

# Using SMS Texting to Encourage Democratic Participation by Youth Citizens: a Case Study of a Project in an English Local Authority

David Griffin, Philippa Trevorrow and Edward Halpin

Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

[d.griffin@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:d.griffin@leedsmet.ac.uk)

[p.trevorrow@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:p.trevorrow@leedsmet.ac.uk)

[e.halpin@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:e.halpin@leedsmet.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** Public administrations across Europe take the view that using digital media for consultation with citizens will help to increase their democratic participation. In the UK, the Government has encouraged local authorities to experiment with new electronic communication channels for this purpose. This paper presents a case study in which one such medium, the mobile phone, is being used in an attempt to raise participation amongst young people. It evaluates a project set up to use SMS text messaging as a means of electronic consultation with young people by a council in the North of England. Specifically, it examines the effect of text messaging on democratic participation by the young and the effect of this type of consultation on the processes of the political administration. This case study identifies a number of organizational, social and cultural issues that may limit the scope for using this technology to increase youth participation and change the relationship between young people and their local elected representatives. Based on the initial evidence from this case study, we take the cyber-sceptic stance. We suggest that the mobile phone is not the 'silver bullet' for invigorating consultation with young people by the local public administration. We identify a series of potential barriers to increasing participation by youth and changing the relationship between the elected politicians and their constituents.

**Keywords:** e-Democracy, e-Consultation, local government, young people, mobile telephony, case study

## 1. Introduction

The 2001 General Election in the UK highlighted the stark decline in democratic engagement over a fifty-year period. Voter turnout at the election was 65% compared with 78% in 1950. Young people, in particular, appeared to be disengaging from civic involvement. MORI (2005) reports that only 37% of the 18-24 age group voted in 2001, down from 68% in the previous general election in 1997 (Couglin 2003). It has been suggested that less than a quarter of those eligible to vote for the first time actually did so (Russell 2005). Following the 2001 election, some parliamentarians felt that new digital media should be employed to halt this decline in democratic participation by young people, as illustrated by this exchange in the House of Commons in 2002 (House of Commons Debate 12 February 2002 quoted in Parry 2004):

*“David Taylor MP: Does the Minister agree that the wholesale abstention by younger voters in June 2001 was at least partly rooted in their sense of detachment from an institution widely seen as mired in an era of quill pens and hansom cabs? Does he believe that there is potential for e-democracy to reconnect this place with the electorate, by promoting and improving the consultation with them on matters that we debate?”*

*Minister Twigg: I very much agree with my hon. Friend.... Clearly, we face a serious*

*challenge in reconnecting young people with politics. As my hon. Friend may be aware, there is now a Cabinet committee on e-democracy. It will address many of the issues that have been raised.”*

The UK government has encouraged local authorities to experiment with new channels of democratic engagement in order to address the fall in participation (Cliff 2004). Electronic voting was trialled in the 2003 local elections; it was not immediately successful (Mathieson 2005). The turn-out did not rise significantly and issues about security and privacy were evident. Council websites are beginning to offer facilities for electronic feedback of residents' views on service delivery and policy formulation. However, access to such facilities is not universal. 35% of UK households do not currently have Internet connectivity in their home and only 10.5% of UK Internet users have broadband access (OECD Statistics 2004). Furthermore, having access to a computer at home does not imply that all, or any, members of the family know how to use it to participate in the information society. The mobile phone has a wider coverage than the Internet. 76% of adults (over the age of 15) in the UK own a mobile phone (Vodafone MORI 2003) and this rises to 97% of females and 92% of males in the 11-21 age group (Haste 2005a). The average age at which a UK child receives their first mobile phone is currently eight (Dhaliwal 2005). It is a tool that is extensively used by young people,

especially for exchanging text messages. The mobile phone has become a “prosthesis of the body, an extension of one-self” (Haste 2005b p.56). It is wherever its’ owner is and is thus an almost immediate means of communication.

Can young people use the mobile phone as a communication channel to increase the democratic engagement? In this paper, we evaluate a project set up to use SMS text messaging as a means of electronic consultation with young people by a council in the north of England. We specifically examine whether it has increased the scope of participation by young people and whether it has changed the democratic process. Based on the initial evidence from this case study, we take the cyber-sceptic stance. We suggest that the mobile phone is not the ‘silver bullet’ for consultation with young people by the local public administration. This case study identifies a number of organizational, social and cultural issues that may limit the scope for using this technology to increase youth participation and change the relationship between young people and their local elected representatives. The paper is organised as follows. First we define the key terms used in the paper before reviewing the literature about e-consultation, concentrating on the scope of participation and the impact on the democratic process. We then outline the research methods used to gather the empirical evidence for this research. Finally, we analyse our findings to identify the issues involved with using this medium of consultation with young people and conclude that there are several factors to be addressed to ensure its successful employment as a means of raising democratic participation.

## 2. Key terms

The following three terms are important in what follows:

1. The period of ‘youth’ is characterised by its semi-independent state. The person is independent in that they can make their own decisions to a certain extent, but they are also dependent on other people for guidance, care and support (Coles 1995). The precise chronological age at which youth begins and ends varies considerably; for the purpose of this paper we will refer to the range 11-24 when discussing youth.
2. Secondly we define electronic consultation (sometimes referred to as electronic participation) as the use of digital technology, such as the Internet and the mobile phone, to facilitate the engagement of citizens in community policymaking and service delivery monitoring (Danodaran 2005).

3. Thirdly, the concept of the digital divide is concerned with an existing, and possibly widening, gap between “information haves and have-nots, knowers and know-nots, doers and do-nots” (Tapscott 1998 p.11; Bucy 2000 p.50; Cullen 2001). It is the rift between those who have access, knowledge and skills to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) and those who lack access, skills and so on. Instead of closing any disparities in knowledge, or access to information, it is believed that the Internet will actually add to the exclusion of disadvantaged groups.

## 3. Electronic consultation

Many local administrations across Europe take the view that e-consultation should form part of the democratic process (Coleman 2004). A recent survey for the European Union (Deloitte 2004), covering 101 cities which the authors claim to be ‘representative of the whole [EU] population’, found that over 90% of the authorities felt that e-consultation with citizens was a good idea and believed that the use of digital technology in this way would encourage and increase participation in democracy. There are several different viewpoints regarding the contribution of digital technology to democracy (Norris 2005). Cyber-optimists suggest that technology will widen the scope of participation and improve the quality of the democratic process. Examples of this viewpoint can be found on some UK government websites (e.g. [www.e-democracy.gov.uk](http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk)). In addition, e-consultation provides a channel that might particularly attract young people to engage in democracy more fully (Ward et al 2005). Cyber-pessimists argue that digital technology will have a detrimental effect on the democratic process. It will increase the divide between the information rich and poor. The technology itself might make the discourse shallower. It might also raise expectations among those citizens who make use of the technology. They might perceive that they are communicating directly with elected representatives and expect action to be taken more quickly than currently happens (Ward et al 2003). Cyber-sceptics argue that there will be little change in participation, with the social divide being mirrored by the digital divide. Providing new channels of engagement will have little effect on democratic renewal. Cyberspace will become ‘normalised’ to be the place where normal political activity is undertaken (Margolis and Resnick 2000).

If digital technology is to have an impact on the democratic process, citizens and politicians will need to change their behaviours (Coleman 2004). Citizens must perceive that online consultation is

a worthwhile means of connecting with public administration. Politicians must not just see e-consultation as a way of appearing to be part of the techno-modernity, but integrate this into their democratic processes. Some studies have suggested “parties have been relatively slow to develop the use of technologies for participatory purposes” (Lusoli and Ward 2004 p.456). Coleman (2004) suggests that the ultimate measure of the success of e-consultation will be the degree to which it leads to better policy and practice. However, in the ‘top-down’ model of politics, those in power control this communication between the elector and the elected. Dahlberg (2001) argues that these information flows need to take place in an environment which is autonomous of the public administration. Blimer and Gurevitch (2001) echo this concern as they warn about the powerful commercial interests trying to bend the Internet to their own end. Similar concerns could be raised about the mobile telephony channel of communication.

#### 4. Research methodology

In this study, we examine two aspects of e-consultation, the scope of participation and the impact on the democratic process. Accordingly, the two objectives of the study are:

- Objective 1: To examine the scope of participation in the SMS text messaging project by participants;
- Objective 2: To examine the project’s impact on the democratic processes of the council.

The research method was to undertake a case study in an English metropolitan borough council. The Youth Services’ Department in this council had initiated a ‘Youth Participation Project’, and installed a SMS text messaging system, to be used in a one-year trial. This investigation started eight months into the project and was concluded at the end of the one-year period.

The case study method is appropriate for dealing with contemporary situations, such as tackling youth participation, in which the intervention being applied is difficult to distinguish from the context (Yin, 2003). In this study, we take the stance that technology is socially situated, is bounded not just by the artefact itself, but by many contextual elements including the culture of the organization, the skills of the staff and so on. There is not a simple causal relationship between the technology being employed and the organization applying it. Organizational characteristics have to help shape the technology (Fleck and Howells, 2001). The case study method uses a variety of sources of

data to investigate a situation (Keddie, 2006). These sources may include: documentation, interviews, physical artefacts, archive material and observation (Yin, 2003). While this study of the Youth Participation Project uses all five of these data sources, interviews provided the main data source.

Semi-structured interviews were held with staff in the council responsible for the service being investigated. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded for subsequent transcription. The interview topics are listed in Appendix A. The interviewees comprised of the project leader, the Head of Youth Services for Students and Communities, the Youth Service Manager and the Deputy Chief Executive. In addition, an interview was held with the Member of the Youth Parliament (MYP) representing the young people in this local education area. Hand-written notes were produced from this interview, rather than recording the discussion, in order to put the young person at ease. At the time of our investigation 100 young people were registered as participants in the Youth Participation Project. This total population was surveyed via text messages, using the council’s SMS texting system, to elicit their views about the project. The survey questions are listed in Appendix B. The research instrument presented some challenges to the researchers. Firstly, the system will only allow a message of 160 characters. Consequently it was decided to send one question at a time and to restrict the survey to 4 questions. Secondly, the conventions and practices of young people using text messaging require a less formal language set. Every effort was made to convert the questions to reasonable ‘text-speak.’

In addition, the following source material was also utilised:

- The results of a survey conducted by the MYP of 100 young people shopping in the town centre;
- The electronic consultation processes documented on the council’s website;
- The SMS text messaging system supplier’s website;
- A demonstration of the computer system by the supplier

The case study method is sometimes criticized for providing subjective results (Yin, 2003). In this study, we have followed Yin’s suggestions for assuring the validity and reliability of the study and have used the tactics described in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Issues of validity and reliability of the study (adapted from Yin, 2003)

Test	Definition	Tactics employed
Construct validity	Establishing appropriate measures for issues being studied	Several sources of data were used to provide data triangulation at appropriate points; attention has been given in this article to making the steps in the development of our argument as transparent as possible; the draft article was submitted to the Head of Youth Services for approval. At the conclusion of the one-year trial, the findings of this study were presented to the chief executive of the council.
External validity	Establishing how to generalize from the case study findings	We studied a single local authority. No attempt was made to suggest that these findings were representative of authorities elsewhere. Serendipity played a part in the choice of the case study. We became aware of this experiment and took the opportunity to study the workings of the Youth Participation Project.  External validity may be achieved through four types of generalization: theory, implications, concepts and rich insight (Walsham, 1995). Here the external validity was achieved through the first two of these types of generalization. This case study identifies implications that might be relevant for practitioners elsewhere who are considering taking similar action to that of the case study authority. To a lesser extent, it also explores theories relating to the application of technological innovation for the purposes of youth participation.

## 5. The case study - The youth participation project

### 5.1 Background information

The case study borough in the north of England had 193,200 residents in mid-2003 (National Statistics 2003). It is a multi-cultural area with 5.7% of the residents being of Asian descent. It has problems of social deprivation; the area was ranked 86 out of 354 in the 2004 Indices of Deprivation (1 being the most deprived area).

### 5.2 Project success factors

The Youth Participation Project was established in October 2004 to help deliver a public service agreement (PSA) target for the local authority, which was concerned with improving community cohesion. One strand of this was to improve youth participation in the democratic process by using SMS text messaging, the channel of communication that young people were employing themselves. A project leader was appointed for one year and a computer system was purchased for sending text messages to, and receiving responses from, young people registered with the project. To encourage participation, a financial incentive was offered; registered participants would receive a £10 voucher for every 50-consultation queries to which they personally replied. According to the Deputy Chief Executive, this project was primarily about improving engagement, particularly by those young people who would not engage in other ways. She

suggested that, in the first instance, consultation would mainly relate to new developments and services for children and young people.

The interviewees identified the following indications of success for the project:

- Consistently high response rate to questions from participants in the project;
- Raising issues with the participants that are meaningful to the current local authority agenda and having an impact on the local youth parliament;
- Evidence that the consultation life cycle has been completed. In particular, that the consultation has contributed to the action taken by the council and its partners in a timely manner;
- Young people in the borough report that they have confidence in the service provided locally and feel that they have an influence on decision making;
- A considerable growth in the number of participants being consulted by SMS text messaging.

### 5.3 Analysis of participants' survey results

The four SMS text messages were sent to the 100 young people registered with the project. The response rates were 9% for question 1, 8% for question 2, 7% for question 3 and 12% for question 4. This low response is not specific to our survey alone as similar response rates were

obtained for questions asked by the Youth Services Team. Although the sample does not provide enough data to be able to derive significant information to the questions posed, it does raise questions in itself. The fact that 100 young people have willingly signed up to the service, with the ability to withdraw their phone number at any point, and yet the highest return was 12% to an individual question, shows that the tool is not yet being used as envisaged when the project was established. The registered participants are not engaging even though it is the means of communication that they prefer and have signed up to use. Interestingly, the question, which achieved the best response rate, was the one that asked how the e-consultation service might be improved. The responding participants felt that two measures were equally important: consulting over issues that matter and receiving the £10 voucher more quickly.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Using SMS text messaging to strengthen democratic participation by the young)

This can be considered at two levels. At the micro level, once the participant is registered, is action being taken to encourage future commitment and involvement? At the macro level, what action is being taken to encourage young people who are not already active citizens to join the participation project? At the micro level, the council has taken steps to ensure the quality of issues raised and to reduce the possibility of consultation fatigue among participants in paper- and Internet-based surveys. All requests for consultation with young people must be submitted to a steering group. This group ensures that different departments are not repeating the same questions and it acts as a quality control gateway. However, this procedure is not being adhered to for SMS texting consultation.

The council does not feed back to participants or other residents, a summary of the action taken as a result of a specific consultation. The Deputy Chief Executive recognized that improved feedback to participants was needed, as this would encourage future participation. The council is considering the best ways of providing feedback on the action arising from consultation campaigns. As there will often be a proportion of consulted people who will not be pleased with the decisions taken, this feedback needs careful management. It is likely that it will sometimes be communicated using a different medium to that used during the consultation. For example, the decisions arising from a texting consultation might be released on

the council's website. The Head of Youth Services and the Member of the Youth Parliament warned against 'tokenism'. They felt that young people should not be consulted because it might look good to external partners, but should inform the action taken as a result of airing their views. A recent study of environmental education projects in Finland, Switzerland and France, showed that the decision makers showed no lasting commitment to young people's ideas or views. Authorities were more likely to pay lip service to youth participation than to treat it seriously (Horelli, 2001). Finally, the discussions with council staff make it clear that there was a lack of commitment to the project by politicians and officers of the council. It had mainly been left to the project manager to develop consultation material. It could be argued that this system is an example of a technology possessing political qualities (Winner, 1999). This project has been situated in a location remote from the main council offices. The way that power and control have been exercised has directly affected the behaviour of the system and its potential to reach and engage young people in meaningful dialogue. It is inaccessible via the main telephone switchboard. A project manager on a temporary contract staffs it.

At the macro level, there is a lack of awareness of the Participation Project by the borough's young people. In a survey of 100 young people in the town centre carried out on Wednesday 10 August 2005 by the MYP, only 7% had heard of the SMS text-messaging project. If the project is to affect an increase in participation, it needs wider publicity among the target group. It is not simply a lack of finance that has caused this. One definition of technology, which emphasizes the human and organizational characteristics of a successful operational system, is the technology complex (Fleck and Howells, 2001). According to this model, the culture of the department and the skills of the project staff are significant elements of the technology that rank alongside the software and hardware components. This system is operated by the Youth Services Department. The culture is one of promoting learning and development of young people. Had the system been placed in a department with a more commercial culture, external funding might have been sought to pay for publicity. The project manager had been involved in youth work, in various capacities, for a number of years, and admitted having difficulties with the artefact component of the system. In summary, by viewing the technology as more than just the hardware and software has given insight into the political and organizational dimensions of the system. The decisions taken about its placement and operation have limited its ability to

strengthen participation amongst those who have registered. The specific resources applied (coupled with disinterest on behalf of young people in the town?) have affected the uptake by the town's youth.

## **6.2 The effect of SMS text messaging consultation on the processes of political administration**

The interviewees in this study identified a number of consultation process improvements arising from conducting them electronically. Firstly, using digital technology made the process quicker. Previous paper-based consultations with young people in the borough had taken 3 to 6 months to complete. Electronic consultation via SMS text messaging, whilst not instantaneous, was far quicker. Secondly, there was a perception that e-consultation provided a more objective process. Traditional focus group responses could be affected by the group dynamic or by the sample invited to participate. However, had the SMS text messaging consultation affected the back-end democratic processes? The interviewees identified several barriers impeding the project's success in this respect:

### **Resources**

The resources available to the youth services-based project, funded initially for one year, have been described earlier. Our contention, applying the technology complex, is that the staff skills and organizational characteristics such as culture are all part of the technology being applied in the council. The issues identified in 6.3.3 and 6.3.4 below are, to some extent, outcomes from the particular technology complex implemented in this specific council. The MYP's survey, whilst methodologically limited, does suggest that further publicity is required to raise awareness of the participation project among young people. As the MYP noted, the larger the sample of participants, the more likely it is that their views will be taken into account.

### **The widening agenda**

The recent introduction of the Children's and Young People's Agenda by the government had caused a restructure within the Council. This started to take effect in the early stages of the project. The Deputy Chief Executive had been appointed as the Director designate of the new service. Within the functional departments, such as Education and Social Services, change management processes were underway. As a result, this participation project was now just a small, single strand within a much wider strategy.

### **Political inertia**

According to the Head of Youth Services, there was agreement within the council that young people's views are important. The process for development of consultation exercises has been established for paper-based surveys, if not for electronic consultation. However, having been consulted, it is possible that young people's opinions might challenge the views of the council executive team (Wallace, 2001). The interviewees felt that some elected members still considered that 'children should be seen and not heard.' The MYP had been made a member of a scrutiny and overview committee, but he felt on occasions that his inclusion was more a token gesture rather than a genuine attempt to gain input from young people in democratic decision-making.

### **Lack of consultation topics**

A major limitation of this project to date has been the lack of actual consultation with the participants. The project manager has attempted to raise participants' interest by using the system to disseminate information about youth club activities and so on. There have been few issues consulted on and the majority of these have originated from the project manager. It was reported that participants welcomed the financial incentive, but felt that at the slow rate that texts were being sent out, they would have cancelled their membership before having received a voucher.

## **6.3 Concluding remarks**

To date it would appear that the case study council has had limited success in either raising participation by the borough's young people or changing the democratic process. However, this study raises several important issues regarding electronic consultation:

- The mobile phone as a technology is ubiquitous amongst young citizens (Haste, 2005a). Furthermore, it has become the normal means of communication in many situations. It tends to accompany the owner wherever they go and fits in with the "mobility and flexibility of young people's lives" (Haste 2005b p.63). It therefore has great potential for immediate feedback and empowerment for young people who have control of the communication.
- Choice of appropriate topics is vital for the success of the consultation. Raising issues that do not matter, or seem irrelevant, to the target population will reduce the likelihood of their engagement with the subject. Furthermore, with a constant population of registered participants, frequent consultation

over irrelevant material may lead to consultation fatigue and adversely affect the response to future communications.

- Public administrations should consider how electronic consultation impacts upon the consultation life cycle. Receiving responses more quickly may lead to an expectation that results will be available in a shorter time frame and, significantly, that action will be taken quickly. In the case study council there was no evidence of any changes to the back-end processes as a result of introducing this new approach.

This study has demonstrated the merit of considering the relationship between technology systems and the organizations in which they are applied. In this study, following Fleck and Howells (2001), our definition of technology is not limited to the artefact itself, but also includes the staff skills and organizational characteristics as well. The placement of the SMS texting system in an

offshoot office, staffed by a temporary employee, has shaped the technology itself. There are some limitations of this study. Firstly, the timing of the study has had an effect on its outcome. Consultants have been engaged for year two of the project. This new skill set, and the learning from the experience of the first year of operation, will alter the performance of the project. Secondly, while we have endeavoured to explore as much of the case environment as was open to us, the only access to the participants that we were able to negotiate was the texting survey. A much richer understanding of participants' views would have been obtained by employing different research methods. Following on from this study, it is intended to carry out a similar investigation in other councils using technology for consultation with the young to compare with the findings of this case study. It is also intended to undertake a survey of young peoples attitudes to being consulted using the mobile phone.

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### **Appendix A - Interview topics**

- What do you feel are the benefits of e-consultation?
- How successful have your web-based consultations been?
- What stages of policy determination are usually consulted over?
- Is the consultation always led by the council?
- How did the SMS texting project come about?
- What types of issue do you perceive should involve consultation with young people?
- What benefits do you foresee in consulting the young?
- What barriers do you perceive will restrict the use of this channel for consultation?
- Do you feel that SMS texting has the potential to strengthen participation by young people?

### **Appendix B – Text message survey questions**

Q 1: Do you have a PC at home?

Q 2: Do you have internet at home?

Q 3: Do you think Youth Participation Project is good or bad?

Q 4: How could the service be improved, A = ask about issues that matter, B = get £10 voucher quicker, C = let you know it's had an impact, D = more texts, E = fewer texts.