

Abstract submitted to

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## **Media (and) sustainability: Crises, paradoxes and potentials**

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### **Sustainable democracy in digital society. Young Danes, information, and democratic engagement**

The argument in this paper triangulates three points: young citizens must be seen as bearers of future sustainable democracy (Mascheroni & Murri 2017; Cammaerts et al., 2014); informed citizenship (redefined) continues to establish a vital element in the foundation of sustainable democracy (Bennett 2008); sustainable democracy depends on the collective ability to allow new forms of information and informed citizenship, and to support young generation to develop democratic self-efficacy (Cortesei et al, 2020). Following this, the research question can be framed as *What are the potential consequences of a discrepancy between young Danes' perception of their informed-citizen level, and their reflections on their opportunities for democratic participation in digital society?*

The paper draws on 16 interviews with 16-24-year-old Danes conducted in 2021 and a qualitative study with first-year high school students conducted at the present (winter/early spring 2024). Both studies investigate questions about perceptions of information and democratic literacy, respectively civic and democratic participation in digital society. These findings are supported by results from a survey on the use of social media in the Danish election campaign 2022 (Stald et al. 2023); the annual survey reports on Youth and Democracy (DUF, 2022 & 2023); the annual survey reports on Danes' use of news media (Schrøder et al., 2022 & 2023).

The term *Sustainable Democracy* usually describes development of new democracies by learning from established democracies (e.g., Przeworski, 1995) or an actual connection between sustainability goals and democratic ambition (e.g., Ward, 2008). In the context of this paper, however, the term is used to frame the challenge of sustaining democracy while also innovating the idea, foundations, and practices of democracy in alignment with societal development, informed citizenship, and the experiences and life-practices of young people.

Our informants believe in democracy and claim Denmark to be the best possible democracy, but almost all feel underinformed, without influence – and they are apologetic about it (Stald & Balle, forthcoming). At the first encounter most of our informants claim that they know little about politics and democracy and that they 'only' get their news and information, casually, by algorithmic default, through social media (Schofield Clark & Marci, 2017; Stald, 2023).

When we deep into the data, however, even the least confident informants demonstrate knowledge and opinions about a relatively large pool of international, national, and local topics and issues. The pivotal point is the prominent perception of politics and democracy as something that takes place elsewhere, with/among someone who know more, who have more authority. But, in many cases the informants talk

themselves into a realization that politics and democracy is also relatable for them, in their everyday life. This is a vital element in sustaining the foundations of democracy.

(An early version of this paper was presented at ECREA 2022. The present paper strengthens the argument based on new research).