

Electronic Democracy and Educating Young People

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Abstract

This paper describes how the International Teledemocracy Centre has been working with the Scottish Government and the Highland Council to better appreciate how young people (11 to 18 year olds) use technology as a medium for democratic decision making, and to evaluate the technology's contribution to improving their participation in democracy. The work is illustrated through two specific projects.

The first project is concerned with the development of an electronic consultation system and its use to consult young people in Scotland. From 2nd May to 12th June 2000, any young person with access to the internet, whether from home, school, cybercafé or community centre, could participate in the electronic consultation by going to www.e-consultant.org.uk/ScottishYouth. At the web site they could do two things:

1. Have a look at the top 20 issues facing young people in Scotland today, read other peoples' comments and, importantly, add their comments on the issue.
2. Vote for the top 10 issues that they think are the most important ones for young people in Scotland.

The second project is still on-going and concerns the development and use of an electronic election system called e-voter. The system is being used to support Highland Council elections to a Highland Youth Council. It allows young people who have registered in each of the 28 secondary schools in the region to vote for representatives and generally take part in the election campaign. The system can be seen at the web site www.highlandyouthvoice.org

The systems, e-consultant and e-voter, are components of a web-based e-democracy toolkit being developed to motivate and facilitate public participation in governance. The International Teledemocracy Centre working with BT Scotland developed a prototype version of the tools in early 2000. The tools demonstrate how relatively straightforward computing techniques can engage the attention and participation of young people, by presenting a medium that they find interesting, convenient and easy to use and at the same time provide an opportunity for young people to develop their ITC skills.

This paper summarises the results and lessons learnt from these two e-democracy youth projects.

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on the introduction of technology to encourage young people's participation in governance through the use of electronic consultation and electronic election systems. The work of the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University in Edinburgh is focusing on how democracy can take advantage of new developments in technology and the increasing uptake of the technology. An important aspect of this work is with the Scottish Executive and Highland Council. We are studying how technology can be developed and used as a medium for democratic decision-making with young people (11 to

18 year olds) and evaluating the technology's contribution to improving their participation in democracy.

The key issues the paper addresses are the functionality needed in digital democracy tools for young people and the lessons learnt from our studies so far.

Section 2 explains the context for digital democracy in the UK and why this was an opportune time to start to develop and evaluate such tools. In section 3 we describe the development of an electronic consultation system and its use to consult young people in Scotland. Section 4 focuses on the development and use of an electronic election system being used to support Highland Council elections to a Highland Youth Council. In section 5 we address some of the social impact issues concerning digital government and young people. We conclude with a brief report on our related work.

2 Context

In July 1999 the Scottish Parliament was officially opened. This devolved power for specific areas of government from the Westminster Parliament in London to a new Scottish Parliament based in Edinburgh. One of the main documents setting out how the new Parliament should work was The Consultative Steering Group document (ISBN 0 11 496125 5). This stated that The Scottish Parliament should aspire to use all forms of ICT “innovatively and appropriately” to support its three principles of openness, accessibility and participation. The Scottish Parliament web site at www.scottish.parliament.uk and the Scottish Executive web site at www.scotland.gov.uk are excellent examples of this.

In August 1999 Napier University established our research centre in partnership with BT Scotland. Its remit is to research and apply advanced information and communication technologies to enhance and support the democratic decision-making process. Its website is at www.teledemocracy.org. Specifically, its objectives include:

- to promote the application of ICT by governments worldwide in order that elected members and supporting staff can conduct their business more effectively and efficiently;
- to demonstrate how ICT can contribute to more openness and accessibility in government;
- to encourage and assist the public, voluntary organisations and business to participate in government through the utilisation of ICT.

To achieve these objectives we are:

- undertaking research into e-democracy;
- developing an e-democracy toolkit as a show-case of digital democracy applications to start to demonstrate the potential benefits of the use of ICT to support the democratic process.

Two components of our toolkit, the electronic consultation system called “e-consultant” and the electronic election system called “e-voter” are the subject of this paper.

In September 1999 the Scottish Executive published a strategy document “Making it Work Together – a Programme for Government” (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library2/doc03/miwt-00.htm>) in which the Minister for Children and Education stated he wished to consult widely on an action programme for youth which values young people and reflects their own aspirations and needs.

In February 2000, the Community Education Branch of the Scottish Executive asked the International Teledemocracy Centre to refine its e-consultant system and run an electronic consultation exercise as part of their Action Programme for Youth.

With regard to local government, there are 32 local authorities in Scotland. Their remit is to provide a range of essential services, such as education, caring for older people, sports centres, libraries and refuse collection as well as to promote economic development for their areas. Highland Council (see www.highland.gov.uk) provides these services to 208,000 people dispersed over 10,000 sq miles, making it one of the most sparsely populated areas in Europe.

Highland Council has been considering how to increase youth participation in democratic decision making processes. A number of significant developments have taken place over the period 1999/2000. The Council has

- convened a successful Highland Youth parliament as part of a national initiative to consider drugs issues;
- appointed a worker seconded from the Community Education service to work on expanding youth participation and to assist in the development a youth strategy for the Highlands
- made a commitment to develop a Highland Youth Council for the area.

In April 2000, Highland Council asked the International Teledemocracy Centre to refine its e-voter system and run an electronic election as part of their Highland Youth Voice initiative.

3 E-Consultant

Section 3 describes our e-consultant tool and its use to consult young people in Scotland.

From 2nd May to 4th June, any young person with access to the internet could go to www.e-consultant.org.uk/ScottishYouth, give their opinion on a range of hot topics, and vote on which of these key issues they think are the most important facing young people in Scotland today. The web site, which could be accessed from home, school, cybercafé or community centre, provided an opportunity for young people to participate in democracy over the internet. The results of this 6 week on-line consultation exercise formed important input to Scottish Youth Summit 2000 - nine separate conferences across Scotland which took place on the 19th of June and was attended by over 1,000 young people and Scottish Ministers.

The initial list of hot topics, which included drugs, education, money and homelessness, was identified from responses from about 500 young people aged 11-18 who gave their views to teachers and youth groups, and took part in a survey in Young Scot newspaper in March 2000.

Our aims in designing e-consultant were to:

1. make the site easy to access and use by a broad range of 11-18 year-olds (our “users”);
2. clearly identify what was being asked of users, and why they were being asked;
3. encourage users to read and respond to comments, using a ‘threaded’ discussion forum;
4. take account of education authority guidelines on the disclosure of personal information by school pupils, by not disclosing full names;
5. minimise editorial control of the content, except where in breach of stated conditions of use.

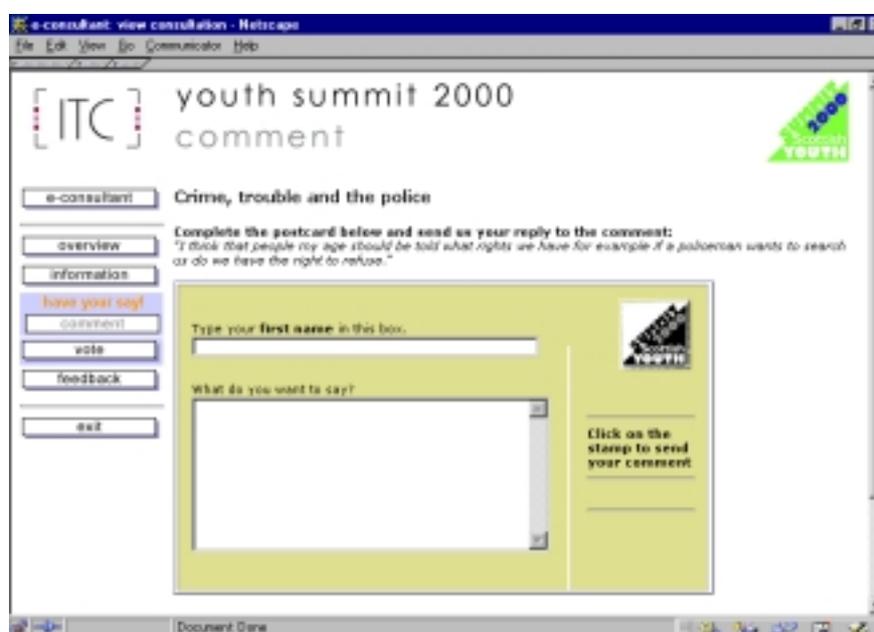
The first of these objectives was the most challenging, particularly within our time and resource constraints. We were aware that only a small minority of young people enjoys easy access to the internet from home, and that school access is normally tied to specific curricular activities. We considered it unlikely that many young people would be able or willing to visit the site more than once during the period. Accordingly, we rejected the possibility of asking users to register (to obtain a password), we wanted access to be as easy as possible. However, the trade-off was that we were then unable to obtain precise details about the users.

The consultation was publicised *directly to young people* through the Young Scot newspaper, by leaflets distributed via the Scottish Parliament, and City Council Libraries and Community Education departments. During the consultation period, online advertising was initiated by the Scottish Executive, involving the placing of ‘banner ads’ on two websites heavily used by young people in the 15-18 age group.

When young people went to www.e-consultant.org.uk/ScottishYouth. They could:

- read what others thought about the top 20 issues facing young people in Scotland today;
- participate in the discussion on the issues;
- vote for the 10 most important issues.

For each of the issues they could read any comments that had already been made by young people and view an opinion poll chart showing how important others thought the issue was. Importantly, they could participate by adding their own comment and rating. A picture of the “have your say” comment page is given below.



On the vote page we asked the young people to choose up to 10 issues that they thought were the most important ones facing young people in Scotland today. They could choose fewer than 10, but no more than that. Young people did not have to post comments in order to vote, but we did encourage this as then they would have a better idea of what they were voting for.

We also invited them to input their name, gender and age so we could get an overall picture of who we were getting votes from. These personal details were not published on the web site or anywhere else.

3.1 Summary of Results

Summary of numbers taking part:

Total number of Comments	587
Total number of Votes	279
Number of male voters	146
Number of female voters	133
Number of voters in age group 11-14	178
Number of voters in age group 15-18	101

Electronic consultation is an innovative way to consult young people using the web. Over 500 comments for an electronic consultation is very high and the figure suggests that young people are comfortable with this mode of communication. It is encouraging to see roughly equal male and female participation. The difference between the upper and lower age range participation is due to the timing of the exercise; during this period the majority of 15 to 18 year olds were on exam leave from school.

We have yet to do a detailed content analysis of the young people's comments. However we think it fair to characterise them as uninhibited either by fear of technology or adult censorship. Below are some typical comments on the issues "crime and trouble". Most of those who commented felt that the police unjustly target young people on the basis of their age, where they live, or relatively minor past offences. The comments have not been corrected for spelling or grammar

Crime and trouble

Police should not just assume that kids on the street at night r causing trouble. Discrimination in the police force should be stopped. Mike 03/05/00

We dont think it's fair because the council build parks etc for us. but when we make use of the parks someone always complains and then we get shifted on by the police kirsty and kathryn , 31/05/00

Why must the youth of today always be blamed for every single crime that happens?!?!?! No matter what happens we are always the first a policeman will come to and the last to be ruled off the list of suspects! What ever happened to equality? Although the police aren't always to blame. Security guards are just as bad. Peolpe I know were searched by a security guard just for LOOKING suspicious. They hadn't stolen anything and the security guard just walked off. It is amazing that stuff like this still happens in the 21st century!!! Pam, 01/06/00

The five issues **Alcohol, Smoking, Sex, Drugs** and **Schools** received the most comments.

With respect to Voting, for both age groups **Drugs** was voted as the most important issue. For the 11-14 age group this was followed by **Bullying, Smoking, Alcohol** and **Crime**. For the 15-18 age group **Drugs** was followed by **Alcohol, Sex, Schools** and **Crime**.

Results ordered by Votes Total				
Issue	Comments	Votes	Votes	Votes
	Total	Total	11-14	15-18
Drugs	62	222	149	73
Alcohol	87	192	124	68
Bullying	46	187	134	53
Smoking	70	175	127	48
Crime, trouble and the police	35	171	114	57
Sex, sexuality and sex education	69	166	100	66
Schools & education	48	144	85	59
Voice for young people	27	137	81	56
Sexual abuse and violence in the home	12	124	87	37
Prejudice and discrimination	10	123	72	51
Housing & being homeless	13	122	90	32
Work & unemployment	5	115	71	44
Money and poverty	6	101	61	40
Clean Environment	15	100	73	27
Tuition fees for students	12	100	50	50
Getting on with family & friends	6	97	65	32
Nowhere to go for leisure & sports	33	94	65	29
Health for youth	5	85	62	23
Transport to get you around	18	69	44	25
Car insurance for young people	7	39	25	14

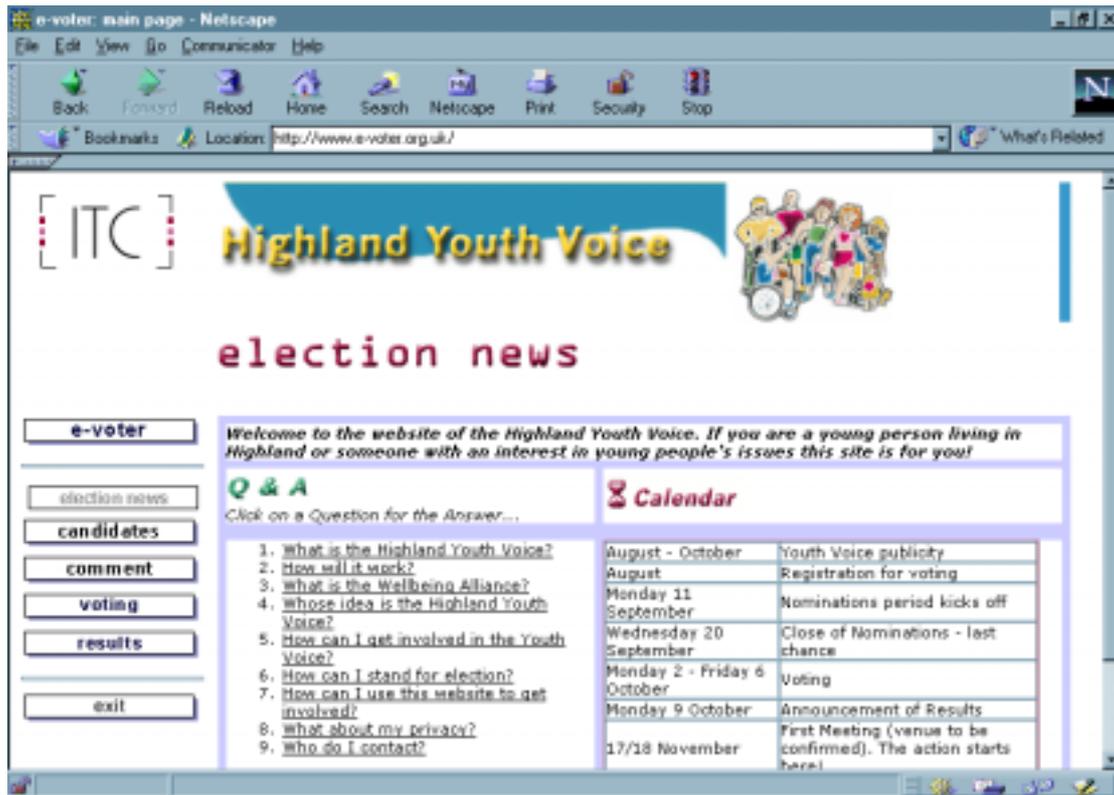
The full results are given in the attached table. A preliminary evaluation report can be found at www.e-consultant.org.uk. The analysis by age and issue of the votes and comments demonstrates that there are significant differences between the concerns of 11-14 year olds and 15-18 year olds, though for both age groups the most important issues appear to be those that can be directly related to personal experience and/or to heavy media exposure.

Responses to the on-line evaluation questionnaire were very positive. They showed that most young people found the site easy to use, and thought they would use it again for other consultations. However a significant minority thought it too text-oriented and lacking a rich and colourful page style. Presentation aspects aside, the most frequently mentioned 'like' was the opportunity to vote and express an opinion, and the most disliked aspect was the inability to add to the range of issues. Most thought that web sites were generally a 'good way to voice your opinion'. There were a few concerns about entering personal details, but the most frequently voiced general concern was that the comments would not 'make a difference'.

4 E-Voter

Section 4 describes our e-voter tool and its application for youth elections. The tool can be found at www.e-voter.org.uk.

The E-voter system is to be used from 4th September to 10th October 2000, to support the Highland Youth Voice elections. It will support the education of the voters on the purpose of the election, the voting process and arrangements for the counting of the votes. Specifically the site will be used for voting and discussion by young people who have registered in each of 28 schools in the Highland area, and other authorised users, provided that they authenticate their identity. It may also be accessed on a 'read-only' basis by any internet user.



e-voter is seeking to achieve the following aims.

1. Support decentralised voting and counting, with appropriate security, accuracy, privacy, and verification measures that can be accomplished given the timescales and limited resources within the schools.
2. Provide public visibility for the election, by enabling the general public to see its outcomes and the extent of youth involvement;
3. Engage the attention and participation of young people, by presenting a medium that they find interesting, convenient and easy to use;
4. Provide an opportunity for pupils to develop their ITC skills.

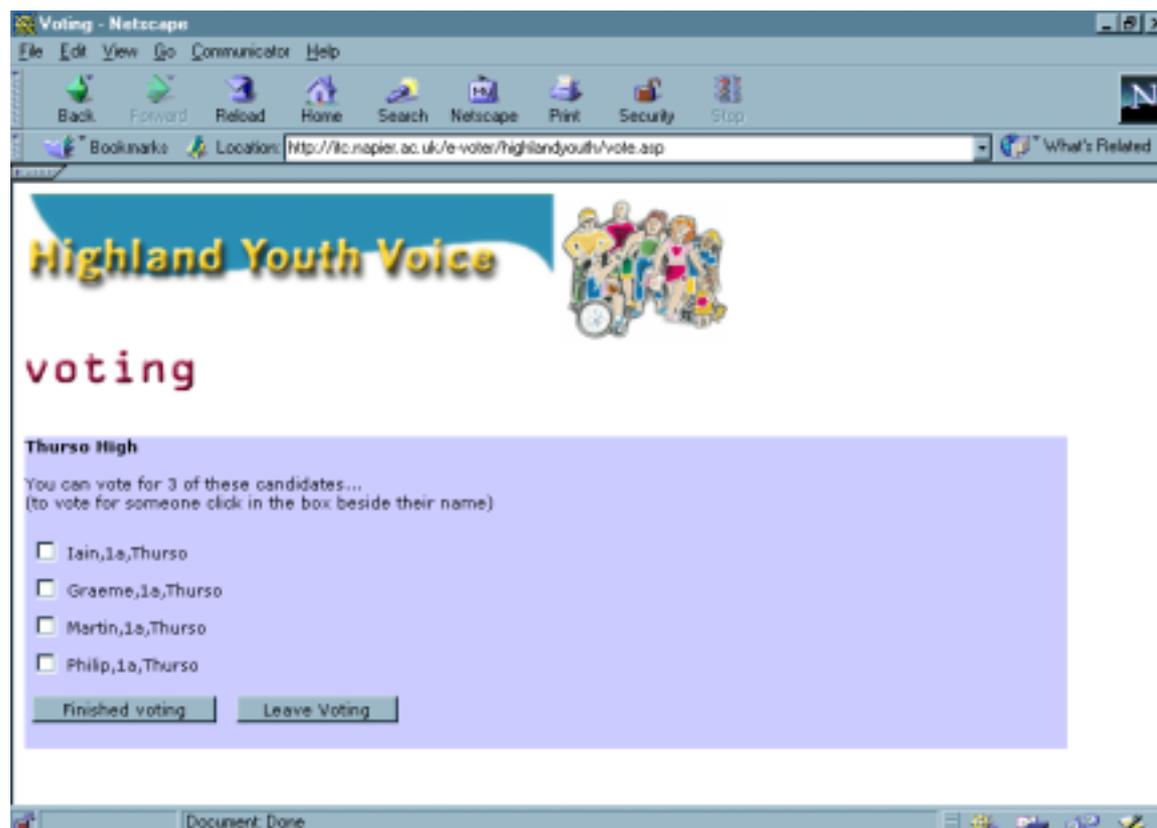
As with any election, an electoral register is required to enable the process to be monitored and controlled. Using the school roll, an election co-ordinator at each school gives each pupil a user-id and a password which allows them to post comments in the discussion. We wished to ensure a secret ballot and the integrity of the election. Therefore it was important for the Centre, as the third party in the election, not to know the full names of eligible voters as this would allow identification of votes cast with each voter. However to ensure the integrity of the election we needed to ensure one, and only one, vote was cast by each voter. Therefore a numeric PIN is being used with the unique user-id for voting only. PINs alone are insufficient because they do not provide a check against voters mistakenly entering a valid but incorrect identifier, leading to an invalid vote.

A user - an 11 to 18 year old school pupil - who has registered to use the site is able to

1. read Election News
2. vote *
3. read candidate statements *
4. read and post comments in an issue-based threaded discussion forum
5. read results of the election turnout and voting

Sections marked * present information specific to individual schools, while others are for the whole of the Highland area.

All 28 schools in the area have been invited to elect either 1, 2 or 3 representatives, the number of representatives being dependent on the school roll. There are a total of 14,787 school pupils who will elect 65 representatives. On entering the voting page, the voters are prompted for their user-id, password and PIN. Once authenticated, they vote by checking boxes against the candidate names for that school. The voting screen is shown below but with fictitious names for candidates. Votes will be tallied using the First Past the Post system and results for each school displayed on the results pages.



5 Outstanding Issues and the Way Forward

On the basis of our experience with the Action Programme for Youth consultation, we can say that version 1 of e-consultant has proved a positive first step. However we are some way from achieving electronic consultation that is as open, transparent, and effective as is practicable. We highlight the following issues to be considered for future youth consultations.

1. The school timetable is very tight and it is very difficult to schedule in extra curricula activities such as online consultations and elections. There needs to be close co-operation with schools to determine the best time to engage young people.
2. There is a need to promote the on-line consultations and elections directly to the young people using a media they are familiar with. They need to be made aware that they can have their say and how they go about this which implies improving on-line and off-line publicity aimed directly at young people.
3. Attracting young peoples attention and retaining it are important issues, with this in mind it is important to design the graphic presentation of the site to reflect the expectations of

the intended audience. One way of achieving this is by involving young people in the design from the early stages.

4. Where the system is to be used in a classroom setting it would be good practice to provide 'slide-show' presentations of background information, so that these may be used (e.g. with data projection) in these group discussions.
5. If there is going to be group use of the systems, it is a good idea to support this directly by providing facilities for local discussion forums, so that local 'moderators' can negotiate which comments go forward as contributions from the local group, and/or hold a local vote and forward the results.
6. It is important to maintain easy and flexible access to the systems but there is also a need to ensure that good analysis of the results/contributions can take place therefore there is a need provide an incentive to users to register personal details.
7. Young people tend to like to tell their friends what they are doing therefore one way to encourage use of the systems is to provide support for individuals to share comments with friends.
8. To support consensus building and to make a start on educating young people on reaching agreement in groups some level of support for users to rate their agreement with specific comments or proposals, and to find others who agree/disagree would be useful.

To conclude on a positive note, we have been impressed by the interest and enthusiasm of the young people whom we observed participating in the e-consultation. They were of the view that they should be allowed to participate in the democratic decision-making process and most thought that e-democracy systems were generally a good way to achieve this.

Finally, the third tool in the e-democracy toolkit is e-petitioner. The e-petitioner tool can be found at www.e-petitioner.org.uk, it is a web-based electronic petitioning tool with the functionality to create a petition; to view/sign a petition; to add background information, to join discussion forum; and to submit a petition. The system hosts "live" petitions - petitions that are valid, will be submitted to the relevant authority and where individuals can add their name and address on-line if they support the petition. Currently, the e-petitioner system is being used to submit e-petitions to the Scottish Parliament and No.10 Downing St. The site is hosting the first e-petition to Downing Street which is a petition on behalf of the WWF asking the government to put in place an ocean recovery programme.

6 Acknowledgements

This work has been carried out jointly between the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University and BT Scotland. The authors would like to thank members of the ITC project team at BT for their contributions to this work. The E-voter work is being supported by Highland Council.

7 General Reading

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