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NEGLECTED OR JUST MISUNDERSTOOD?
THE PERCEPTION OF YOUTH AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AMONG SLOVENIAN POLITICAL PARTIES

Abstract. *Modern democracy needs citizens, but citizenship has become a complex concept owing to the changes that digital media and social platforms have brought to political participation and civic engagement, which political institutions can no longer ignore. This article questions the way political parties conceive of digital citizenship and how they incorporate new media into their own communication practices. While changes in civic engagement and political participation are most prevalent among young people, the primary focus of this article is the problem of how political parties represent young people as emerging citizens and their potential future voters. Our study uses recent research on young citizens and the responses of political parties to young citizens to provide answers. We also perform a qualitative analysis of their representatives within a sample of Slovenian political parties. The aim of the article is to present a general map of youth as an emerging citizenry within the digital culture in order to identify the problems political parties are facing in their inability to identify with young people as digital citizens.*
Keywords: *citizenship, digital media, political participation, youth, qualitative analysis, political parties*

Introduction

The long term presence of the internet and digital technologies has presented an opportunity to renew forms of political participation (Grossman, 1995; Barber, 1997), as more interactive, easy to set up and inclusive. With the emergence of social media, the capacity to participate extended to other interactive platforms: blogging and microblogging; Facebook profiles; and Twitter posts. These have transformed the conditions of collective political activities, reshaping the existing forms of politics, and mobilising citizens and political actors across horizontal rather than merely vertical

communication flows. Consequently, several types of political activity exist: those only possible online; those carried out equally offline and online; and those carried out only offline (Anduzia et al., 2009: 4). But despite the support of digital technologies, institutionalised participation (voting, contacting civil servants) and individualised participation (signing petitions, horizontal networking), research into digital settings reveals strong support for individualised forms of participation (Hafner and Oblak, 2014; Norris and Curtice, 2006).

Several studies (Banaji, 2011; Dahlgren, 2007; Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2007; Olsson, 2007; Mihailidis, 2014; Hafner-Fink and Oblak, 2014) confirm the growing popularity of these unconventional forms of civic activities primarily among the young. They evidence a high internet adoption rate, as youth come into contact with digital media from an early age. In some countries, such as the UK and Sweden, there are almost no non-users among teenagers and young adults (Livingstone, 2007; Zimic and Dalin, 2011). This generation of 'digital natives'[1] is developing its own political subjectivity in different cultural contexts to the previous generations, where notions of accountability, trust, equality and authenticity are shaped by the principles of digital communication accessed through mobile smart media rather than the norms and standards of traditional mass communication media.

This article focuses on the activities of young people, who appear to neglect conventional forms of political participation, finding political issues 'boring', since 'no-one listens to them' and in which political actors promote 'uncool politics on uncool websites' (Livingstone, 2007). Nevertheless, 'young people are mobilising politically, but outside the system' (Sloam, 2012: 5), and if established democracies are in a period of transition, then young people are at the vanguard of this change. Similarly Mycock and Tonge (2012) note that since young people operate politically outside of traditional settings, they are not recognised within mainstream politics. But, in order to understand political participation at all, we must explore how each new generation comes to develop its own conceptions of citizenship and express itself through civic and political engagement (Sloam, 2012: 4). The most recent comparative study of political participation among young Europeans (Sloam, 2016) argues that low levels of participation or even low ratios of participation are not to be equated with weak citizenship or a lack of interest in politics. Many discussions in communication and media studies (Dahlgren, 2007; Hartman et al., 2007; Thorson, 2011; Scholl, 2015; de Zúñiga and Shahin, 2015) explore the recent transformation of civic engagement among young people, and call for a redefinition of civic culture.

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[1] *This is problematic and in several studies (e.g. Thomas, 2011 or Buckingham et al., 2014) the criticised term is used only figuratively.*

Thorson (2011) argues that modes of citizenship and civic engagement are changing. There has been a drift away from the dutiful, routine civic norms of older generations. The concept of the 'emerging citizen' expresses something similar (Mihailidis, 2014: 5–6), entailing public involvement – as much by engagement in expression, activism, sharing, and dialogue as by public duty.

However, while there is a lot of focus on the changing practices among young people, less focus is given to how political institutions respond to these trends, in particular the consequences that new forms of political participation have on the institutional understanding of citizenship and how political parties respond to such transformations. Political parties have been historically reluctant to engage with young people, neglecting their interests in the formulation of policies and frequently overlooking young people in political debates (Mycock and Tonge, 2012: 139). In order to analyse the complex relationship between youth as 'new digital citizens' and political institutional responses, the studies should explore political actors' perceptions of youth, and the crisis of legitimacy faced by political parties (Mycock and Tonge, 2012; Sloam, 2012).

In light of these concerns, the article intends to analyse the institutional context within digital culture through an interdisciplinary approach, with reference to two general issues: first, how young people practice political engagement and citizenship; and second, how digital citizenship is understood among political parties and how this influences their perception of young people's participation in politics. The article therefore combines the theoretical framework with empirical findings from media studies, which address the changing political and civic engagement among young people as a case of generational transformation. Additionally, the study follows political research on how political institutions discuss young people and how they understand the emerging 'youth citizenship'. Institutions usually adopt 'a one size fits all' model of language (Banaji, 2011) in which technology is applied in the design features of a website offering – but not explaining – many tools: 'This model is generally consonant with a range of beliefs about young people, either as inherently tech-savvy, as content creators, or as interested more in fun and entertainment than in policies and politics' (Banaji, 2011: 61).

At the empirical level, the article focuses on the case study of Slovenia. Together with the findings on political and civic participation among Slovenian youth (Ule, 1988; Kirbiš and Flere, 2010; Hafner-Fink and Oblak, 2014), the article explores the representation of youth in political institutions. In particular, the analysis evaluates the perceptions of youth and digital citizenship among Slovenian parliamentary political parties. The results and interpretations are based on the national research project *Digital Citizenship*,

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for which in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of all political parties that had been recently active in the Slovenian Parliament.[2] The qualitative analysis focuses on two inter-related questions: 1) how do political parties perceive the notion of digital citizens?; and 2) in what way do parties develop communications with young people? Within such a multifaceted framework, the empirical section aims to identify the attitudes of political parties towards digital citizenship and youth as citizens in the making (Mycock and Tonge, 2012). The aim of our analysis is to explore how political parties interact with young people and how they perceive the implementation of new media within the notion of citizenship.

Although Slovenia is a 'small nation with a young democracy',[3] the study provides insights into the status of youth within parliamentary political institutions. Although political parties see the digital citizen as a logical extension of digital media, they do not incorporate any concrete practices for young people to realise themselves as young citizens in digital contexts, in contrast to the expectations of digital natives as emerging citizens. This finding is comparable to the more general trend in which politicians regard the internet as a platform 'for their own disintermediated self-presentation' instead of an online public sphere 'in which citizens sets agendas, bring their experience to issues, and coproduce policy' (Coleman, 2015: 380). Since the mediation of citizenship in the era of the internet and social media is radically different from the broadcast model (Coleman, 2015: 379), the misrepresentation of young people and the neglecting of 'the next-generation internet users'[4] (Blank and Dutton, 2015) has brought more disappointments than promises for the potential structural transformation of democracy in the near future.

The Youth as Citizens of the Digital Culture

The complex positioning of young people as new digital citizens has over the past decade largely been considered by media and communication studies (Bennett, 2007; Bennet et al., 2011; Livingstone, 2007; Dahlgren,

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[2] *The project was conducted in partnership between the Mirovni Institute, FDV and UP-ZRC from 2013–2016 and was led by Dr Mojca Pajnik. The interviews were conducted by professional interviewers mainly from the Mirovni Institute but also by members of other research partners, who generated the questionnaire and sample (see details about the research in chapter 3).*

[3] *In recent years Slovenia's political establishment has faced turbulent changes: the entrance of the right wing coalition produced huge civic protests in almost all Slovenian cities in 2012. But the successive government, led by a Prime Minister Bratušek lasted only for a year (from March 2013 to July 2014). The recent coalition is again led by a 'newcomer party' of Prime Minister Cerar.*

[4] *According to Blank and Dutton, the next-generation user is defined by two related trends: portability and access through multiple devices, namely 'as someone who accesses the internet from multiple locations and several devices' (2015: 128).*

2007; Buckingham, 2008; Thomas, 2011; Mihailidis, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2009; de Zúñiga, 2015). According to Mihailidis (2014: 18), today's younger generations are finding their own voices in online spaces to such an extent, that 'young citizens no longer organise their lives around information but instead organise information around their lives'. Some observers argue that recent generations have entered a time of more personalised, less institutionally organised politics in which they participate by self-actualising or self-reflexive involvement in personally meaningful causes. Bennett (2007: 61) notes that 'young citizens find greater satisfaction in defining their own political paths', which some label the generation of 'everyday makers'. Some studies emphasise how young citizens mistrust traditional top-down organisations and media, and obtain political information from citizen-based online networks (Scholl, 2015: 49). But research into the practices among young people does not uniformly confirm such changes, especially not among young people transitioning to adulthood. Mycock and Tonge (2012: 3) argue that the 'utilisation of age as a signifier of a distinctive 'youth citizenship' is complex as there are considerable challenges in defining the term youth'.[5] The term 'youth citizenship' primarily refers to young people as 'not yet citizens' (Lister, 2007), namely those without the right to vote.

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Contemporary citizenship among younger cohorts is characterised by openness, choice, uncertainty, tolerance and no single 'right way' to take part in public life. Thorson's study (2011) reflects this. Participation in all forms is the responsibility of the individual, whose decision it is whether to engage, how to act and stay informed, which issues matter, which organisations share the right approach etc. Although civic norms relating to dutiful and informed citizenship are present, they feature as 'zombie concepts' without referred practices (Thorson, 2011: 18). Consequently, the alternative for young people is not a homogenisation of civic participation to a single – mainstream or digital – form, but a pluralisation of participation and individualisation of civic life experience (Thorson, 2011: 8). Dahlgren and Olsson (2008: 495) regard these novelties as a turning point towards a 'new politics' in which young people have difficulty identifying with political actors. Although the internet is central in this new arena of politics, engagement among young people, especially activists, is not necessarily prompted by the internet per se, but has emerged as a result of various experiences in their lives, which Vinken (2007) relates to an identity work seen as 'reflexive biographisation'. Although young people value having influence and tend to demand participation in social issues, their identities are shaped through consumption, leisure, and popular culture. The internet and social media platforms are perfect venues for the 'actualising citizen, more than it will

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5   *But due to the length restriction, this problem is not further elaborated within the article.*

probably ever be for the classic dutiful citizen, who regards voting as the core democratic act and frames its part in political life as the obligation to participate in government centered activities' (Vinken, 2007: 52).[6]

A potentially similar turn is reflected in the empirical analysis of Slovenian youth and their political participation patterns. Kirbiš and Flere (2010: 198) note that unmediated, conventional participation remains the most preferred form of civic engagement, but the main problem lies in the unresponsiveness of political institutions and elites to the expressed opinions of youth. However, in relation to the rise of new media and accompanied individualised forms of participation, the same survey admits that young people are the most active when engaging in online forums, online media platforms, political discussion groups and consumption boycotts (see Kirbiš and Flere, 2010: 201). Consequently the authors assume that individualised and digital forms of participation will become more popular, meaning 'that these activities are not an alternative for the young, but are the central form of their political participation' (Kirbiš and Flere, 2010: 203); in comparison to their EU peers, a high percentage of Slovenian youth take part in political protest (Kirbiš and Flere, 2010: 209). Similar findings were identified among the general Slovenian population, confirming that age is one of the most indicative factors of utilisation of unconventional political patterns (Hafner-Fink and Oblak, 2014). The results of the study indicate the existence of a large group of citizens who, for their political activities, apply only digital forms of political participation. In addition it reveals stronger associations between online participation and individualised (or protest) forms of participation than conventional forms of participation. The results also confirmed that online forms of political participation are by far the most present among the youngest and the most educated citizens.

The growing preference for unconventional participatory forms among young people is another argument why political parties should adapt to these trends. Especially if this conclusion is viewed from a historical perspective, in which Slovenian youth has often felt 'neglected in relation to their expectations and interests which lessen their level of political activity' (Ule, 1988: 80). Since the political sphere is primarily occupied by 'digital immigrants' who dismiss the expectations and habits of 'digital natives', a new tension appears within our understanding of the core democratic notions of participation, engagement and citizenship. Or as Kimberlee (2002: 89) concludes, 'it is unsurprising that very few young people are involved in political parties today'. According to his study, young people find the organisation and

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[6] *Similar distinctions among youth perceptions of citizenship were identified and evaluated in the project within a small sample of digitally active young people in Slovenia (see Oblak, 2016), but the pilot study was unable to draw any firm conclusions.*

policies of UK political parties to be exclusory, remote and irrelevant. In order to respond to changing practices among young people, political institutions should accept these trends in the individualisation of civic experiences and the pluralisation of modes of participation by incorporating them into their structures and actions. This means, firstly, not only being visible online, but being active and responsive within social media platforms, mixing opportunities for young people to express themselves and become informed about public issues. Secondly, they should be open to engaging choices, instead of uniformly closed. Thirdly, they should address pragmatic issues and offer concrete aims close to young people's needs. And finally, they should be global and organised, networked, interconnected and non-hierarchical organisations.

Positioning digital citizens and young people within political institutions

As Mycock and Tonge (2012) argue, a number of important studies (Kimberlee, 2002) seek to explain young people either as 'politically apathetic', 'uninterested' or a 'disengaged' generation, while others view young people not as uninterested in politics, but as disillusioned (Livingstone, 2007) or powerless for not being fairly treated by governments (Henn et al., 2005). The perspectives of institutions are rarely in balance with the expectations of young people. The interviews with 14–15 year olds in the UK reveal that political websites are 'hyper-boring': 'You can really tell they are so cheaply made as well. It's like italic links, with the boxes round them on cheap websites' (Livingstone, 2007: 111). Or as Henn et al. (2005) concluded: 'politicians and political parties have a lot of work to do if they are to overcome the distrust and scepticism of young people' (in Sloam, 2012: 6).

Although governmental structures and political institutions follow the principles of digitalisation, addressing the need for effective online presence, their practices remain self-centred and strongly self-promotional, avoiding dialogue with the users and proposals from citizenry (see Oblak and Prodnik, 2014; Oblak, 2016). The UK government has expressed a wish to 'enable all adults to have the ICT skills they need to learn effectively online, and become active citizens in the information age' (Livingstone, 2007: 104). The Slovenian national strategy for digitalisation[7] also stresses the need for 'digital development'. However, both neglect a coherent focus on younger generations. The complex nature of youth citizenship is rarely recognised by politicians and political parties (Mycock and Tonge, 2012). Meanwhile,

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[7] *Accessible at http://www.mizs.gov.si/fileadmin/mizs.gov.si/pageuploads/Informacijska_druzba/DSI_2020.pdf.*

considerable commercial interests target the youth market, inviting them to take action, more intentionally than state institutions. According to Banaji (2011), in the UK and across the European Union, the promotion of civic participation among young people has become a priority for a number of governmental, political, charitable, and other non-governmental organisations led by young people (Banaji, 2011: 53). However, the European comparative project Civic Web reveals, among others, that websites 'often do not make use of the range of interactive digital tools potentially available, or under-utilise ones they do include' (Banaji, 2011: 55).[8] The findings for Slovenia highlight the difference in the usage and understanding of the internet as a civic engagement tool among young people themselves (Turnšek Hančič and Slaček Brlek, 2009).

The approaches political parties adopt provide a clear insight into how they construct the position of young people in society in general. Some discrepancies between the perception of young people and the practices within the institutional digital sphere in relation to the notion of citizenship have already been presented (see Oblak, 2016). How Slovenian political parties in particular perceive the position of youth has been presented elsewhere (see Hrženjak and Pajnik, 2016: 138–140). The authors summarise[9] that young people are not accepted as their primary public, although some parties gradually or at least partially include new digital media in their communication strategies in order to target young people (Hrženjak and Pajnik, 2016: 140).

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Empirical study: Perceptions of digital citizens and young people among Slovenian political parties

Less effort is given to perceptions of new media as encouraging tools for political engagement among parties. The following analysis is thus focused not only on the question of representation of youth, but also on the perception of digital citizens among the party representatives in order to elaborate on whether the notion of digital citizenship refers to the young generation as well. We address this dilemma by asking how political parties perceive the concept of 'digital citizen' and which strategies for mobilising young people they practise and through which communication media. The analysis focuses on the strong political sphere, which enables the identification

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[8] *The absence of forums, video-upload facility, podcasting, however, is also the result of the limitations in funding and budget, not just their unwillingness.*

[9] *Hrženjak and Pajnik (2016) in comparison to our analysis presented in the following chapter included interviews with several political parties, not just parliamentary ones, but also parties not currently holding seats in parliament (like SLS, Pirati, TRS and PS) and some civic student organisation as well (for instance Iskra).*

of alternatives for the established actors and the comparison of communicative strategies among selected parties.

The study is based on a qualitative method, namely in-depth structured personal interviews with communication strategists or general secretaries of selected political parties, conducted between November 2014 and February 2015.[10] The sample of interviews include seven political parties: governing parties, namely the Social Democrats (SD), Democratic Pensioners' Party of Slovenia (DESUS), and the Party of Miro Cerar, now the Party of the Modern Centre (SMC); and the opposition parties, the Alenka Bratušek Alliance (ZAB), United Left (ZL), the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and New Slovenia-Christian Democrats (NSI).

Results

Although the interviews included many questions, we will consider just two of those questions: 1) How does the representative of a single political party understand the notion of 'digital citizen'? 2) What strategies does a political party develop to include young people in their own activities? The main findings on both questions are presented separately in the following two sections.

Who do political parties perceive to be 'digital citizens'? The views of established parliamentary parties on digital citizen can be presented as a diverse typology within an extended continuum, from a digital citizen as a 'virtual political person', as SD believes, to the opposite extreme of expressing strong reservations about new technology (DESUS). The majority of parties (SD, SDS, ZAB, NSI) incline towards the 'opportunist strategy' (Coleman, 2015: 381), in which the focus is on being seen to engage with the digital world, adopting the language of interactive communication, but maintaining the strategy of monologue self-display. A few political actors (MC, ZL) accompany digital citizenship with an 'empowerment strategy', intended 'to create a communication environment in which public information can be liberated from the official grip' (Coleman, 2015: 382). None of the parties surveyed plans to use digital communication as part of a 'deliberative strategy'. However, if we consider their opinions more closely, we can identify four distinct groups of parties' images:

1. The dutiful digital citizen (SD and SDS): According to the SD, a citizen will be highly technology driven and closely embedded in the citizen body. As the SD secretary general has stated: 'in the morning you will open

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[10] *The detailed presentation of all the parties' representatives and additional information about the conducted interviews were published in Amon Prodnik (2016).*

your eyes to all the unsolved matters and issues which the government will present its citizens for their consideration; you will need to check and click 'yes' or 'no' or other possible answers. Citizens will be able to propose their own agendas and could track the results and share them within their own networks, inviting others to participate in the voting' (Jauševec, SD). A similar idea of a 'constant online presence' was presented by the SDS, which understands the digital citizen as being highly involved in the digital environment, but primarily through the use of several popular digital tools: 'your day begins with this and you are constantly all day long logged on, no matter what you do, you jump on Twitter, you jump on Facebook etc. (…)' (Jeraj, SDS). However, what they stress is the need for the digital citizen to make the selection between these tasks. Neither the SD or SDS mentioned the digital citizen in relation to the younger generation; both view the digital citizen as a subject who needs to complete duties and tasks.

2. Digitalised politics for the active citizen (SMC and ZL): The two new established parties – the SMC and ZL – strongly integrate digital technology with future citizen activities, but in a much less futuristic way. What is distinctive in their outlook is the image of the digital citizen not as an individual, but rather encompassing the digitalisation of the state and public administration. The SMC party especially views digital citizenship in a complex way, as a conglomerate of three interrelated dimensions: firstly, as a platform that enables citizens to be more proactive; secondly, as the platform that opens the state to their citizens; and thirdly, as an educational platform, with which 'people can educate themselves about matters and gather new knowledge' (Kopač, SMC). Here, a digital citizen is perceived as an active member involved and engaged in collective issues that are publicly open to all. The new party ZL on the other hand, perceives the idea of the digital citizen to mean the idea 'that all the topics and issues relating to public administration and civic rights could be managed through the web or through applications that would enable action' (Janović Kolenc, ZL). For ZL, it is not a question of organisation, but a question of action, the need for the digital citizen to be actively involved in policy and decision making. But as with previous cases, neither of these parties relate digital citizenship to the younger generation.

3. Digital tools for the dutiful citizen (ZAB and NSI). Two other parties also regard digital applications primarily as a tool, but with an important difference between them. ZAB has expressed strong support for the Estonian model of digital citizenship as 'one of the best models that exists' (Jakič, ZAB) which is known to be a good example of the implementation of digital media within the traditional political practice of national elections. ZAB therefore primarily views a digital citizen as one who uses new media to supplement conventional political duties. The NSI party on the other hand, describes a digital citizen more generally 'as a citizen of the modern era,

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who uses the tools currently offered, from e-mail onwards' (Ilc, NSI). Both parties share the view that digital media is primarily a tool, without really clarifying what such tools mean for citizenship.

4. Digital media as an unreliable tool (DESUS). The most reluctant position in relation to digital media can be found in DESUS, whose representatives confessed uneasiness with the possibility of online voting due to their general mistrust of technology implementation. However, their image of a digital citizen in principle seems to be closer to the NSI: 'you can do everything by computer, but this is not good' (Simonovič, DESUS).

How do political parties address youth? This section focuses on the positioning of youth within the communication strategies of the parties analysed. In relationship to young people 'the attitudes of parties are as heterogenic as the political parties themselves' (Hrženjak and Pajnik, 2016: 138). A closer analysis shows that the most evident difference in relation to young people is between the older political parties and the newcomers, namely ZL, ZAB and SMC. However, there are specific differences in their perceptions and strategies to mobilising disengaged youth.

1. Older players: from 'Young people represented in structural policy' to 'Young people addressed by new media': Two of the established parties – SDS and DESUS – argue that their concern for young people as citizens is realised through the issues they address in their policies. The SDS, for instance, perceives itself as a 'youth-friendly party', not just because it constantly communicates with young members through social media, but primarily because it 'communicates topics relevant to young people, because we involve them in the work of the party, which is our priority' (Jeraj, SDS). DESUS, primarily a party representing the interests of pensioners, tries to build a bridge with young people by focusing on the issues of 'social partnerships', as 'an opportunity for unemployed youth' (Simonovič, DESUS). Their own limitation is evidently in conflict with young people who use different social media which their members and representatives do not. Another difference between the SD and DESUS is that, while the SDS puts some effort into growing the party's youth wing, DESUS does not. The SDS is in this sense a traditional party in its organisational structure, expecting young people to be socialised within and through the classical forms first at the local level, from which they can later enter the main party's national bodies. The third traditional player, NSI, similarly claims to make the most effective contact with youth through its own youth wing, but also sees new media as an effective tool for communicating with young people. The fourth party, SD, has been trying to adapt to the younger generation, but have admitted relatively low success. They have developed communication paths with young people primarily through social media, although they still

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believe the strongest communication strategy with the general population is personal contact.

2. The newcomers: Between 'youth as the general public' to 'youth as neglected actor': A completely different position towards young people prevails in those parties formed only recently, but with some notable differences among them. ZL perceives itself as a young person's party without any specific strategy in relation to young people. ZL entered the political scene with a broad appeal based on ideology: 'we counted more on being popular on the ideological level instead of on a constructed specific population' (Janović Kolenc, ZL). A similar view is present in the SMC. The SMC perceives young people 'as a part of society' which should be addressed through issues that are close to young people. Or as their general secretary stated: 'we haven't approached young people as a specific group, but have tried to include their problems in our programme topics' (Kopač, SMC). The young people here were identified as part of the general public, rather than a 'segregated' group. The ZAB party seems quite reluctant to adopt a position on young people, partly because it has no critical engagement with the younger generation in general. In this respect they have no specific strategy for the active inclusion of youth in their party at all.

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Conclusion

To summarise: political parties recognise the concept of digital citizens in close relationship with digital media, but not in direct relation to young people. The parties that define a digital citizen as an individual who explicitly depends on technology and who needs digital media to carry out political duties are in a paradoxical way either neglecting young people as an important part of their membership (ZAB), or utilising young people primarily through conventional inner structures (SDS, NSI). On the other hand, the parties that understand young people as more than an extension of their electoral base or as a part of the general public represent young people on specific policy topics (SMC, ZL). They position digital technology 'above the citizenry' as a tool through which the citizens can activate and evolve as educative, informed subjects. Consequently, it is not the citizens that are being digitalised but politics, which becomes more open and accessible to the public.

Combining the findings of both research questions complicates the conclusion. On the one hand, young people are not regarded as actors with their own personalised or individualised choices or as 'actualised citizens'; and digital media is mostly regarded by parties as a tool to make citizens become more dutiful subjects. For digital natives, 'participating actively in self-governance is a vital part of citizenship in a democracy' (Mihalidis, 2014: 126) and they expect to be able to use digital media to do this. Yet

no single party uses the full potential of digital media to help young people express themselves politically. The major critique of political parties in their attitudes towards 'digital youth' does not end here. Their attempts at digital engagement with young people are open to criticism of stereotyping youth as either immature or fully actively engaged regardless of social circumstances.

A study of political participation within the original EU15 member states confirms that although the ratios of participation are higher in issued-based forms of political engagement than in voting, these ratios are similar across countries, suggesting that changing repertoires of youth participation are the result of long-term trends defined by a country's existing pattern of political engagement (Sloam, 2016: 533). It has also been found that young people's participation is strongly influenced by the civic-political culture of the particular country they come from, meaning that 'political opportunity structures are crucial in determining the nature of young people's politics' (Sloam, 2016: 533). But as the communications landscape is diversifying, specialising, globalising and becoming more direct and interactive (Livingstone, 2007), political actors need to make greater attempts to encourage young people into civic engagement, and need to rethink the notion of the representation of young people in the chosen public issues.

Such changes should be conceptualised within the diverse and heterogenic youth, also addressing the social, cultural and economic difference among young people. While political participation is unequal, with activists coming from the more privileged sectors of society, internet access and its usage are also unequally concentrated among specific groups. This is especially true of young people from less affluent sectors of the population, since those EU countries 'where youth participation is the lowest, are also the countries where income inequalities and child poverty are among the highest' (see Sloam, 2016: 532).

Alternative perspectives have begun to document innovative modes of democratic engagement, exploring the emergence of political-minded consumption rather than institutional politics, revealing the internet to be an alternative medium for carrying out political activities beyond the scope of the classical institutions. This facilitates the use of 'new repertoires' both offline and online (Anduzia et al., 2009: 7). These 're-imagined repertoires' of content creation and sharing are made possible or at least made easier especially by new media' (Thorson, 2011: 7), but these are, as Sloam (2012: 10) stressed, 'dominated by well-educated and well-off individuals'. This adds at least three additional tasks to fulfil: to reconnect young people with electoral politics; to ensure young people have a voice in public policy; and to minimise the marginalisation of young people from less privileged backgrounds.

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