



Youth Participation in a Digital World: Designing and Implementing Spaces, Programs, and Methodologies

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Youth Participation in a Digital World:

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING SPACES, PROGRAMS, AND METHODOLOGIES

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Bluebook

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Youth Participation in a Digital World: Designing and Implementing Spaces, Programs, and Methodologies

By Sandra Cortesi, Alexa Hasse, & Urs Gasser.

This spotlight seeks to share Youth and Media’s initial insights around ways different stakeholders – such as international organizations, companies, researchers, and educators – can build participation models (e.g., spaces, programs, and methodologies) that enable meaningful youth (ages 12-18) engagement in our digital world. The paper, inspired by results from a 2020 global online youth consultation and informed by different implementation pilots, highlights four specific models of youth participation: youth labs, learning and co-design spaces, youth boards, and participatory research. The spotlight describes, for each model, the overall goal, what adult and youth participation might look like, potential challenges and barriers within and across models, possible first steps in designing such models, and existing examples of these forms of engagement.



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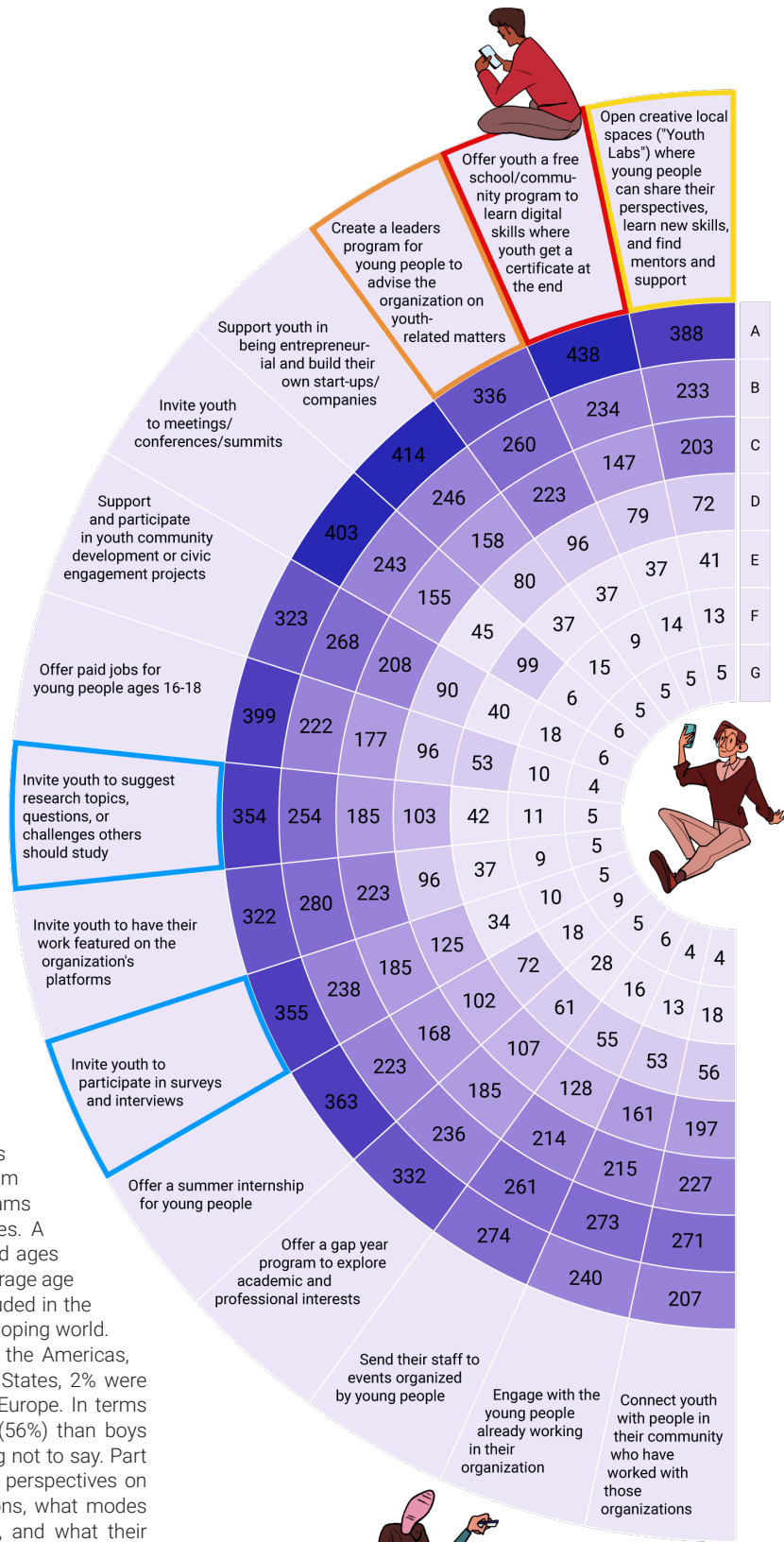
I. INTRODUCTION

Across many areas of decision-making and digital life, from health and well-being to the future of product design, there is an **increased interest** in and awareness of the promise of enhanced youth participation in processes that were previously almost exclusively the domains of adults. The drivers behind this “participatory promise” are manifold and include the normative, practical, empirical, and educational. For example, from a normative perspective, one may say that youth have an integral role to play in helping to develop programs and policies that will impact them. And from a practical standpoint, policies and programs co-created with young people will likely be more relevant to youth’s needs, interests, and backgrounds.

With increased interest and awareness comes the question of how to meaningfully engage youth and what participation models suit their contextual realities and needs (e.g., youth’s unique digital access and skill levels). In light of that, a number

of organizations, including Youth and Media (YaM), have been exploring, designing, and implementing a variety of models and consulting with youth about their perceptions of these participatory spaces, programs, methodologies, and other efforts, including which aspects they find most valuable. One such YaM youth consultation was done in collaboration with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) (see further details about the consultation in the box*). As demonstrated in the visualization on the following page, there is much interest from youth in participating in a variety of models. For the purpose of this document, we have chosen to highlight four models – some are closer to methodologies, while others describe spaces and the types of engagement that might be carried out within them – that youth expressed interest in and that have been piloted in different contexts and regions, allowing us to identify specific modes of participation, initial observations, and key challenges and opportunities.





* In 2020, the Youth and Media team at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University supported the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in an online consultation (in English, French, and Spanish) of young people from across the globe. The survey asked youth about areas ranging from the skills they want to learn from internships and other youth engagement programs to the global issues that most impact their lives. A total of 1,138 participants from around the world ages 10 to 25 completed the online survey, with an average age of 16.9. Perspectives from 58 countries are included in the data, with the large majority (86%) from the developing world. Overall, across all respondents, 60% were from the Americas, 24% were from Africa, 2% were from the Arab States, 2% were from Asia and the Pacific, and 12% were from Europe. In terms of gender identification, there were more girls (56%) than boys (40%), with about 4% self-identifying or preferring not to say. Part of the survey aimed to better understand youth perspectives on how they would like to engage with organizations, what modes of participation they would find most valuable, and what their participation in such models could look like. One question asked: "A number of organizations are trying to engage more closely with young people. Do you find the following ways to engage helpful?" A follow-up question asked: "What other ideas do you have as to how organizations could engage young people like you?" Supported and inspired by those results, Youth and Media has been developing templates and pilots of some of these models. A comprehensive overview of the survey, including high-level takeaways, results, and recommendations, may be found at <https://perma.cc/9A48-VYMP>.



Survey Response	Amount of Responses
A: Yes, extremely	1-50
B: Yes, considerably	51-100
C: Yes, somewhat	101-150
D: Yes, a little	151-200
E: No, not at all	201-250
F: I don't know	251-300
G: Prefer not to say	301-350
	351-400
	401-450

II. CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES ACROSS PARTICIPATION MODELS



There is currently no single best practice that applies to the design and implementation of youth participation models, and there are a variety of elements to consider and challenges to address by those developing and implementing the models. Looking ahead, there is a need to cultivate a solid evidence base around such models and their best practices by documenting and sharing learnings from these efforts, generating additional research, and filling the gaps where evidence is lacking.

Overall, it's important to consider that the participation models outlined in this spotlight require a great deal of investment, thought, and energy both from the adult/organizational side (including organizational leadership) and the youth side. Such an investment can mean that youth participation models are not conceptualized as one-off engagements (e.g., at an event or as part of a consultation), but rather as interfaces that can be sustained over time to provide youth with opportunities to cultivate supportive and long-term youth-adult mentoring relationships. These models also require, in many cases, the cultivation of skills, such as an adult's ability to think about young people and the contributions they may offer in new ways. Additionally, the models call for young people to bring and apply passion and excitement in exploring different thematic areas and issues as co-collaborators with adults. Conversely, adults

are asked to consider how passion and excitement could be fostered among youth. Finally, and most importantly, it's essential that adults are committed to actively listening to youth and – no matter how big or small young people's contributions – taking their insights seriously, incorporating them in the advancement of the specific issue(s) at hand and youth inclusion more broadly.

In addition to these baseline questions, we have identified four design challenges across participation models. (1) Promoting equity and inclusion: Not all youth are able to participate under the same terms – significant disparities in participation persist for youth across multiple dimensions, such as geographic location, skill and education level, social class, race, age, and gender. It's crucial to create programs that are responsive to the cultural, political, economic, and social contexts that shape young people's everyday lives. It's also essential to consider ways to make participation efforts even more inclusive and accessible to youth from different socioeconomic statuses (e.g., by providing financial support), geographic regions, and communities. (2) Making modes of participation more accessible: Many models require youth to spend significant time and other resources in addition to already having relatively packed schedules/lives. As such, participation needs to be seen as a dynamic (rather

than gradual or linear) process and include varying degrees and modes of participation. We recommend not viewing specific forms of participation as more valuable or desirable than others, as even seemingly mundane activities can lead to powerful outcomes or serve as entry points for further types of engagement.

(3) Enabling a mindset shift: A common challenge in youth participation models entails shifting the power structure inherent in adult-youth relationships. It may then be useful for adults involved in such models to critically consider how power dynamics allow or prevent youth's participation in actions and decisions; the power resources people have or lack; and the position that different people involved take in this power structure.

(4) Embedding oversight: Since implementing participation models can be quite complex, it may be helpful to consider the involvement of an oversight entity that keeps track of all elements and helps ensure that the model and activities have youth's rights and best interest as a guiding principle. In academia, such an entity could be an ethics review board. In contexts where such entities are not available, consulting with experts is advised.



III. SELECTED MODELS



1. YOUTH LAB

A youth lab is envisioned as a space (which may be virtual but is often physical) within, for instance, an academic center, company, or non-governmental organization that convenes a group of young people with adult stakeholders to create knowledge exchange opportunities. Compared to some other participation models described here, youth labs are unique in that they require not only a group of adults excited and able to collaborate with youth, a clear vision and thoughtfully-designed program, as well as actionable content that youth and adults can work on together, but a physical or virtual space where youth and adults can learn from and with each other.

Purpose: To facilitate human connections and a space that enables (a multi-stakeholder) engagement among youth and adults, often through a set of semi-structured activities, explorations, or exercises. Through the engagement, lab participants can learn about each other's attitudes and values, gain new knowledge and skills, do (participatory) research, and/or work on practicable and concrete use cases and innovative ideas.

Youth participation: (1) Share opinions and perspectives about specific issues, themes, and developments. (2) Provide feedback on existing use cases, products, programs, research, or other efforts or contribute to the development of new ideas, content, or products. (3) Teach and learn from each other specific knowledge and skills.

Adult participation: (1) Through conversations with youth, learn about the attitudes, values, and perspectives of young people and their relevance for one's work. (2) Receive valuable input about existing product ideas or co-develop new ideas through innovative workshops. (3) Learn specific skills from youth and serve as a mentor and teacher for them. (4) With young people, co-create ideas and products in one's area of work that speak to youth.



Three challenges: (1) Manage the, at times, disruptive nature of having youth in a lab for many hours of the day, while asking for active engagement, supporting mentorship, and involving youth in interesting tasks. (2) Ensure that there is a level of consistency in adult participation. Each lab needs at least one lab facilitator. (3) Populate the lab with exciting and fun session formats where youth feel like they can meaningfully contribute and that their inputs are taken seriously.

Possible first step: Map key questions that are to be explored in the youth lab. As the exchange tends to be less structured/formal, it may help to have a defined path and goals.

Examples: Two examples of a youth lab are the [20 Minuten Youth Lab](#) and the [Tages-Anzeiger Youth Lab](#) for journalists and youth.



2. LEARNING AND CO-DESIGNING SPACE

A learning and co-design space is a collaborative and creative environment that brings together youth with experts (e.g., staff, faculty) to learn from and with each other. Much like the youth lab, this space requires a group of adults who help manage the space, as well as actionable content and, at times, collaboration with additional subject experts. Further, such spaces require the inclusion of those who are skilled in instructional design, and learning and education more broadly.

Purpose: To place youth at the center of learning, design, and advocacy processes. In this space, youth are empowered to learn new digital skills and co-design learning resources with other young people and adults. The co-design process allows youth and adults to create learning resources that connect youth's interests and passions with different knowledge areas. As youth engage with learning resources, whether by participating in the co-design process or completing the resources in a different setting, they will gain digital skills in an impactful and youth-friendly way.

Youth participation: (1) Learn new subject areas and digital skills (and possibly receive a certificate upon completion). (2) Cultivate metacognitive capacities. For instance, in the case of co-creating educational content, youth must consider how the content can be framed in a way that can be understood by other learners. (3) Co-create content not only with experts but also with other young people, providing spaces for peer-to-peer teaching and learning.

Adult participation: (1) Equip youth with digital skills, which may range from the ability to advocate for a cause they are passionate about to the capacity to be aware of, create, collect, represent, evaluate, interpret, and analyze data. (2) Develop materials and programs that align with youth's interests, needs, and experiences. (3) Engage in design thinking processes with youth, such as ideating, prototyping, and testing.

Three challenges: (1) Adapt to youth's needs and schedules. For example, meet youth in the communities they live in versus expecting young people to go to a specific location/organization.



(2) Allow for adequate time for testing and iteration. As co-design entails testing and refining the end product(s), the process requires sufficient time for iteration. (3) Ensure that youth understand the language one introduces (particularly the more technical vocabulary) and, by the same token, clarify any terms young co-designers introduce that one may not be familiar with.

Possible first step: Identify a space where youth like to spend time (e.g., library, museum, community space) and explore if that space could be transformed into a co-design environment.

Examples: The ITU intends to propose to youth digital skills and capacity-building programs through the [Digital Transformation Centres](#) and the ITU Academy. These efforts will provide guidance, understanding, and feedback to ITU on relevant youth issues. As another example, the YaM team has [co-designed](#) over 100 open access educational resources about the digital environment with youth themselves, available on the team's [Digital Citizenship+ \(Plus\) Resource Platform](#).



3. YOUTH BOARD

A program to engage a group of young people who work with senior executives at the highest level of an organization (e.g., senior management or board of directors) on strategic initiatives. Designing and facilitating such a program requires expertise in program design, but, more importantly, the ability to translate the questions or needs of senior executives into challenges youth are able to engage with, an understanding of the organization, and a sense for how to best empower youth as part of such a board.

Purpose: To work with a group of young people who serve as “bridge builders” between an organization and the world of youth to leverage their insights regarding future requirements for programs, products, services, and processes, and to diversify the perspectives that senior executives are exposed to. Including youth perspectives in decision-making at the strategy level may also help inform policies, activities, and programs that empower youth and foster inclusion. Additionally, this model can help cultivate supportive and trusting relationships between senior executives and young people within specific settings and, more broadly, promote a youth-centered lens across different sectors.

Youth participation: (1) Highlight trends and shifts connected to digital technologies and (youth) usage patterns. (2) Contribute to an organization being perceived within the industry as innovation-oriented and a topic leader in terms of issues at the intersection of digital technologies and youth. (3) Advise an organization by contributing ideas on defined key topics and asking critical and constructive questions to point out weaknesses and “blind spots.”

Adult participation: (1) Meet regularly with youth and promote meaningful conversations. (2) Cultivate a culture at one’s organization that values youth inclusion. (3) Help transform youth inputs so that they can be incorporated in the implementation of the strategic plan.

Three challenges: (1) Have senior employees lead the creation and implementation of a youth board and not delegate it to HR or a more junior employee. (2) Consider engaging with “disruptors” – a small and diverse group of people that have creative ideas, enjoy complexity and problem-solving processes, and are



interested in contributing and sharing their knowledge in a constructive way. (3) Regularly incorporate input and feedback from youth, demonstrating that their perspectives are valued.

Possible first step: Identify a senior executive willing to champion the board and receive buy-in from the organization’s leadership team and those at the most senior executive level. While the youth board is meant to engage with senior executives, the board will depend on support and interactions with others in different functions.

Examples: Informed by findings from the youth survey described in this spotlight, the ITU launched a [Generation Connect Visionaries Board](#) call for people ages 18 to 30. Additionally, the Council of Europe has created an [Advisory Council on Youth](#). Other organizations are in the process of developing youth boards focused on specific themes. For instance, the World Economic Forum’s [AI Youth Council](#) convenes young people ages 14 to 21 from different parts of the world to share their perspectives on AI ethics and governance. [Youthwise](#), by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), brings together young adults ages 18 to 30 to discuss their hopes and concerns related to the future of work. And Gucci created a [Youth Shadow Board](#) to provide insights around issues the company’s executive committee is considering. Overall, it’s fair to say that previous youth boards and their specifics (e.g., composition, purpose, programmatic content, incentives, etc.) have not been well-documented – very few public examples exist – and most youth boards focus on young adults (i.e., people ages 18 to 24).

4. PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

A research model that enables young people to participate as co-researchers in every step of the research process (from conceptualizing the themes to defining the methodology and the creation of outputs). This model of youth participation depends on adults having research experience as well as an ability to see youth as equitable partners, while being able to understand how youth's knowledge and skills best fit each component of the research process.

Purpose: To focus on research and knowledge creation (within academia but also in other research settings) related to youth's actual experiences (vs. what adults perceive those experiences are) to then develop solutions, content, programs, and policies that are able to connect to young people's lives and realities.

Youth participation: (1) Share how they conceptualize different research themes, connecting such themes to their own interests and experiences. (2) Offer their ideas around what methodologies best capture different types of data. For instance, on the YaM team, the decision to both audio- and video-record focus groups was based upon a teen's input that they cannot easily distinguish their friends' voices. (3) Contribute to outputs in creative and innovative ways (e.g., by adding illustrated visuals that can make the work more accessible to different audiences).

Adult participation: (1) Ensure that there are clearly defined, feasible ways that youth can contribute to all aspects of the research process, from the conceptualization of themes examined to the development of outputs. (2) Provide young people with mentorship, and, if possible, help to connect the activities young people engage in as part of the research process to youth's career goals. (3) With youth, explore one's blind spots and deficits in how research is framed and articulate these areas for improvement.



Three challenges: (1) Tailor youth engagement activities to young people's age and experience levels (e.g., a 12-year-old may not be as familiar with more technical language as a 17-year-old). (2) Be flexible and willing to potentially adjust the research process as it progresses, co-designing the process itself with youth. (3) Shift one's mindset to not just view youth as participants or objects of study but active co-leaders in the research process.

Possible first step: Assemble a group of motivated youth and co-design the research process itself (e.g., identify what knowledge and skills each can contribute so it becomes an equitable partnership, what modes of engagement are feasible, and what research themes can be explored so they well match youth's lived experiences).

Example: The YaM team engages in the participatory research process. That is, the team involves youth as active contributors in every step of their research, from conceptualizing the themes explored to defining the methodology and the documentation and visualization of outputs. See [here](#) to learn more about the process.

IV. A WAY FORWARD

We hope that the youth participation models featured here are showcasing the promise of such models, while also outlining a set of considerations and key challenges that one needs to address when designing and implementing the models.

Across models, our work highlights that youth are eager to participate; are often excited about helping to impact organizations, communities, and their lives, as well as those of others; and bring their own knowledge and meaning-making that are valuable for models to include. Yet, it's important to acknowledge that not all models may be equally feasible for all youth. It's key to consider – both from a youth and an adult perspective – how young people envision their own participation, what models make participation more feasible, and which spaces, programs, methodologies, and other efforts youth may find most valuable.

The participation models we have explored enable youth to participate in diverse ways, ideally tailored to their contexts, needs, and interests. And while each model highlights the promise of youth participation, it will be key to carefully think through all model options, the challenges and opportunities they come with, and the limitations in terms of what can be accomplished with each model. Being clear and transparent about these limitations is important, not just for the participating youth, but also for the adults and organizations involved. Models that overpromise what everyone is able to contribute and gain from the experience may decrease people's excitement to further explore, implement, and participate in such models.

Moving forward, despite all challenges, we as adults and organizations should strive to demonstrate leadership and become key allies for youth. Together, we can unlock the full potential of stronger youth participation, particularly for youth from underrepresented communities, and learn to appreciate and support youth as co-collaborators as we shape our future.

