A Rapid Feedback App: Possibilities and Pitfalls for Extended Democracy

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Abstract

Recently, a democratic deficit has called for new forms of e-participation to increase or deepen citizens' political participation. A new solution for rapid feedback, GiMening, is undergoing development and implementation in Norway. This article contributes to the understanding of the implementation of quick-response tools by suggesting which key points of awareness must be considered to enhance associated possibilities and avoid pitfalls. The research questions under examination are: How do municipal political leadership, school leadership and youth perceive the need for extended digital citizen participation? What are their thoughts on the possibilities and pitfalls that GiMening may trigger during its implementation and use in different contexts? Research on digital engagement and political participation among Scandinavian youth is used to theorise about the concept of democratic innovation. The data material consists of semi-structured interviews with actors from five Norwegian municipalities. The main findings of the analysis show that the use of GiMening could lower the threshold for participation, lead to better-informed decisions, increase citizens' level of trust and improve awareness of people's opinions; however, there are pitfalls related to the risk that GiMening might be used only as a one-way information sharing tool or that decision-makers will not apply input data.

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Introduction

Liberal representative democracies throughout the world are threatened by a democratic deficit and experiencing a decrease in participation, trust and support for traditional representative democratic channels (Adenskog 2018; Edelman 2019; Norris 2011; Van Reybrouck 2013). The democratic deficit is also occurring in Scandinavia, where citizens' trust in politicians and political institutions is receding and where growing polarisation is taking place because large groups of citizens do not perceive the political system as responsive to their needs and wishes (Löfvenius 2016; Statens Offentliga Utredningar 2016). Crouch (2004) called this situation a "post-democracy" characterised by the use of democracy as "a play" that leaves considerable numbers of citizens as apathetic spectators. In particular, young people are characterised by relatively low levels of participation in formal democratic channels. In mature democracies (e.g. Scandinavian countries), youth are especially prone to being non-active (Amnå and Ekman 2014). Disengagement among the younger generations is problematic because the habits of political activity one develops early on are thought to affect one's lifelong political engagement (Dahl et al. 2018).

To cure such democratic malaises, it has been argued that there is a need *to extend democracy*—that citizens can and should be able to exert more direct

influence on political decisions than is possible in current liberal representative models (Fung 2015; Geißel 2013; Pateman 1970; Pierre and Peters 2000). Expanding politicians' and other decision-makers' opportunities to interact with stakeholders provides new and different forms of input, which may enrich policymaking by promoting innovative policy ideas (Bovaird and Downe 2008; Sørensen 2016; Torfing et al. 2012; Warren 2009). Mobilising resources, knowledge and ideas from a plurality of actors in public problem-solving may also lead to decisions with more solid foundational support and strengthen the links between citizens and political institutions (Røiseland and Vabo 2016; Harpin 2006). The traditional norms of (local) democracy emphasise broad opportunities for citizens to make their voices heard, which in turn may strengthen citizens' loyalty to decision-making bodies. Without the possibility of having a voice, citizens may exit from democratic participation (Hirschman 1970).

The deficit in representative democracies is spurring different forms of democratic innovation, defined by Smith (2009, p. 1) as institutions that are "specifically designed to increase and deepen citizens' participation in the political decision-making process". Finding new ways to engage (especially young) people in politics and creating attractive forms of political engagement has become an important government goal (Kwon 2019). Within the context of new information and communication technology (ICT), the debate on participation has been revitalised, and new forms of electronic participation (e-participation) are continuously being introduced to further democracy. E-participation has now become a research agenda of its own (Lember et al. 2022). Compared with traditional "offline" participation, e-participation is regarded as a way to broaden public participation, involving a much wider audience, e.g. citizens who do not usually participate in formal democratic channels (Randma-Liiv 2022). However, "while there is a rich body of literature outlining the targets of e-participation, it remains silent about how to achieve them" (Witz et al. 2018, p. 4).

In Norway, a new e-participation solution for rapid feedback and dialogue between citizens and politicians (or other decision-makers) is undergoing implementation and further development. We studied this innovation process by focusing on young people in two different democratic contexts: local democracy (involving young citizens and political leaders/youth councils) and school democracy (involving pupils and school leaders/school councils). The digital solution, GiMening, consists of a mobile application with survey-like functionality, which allows politicians and other decision makers (e.g. school leaders) to present short rounds of questions to citizens/pupils to receive their input regarding various matters (Johannessen and Berntzen 2020). GiMening can be categorised as a "civic technology", a technology created to enable civic participation in public administration and to facilitate new and innovative processes of participatory democracy (Saldivar et al. 2019; Spitz et al. 2018). GiMening builds on the assumption that most people want to express their opinion and have their voices heard but are not interested in being directly involved in complex political issues or spending time reading long policy documents. Its main goals include involving citizens with low motivation for engaging in time-consuming activities in dialogue and decision-making processes between elections (Johannessen and Berntzen 2020).

The objective of this paper is to investigate how GiMening may stimulate democratic participation (i.e. extend democracy by involving citizens/pupils more directly in decision-making processes), and furthermore to suggest key points of awareness to enhance possibilities and avoid pitfalls in a full-scale implementation. Hence, this paper explores the involved actors' experiences of the present situation and their thoughts related to the rapid feedback app. In doing this, we answer the following research questions:

- How do municipal political leadership, school leadership and members of youth and school councils perceive the need for extended digital citizen participation?
- What are their thoughts on the possibilities and pitfalls that GiMening may trigger during its implementation and use in different contexts?

The following section theorises about the concept of democratic innovation through e-participation, focusing on young people's political participation in Scandinavian countries.

Next, the overall research project is explained, including how the data were collected and analysed. The main findings stem from an empirical case study of GiMening as a new tool for increasing political dialogue in decision-making processes. Through theoretical reflections, we use these findings to illustrate the potential benefits and problems associated with using an app for digital citizen participation. We contribute to the understanding of how such an e-participation tool should be implemented by suggesting key points of awareness to enhance possibilities and avoid pitfalls during full-scale implementation.

Theoretical Framework

Young people's political participation: Scandinavian trends

Extant research shows a democratic deficit in terms of youth participation when measured by voter turnout, party membership and other formal political indicators (Gallego 2009; Grasso 2018). All Scandinavian countries experience an election turnout gap between young people and the general population. This is true for national and local elections (Nordic Council of Ministers 2017). Younger generations tend to be detached from conventional politics (Grasso 2018), and several studies have expressed strong concerns about young people's seemingly increasing lack of political interest and low degree of participation through traditional political channels (Hegna 2020). However, despite this disengagement, substantial evidence exists that "young people do have political views and participate in alternative political behaviour" (Print 2007, p. 327).

Voter turnout is not the only indicator of political engagement among youth. Another approach to studying young people's political participation applies a broader, so-called "youth-centred" concept of political engagement, including everyday political participation in schools and civil society organisations. For example, Hegna (2018, 2020) argued that it is important to understand young people's involvement in everyday citizenship activities (i.e. from the perspective of here and now) instead of considering youth as "human becomings" who have the *potential* for participation. This aligns with Putnam's (1995, p. 665) definition of civic engagement as "people's connections to life in the community, not only to politics". This also means that the study of youth participation must include young people's participation in school democracies and other places where they discuss politics and perceive themselves as active citizens. In Norway, schools are expected to "be a place that gives pupils experience of various forms of participation in democratic processes in its daily activities and representative bodies" (Ministry of Education 2015, p. 33). Studies adopting this approach have concluded that young people showed stronger signs of engagement in society and politics in 2016 than in 2009 (Hegna 2018, p. 66).

These results echo Danish research on youth political engagement, which has concluded that relatively low levels of participation through formal democratic channels among young people must *not* be interpreted as indicating a lack of knowledge or engagement in politics and society (Mandag Morgen 2018). On the contrary, Danish youth are engaged in and knowledgeable about these issues; however, they prefer informal, temporary and action-oriented engagement over participation through formal structures (Andersen 2011; Grubb 2016). Today's digital youth are accustomed to constant high speeds. Thus, they require action "here and now". They expect easy access to information and cultivate nonbinding and superficial commitments. According to Hansen (2021), this entails the risk that representative democracy appears artificial, slow and distant compared to social media, which offers a faster, more direct path to influence and a visible opportunity to make a difference. Also, young people tend to avoid participating in societal and political debates (e.g. on Facebook) because they find it uncomfortable (Zuleta and Laursen 2019). This supports the need for youth to have opportunities to participate anonymously (Berg 2017), making participation without the risk of incitement possible.

Danish research on youth participation points to a paradox: despite high levels of engagement and knowledge about democracy and politics, young people are characterised by low levels of "self-efficacy", or trust in their own ability to influence political decisions

(Bruun, Lieberkind and Schunck 2016; Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd 2018; Nørgaard Kristensen 2016). This is important because research points to citizens' self-efficacy as a determinant of active participation through formal channels (Reichert 2016). Accordingly, Amnå and Ekman (2014) identified both "unengaged citizens" and "disillusioned citizens", with the latter referring to citizens who have lost their sense of ability to influence political decisions. Amnå and Ekman (2014, p. 2) identified a third category of political inactivity: "standby citizens" who stay alert and keep themselves informed about politics and are willing (and able) to participate if needed. Thus, the passivity seen in young people and the general population between elections is not necessarily negative; it can be a sign of a well-functioning democracy with high levels of trust among citizenries. However, it is still interesting to determine when and why "standby citizens" choose to become active (Johannessen and Berntzen 2020).

To summarise, in terms of democratic participation, young people are "action-oriented networkers" (Andersen 2011). Despite their high levels of political and democratic knowledge and engagement, young people distrust their own ability to achieve influence through formal democratic channels and prefer participating through informal, temporary, case-specific channels organised through networks and activism. Thus, digital engagement seems to be an obvious choice when engaging youth. In the following section, the possibilities and challenges of e-participation are examined.

Digital citizen participation

Channels for e-participation are being adopted primarily at the level of local government, and development within the field is driven by the supply side, with an increasing number of private companies developing and offering advanced e-participation tools (Le Blanc 2020). Such civic technologies have different goals; however, these goals often include more responsive governance, more efficient use of existing resources and more meaningful engagement with citizens (Wilson and Chakraborty 2019). Based on a literature review, Wirtz et al. (2018) identified six key targets for e-participation: (1) increase overall participation, (2) enhance information provision, (3) improve the quality of public policies, (4) strengthen public trust, (5) improve and share responsibility for policymaking and (6) increase public awareness and understanding of policy issues.

Digital citizen engagement has the potential to lower the threshold of political participation by offering easily accessible and user-friendly channels, thereby allowing more citizens to participate. E-participation is a cost-effective tool for actively involving citizens because it leads to the collection of more data (Royo et al. 2015). Thus, engagement through digital channels has the potential to communicate citizens' ideas and preferences quickly and simply to planners and policymakers. Research shows that apps for mobile devices, such as smartphones and smartwatches, have the potential to fulfil a need for citizens' "lunchtime participation" (i.e. participation that is instant, location-based, easily accessible, guided and informal, without requiring knowledge about planning procedures, institutions or rules) in urban planning (Wilson et al. 2019).

Despite the rise of civic technology, there are several concerns, especially regarding whether e-participation solutions can enhance and broaden democratic participation or whether they just provide new arenas for already-engaged citizens (May and Ross 2018). When making access and participation easier, research points to a challenge related to the "democratic quality" of digital involvement (Wilson et al. 2019). Specifically, e-participation primarily occurs on the lower levels of the United Nations' (2020) three-point e-participation scale, which includes (1) *e-information* (providing citizens with public information and access to information with or without demand), (2) *e-consultation* (engaging citizens in contributing to and deliberating on public policies and services) and (3) *e-decision-making* (empowering citizens through the co-design of policy options and co-production of service modalities).

Concerns and challenges

American democracy researchers Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) put forward the notion of "thin participation" as opposed to "thick participation". Thin democratic participation includes a variety of fast, easy and convenient approaches that allow citizens to receive or provide information. It is characterised by engaging citizens as individuals, not by supporting mutual learning, dialogue or collaboration. Thick participation enables a large number of people to collaborate in small groups to discuss, learn, decide and act together (Nabatchi and Jo 2018). Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) categorised most digital participation platforms as promoting thin participation, thus challenging the democratic quality of these endeavours. For example, in testing a smartwatch app (ChangeExplorer), researchers discovered a tendency among citizens to report problems they wanted to be fixed instead of describing larger visions for the area: The app was effective at simplifying methods of participation, but sometimes, this over-simplification led to people simply reporting issues, rather than presenting a vision of the future. Problem reporting is potentially easier to resolve but does not reach the goal of giving citizens an enhanced role in shaping the future of their area (Wilson et al. 2019, p. 298). This result corresponds with research pointing to the fact that, in general, digital involvement tends to lead to thin types of participation, affording a relatively low degree of collaboration, empowerment and shared decision making with citizens (Randma-liiv and Vooglaid 2020). Pitfalls can occur when digital solutions are only used as information tools (i.e. the lowest level of citizen participation), as "citizens are attracted to political involvement when it is clear that the involvement can lead to change" (Smith 2005, p. 9).

A downside of digital involvement through apps is that some citizens may find the simple communication they enable (e.g. polling and responding by ticking categories) superficial and unsatisfactory. The question is whether communicating views and ideas through an app will sufficiently capture the richness of people's views and support dialogue. Furthermore, according to Randma-liiv and Vooglaid (2020), digital citizen engagement has experienced difficulty attracting citizens who are not normally willing to participate (e.g. in planning processes). Thus, digital channels tend to require several marketing initiatives to create visibility and awareness among citizens, creating major challenges for municipalities relating to existing organisational, political and ICT structures and limited resources and knowledge (Schröder 2014). Specifically, the management of citizens' expectations may be challenging, as citizens tend to expect quick answers and actions in response to their inputs—expectations that may be difficult for public employees to honour (Wilson et al. 2019).

In general, the barriers to digital involvement have been shown to be like those of face-to-face involvement and are often related to the organisation and operation of public administrations (Randma-liiv and Vooglaid 2020). Thus, it has proved challenging for administrative and political systems to process and translate citizen input received through digital participation channels. According to Schröder (2014, p. 291), "What is often missing in the design of digital technologies is for the voices to be captured in a way that is actionable by decision makers while also being user-friendly and easily understood". Moreover, transparency is essential to building trust and confidence in the political system. Citizens need to know whether and how their contributions (e.g. proposals and inputs) have been considered (Royo et al. 2015). E-participation researchers have pointed to the fact that, despite great expectations, e-participation has not succeeded in transforming democracy (Bastick 2017; Le Blanc 2020). On the contrary, e-participation opportunities are often applied in ways that reproduce existing democratic processes and power relations due to the reluctance of political systems to genuinely share agenda-setting and decision-making power. This is in line with a Norwegian study showing that established institutions in representative liberal democracies may influence elected representatives' role perceptions and attitudes towards citizen involvement (Sønderskov 2019, 2020). Despite a widespread assumption that citizens do not want to participate politically (e.g. because of a lack of motivation), Åström et al. (2017) showed that a representative sample of the Swedish population supports democratic

innovations; however, local politicians often have low confidence or trust (i.e. they do not think citizens can fully consider the public's interests).

To summarise, digital citizen engagement has the potential to lower the threshold of participation by offering an easily accessible channel; however, digital channels per se do not attract groups of citizens who are normally unwilling to participate. Digital participation may also be criticised for being democratically thin. Finally, extant research points to e-participation possibilities primarily being applied in ways that reproduce existing democratic processes and power relations due to authorities' reluctance to share power with citizens. In the next section, the empirical study forming the basis for the investigation of this article's research questions is presented.

Materials and Methods

The empirical data were derived from a study examining possibilities and pitfalls linked to the implementation of a new Norwegian rapid feedback app. GiMening was created, designed and is still managed by a small start-up business called PostLocal. The findings in this article stem from a larger study financed by the Norwegian Research Council (NRC) to develop new empirical and theoretical insights concerning the implementation and use of GiMening in five Norwegian municipalities. However, the objective of this paper is to investigate how this digital solution may stimulate democratic participation and to suggest key points of awareness to enhance possibilities and avoid pitfalls in a full-scale implementation. We focus on young people's political participation in the local democracy and school democracy contexts.

The GiMening application

PostLocal's objectives for the GiMening rapid feedback app are outlined here. The app intends to make it easy for the "silent majority"—those who are not represented via traditional democratic channels, organisations or public meetings—to participate in political processes. Youth are targeted as a particularly important group to activate. Furthermore, GiMening intends to make it easy for politicians at local levels (municipalities) to consult with citizens on current issues, and citizens do not need to spend more than 2 to 3 minutes on each round of questions (so quick and easy to use that it can be done in the checkout queue at the supermarket). GiMening was tested through a pre-project showing that this type of solution has the potential to engage youth and "standby citizens" (Johannessen and Berntzen 2020, p. 119). While the technology already existed, in the larger NRC study, researchers and PostLocal cooperated regarding further development and innovation, including the implementation of the app in the NRC study.

GiMening is available for free through the App Store and Google Play, and it works as follows: When logging in, new users are asked to answer questions about where they live, their age and what gender they are. In municipalities that have tested GiMening, users are greeted by a short video from the mayor providing information about the purpose of the app. Participation occurs through completion of a simple survey containing a few questions (e.g. regarding political issues that elected representatives or other decision-makers would like the population's opinion on), with an opportunity to provide more in-depth feedback at the end. Finally, users can see others' responses, a feature based on the idea that seeing others' opinions may aid mutual understanding. After completing a set of questions, users receive feedback from the sender (leaders/councils) on how the results will be used, e.g. in formal political processes. It is also possible to contact the sender directly, but when this is done, the inquiry is sent via e-mail and the anonymity is thereby lifted. GiMening also contains a live function that enables the app to be used, for example, to ask questions at public meetings. Below, we have included two screen shots from the application.

Figure 1: Start page

Figure 2: Live function
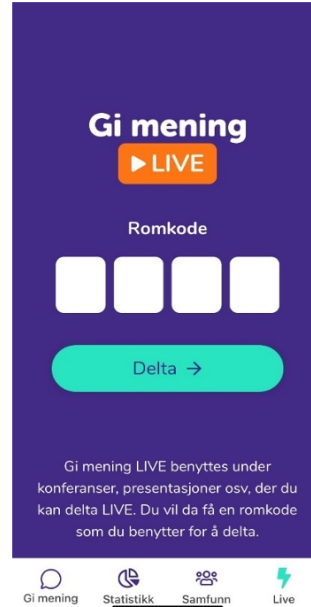
Even though users of the app are initially asked about their place of residence, gender and age, this information is only used to make it possible to sort received responses based on these parameters. Privacy is ensured, and external consultants have verified that GiMening is General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliant. That means all answers given in the app are completely anonymous.

Data collection and analysis

As researchers, our purpose in this preparatory phase of implementation was to study the development and innovation process using elements of trailing research (i.e. following and studying an intervention in the social field in "real-time") and different theoretical perspectives in the analysis. Thus, the evaluation was formative, taking place at the same time as the rapid feedback app was prepared for implementation and implemented, focusing on processes and reasons explaining how and why GiMening was successful or not (Olsen and Lindøe 2004; Stensaker 2013). The plan was to launch a full-scale implementation of GiMening in five Norwegian municipalities in a local democratic context (to increase dialogue between citizens and political leaders/youth councils) and in a school democratic context (to increase dialogue between pupils at secondary and high schools and school leaders/school councils). The three largest municipalities included in the study comprise around 26,000–29,000 residents, while the other two have fewer than 7,000 residents.

The first step was to determine how the involved actors perceived the situation before using GiMening (we called this a "zero-point analysis"). An approach relying on qualitative methods was chosen (1) to gain deeper insight into how municipal political leaders, school leaders and youth representatives perceive the function of existing democratic arenas and (2) to explore these actors' reflections on GiMening as a way to extend democracy. Our explorative analysis was based on 21 semi-structured group interviews (2-4 informants per interview) with political leaders, school leaders and members of municipal youth councils and school councils, respectively. Thus, in total, we interviewed 45 informants. The interviews were conducted from August 2020–October 2020 using Teams. The different actor groups were interviewed separately:

- Group interviews with the political leaders (the mayor and vice mayor) in five municipalities (in total 10 informants).
- Group interviews with youth council members in five municipalities (in total 10 informants).
- Group interviews with school leaders from three secondary schools and two high schools in different municipalities (in total 10 informants).
- Group interviews with pupils (school council members) from the schools (in total 15 informants).

In three of the municipalities, the political leadership informants were familiar with GiMening (had used it), due to their participation in the pre-project. The mayor of another municipality also had substantial knowledge of the app. To give an impression of how GiMening works, we spent time in the interviews explaining GiMening's functions and purposes, and we also showed the app to the informants.

All interviews were fully recorded and later transcribed. We used NVivo to sort and code the data. After thematically coding the interviews based on the questions in the semi-structured interview guide, we first analytically interpreted and sorted the empirical material according to two main thematic categories: (1) the function of current political engagement and (2) the possibilities and pitfalls related to the implementation and use of rapid feedback apps. Below, we present the results relating to the different contexts. The results based on this data do not tell us anything definitive about how e-participation tools may expand young people's participation in local or school democracies; however, our findings reveal what the involved actors (political leaders, school leaders and members of youth/school councils) think about GiMening as a democratic innovation (i.e. what expectations they have regarding the use of an e-participation solution to repair the democratic deficit).

Results

The current situation in local democracies

Overall, the mayors and vice mayors described a situation characterised by a decrease in political engagement in local democracies. Regarding formal political positions, it is difficult to convince people to run for office. The political leaders reported that they must engage in outreach activities and question relevant people directly using their networks to find candidates with sufficient interest, resources and expertise to join the municipal council. These leaders feel that the challenges related to the recruitment of new politicians stem from the demands put on local councillors, the tough political tone and the debate climate. As one vice mayor said:

> You are declared an idiot. You are accused of being corrupt, vicious, and idiotic. It is simply much tougher than it was before. I think that affects who actually wants to take that step and perform a civic duty.

The interviewed political leaders perceive themselves as less representative due to decreased party membership and support. They sense a distance between elected representatives and their people. As one participant said, "I do not really know how interested people are in politics. Sometimes, I feel like we are operating on a desert island". The informants believe that citizens do not perceive participation between elections as necessary because they have given politicians the power to make decisions on their behalf. While extant research explains this disengagement using different types of political inactivity (e.g. disillusioned citizens or low levels of self-efficacy), political leaders think this disengagement results from citizens being content with the current democratic circumstances. They view the lack of political interest as a result of public engagement being more individual and complex in general; citizens are only interested in participating in issues that directly affect them, they say. According to the mayors and vice mayors, it is particularly difficult to reach young people.

Thus, the mayors find it important to develop new and more attractive ways of engaging young people.

When the members of youth and school councils were asked to reflect on how to strengthen political engagement in general, we found a consistent answer: It is important to show that young people have a voice and opportunities to influence society. Moreover, according to the young informants, politics generally tend to be "dryly served" and presented as "boring". Here, we found a contradiction between politicians and youth in the empirical material. While the young people emphasised the importance of being involved in specific issues that affect their everyday lives (i.e. in everyday citizenship activities), the politicians described young people as uninterested in local issues. Members of youth councils generally find it difficult to obtain information about what is happening in municipalities. Young people do not read local newspapers, and information posted on municipal websites is often inaccessible and/or written in language that is difficult for most people to understand. Hence, young people want new information and participation channels that allow them to participate. A member of the youth council emphasised the importance of being involved:

> We [young people] must gain an understanding of how things work in a democracy. Moreover, the more we get involved [in politics] leading up to our turn to vote and represent Norway, the better it is.

The youth councils' members expressed a desire to be invited to participate more directly and to be informed about political issues and cases processed by the municipal council. They also want municipalities to contribute more to the visibility of youth council work by activating this democratic arena, as they perceive youth councils as a possible way of linking young citizens and municipal councils. Another common challenge highlighted by the young informants is that youth's interests, such as leisure activities, tend to be given low priority by the municipalities due to poor finances. Municipalities close leisure clubs, and young people thus do not feel heard. Municipalities focus on the lack of resources, and political leaders think it is difficult to show that they are prioritising children and young people because political processes are complex and lengthy:

> There are many questions and issues in a municipality that have an impact on young people's lives—a whole bunch of issues that they are not aware of. Maybe it can be concretised into simpler questions. I think that could be a way to make it easier to engage young citizens.

The findings regarding the current situation in local democracies point to a widespread desire among political leaders to reach a wider audience and find new ways of communicating with citizens during election periods. There is a need for new democratic arenas to obtain feedback from larger groups of citizens, especially young people—arenas in which elected representatives may hear the voices of those who usually do not raise their hands or participate in formal decision-making processes and established participatory arenas.

The current situation in school democracy

Decreasing political engagement is also apparent in the school democracy context. Most pupils in secondary and high schools do not want to be school council members. They often feel that issues are treated as a formality without any real change happening (e.g. "You feel that no matter what you say, you will not get through to the school officials anyway"). Our data contain examples of school council members clearly and unequivocally stating that they do not want to co-arrange or participate in school balls or certain Christmas arrangements. Despite this, school leaders push them to participate in arranging these events, disregarding the council's views. This affects pupils' motivation to participate in formal school democracy, as it is their experience that the school council's work is not taken seriously by the school leadership. When the school council's work is not perceived as important, poor attendance and engagement occur.

Low political engagement applies to pupils in general. The school council members described other students as "inactive"; it is rare for someone to have something they want to

address through a school council representative. School leaders want to get their pupils more "on the field", but many of them are modest, quiet and reluctant to express their opinion in front of other pupils. School leaders say that these challenges are often due to the setting and getting the pupils to see that there are real opportunities for influence because it is a useful experience for pupils to understand that they are being brought on board. According to school leaders, previous experience with school council work is useful: Those who have been members of the council for several years become familiar with the processes. However, some aspects of school life are fixed, and school leaders see it as a challenge to find school-related subjects and issues over which the school council can be given greater influence:

> They cannot be involved in deciding everything, but they can, of course, have a say in everything. But some things cannot be discussed, such as when the school day starts and ends, how many hours each subject has, and whether they should have grades or not.

Another challenge in the school democracy context is that implementing changes usually takes several years, meaning that pupils who start a process (e.g. getting new play racks) have left school once the change happens. Therefore, according to one of the school leaders, it is important to find issues that are close to the everyday lives of pupils to make the school council's work feel real. To summarise, on the one hand, the school leaders pointed to the importance of previous school council experience (e.g. in getting pupils to understand that their voices are heard). On the other hand, the pupils themselves pointed to the fact that earlier experiences in educational democratic arenas have led to declining confidence in their ability to gain influence through school councils. We now turn the focus towards the possibilities and pitfalls of introducing and using a rapid feedback app (GiMening) to increase young people's democratic participation.

Possibilities and pitfalls during implementation and use

Most of the informants agreed that an app would be an easy way to get in touch with young people, as everyone has their phones on them at all times. In this way, they can be met "where they are". However, several informants, especially youth and political leaders, pointed out that it is a prerequisite to download the app, highlighting the importance of the way GiMening is promoted. Moreover, all informants considered the relevance of the questions asked (the themes) important. The purpose of the question must be clear, and the themes must affect youth directly to motivate the use of the tool (e.g. asking them if they want to prioritise a better bus service or a better school canteen). Thus, according to the young people interviewed, it is important to understand youth's everyday citizenship activities and what kinds of issues they are interested in (e.g. school and leisure activities). Furthermore, both youth and school leaders stressed the importance of adapting the design and content of GiMening (e.g. for differences in reading skills). These informants suggested that the app's interface should include voice functions to make it possible for children and youth to receive and deliver information through oral messages.

Informants from all actor groups experienced a high threshold for participation in public debate in local democracies and school democracies. Many citizens/pupils want to contribute anonymously because they are reluctant to express their opinions publicly. The political leaders emphasised that anonymity is of great importance in encouraging more people to speak. In social media, disproportionate attention tends to be given to statements made by a few, often loud-mouthed and very active individuals: "When calm and sane people try to comment on a post, they are sabotaged", one mayor stated. GiMening is likely a more anonymous way for citizens/pupils to contribute their opinions. According to the political leaders, the app itself may enhance the more general political discussion around the lunch table if an engaging question has been sent; however, the mayors and vice mayors expressed uncertainty about how many questions they can ask: "We cannot shoot out questions. We have to be a little strategic to avoid people getting tired of it". Also, if too many opinions/answers are received, it would be difficult to administer and implement them in the municipalities and schools.

The analysis showed that the informants perceived the potential of GiMening in different ways. Some political leaders believe that the most important issue for citizens is to be consulted: "People, in general, accept decisions they disagree with if they just think they have been heard". Others are more concerned about representation—that is, the possibility of forming a representative impression of the public's opinion. By getting a lightning-fast response from a representative sample of citizens, the use of rapid feedback apps will make it possible for elected representatives (or members of youth/school councils) to form an impression of the population's opinions. Thus, some of the informants were concerned about the number of responses and who would respond, emphasising the importance to get as many answers as possible to represent overall public opinion. However, others were not concerned about representation and instead wanted to use GiMening to attract groups of citizens that are normally unwilling to participate (e.g. young people). The latter is what the idea behind the tool was: To involve a wider audience, i.e. people who do not usually participate in formal democratic channels.

Our decision-making informants (political leaders and school leaders) were uncertain regarding the degree to which the opinions voiced through the app should be taken into account (i.e. the level and goal of citizen participation). The political leaders regarded the app as an opportunity to bring in conflicting opinions, promote better and broader public dialogue and, consequently, increase public involvement in local policy issues. One mayor stated, "Then, after getting people's opinions, the different political constellations must decide which voices or interests they choose to pay attention to" (e-consultation). However, several decision-makers suggested that citizens' engagement with the app will deteriorate if they do not experience their input being used. The political leaders were also concerned about creating unrealistic expectations among citizens, such as people perceiving GiMening as a voting tool (e-decision-making). Another concern was that the legitimacy of municipal council politicians would be overridden.

Regarding the original idea of the app presented in the introduction, GiMening builds on the assumption that most people want to use their voice; however, citizens/pupils are not interested in being directly involved in time-consuming political activities. Also, the hope is that increasing feedback to decision-makers could improve policymaking and the quality of policies, thereby strengthening public trust and raising awareness of political issues. Connected to the six key targets introduced in the theory section, Table 1 summarises the main findings of our analysis. GiMening is not expected to achieve all of these targets, but we consider these criteria useful for application in further discussions of the informants' reflections on the possibilities and pitfalls of implementing and using rapid feedback apps.

Table 1: Possibilities and pitfalls related to the implementation of a rapid feedback app (inspired by Wirtz et al. 2018)

	Key targets	Possibilities	Pitfalls
1.	Increase overall participation	It could provide a lower threshold/ a quick and easy way to participate.	It could be difficult to reach all groups and motivate people to download the app.
2.	Enhance information provision	It might help keep citizens/pupils updated about (political) issues when they get feedback.	When only used to provide information, citizens' motivation is negatively affected.
3.	Improve the quality of public policies	If decision-makers use the input, decisions may be better informed and effective.	When citizens do not receive feedback on how their input is applied, the use of the app fails.
4.	Strengthen public trust	Two-way dialogue and well-informed decisions may increase the level of trust.	The app may fail to make decision-making transparent (lack of feedback on how the results are used).

	Key targets	Possibilities	Pitfalls
5.	Improve responsibility for policymaking	It could increase citizens' awareness of their responsibility to voice their interests in local decision-making processes.	If decision-makers fail to use the input, their reciprocal commitment to their citizens is not fulfilled.
6.	Raise public awareness and increase understanding of policy issues	Young people and "standby citizens" may experience increased interest from this opportunity to use their voices.	When decision-makers do not take special—or minority—interests into account, it fails.

In the next section, we turn to the discussion concerning how GiMening may stimulate young people's democratic participation, including suggesting key points of awareness to enhance possibilities and avoid pitfalls in a full-scale implementation, which is the objective of this article.

Discussion

In this paper, we seek to answer two questions: How do the involved actors (political leaders, school leaders and members of youth/school councils) perceive the need for extended digital citizen participation, and what are their thoughts on the possibilities and pitfalls associated with the implementation and use of GiMening? The findings show that the democratic deficit is experienced quite concretely in all the informants' everyday lives. The political leaders feel a lack of connection with their electorate, the youth council members feel insufficiently involved in formal political processes and the school council members feel they are not taken seriously by school leaders. Concerning the need to *increase overall participation* (key target 1), GiMening has the potential to be a fast and easy way to communicate with a wider audience. There is reason to believe that this may in particular increase participation among young people—the action-oriented networkers who expect access to information and opportunities for non-binding, anonymous commitment (Andersen 2011; Hansen 2021). (Andersen 2011; Hansen 2021). However, like digital channels in general, several marketing initiatives will be required to convince people to download the app (Schröder 2014) and help this solution become a new practice. GiMening must also be adapted for different users (including youth in general) based on universal design principles, meaning that the application should be "usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Story 2001, p. 4.3). According to Saldivar et al. (2019, p. 192), civic technology is particularly challenging because "it justifies itself as a means for increasing participation, while at the same time it can potentially exclude people if it does not consider the capabilities and resources available to all citizens". GiMening was not initially developed according to these principles, which is a vital issue to consider.

Our findings highlight several dilemmas related to the implementation and use of GiMening. Our data illustrate that the decision-maker informants, on the one hand, perceive a need to bring more people's voices to the decision-making table. They expressed a need for new channels for sharing input and new ways to involve the silent majority (including "stand-by citizens"). However, on the other hand, political and school leaders are afraid to undermine their own legitimacy, to weigh interests and to make a final assessment—that is, to disturb or destroy formal decision-making processes. A dilemma arises when decision makers (i.e. local politicians/school leaders) must decide whether a problem or issue is "suitable" for being the subject of citizen/pupil feedback. If the municipal or school council does not have sufficient confidence in the respondents' ability to contribute their voices, the questions asked through the rapid feedback app may be too simple and superficial (e.g. what food is to be offered in the

school's canteen instead of questions concerning e.g. the design of the school's outdoor area) resulting in a narrowing of opportunities for engaging citizens/pupils.

Politicians' doubts and concerns regarding the use of GiMening are strongly aligned with extant research showing that the biggest barrier to digital citizen participation lies within public institutions themselves (Randma-liiv and Vooglaid 2020; Schröder 2014), where cultural notions and institutional logics of appropriateness may prevent new practices and thereby inhibit democratic innovations (Sønderskov 2019, p. 2020). This means that despite the great potential for GiMening to *enhance information provision* (key target 2) by helping to keep citizens/pupils updated about political issues in local/school democracy, there is a risk that decision-makers' uncertainty will lead to a situation in which the app is used only as an e-information tool instead of as a means of engaging citizens in contributing to and deliberating on public policies (e-consultation).

The democratic quality of these endeavours may also be questioned; it is difficult to capture the richness of people's views through an app. Therefore, like most other digital participation platforms, the app is likely to be used at a thin participation level (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). Hence, another dilemma arises: It is important to remember that citizens are only motivated to participate when it is clear that their involvement can lead to change (Smith 2005). When the questions asked through GiMening are too superficial or uncontroversial, the respondents' motivation is negatively affected. This may lead to citizens/pupils exiting, which results in a failure to exploit their potential to *improve the quality of public policies* (key target 3). Decision-makers must use respondent input in formal processes to prevent respondents from losing motivation. Therefore, the sender must provide feedback after a round of questions regarding how peoples' input is utilised, thus clarifying the extent to which respondents' voices have been heard and how their responses are treated throughout related formal political processes. This, in turn, will affect citizens'/pupils' confidence in decision-making bodies, including whether they respond to the next question. If their input is not considered by decision-makers, their participation is symbolic (Arnstein 1969). The use of an app can lower the threshold for using one's voice in general; however, there will always be the opportunity for one to "exit" if a relevant response from politicians is not received. This is closely related to the possibility of *strengthening public trust* (key target 4). While well-informed decisions may increase trust levels by establishing a two-way dialogue, the opposite occurs if such a dialogue is not successfully achieved. The management of expectations is important to avoid citizens' degree of trust weakening instead of being strengthened (Wilson et al. 2019).

Improved responsibility for policymaking (key target 5) depends on citizens'/pupils' awareness of the importance of using their voices in decision-making processes. Here, barriers related to young people's participation exist. Research points to a lack of democratic self-efficacy in the sense of a widespread belief among youth that their voices cannot lead to change (Bruun, Lieberkind and Schunck 2016; Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd 2018; Nørgaard Kristensen 2016). The results of this study confirm this; there may be structural barriers in municipalities in the form of low priority being given to decisions affecting young people's everyday lives, as well as a lack of readiness on the part of some school leaders to listen to pupils. Thus, youth believe that it is useless to share their opinions because no meaningful change will occur. Therefore, it may be a good idea to allocate a specific budget to projects decided upon via surveys in GiMening. Regarding the last key target for e-participation, *to increase public awareness and understanding of policy issues* (key target 6), the results indicate that young people and "standby citizens" may develop increased interest by being provided with new opportunities to share their opinions. GiMening also allows these people to participate anonymously, which is another benefit (Berg 2017). Such lightning-fast responses or snapshots of opinions, however, may or may not be well thought through, and the deliberative dimension is missing. But it is possible to arrange for more deliberation, e.g. by using the live function in public meetings, where rounds of questions is carried out following presentations or discussions.

Conclusion

Our data suggest that the democratic deficit is experienced by political leaders, school leaders and members of youth and school councils in their everyday activities. Our study illustrates that quick-response apps (e.g. GiMening) hold promise as a means of enhancing democratic channels for the voices (Hirschmann 1970) of youth and other citizens. Thus, there may be some potential to extend democracy through the implementation of such a supplementary digital participation channel. For example, the analysis shows that the involved actors think that GiMening may reach more people (including new groups) than traditional democratic participation channels, that it is easy to use and that it may give decision-makers immediate access to citizens'/pupils' perceptions of specific issues.

We have suggested that the *possibilities* this tool holds are as follows, it could:

- lower the threshold for participation;
- keep citizens/pupils updated about central issues;
- make decisions better informed and more usable;
- increase the levels of trust;
- raise awareness of one's responsibility to voice one's interests; and
- motivate the interest of young people and disillusioned citizens or "standby citizens" (people who are willing to participate if needed).

However, the empirical material also highlights several dilemmas that must be considered when discussing whether the app's potential can be realised. For example, it is important to highlight the degree to which decision-makers trust citizens'/pupils' voices in decision-making processes. If decision-makers are hesitant to use new e-participation tools at a higher level (e.g. to consult or collaborate with the public), this may result in self-reinforcing processes (i.e. if the rapid feedback app is used only as an information tool, people will lose their motivation to be involved because there are no real opportunities for influence). Decision makers' assumptions about citizens'/pupils' inability or unwillingness to participate are thus confirmed.

We have also suggested *pitfalls* that may decrease the trust levels of youth and other citizens and that may increase the possibility of exit. Pitfalls may occur if:

- the rate of downloading the app is low;
- the tool is not adapted to different groups (universal design);
- the tool is used for one-way information only;
- feedback from decision-makers is missing;
- decision-making processes are not transparent;
- decision-makers are not applying the input; and
- special—or minority—interests are not being considered.

Although the results reflect the existing literature, the findings provide a more nuanced picture of the implementation and use of rapid feedback apps by suggesting points of awareness to avoid pitfalls. Even though the case study was conducted in Norway, we expect there to be contextual similarities in other countries with similar democratic institutional structures. All European countries have local government systems based on representative democracy, where elected politicians make important municipal decisions (Lidström et al. 2016). Measures to increase public participation in political decisions through e-participation solutions are implemented all over the world. This means that the findings of this article may also be valuable to non-Norwegian European designers of digital democratic innovations and valuable to municipalities thinking about implementing similar solutions to the GiMening application. However, the study suffers from limitations that must be addressed in future research. The analysis was based on qualitative interview data involving actors from five Norwegian municipalities. Only six of the 45 informants had previously used the app due to

their participation in the pre-project. However, to give an impression of how GiMening works, we spent time in the interviews explaining GiMening's functions and purposes, and we also showed the app to the informants. Future in-depth case studies on the implementation of e-participation initiatives will require a broader scope with a comparative element, and they may also need to rely on quantitative data.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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