels of engagement are also due to less time available, limitations in access facilitated by family and friends or a less active manner of approach in personal environments, clubs or youth work.

Despite the educational differences in the patterns of media use, it is evident that social networks are perceived as a space for new participation and educational experiences, and that a specific digital culture of engagement is emerging. Through civic engagement – including digital varieties – young people have the chance to experience co-determination. This way, engagement can contribute to democratic education, because democracy is practised daily in civic engagement when young people are involved in opinion-forming and decision-making. Since young people under 18 years of age (in some federal states under 16 years of age) have no formal right to political co-determination in the sense of voter participation or participation in political decisions, participation experiences in social contexts are particularly important for their democratic education. School can be a valuable place to introduce young people to civic engagement, even though it cannot replace voluntary membership in a club or the association with a political movement.

“To what extent does digital engagement put established policy-makers under pressure to change?”

Analysing the democratic relevance of (digital) engagement raises the question of the extent to which digital engagement puts established policy-makers under pressure to change. For example, the survey of the Third Civic Engagement Report shows a decreasing importance of political parties for young people at various points. Parties as a traditional, permanent, but also slow and hierarchical organisation form of political participation are challenged by innovative, short-term and project-based civic engagement opportunities. Through the possibilities of digital media, individual (political) participation can be more specific and small-scale than before. However, this happens to the detriment of parties if their structuring function in public will formation loses relevance as a result. Problems, perspectives and

fields of action are no longer primarily specified, combined and represented by party political actors. Especially for young people, the time-consuming and binding political participation in parties is not very appealing. Instead, they prefer the advantages of time-flexible, goal-oriented engagement in temporary and partly digital forms of organisation. In this context, newer political parties can also be understood as a reaction to a changed need of involved people by representing a more flexible understanding of membership. The change that can be observed in the forms of digital social engagement opens up an additional participation dimension for citizens, which must be taken into account in understanding participation processes.

7

Key recommendations for action

Promoting the (digital) engagement of young people and the digitalisation of the engagement sector

The coexistence of digital and non-digital forms of engagement described in the report opens up potential for strengthening engagement. Young people involved in efforts in particular have important experience in dealing with digital media and programmes, which should be valued and strategically utilised. What remains true to this day: engagement takes place predominantly in organisations, so special attention should be paid to them through measures to strengthen the engagement sector. Similarly, the diversity of platforms in the engagement sector needs to be recognised and, if possible, preserved. A number of action goals can be derived from the report's findings, which in turn justify concrete measures to strengthen digital engagement and the digitalisation of the engagement sector.

Objectives

- Combining established and digital forms and cultures of engagement in a better way and valuing the civic engagement of young people.
- Strengthening the effectiveness of participation rights – creating a level playing field and access to civic engagement across the board.
- Avoiding newly arising educational differences, reducing existing divisions.
- Facilitating and strengthening digital aspects in pedagogical work and promoting the development of new skills for teaching staff.
- Strengthening research on young people's media activity and digital engagement.
- Supporting organisations that are committed to the digitalisation of civil society as an organisational purpose.
- Creating support structures that enable organisations to take advantage of digitalisation.
- Establishing structural support for the digitalisation of the engagement sector
- Promoting the diversity of platform models in the engagement sector.
- Perceiving platforms as collective actors with social responsibility and supporting their networking.

Measures for achieving these objectives

- Greater recognition of the digital engagement of young people through public competitions or the introduction of a “digital engagement” category in the German Engagement Award. Establishment of young digital advisory boards in political institutions and engagement organisations.
- Support programmes for the development of digital participation tools that are easy to use (and use simple language), enabling organisations to offer easier entry points and attractive participation opportunities for young people. Systematic consulting and networking opportunities for organisations in the context of (digital) engagement avenues.
- Financial and technical support for the development of forums and formats for connecting young people involved in efforts with digital know-how and organised engagement in order to exchange experiences, problems and solutions.
- Fast and comprehensive internet for all regions. Establishment of an earmarked engagement fund – similar to structural support measures for rural areas – to strengthen digital services in these regions.
- Comprehensive initiation and sustainable pursuit of measures for the internal and external digitalisation of ministries and federal authorities. Making the public-interest data of ministries and authorities accessible and usable in a manner that is friendly to both users and data protection.
- Strengthening of schools as central places for experiencing the possibilities of civic engagement and political participation as part of social coexistence. Integrating political education, experiences of engagement and the acquisition of reflective media skills into the teaching process more strongly than before.
- Placing greater emphasis on political education in combination with media education in a majority of educational institutions and extra-curricular youth work. In view of the increase in disinformation campaigns and the spread of anti-pluralist ideologies, these institutions are called upon to develop content and working forms that strengthen citizens’ ability to reflect.
- Promoting scientific research that takes into account current findings of youth-related digitalisation and engagement research. This should lead to the development of pedagogic/didactic concepts to support the teaching of appropriate digital and civic skills.
- Consistently integrating content to increase the ability of children and young people to reflect on media opportunities and challenges into pedagogical training and further education. Enabling educators to provide information about media risks and challenges in the context of social engagement.
- Establishing support measures for actors in the field of digital literacy dealing with the development of young people’s media skills. These actors should cooperate more closely with other educational institutions such as schools.
- Supporting open youth work organisations and forms of outreach work. This necessarily requires efficient digital equipment, as well as a staffing level that meets the needs and corresponding training of the educators.
- Providing research funds for regular qualitative and quantitative data collection and evaluation in order to identify new phenomena in the field of digital and non-digital engagement (such as innovative forms of engagement, uncivil engagement) at an early stage and to be able to develop measures.

- Research on social inequality in the field of digital civic engagement and effective solutions. In addition to education-related dimensions of inequality, other dimensions of inequality such as migration, disability and income must also be taken into account.
- Integrating digitalisation aspects of civic engagement in other reports and research projects relevant to engagement; for example by including digital engagement as an area of investigation in the German Survey on Volunteering.
- Establishing special funding lines for organisations and initiatives that work for the common good to digitise the engagement sector. This includes the promotion of digital technologies and tools. Civic tech projects in particular are proving to be very promising.
- Supporting digitalisation processes in engagement organisations by establishing consulting and networking structures that relieve organisations in terms of funding and staffing. This concerns the development and establishment of freely usable systems for the digitalisation of organisational processes.
- Promoting the development and support of an open-source infrastructure for platforms consisting of individual components. A modular structure also allows engagement organisations to adapt platform components to their specific needs and experiment with them.
- Promoting the exchange of experience on how to deal with digitalisation between organisations with different digital affinities. Existing formats such as the *Digital Social Summit* can point the way forward.
- Developing the potential for the use of public and engagement-specific data by promoting cooperation between engagement organisations and data analysts. Developing infrastructures for the storage, processing and provision of relevant data sets.
- Establishing regional and thematic competence centres in the form of advisory, networking and advocacy services for the long-term and low-threshold promotion of digitalisation of the civic engagement sector on a wide scale. Merging the competence centres into a nationwide competence network which identifies cross-organisation research questions and needs at the interface of technology and organisation and advocates for digitalisation interests of engagement organisations.
- Scientifically monitoring and analysing of the activities of global digital platforms continuously to identify possible positive and negative developments for civic engagement as well as activities of engagement organisations and platforms and to develop policy measures where necessary.
- Reviewing and reformulating the criteria for the recognition of charitable status. The definition of charitable purposes in the tax code needs to be extended to take into account new types of civic engagement such as engagement platforms.
- Developing national coordination structures for large and small platforms relevant to the engagement sector. An umbrella organisation should establish a regular exchange and, above all, develop cooperative potential.
- Making facilitation goals (such as donations) on platforms in the engagement sector verifiable and introducing sanctioning measures in case of violation of facilitation goals. Platforms should formulate best practices that are suitable for better balancing the risks of damage between platforms and users in order to meet their social responsibility.

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