Research Report

Community Engagement of Youth: eParticipation Realities in Uganda and Norway

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Abstract

Accessing ICTs among youths especially in peripheral communities is gaining momentum as it is assumed to contribute to democratic and distributive justice, increased participation, and a general improvement in citizens' present and future welfare. The move to create local media spaces for youths in an era of increasing apathy (especially in the industrialized countries) and limited access (especially in the developing countries), represents one common vision—provide an intervention—by empowering local communities with communicative platforms and sources of information with which they can face mainstream discourses that overlook minority concerns on the one hand and revitalize the collapsing levels of interest in political and civic engagement on the other hand. This paper is based on two interventionist case studies, a grassroots initiative in rural Uganda and the other, a governmental initiative in a local municipality in Norway. The aim is to examine how these two initiatives have approached the common vision of access, utilization, participation and engagement of youths in their respective communities. By juxtaposing both visions of access to ICT promotion for civic engagement among youths, we unravel a common rhetoric and differences mainly reflective of the socio-economic and political context of the cases. We draw interesting lessons that each case presents to the other and implications to the notion of democratic participation.

Introduction

The future of societies depends on their success in providing pathways whereby young people develop and prepare themselves to be contributing adults to their communities. When these pathways are well marked, stable, supported by community, a society can be confident that new generations will join the ranks of adulthood well prepared. (Brown et al., 2002)

This article explores and compares approaches to providing access for community youth to information and communication technology (ICT) and to promoting civic engagement and participation by this target population in ICTs. By highlighting insights and experiences from two local communities—the municipalities of Nakaseke (Dralega, 2008) in southern Uganda and Tromsø in northern Norway (Due, 2009)—we will show that experiments with ICTs can have some surprising similarities despite widely differing cultural and socioeconomic contexts. These cases were studied in two recent projects on ICTs and local democracy.

Before outlining the cases, we should note that the insights drawn

from these two contexts were not generated by a systematically designed comparison of the two cases. Rather, the similarities and differences were inferred when studies and data were compared post hoc and showed results of interest to a wider audience.

Cases from Norway and Uganda

The comparison of ICT implementation in Tromsø and Nakaseke is of "most different cases" (Lijphart, 1971). We compare the two with a specific objective, namely, to find out whether the introduction of ICTs into communities in different settings met with comparable challenges and gained comparable experiences. If so, what were these challenges and experiences, and how can these insights inform theory formation, design, and implementation of ICT services for citizens?

There are good and justifiable reasons for comparing the two. First, many predictions on how dissemination of ICT will change society (Brown, 2000; Thioune, 2003; Castells, 1996) have been made with no specific geographic reference, and the visions adopted in country after country tend to ignore differences in economy, culture, and social life (Storsul & Syvertsen, 2006; Chiumbu, 2008). For instance, the idea of "the network society" (Castells, 1996) suggests the notion that ICTs can create an all-encompassing global society, based on "information" or "knowledge." Yet the phrase rhetorically ignores the multiplicities of societies with both different and similar perceptions of what information and knowledge are, and for whom, and why.

Second, the analyses of the Nakaseke and Tromsø cases showed results that prompted comparison. ICT implementation in both municipalities can be discussed as interventions that share common ambitions, namely to provide access to ICT and communicative spaces to citizens in general and to young people in particular. In Tromsø, the intervention can be termed an *e-government* initiative, consisting of a municipal Web site that, among other things, included portals for local government and local administration, as well as an open discussion forum aimed at improving government and citizens' e-participation. In Nakaseke, the Community Multimedia Centre (CMC) was established as a community institution that sought to provide citizens with access to a set of innovations (ICTs) where they did not exist before (Colle & Roman, 2002). The services provided by the CMC were many, including computer access, Internet access, a radio station, a library, and learning materials on CD-ROM.

The approaches to involving citizens were somewhat different in the two settings. In Tromsø, the ICT initiative was not targeted at specific groups, but to the population in general, including the youth community. At the same time, interviews with politicians and administrative employees revealed that all informants emphasized the importance of increasing youth participation. In Nakaseke, a number of citizen's groups were identified at the outset, among them the youth, and specific services were targeted at that group.

Methods and Data

Data collection and analyses of the empirical material were done by qualitative methods. The data from Nakaseke were mostly experiential and descriptive, spoken and written, and recorded by the researcher and an assistant in notes. This was done through structured interviews (Lindolf, 1995) with the CMC manager and the youth representative on the 10-member[1] Local Management Committee (LMC). Telephone and e-mail were used to follow up and complement the material (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Themes and issues of the discussions and interviews included aspects of participation, representation, and youth informational needs.

The empirical material from Tromsø consisted of semistructured group interviews with seven politicians and four administrative employees (Gentikow, 2005). The politicians participated regularly in public debates and were familiar with and regular users of ICTs, whereas the administrative staff participants had to be either the top administrative leader or staff members responsible for implementing ICTs as part of administration and governance of the municipality. They were asked about their expectations for the municipal Web site, their opinions of and experience with the municipal digital discussion forums, and their expectations for and efforts to engage

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1. This included a representative each for farmers, mothers union, youth, religious organizations, local government, traditional medicine practitioners, schools, Nakaseke hospital, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), and the business community.

youth. Semi-structured interviews with young people and other types of data were also included.

There were no major differences in the types of data collected for the two cases. The data are gathered from the implementers, or those responsible for making the ICT initiatives work. It is their hopes, visions, and experiences, as well as their disappointments that this article examines.

Theoretical Approaches

To frame the comparison of the two cases, we employ a theoretical approach that takes its inspiration from different strands of reasoning. First, we address theories and perspectives critical of the widespread belief that information and communication technologies will have positive and equal (or equalizing) effects in the societies where they are introduced. We are fully aware that this optimism has come under heavy criticism, yet we can refer to many references in political documents[2,3] to the positive effects of ICTs. Second, we look at approaches to youth and ICTs. Third, we take inspiration from the debate on electronic democracy and e-participation. Finally, we refer to findings from studies of telecenters and other ICTs in local communities, both in developing and in industrialized countries.

As most other countries, Uganda and Norway have drafted national policies for implementation of ICTs for social development. Such policies or ICT strategies are not only formulated by states, but also by regional and global bodies, such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), or the African Union (AU). Policy making in this field is also described as "relying on a complex web of private, non-state and international actors who have become increasingly influential in the formulation of global public policy" (Chiumbu, 2008, p. 6; see also Held & McGrew, 2002, p. 10). Without delving further into this web, we may regard the national ICT strategies and policies in Norway and Uganda as local variants of this global policy-formation process. The national policies can be found in documents, plans, policy formulations, and political decisions

that have been formulated and implemented over the last two decades (Dralega, 2008; Storsul & Syvertsen, 2007; Due 2009; Skogerbø, 1996). Common to these documents is an underlying technological optimism that believes ICTs will contribute to improving social, political, and economic conditions for citizens and economic enterprises. These beliefs have been widespread, both in theoretical contributions concerning the potential benefits of the information society and among political decision-makers and market actors on the global and national levels. On the other hand, there has also been widespread skepticism to this approach from researchers in the field. For instance, Vincent Mosco (2004) characterizes expectations and visions such as these as reproducers of myths that he argues surround digital technologies. These myths are understood as the expectations that digital technologies will lead to increased democracy by bringing power closer to the people. The paradox Mosco reveals is that, in contrast to democratization, these expectations might contribute to an overthrow of public authorities:

> With the help of information technology, capitalism is presumed to have the power to end all injustice and create a world where all are equally free to pursue life as entrepreneurs. With injustice gone, the state is made superfluous and will crumble under the weight of its own uselessness. (pp. 105–106)

Selwyn (2003, pp. 351–378) and Mosco (2004, pp. 79–84) note that the ideas, dreams, and visions about access to and use of digital communication technologies often include youth as a special group that will experience improved and enhanced democracy. They argue that this belief has become one of the dominant myths concerning the ICT distribution. The myth is bolstered by the, perhaps universal, perception of youth as being technologically "savvy" (Mihyo & Sesan, 2004, p. 132; Mwesige, 2004, p. 11). Indeed, according to UN World Youth Reports (2003, 2007), globally, youth are believed to often have an edge in the emerging information

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2. http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/fad/dok/rapporter_planer/planer/2005/eNorge-2009—det-digitale-spranget.html?id?476705 and http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dokumentarkiv/Regjeringen-Bondevik-II/Kommunal—ogregionaldepartementet/265050/266497/ikt_og_lokaldemokrati.html?id?267137 Retrieved Oct. 10, 2008, from http://www.ks.no/upload/77518/eMunicipality%202009.zip
3. ICT Sector Thematic Review (February 2009) Ministry of Information and Communication Technology. http://www.ict.go.ug/index.php?option?com_docman&task?cat_view&gid?51&Itemid?61 (Accessed Nov. 12, 2009).

society and are perceived as innovators in the use and spread of ICTs: "They adopt quickly and are generally quite hungry for the great potential of information, locally and globally that can be provided through emerging ICTs."[4]

Several studies have pointed to findings that suggest youth are often apolitical or generally uninterested in political matters (Keeter et al., 2003; Norris, 2001; Bell, 2005), and that the use of ICTs for political purposes may therefore serve to enhance interest from young people. These studies perceive new technologies as tools to fight apathy by including the discourses of youth in "mainstream" ICT initiatives. They highlight youth as "future leaders," with the potential to use the range of new technologies for the benefit of democratic inclusion of and participation by the younger generations (Bell, 2005; Brown et al., 2002). Considering that, globally, youths represent one-third (2 billion) of the world's population (The Fifth African Development Forum (ADF-V) 2006), the importance of recruiting them to use ICTs in democratic and participatory ways seems obvious. Fewer than one-quarter of youth live in the industrialized world (Gigli, 2004), whereas half of them (representing 60% of the world population) live in developing countries (ADF-V, 2006).

Nonetheless, there is no common view in the literature concerning the way in which youth use ICTs, except that they use and adopt new technologies in ways quite different than their parents (Livingstone et al., 2005). Some contributions indicate that young people's access to and use of ICTs will lead to positive consequences for democratic development (Bell, 2005; Mihyo & Sesan, 2004). Others, such as Woodard and Schmitt (2002) are more cautious in attributing technology as a tool for overcoming the political apathy and nonparticipation, especially among young voters, that have been recorded in many Western countries: "Technology is not a panacea for youth political apathy, but a tool that, with directed use, may help overcome it" (p. 96).

On the other hand, researchers such as Norris (2001), Nyamnjoh (2002), and Mwesige (2004) dwell on the problems of the digital divide and present a less optimistic picture concerning the global, social, and democratic aspects of locality, access, and usability. Class, gender, age, income, and other social factors strongly influence the possibility of

youth having access to ICTs, both in developing and industrialized countries. Naturally, the share of ICT-deprived youth will be larger in poor than in rich countries, but the mechanisms and reasons for deprivations would basically be the same.

Between pessimistic and optimistic perspectives on ICT and democracy, one finds studies on local practices and ongoing debates that challenge the notion that youth are disengaged. Bell (2005, p. 18) for instance, contends that youth are indeed participating in civic discourse, arguing that technology is not the only, nor necessarily the most important, means of engagement for youth. Gigli (2004) points out that youth are making use of new media for engagement and notes some of the obstacles to other forms of engagement, such as lack of political funding and will, cultural differences, and the need for more training for both youth and for those producing material for and about them.

Mihyo and Sesan (2004) cite examples from the African continent, where African youth take advantage of opportunities to participate in national, regional, and global civic discourses. According to Gigli (2002) and Bell (2005), the needs of youth must be met by community ICT initiatives. The provision of relevant information and communicative platforms with which rural youth could address their concerns, often overlooked by the mainstream, urban-based media, would probably give rise to discourses that would benefit the whole community (Mihyo & Sesan, 2004). From a Scandinavian context, Zackariasson (2006) gives examples of how youth are increasingly politically engaged, on- and offline, but outside traditional party channels.

In both Nakaseke and Tromsø, the expectations and prospects of increased democratization and participation were important motivations for setting up ICT services for those populations. Reaching out to youth was seen as critical in both localities, not only because they were regarded as future leaders, but also because the group was a stakeholder in the (local) public discourse.

This brings us to a third strand of theory relevant to our study, namely the democratic and participatory approach to communication. We find assumptions that innovations such as e-government and telecenters will have positive effects on democratic development, such as increased participation, a

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4. http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wpayinformation.htm (Last accessed Oct. 10, 2008).

more informed citizenry, and an improved public sphere. Participation, free access, deliberation, rational discourse, and a platform from which to question the legitimacy of political authorities have been at the forefront of most trials with ICTs, including those in Nakaseke and Tromsø. We find arguments resembling these ideas for both the telecenter and the municipal Web site.

Participation is regarded as an aspect of decentralization of democracy and democratization of communication (Jones & Lewis, 2006, p. 17; Huesca, 2003, p. 221). This has been the case in many industrialized countries where there was a tendency in the 1980s and 1990s to "decentralize" the mass media through setting up regional (media) initiatives and increasing the number of centers for program productions (Skogerbø, 1996; Jones & Lewis, 2006). However, experiments have shown that decentralization does not necessarily result in democratization (Moyo, 2006; Dralega, 2008), as democratic communication requires participation in both the media and in society.

Development communication theory focuses on participation as a contextual activity. Here, participation is seen as a process of empowerment and an end in itself, and not for its results (Ascroft & Masilela, 1989; Huesca, 2003; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Bessette, 2004). According to Melkote & Steeves (2001), participation is important because:

the need to think, express oneself, belong to a group, be recognized as a person, be appreciated and respected, and have some say in crucial decisions affecting one's life are as essential to development of an individual as eating, drinking, and sleeping. (p. 337)

With regard to the Nakaseke Community Multimedia Centre (CMC), recognition and empowerment of target groups, including youth, was a conscious decision. In the Tromsø context, the lack of target groups makes these concepts somewhat less relevant.

In addition to these perspectives, ICT implementation in local settings can be looked at from a governance and/or institutional viewpoint. Several countries, including Norway and Uganda, are currently implementing ICTs in local and central administration as a strategy to make governance more transparent, accountable, and effective. Accessing

ICTs at the local levels is therefore seen to strengthen local institutional capacities, service delivery, and local decision-making, be it within the framework of a local administrative institution, such as Tromsø, or local community center of Nakaseke.

It must be noted here that although the telecenter movement shares some of the same qualities above and despite them becoming increasingly popular institutions in many countries, particularly developing ones, there is a lack of theories. Roman argues that the telecenter should be regarded, on the one hand, as a novel institution in local communities, and on the other hand, as a cluster of innovative services that it provides (Roman, 2004; p. 57; see also Parkinson, 2005; Etta & Wamahiu, 2003). We would add that telecenters are indeed evolving institutions, as they are continuously reshaping and remodelling the services they provide and the technologies they use to accommodate the capacities and needs of the communities they serve (Dralega, 2008). The telecenter could also be studied from a diffusion-of-innovations perspective, but this angle is not deemed fruitful here.

ICT, Youth, and Politics of Civic Engagement in Nakaseke

In 1999, the launch of the Nakaseke telecenter was a national media event. The president, ministers, and stakeholders, including the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), the National Library Board, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and UNESCO, convened at Nakaseke. The establishment of the first CMC in Uganda was driven by two overall convictions. The first and most obvious was to provide the remote community with access to ICTs and communicative spaces that previously had been nonexistent in the area. The second was the assumption that its establishment would help revitalize participatory democracy and promote development.[5]

The Nakaseke CMC was to operate under an organizational structure that approached the community as a whole, but also directly addressed the informational and communicative needs of various segments/interest groups through a representative body known as the Local Management Committee (LMC). The LMC included representatives of various groups such as youth, farmers, women, local gov-

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5. Nakaseke brochures and Weblog can be accessed at nakasekecmc.blogspot.com

ernment, the Nakaseke hospital, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), the business community, and religious groups. In addition, the LMC had a chairperson, a vice chairperson, a publicity secretary, and a treasurer. Together with a board of directors, the LMC met monthly to discuss the operation, make policies, and supervise the CMC managers in the execution of their day-to-day operations. The committee members were also responsible for creating awareness of the CMC in the communities/ segments they represented and raising funds. Yet the representatives' primary roles were to provide relevant information about their constituencies that would inform the center managers about the needs and desires for ICTs.

The youth in Nakaseke made up a significant interest group for the CMC, because they represent a majority user-group—mainly attributed to the eight surrounding schools that heavily rely on the CMC for all their ICT services.

What then happened when expectations met reality? While youth engagement in both political and apolitical activities was an ongoing activity since its launch in 1999—especially from 2002, when the community radio was added to the other telecenter services—it was not until 2005, when the notion of political debate was put to the test, that political engagement was banned and apolitical activities increased.

The February 2005 Uganda presidential and parliamentary elections were dominated by two main factions. One was led by the incumbent, President Yoweri Museveni, who after ruling for two decades had manipulated the constitution to allow for a third term in office under the "no change" slogan. His main opponent was Dr. Kizza Besigye, whose call for change prompted multitudes of Nakaseke youth to participate in demonstrations. These two factions engaged in (among other rhetoric) derogatory communication on the community radio and took part in violent street clashes. The result was the alienation of a segment of the community (Besigye supporters) who then refused to use the services at the CMC, accusing the management of favoritism. This act of defiance brought with it grave conse-

quences, notably a shrinking number of customers, for the struggling, financially self-sustaining initiative.[6] Eventually, the local politicians and the CMC management were compelled to abolish any political activities at the CMC. According to an interview with the Nakaseke CMC manager, "We turned down any political activities at the Community Multimedia Centre, because it is a neutral service provider whose aim is to serve the whole community without favoring any party."[7]

This decision was not contested by the youths, perhaps because management had previously been receptive to several of their nonpolitical demands, activities, and communicative platforms. Their main demands, according to their LMC representative, and corroborated by the CMC manager, were for (a) information provision and information sharing through talk shows; (b) documentation on problems that afflict them, such as HIV/AIDS, drugs, and alcohol abuse; (c) money-making activities they could engage in to supplement their parents' incomes; (d) organization of sports galas that unite and consolidate their sense of community; and (e) cheaper ICT training.[8]

These demands resulted in an increase of youth-focus initiatives. One of them was the *Muvubuka Weyogerere (Youths, Speak Out),* a "radio-browse" program targeting young people in which the CMC staff browsed the Internet for information requested by the audience and aired it on the radio. This was probably the most effective ICT service in terms of reach and cost effectiveness for the audience of the Nakaseke CMC. The radio-browse program was aired in *Luganda* and disseminated to everybody, without the need for costly equipment. The community radio then became an interface between the Internet and the community as the broadcast interpreted information from selected Web sites. From 2005, for one hour every Thursday evening, Nakaseke FM aired the youth program *Muvubuka Weyogerere.* The Nakaseke CMC management, in collaboration with the Ugandan Red Cross, engaged in the collection, packaging, and dissemination of information about HIV/AIDS, health, and other issues arising from the requests of youth. This infor-

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6. After two years of financial support by founding institutions and donors, the CMC was to be self-sustaining. Most of its income derives from radio advertisements and ICT-related services, such as faxes, photocopies, secretarial services, computer training, equipment rental (for parties), and so on.
7. First interview with Nakaseke CMC manager, January 2005.
8. Follow-up interviews with Nakaseke CMC management, November 2007.

mation was collected from multiple sources, including the Internet, the Ministry of Health and local government, libraries, and researched information from the community. During the program, live phone calls to the producers were encouraged, who often had expert guests from relevant fields.

> *Muvubuka Weyogerere* was one of the responses to requests from the youths as a constituency. Through their representative to the Local Management Committee board, the youths had asked for more information and awareness building on health, HIV/AIDS, and sexuality matters as their biggest need, and we made it the main youth program. (Interview with the Nakaseke CMC manager, Nakaseke CMC, November 2007)

Muvubuka Weyogerere promoted participatory, grassroots communication that involved youth in interactive or two-way communication, allowed them to identify and voice their needs and problems (through their representative), helped them understand causes of their problems, encouraged them to propose solutions, and then facilitated or encouraged them to organize to take appropriate action. In addition, every Sunday, 30 minutes of air time were devoted to general youth discussions in *Luganda.* The issues discussed, according to the manager, included land ownership and documentation, alcohol and drug abuse, fundraising, and education issues.

Further, youth lacking disposable income were provided with subsidized ICT training. For instance, youths were charged UGX 20,000 (approximately US$10) compared to adults who were charged between UGX 30,000 (US$16) and UGX 50,000 (US$ 26) for five basic computer packages: Introduction to Windows, Word, Excel, Access, and PowerPoint. Youth who had dropped out of school were offered free training for the first package and free Internet browsing. A program of peer-to-peer ICT training was implemented in which youth who had been trained were also encouraged to teach others, as one of the problems impacting the young was a lack of ICT skills. This move toward active engagement and inclusion of young people signalled a departure from earlier top-down and prescriptive approaches that previously had dominated

Ugandan broadcasting (Melkote & Steeves, 2001, p. 339; Mwesigye, 2004).

Another demand of the youth resulted in the CMC management organizing social activities with the help of community volunteers. These included a football gala in November 2006 sponsored by several radio stations, including the Central Broadcasting Service (CBS). Such events were normally aired live on the community radio with community members phoning in.

The center also started a drama club in response to the need for income among "out of school" youth who had talent, but no financial support. The club staged shows to raise revenue through ticket sales for the actors and the CMC. In addition, the plays and dramas were featured on the community radio. Their plots revolved around pertinent issues affecting youth: AIDS, early pregnancies, early marriages, and drug abuse.

The findings from Nakaseke indicate that the visions of increased democratization and participation worked better as unrealized visions than as practical measures, as shown when the youth used their new means of communication for political protest, an unintended, unexpected, and obviously unwanted activity. The argument that the CMC as a service provider had to remain neutral, nevertheless, had several effects. First, the banning of politics, especially through the community radio and on the premises of the CMC, muted political opposition, but it also prompted concessions in terms of other information and communication benefits for the youth. Second, it raised the question of how institutions that are set up to benefit the community as a whole can deal with political disagreement, in particular, when the form it takes is disputed, too. Interestingly enough, some of the same issues were raised in Tromsø in a radically different context.

E-Government, Civic Engagement, and Youth in Tromsø

Tromsø, an urban municipality in the very north of Norway, from 2000 onward, implemented its official Web site and other ICT solutions in the context of the national strategies laid out in a number of documents[9] from shifting governments, the Norwe-

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9. http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/fad/dok/rapporter_planer/planer/2005/eNorge-2009—det-digitale-spranget.html?id?476705 and http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dokumentarkiv/Regjeringen-Bondevik-II/Kommunal—ogregionaldepartementet/265050/266497/ikt_og_lokaldemokrati.html?id?267137 Retrieved Oct. 10, 2008, from http://www.ks.no/upload/77518/eMunicipality%202009.zip

gian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), and several other political actors. In Tromsø, there was no establishment of a separate telecenter. Rather, the initiative can be described as a long-term process of digitization targeted at improving services and infrastructure in local government and local administration for citizens and for the elected representatives (local politicians). This process was undertaken by all Norwegian municipalities, but at a varying pace and with varying local solutions and priorities, depending on the local economy, size of the municipality, specific needs, and other local adaptations.

The Norwegian strategy documents for ICT implementation can be characterized by much of the same techno-optimism that Mosco (2004) criticized. There are several references to the vision of citizens' use of the Internet leading to increased participation and access, and to the hope that inclusion of the young in the information society will improve democracy and democratic dialogue.[10] For instance, in the e-Municipality 2009 (St.meld. nr 17 [2006–2007] p. 2), one finds a passage that reads, "give the citizens the possibility to participate in a democratic dialogue on Internet on important societal questions." Further, to avoid digital divides the "municipalities must provide access to Internet for all in public spaces [such] as libraries, the town hall, shopping centres" (St. meld. nr 17 [2006–2007], p. 22). This exemplifies how the objective to provide everybody, including youth, with access to ICT was to be carried out in practice.[11]

In Tromsø, the establishment of a Web site for the municipality that provided information and communication opportunities between citizens and the local government and local administration, was one of the most prestigious initiatives. On the national level, creating the best Web site was turned into a competition among more than 450 Norwegian municipalities—a competition that was won by Tromsø in 2003.[12]

The Tromsø municipality administration staff was aware that access and information about ICTs did not in itself provide increased political engagement and participation, as this politician explained:

> I wanted us to be connected to the Internet and to provide people with the possibility to communicate directly with the local government and local administration. The idea was to bring the local government closer to the citizens. . . . To be on the Internet is important in politics, as it enables participation and democracy, to reach out to the people deep and wide. (Interview with Tromsø local politician, Tromsø, December 2004)

From the foregoing quote, it can be deduced that local politicians seemed to adopt the techno-optimistic myth about how ICTs impact democracy. Another local politician emphasized even more strongly the importance of communicating and engaging with the citizens, referring to the municipal Web site's Speaker's Corner, the open discussion forum initially launched when the Web site was established:

> Since we are dependent on communicating with the citizens, we have to make rooms for them. A Web site is a good starting point and a 'Speaker's Corner' is just as important. If we don't find arenas for communication, the distance will just [keep] getting bigger and bigger—and then it is bye, bye to local democracy. (Interview with Tromsø local politician, Tromsø, December 2004)

All informants, both politicians and administrative staff, noted that communication involving engagement from both politicians and citizens was crucial for local democracy. This was also the reason why the open discussion forum was set up to begin with: it was considered important to "make room" for dialogue and communication. The dreams of a deliberative democracy did not survive the meeting with reality, as this informant summed up:

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10. "The Programme for Digital Competence alone will not solve all the challenges facing the use of ICT in Norwegian education. The Programme is collaborating with other parts of the educational policy and other policy areas. The Knowledge Promotion with its new curricula, White Paper no. 17: An Information Society for All and e-Norge 2009, are all important political documents the Programme must be seen in conjunction with." http://www.regjeringen.no/en/ dep/kd/Selected-topics/compulsory-education/strategic-plans/programme-for-digital-competence-.html?id?279659 [Last accessed Oct. 10, 2008].

11. There was no lack of youth participatory initiatives in Tromsø. For example, the Youth Council and a culture house named Tvibit were established for youth. However, these sites are not an integrated part of the municipal Web sites; the municipality only provides links to them.

12. http://www.tromso.kommune.no/index.gan?id?5099&subid?0 (Last accessed Sept. 29, 2008).

The Mayor was the initiator of the 'Speaker's Corner.' Initially, there [was] some activity in the forum, but the politicians did not reply to it. We closed it down, it became just rubbish. Then we straightened it up and made a 'Citizen's Forum,' with an introduction, so municipal issues could be discussed and not regurgitate[d]. In spite of these efforts, however, the forum showed few signs of dialogue between citizens and politicians. (Interview with Tromsø administrative staff member, Tromsø, December 2004)

Another informant expressed the disillusion over the breakdown more strongly:

Discussion forum? The head of the information department could not erase all the hopeless things youths wrote. We wanted a site for expression of opinions, but it became a toilet-wall. We wanted a Web site where the communication went both way[s]. (Interview with Tromsø administrative staff member, Tromsø, December 2004)

In other words, when citizens, among them the youth, were invited to talk back and did so, they did not behave as expected. Neither did the local politicians, as noted in one of the foregoing quotes. Instead of engaging in a discussion with concerned citizens, they avoided replying to questions on the discussion forum and would not take a clear stand on issues that had not yet been decided in the political decision-making bodies. These two aspects— that citizens who chose to use the forum did not live up to the requirements for taking part in a "civil(ized)" debate, and that local politicians would not commit to an open dialogue—"killed" the interactive forum. One of the local politicians described the defeat: "We tried to establish a 'Speaker's Corner' where citizens could chat on-line, but now the municipal Web site is the administration's site" (Interview with Tromsø local politician, Tromsø, December 2004).

The experience was also clearly believed to be a failure by the administrative staff, despite the viewpoint expressed by the local politician that the Web site became "the administration's site," thereby signaling a potential conflict between political and administrative points of view. These viewpoints show differences of opinion as to what kind of activity these sites where to provide—discussions on municipal issues, opinions, or chats? They also clearly bring to the fore the conflicting values and roles that plagued the municipal Web site. On the one hand, the municipality aimed to provide an open forum; on the other, the Web site became an official information channel for the municipality, and as such, provided the official views of the local government:

We do not want to take positions that are embarrassing for the municipality, as far as it is possible to make a neutral picture. . . . We wish to work pro-active[ly] and publish cases before they get 'ruined' by the media. (Interview with Tromsø administrative staff member, Tromsø, December 2004)

Here, the emphasis is on the role of the municipality as an agent of information, and interestingly enough, on its ambition to be an agenda setter for the local news. The discussion forum was not replaced; instead, the citizens could use the online service center to contact the municipality. However, by moving citizens from the discussion forum to the service center, the emphasis shifted from the potential communication between voters and their representatives, or between citizens and governors. Instead, citizens were viewed as clients or consumers of public services provided by the local administration. The service center was designed for improving the service provision from the local administration to the inhabitants of the municipality, and not for communication between citizens and politicians. This point was picked up by one of the local politicians, too: "Maybe the service center is too efficient and removes important communication with the citizens" (Interview with Tromsø local politician, Tromsø, December 2004).

The experiences from Tromsø were not unusual. Debate forums on municipal Web sites have not worked in Norway as such (Skogerbø & Winsvold, 2008; Winsvold, 2007). Other countries have had similar experiences, and there are probably a number of explanations for the lack of success of such general Internet forums. Access to digital technology in itself does not guarantee usage. There need to be issues, themes, maybe even needs that attract citizens. The communicative space on the municipal Web site in Tromsø was eventually closed down, but the service center continued to provide one-to-one online contact with the administration.

The discussion forum's failure, attributed by some to youth abusing the opportunities, did not seem to alter the approach toward this group. When the

implementers of the ICT services and Web site in Tromsø were asked which specific strategies and initiatives were explored to engage youth through the Web site, it became evident that there were few conscious approaches targeted at this group, despite the belief by all informants that it was important to engage youth. In a group interview with administrative employees, the following exchange took place:

The problem with Web sites is that they need to be built with a specific structure. We need to have a general design. But we have allowed links to specific Web sites for youth culture, such as Tvibit[13] and kulta.no[14] to enter our sites on the youths' premises as we provide them with link[s]. (Interview with Tromsø administrative staff member, Tromsø, December 2004)

Another informant added "but at the same time, we cannot have 'concert coming up' on our Web site, we just can't" (Interview with Tromsø administrative staff member, Tromsø, December 2004).

The first respondent replied that "We recognize that we need more resources in order to reach everybody" (Interview with Tromsø administrative staff member, Tromsø, December 2004).

When asked if there was a participatory approach toward youth in place when the municipal Web site was developed, the first respondent answered as follows:

I think we could have done a better job, we could have been more conscious. There is much talk about how the public sphere is changing. Will it be that we only think about services, maybe the youths really want to participate politically? But, how do we find out? (Interview with Tromsø administrative staff member, Tromsø, December 2004)

Despite the concern for youth (and unlike the Nakaseke strategy), there appear to have been few attempts in Tromsø to design ICT services aimed directly at the young, nor much awareness about how and when to consult the young in order to create such services. Interviews with local politicians indicated that they had different perspectives on young peoples' engagement. For instance, one politician expressed eagerness to work with schools to practice political participation and debating. "We

have to get politics into the school agenda—debates and communicative role-games—[as] it is all about including youth more into societal agendas." (Interview with Tromsø local politician, Tromsø, December 2004).

Another accepted that youth were not engaged in traditional politics, but rather in other types of organizations. "Although their participation in traditional party politics is dwindling, young people demonstrate, take part in direct action groups, talk to media, discuss politics in their homes and also engage in eDebates" (Interview with Tromsø local politician, Tromsø, December 2004).

Nevertheless, all informants seemed to believe that it was important to engage youth politically. They all found youth engagement important for democracy, but they also agreed that the efforts to reach young people had failed in practice. The informants emphasized the necessity of involvement with youth in schools and by politicians to practice political participation.

Concluding Discussion

We began with the research question that asked whether the introduction of ICTs into local communities in different settings met with comparable challenges and gained comparable experiences. If so, what were these challenges and experiences, and how can these insights inform theory formation, design, and implementation of ICTs for citizens? What conclusions then can be drawn from our research and what theoretical inferences made?

The findings from the two cases show, as expected, that the strategies for implementation of ICTs in both communities were inspired and informed by the global techno-optimism criticized by Mosco (2004) and others. In both countries, there were political strategies that emphasised the need to implement ICTs as a means to improve both governance and living conditions for the citizens. The main difference between the two cases on this point seems to have been the conscious targeting of specific groups (youth, women, farmers) in Nakaseke, and correspondingly, the lack of target groups in Tromsø. These differences may partly be explained by the widely different socioeconomic conditions that characterize the two localities.

13. A film and culture house for youth.
14. A platform for performing artists and a learning ground for young artists.

In Tromsø, the local government could rely on an already-existing communication infrastructure: broadcasting, newspapers, telephones, and mobile phones were close to ubiquitous household ICT resources, and a large portion of the inhabitants had PCs and Internet access from home, school, libraries, or the workplace. The political system was stable and all citizens had equal and formal political rights to participate and express themselves. Citizens were identified as voters with needs and wants for political information about local democracy and as users of public services provided by the local administration, without further specification. The services introduced were mainly online and Web-based information services, for example, the official Web site for the Tromsø municipality.

In Nakaseke, few of the infrastructural conditions were present and the political system was less stable and not fully democratic. Citizens had to physically come to the CMC to gain access to the shared resources, and they were, to varying degrees, aware of the center and its resources (Dralega, 2008, pp. 141–142). As a means of facilitating identification of needs and wants, target citizens groups were identified from the start and included in the Local Management Committee. The services provided for groups in Nakaseke were, among others, access to radio production facilities, the Internet, and CD-ROMs. In addition, alternative information about AIDS, sexuality, farming, and such was available through various channels that included in-house–produced radio programs, the Internet, NGO sources, and World Space Radio to which the CMC subscribed (Dralega, 2008, p. 90).

The two approaches to introducing ICTs naturally reflect the large differences between the communities, but they also clearly show the shortcomings of the general predictions about ICTs and social change. Foremost is that these predictions are far too sweeping and do not allow for local adaptations, as many have commented on before (Mosco, 2004; Skogerbø & Syvertsen, 2004; Chiumbu, 2008; Hafez, 2007). Second, they confuse the fact that ICTs in many developing countries simply mean access to broadcasting and information. Third, they totally overlook the large differences in the diffusion of different ICTs. For instance, the diffusion of mobile telephone connections shows much more rapid growth in developing countries than any other ICT-related resource (United Nations, 2007;

Skogerbø & Syvertsen, 2008, pp. 129–131). Interestingly, neither the Nakaseke CMC nor the Tromsø municipality studies seem to reflect the fact that mobile phones may be one of the most accessible means of communication for youth in both communities. Not unexpectedly, the findings from Nakaseke and Tromsø, to some degree, undermine visions and assumptions about ICTs and political participation. As this article notes, most ICT strategies and policies, in Europe and Africa alike, predict improved opportunities for political participation. However, in these two settings (distant from one another socio-economically and geographically), when the youth used new channels to communicate, or to protest or simply to abuse the political system, the channels were closed down, access restricted, and some types of messages banned altogether. This happened in Nakaseke after the CMC was used as a platform for political protest during the presidential election, and it also occurred in Tromsø when the Speakers' Corner was closed down due to abusive postings. In both cases, the need to keep the public spaces—the Nakaseke CMC and the Tromsø Web site—neutral and non-offensive was given as the main reason for the restrictive measures. Why did we get these seemingly similar reactions in two very different settings, and what implications do they have for our theoretical approach?

The concrete reasons for the measures were somewhat different. In Nakaseke, the CMC management called for neutrality because the partisan broadcasts had direct economic consequences for the CMC, as it was an open market enterprise that earned its revenue from the local user. Since siding with one party in the election campaign immediately led to the loss of trust and confidence from important customer groups, few other options may have remained than to declare the CMC neutral ground. Whether the political protests also could have led to reactions from national political authorities is not explored here. As compensation, youth were offered a number of alternative activities and services aimed at improving their quality of life.

For the Tromsø municipality, there were no economic consequences that resulted from the discussion forum being turned into a "toilet-wall," but that unintended consequence clearly was believed to be detrimental to the local government's reputation, thereby causing a loss of credibility. These costs were obviously judged as too high. Unlike Nakaseke,

no specific compensation was provided for those who lost this communication channel, other than the Web site still linked to a number of activities for young people.

These cases lead us to one obvious question: Did the claim for neutrality and non-offensive content rise as an unavoidable consequence of the institutional set-ups of the two interventions? The common denominator was the semipublic (Nakaseke) or public (Tromsø) character of the institutions. In Tromsø, the e-government intervention was instituted by the local government. Local governments have clear obligations to the entire citizenry and should strive for equal and fair treatment of their citizens. At the same time, they are authorities with a claim and a need for legitimacy and accountability. Both these features—fairness and accountability— were threatened by the abusive use of the forum. Citizens and employees may have been harassed, and the authority of the local government questioned.

In Nakaseke, the role of the CMC as a semipublic, trustworthy, and nonpartisan institution came under pressure when it was used as a platform for partisan political protest and political unrest. As in Tromsø, the utterances and actions of the youth apparently threatened the legitimacy and accountability of the telecenter as an institution for the community as whole, thereby threatening the institution itself. Rajalekshmi (2008) argues that trust from the local community seems to be important for the success and efficiency of telecenters in India; the same seemed to be the case in Nakaseke. We may argue that even the e-government initiative in Tromsø was dependent on citizens trusting the services provided.

Both the CMC and the municipal Web site were directed at serving the entire local audience, and this orientation seems to be the main explanation for the reactions in both cases. In Nakaseke, the loss of market segments and in Tromsø, the loss of trust led to the declarations of independence and neutrality, a step that can be regarded as an effort to regain lost assets. Drawing theoretical inferences from these experiences, we may speculate that, if not neutrality, then accountability, legitimacy, and trust from the majority of the population would have to be necessary characteristics of any ICT intervention that is set up with the support of and for the benefit of the general public. Is it possible to think of public ICT interventions that would serve partisan, minority needs? The experiences from Nakaseke and Tromsø would suggest not.

Perhaps the most interesting lesson is the one gained from Nakaseke, namely, that it is possible for a CMC with limited resources to succeed in providing access for and entail engagement from local community youth. Interestingly enough, the Nakaseke CMC seems to have handled the crisis of confidence described previously more successfully than did the Tromsø municipality, in the sense that the CMC responded directly to the wants and needs of their targeted groups, a strategy not adopted in Tromsø. The explanation may be that as a development communications project, the Nakaseke project was designed to encourage participatory communication in the community. The Nakaseke CMC was set up as a response to a clearly defined need for development information and communicative platforms in the locality, and the telecenter provided them for youth and other groups. A winning formula for Nakaseke was the Local Management Committee, which provided a feedback channel that was nonexistent in Tromsø. For its part, the Tromsø intervention was not designed primarily to meet local needs, but could instead be described as the local government's response to the call for ICT implementation from the central government. ∎

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