

Political Participation Among Youth in the Edgeryders Project (DRAFT)

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1 Introduction

1.1 About the Edgeryders Project

Edgeryders is a pilot project initiated by the Council of Europe with the purpose of gathering policy input on the lives of young Europeans today directly from interactions with a web platform where young people themselves, called "edgeryders" tell about their experiences by completing "mission reports" on several different topics. This text will examine how edgeryders take political action and participate in political processes. It will also see how the kinds of participation that edgeryders are involved in differ from how European youth policy imagine political participation and if it is possible to bridge these differences.

That the Edgeryders project want to examine political participation seems natural. One of the major ideas behind Edgeryders is that the citizens are experts when it comes to their own lives and as experts they should be involved in the policy process. Edgeryders explicitly wants to define itself against a passive presentation of youth as a problem category that policymakers and experts have to figure out and come up with policies for.¹ Therefore, Edgeryders itself is an experiment in policy making that is based on a new kind of political participation.

Within the policy field there is a wide-spread concern about the state of European youth. The economic crisis have hit the young people of Europe hard with high unemployment rates and there is concern about the low numbers of youth participating in traditional political parties, institutions and organizations. The concept of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) highlights concerns about a generation left out of society, excluded from participation, influence and possibilities of self-realization.² The way Edgeryders want to counter this image is to listen to the stories from young people themselves about how they build a common future; making a living, socializing, learning and trying to influence the world around them. By creating a platform that lets young people speak for themselves about the topics they care about, Edgeryders hope to show that youth are more active and creative in building this common future than the negative concept of NEETs suggest.

1.2 Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to paint a picture of how edgeryders, the young people in Europe creating futures on the edges, take political action; how they view political institutions, how they participate in protest movements and how they invent new ways of engaging politically and invent new forms of political systems.

I will also undertake a critical reading of current European youth policy to see how they try to engage youth in policy and how they view the status of youth participation today. How is the relation between citizen activism and political institutions imagined and what is considered to be political participation?

¹See for example the description of the campaign "We, the People" Edgeryders, "We, The People" (2012), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/campaign/we-people>.

²J. Bynner and S. Parsons, "Social exclusion and the transition from school to work: The case of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET)," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 60 (2002): 289–309.

From these empirical investigations I will identify gaps between how edgeryders take political action and how the youth policies imagine political participation.

From this I will identify possible bridges between the two realities. How can they interact with each other, under what conditions, on whose initiative?

1.3 Method

To get an overview of how edgeryders take part in political processes I have conducted a study of the mission reports and comments to those reports on the Edgeryders platform. This has primarily been focused on the campaign "We, the People" which specifically dealt with political participation. However, mission reports from other campaigns are also relevant, such as "Caring for Commons", "Making a Living" and "Resilience". This is an important point, because as we shall see, edgeryders do not restrict their political participation to a separate sphere but keep a holistic view on all the whole of their lives. In exploring the site I have gone through all the mission reports in "We, the People" and followed links to other campaigns as well as following the most discussed mission reports. From this exploration, topics have emerged that I feel gives an overview of the most crucial aspects of how politics and participation are viewed from the edgeryders.

For the section of European youth policy I have analyzed several recent official reports and documents from the Council of Europe and the European Commission that focuses on youth policy. I have focused on but not limited myself to documents about youth political participation because those policies are also shaped by the general view of the situation of youth in Europe today. From this material I have constructed an analysis of how European youth policy considers the topic of participation in the political process and what the aim of the youth policy regarding participation is. I have also used some second hand material from research on youth participation that gives larger overviews of the field.

In addition to this primary material I have used secondary literature to aid in the analysis. This has been research focusing on youth policy and youth in general as well as the state of political institutions and citizen participation in the political process. I have also relied on political theory, primarily regarding new forms of political participation that we can see examples of on Edgeryders and how these forms can be interpreted. This comes in several categories that has been chosen for how they correspond to forms of political participation I have found in the mission reports. This is somewhat of a redundant approach. Since the edgeryders are "citizen experts", they are of course also self-reflexive and read and are inspired by theory, perhaps the same theory that I use to analyze the forms of participation they engage in. There are even references to this kind of literature in the mission reports and discussions on Edgeryders. The use of this material is therefor not only a way of externally interpreting the actions of edgeryders but also to bring forth some of the *source material* within these forms of participation. For example I rely sometimes on design theory that in recent years have developed into a theory for the practice of performing socio-technical interventions in a social field. I also use theory from the hacking and free software communities as well as contemporary political theory that form a part of today's protest movements.

1.4 Structure of the text

After this initial introduction, *section II* deals with the data from the Edgeryders platform. After a more detailed look at how the Edgeryders project officially talk about participation and how that has structured the project I will describe the forms of participation found in the mission reports on Edgeryders. I have divided these in three categories; protests, systems and social innovation. *Protest* deals with street protest movements, *systems* deal with the invention of new kinds of political procedures and systems and *social innovation* deals with attempts to directly improve a certain situation or living condition. After this description I will analyze the findings along several dimensions: *First* how politics is situated and performed in relation to other dimensions of life; *second* about process, goals and continuity of political participation; *third* about horizontal vs. vertical trust and the view of institutions and *forth*, taking a look at what kind of participations seems to be missing from Edgeryders.

Section III deals with youth policy. This section begins with a description of the current state of youth and participation as seen from the perspective of youth policy. It then continues to describe the youth policy itself, its aim, methods and how it wants to improve youth participation. From this material I will deconstruct the idea of participation as it is presented within youth policy. What kind of participation is youth policy talking about? In what way and with what influence does it expect youth to engage in politics and how is it supposed that these process will be structured and managed? After this, a comparison highlighting the differences with Edgeryders in several aspects is made. This deals with what counts as political, who sets the agenda for participation and influence and if the very idea of a separate policy for youth participation makes sense in light of the findings from Edgeryders.

Section IV provides suggestions for policy improvements within the area of youth participation. The aim of this section is neither to broadcast my own views on youth policy, nor select specific form of participation from Edgeryders and suggest them. Rather it is to point to the rich source of experimentation with new political participation that edgeryders are and suggest some methods and procedures for how to begin to experiment with this. I highlight some themes of where there are gaps today and where bridges could be constructed. The first is if institutions should take the lead in the foreground or remain in the background as support structure for citizen initiatives. The second concerns how edgeryders and institutions could find common spaces and concerns and work together. The third theme regard open government as an umbrella concept for a new way of working together. And the forth theme regards the idea of "prototyping cultures" as a form of participation that embraces uncertainty, adhoc decisions and experimentation. Finally, this section contains a part of the role of a project like Edgeryders in shaping youth policy.

A final *section V* contains concluding remarks and broader discussion on the relation between youth and institutions.

2 Describing Edgeryders

2.1 Edgeryders and participation

As said in the introduction, apart from the topics discussed on the platform, Edgeryders as a project (uppercase E) deals specifically with participation from its users in the role of "citizen experts", here called edgeryders (with lowercase e). This is reflected in the presentation of Edgeryders as "the worlds largest think tank":

Thanks to the web, we can collaborate on a massive scale to aggregate our expertise into the world's largest think tank. This is what Edgeryders wants to be.³

Edgeryders is therefor both a way of gathering stories about responses to the problem of political participation by young people as well as an answer to its own concerns. These concerns are presented in a blog post on Edgeryders from January 2012 discussing the new campaign "'We, the People":

The reasoning behind this inquiry is that surveys point to a growing lack of involvement on youths' part and a gloomy future of party politics. [...] Who will elect our officials if not a small minority? If indeed they are turning away, institutions are responsible to look into why this happens and how to bring them closer.

These concerns are also put in another light in a blog post in June 2012 reflecting on the then upcoming Edgeryders conference, calling for a new vision of political participation for Europe to arrive as a response to the crises it is now facing:

We have so much creative freedom, so much scope to respond to our crises beyond the simple models of elections and parties, all the way through to new economies, wikipedia-type collaboration, changing cultures and changing goals. The future is wide open, and we hope to reach as far into it as possible, and lay the foundations for making it real at the European level.

Central to my survey of the mission reports and discussions on the Edgeryders platform has been the campaign "We, the people",⁴ as it dealt directly with political participation. The campaign presents a picture of how young people are rejecting traditional political participation:

What is alarming for scholars and democracy advocates is that participation is no longer a natural result of stepping into adulthood, of taking up responsibilities, paying taxes etc, as it used to be.

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³Edgeryders, "How Edgeryders Work" (2011), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/how-edgeryders-works>.

⁴Edgeryders, "We, The People."

⁵Ibid.

However, the campaign asks:

The question is: to what extent they are disengaged? Or rather they are engaged differently?

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It then proceeds to suggest that the latter is true, citing examples such as *the arab spring*, *Los Indignados* and the *Occupy protests*. The campaign description also highlights how digital tools lower the threshold of participation and create new channels for communication and organizing, although it suggests that it is not certain if these new forms of participation will lead to any lasting social change. Digital technologies are also presented as something that can both create new forms of interaction by citizens with political institutions and new forms of surveillance by governments and other entities.

The campaign then presents four missions:

- Reactivating democratic institutions⁷
This mission is about stories from traditional political participation.
- Taking it to the streets⁸
This mission captures experiences from street protests.
- Hacking for change⁹
This mission is about how technology aids political movements
- Spotlight: open government¹⁰
This mission takes a special look at how technical systems can foster participatory collaboration between citizens and governments

Apart from "We", the people" I have incorporated mission reports from other campaigns, the reason being that forms of political participation can also be seen in practices that is not necessarily framed as a political participation but is still about shaping the collective world we live in. Stories from the introductory life stories from the mission "Share my ride"¹¹ fits here, as well as mission reports from "Making a Living"¹² about jobs and social innovation, "Caring for the Commons"¹³ about protecting and enhancing common resources and "Resilience"¹⁴ about how society manages food and other vital resources.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Edgeryders, "Reactivating democratic institutions" (2012), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/we-people/reactivating-democratic-institutions>.

⁸Edgeryders, "Taking to the streets" (2012), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/we-people/taking-streets>.

⁹Edgeryders, "Hacking for change" (2012), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/we-people/hacking-change>.

¹⁰Edgeryders, "Spotlight: open government" (2012), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/we-people/spotlight-open-government>.

¹¹Edgeryders, "Share your Ryde" (2011), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/bootcamp/share-your-ryde>.

¹²Edgeryders, "Making A Living" (2011), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/campaign/making-living>.

¹³Edgeryders, "Caring for Commons" (2012), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/campaign/caring-commons>.

¹⁴Edgeryders, "Resilience" (2012), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/campaign/resilience>.

2.2 Forms of participation

One thing that is striking about reading mission reports on the Edgeryders platform is the richness and variety of political initiatives being presented. It is not an easy task to categorize them and what I have done here can be nothing more than an arbitrary sorting that does not do justice to the heterogeneity of the examples. That said, there seem to be two dominating themes that occur throughout the forms of participation that is almost always mentioned. One is *the internet*, the other is *crisis*. In one way or the other almost all of the mission reports and discussions about political participation is either about new opportunities enabled by widespread internet access and digital technologies or about the challenges that some version of the triple crises of economy, ecology and energy presents. This has at least two consequences. One is that there is a lack of trust in established ways of doing politics. Not necessarily lack of trust in the sense that institutions are mistrusted (although that is not uncommon), but a lack of trust that institutions and political structures are either equipped to face new political challenges, utilize new participatory opportunities or equipped to be able to adapt to the new circumstances. This leads to there being multiple contending proposals of what to do next, but no consensus of how to proceed. This leads to a situation where there is lots of trial and error and many small scale experiments, both failing and succeeding rapidly. There is also a lot of imitation, adaption and mutation of each others forms of participation since the internet spread ideas rapidly and youth in different regions find themselves in similar situations.

For the purpose of analysis I have divided the forms of participation in three categories: *protests*, *systems* and *social innovation*. I have chosen not to have a category for participation in formal political institutions partly because there are few accounts of this and partly because the story of those participations have already been widely researched. I will however mention some examples in passing.

2.2.1 Protests

The first category is one that on the surface at least feels familiar: street protests. This area has in the recent year in Europe been dominated by three big phenomena that are all represented in Edgeryders: the Anti-ACTA protests, Occupy protests and Los Indignados. The ACTA protests has had a peculiar relation to political institutions, so I will wait with that and begin with the two latter which has been more strictly grassroots oriented and has had an antagonistic or at least indifferent stance towards political institutions.

Both the Occupy protests and Indignados has several characteristics that is typical for movements of this generation. They are both exploratory in the sense that a clear problem space has been identified (although not strictly defined or limited) but there is no formal demands directed to any decision makers. Instead, both movements experiment with new ways of tackling the political problems with new forms of participation, new ways of connecting issues and struggles and from there trying to articulate, in practice and in theory, alternative ways of being and acting politically.¹⁵ Both movements also seem to have broken through a tipping point of social

¹⁵See for example the mission report from Kevin Carson on his involvement with Occupy Kevin

tabu, releasing personal frustration and emotions — indignation — in broad segments of the population and exposing things in public that has previously been kept private.¹⁶ They have by and large been successful in capturing and directing currents that already existed in society but in an unarticulated form. Currents whose direction was ambiguous and could just as easily have been captured for example by far-right movements. Both movements started as central public gatherings and has since dispersed out into several diverse initiatives.

The Anti-ACTA protests differ from Occupy and Indignados in the sense that they are primarily directed toward influencing decision makers within political institutions, rather than articulating alternatives within the movement itself (though this is not saying that alternatives are not articulated and worked out in the process). The Anti-ACTA protests, like other net activism movements before them, is interesting because they target issues that are normally perceived to be just an administrative matter and turn them into contested political issues. In the case of ACTA — the negotiations of a trade agreement on intellectual property. As a consequence, there is no clear divide among the political parties on this issue. No one "owns" this issue or a position on it and this can create interesting political alliances.

An unintended consequence of this political diversity on the streets was that neither politicians nor media had a clue how to describe the movement, how to narrate about it nor categorize it. [...] It turned out that neither media nor politicians are able to handle truly grass-roots, spontaneous initiatives focused on particular issues, functioning over (or away from!) the usual political and social divides.

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Not only does issues like this create new political alliances but since neither media nor politicians have an established routine for handling them, especially when they target a part of the political process that rarely interacts with citizens, it opens up political space for unexpected turns of events. In the case of Anti-ACTA in Poland, this is best exemplified with the 7 hour long debate between the activists and the polish prime minister that is described by rysiek in his mission report.¹⁸

2.2.2 Systems

This category captures initiatives that in some way involves constructing new systems for political participation. They often involve digital technology and some actual software, but must not necessarily do so as long as it involves constructing some formal procedures and rule sets for enabling participation. This participation can

Carson, "My Association With Occupy (Such as it is)" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/taking-streets/mission_case/my-association-occupy-such-it.

¹⁶See the video in the mission report Giovanni de Paola, "Indignados: 'A methodological revolution' - interview in Brussels" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/taking-streets/mission_case/indignados-methodological-revolution-interview-brussels.

¹⁷Rysiek, "Anti-ACTA in Poland - seen from the inside" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/welcome-group/mission_case/anti-acta-poland-seen-inside.

¹⁸Ibid.

both be participation in the formal political process of political institutions from the city level to the European, but it can also be structured participation among peers. The inspiration for these systems comes from the online world and the many social networks and communication platforms found there and how they seem to be able to organize and create participation in ways and on a scale that was not possible before the internet. The distributed encyclopedia of Wikipedia, the free operative system of GNU Linux and similar initiatives are highlighted as forerunners since these have managed to achieve large scale projects based on horizontal collaboration models with large scale user participation and not traditional hierarchies or delegation of action to experts.

Several of these system proposals in Edgeryders deal with money, currencies and value. The user "neodynos" has a mission report mentioning several forms of alternative currencies: barter currencies, which is local currencies that stimulate local economic exchange; time-banking, local currencies where "the unit of exchange is one hour of work"; and bitcoin, which is a digital and decentralized system for cryptography-based monetary exchange whose functions is a bit too complicated to be described here.¹⁹ As "neodynos" writes, these systems can be alternatives when the mainstream monetary system fails to work properly:

They offer economic development options amidst all the current economic collapse and high unemployment, potentially also triggeri[n]g a revival of the formal economy. So it is proposed here to enact EU-wide regulation that gives non-profit status to local currency initiatives, not taxing any transaction happening there. (This exemption can be limited to individual self-supply transactions; there is no need to allow big business, as local currencies are intended as a means of self-help in tough times.)

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In the comments section of the mission report, which feature over 30 comments and several of mission report length, the user "Ginevra" raises the concern if systems like these does not transform social behavior into economic behavior.

I'm not sure I would like a system in wich you receive some form of compensation or can gain it through beahving or doing things for others.

It would be very useful in crisis situations, but in "average" periods I think that it could lead us to miss the point of what doing things for others is.

I think that collaboration and sense of community are things that should be taught, not inserted as an opportunity in an economic process.

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¹⁹Neodynos, "Alternative currencies to the rescue? | Edgeryders, Project Website" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/spotlight-social-innovation/mission_case/alternative-currencies-rescue.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ginevra commenting on Ibid.

There could be a danger in over-formalizing social behavior when designing these kinds of systems, but Edgeryders seem to be aware that our current economic and political systems promote certain values and behaviors that are historically and socially constructed. Common throughout several proposals for systems on Edgeryders is that they are not only proposing the systems as being more efficient than the present systems but also based on other values such as cooperation, community development, democratic participation and sustainability.

One recurring theme here is that of *sharing*. Free software and the internet in general has created an inspiring culture of sharing and co-production that these system builders tries to adapt to other phenomena in society.²² As one edgeryder puts in:

[I]t's possible to create a whole lifestyle based on sharing without joining a commune. Car sharing, co-housing, co-working, yard sharing, bike sharing, tool sharing and other innovations are growing in popularity. And they do not require you to give up your privacy, individuality or even ownership of your stuff.

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One prolific cluster of initiatives are the ones that go under the banner of *Open Data*. This is initiatives that see a participatory potential in governments opening up their information databases for the public to use and engage with. This would allow citizens to engage directly with the heart of political institutions in their daily labour instead of only interacting with representatives. The motivation for this can be that citizens have the right to follow the governance institutions work in real-time to be able to hold them accountable, but it can just as well be seen as a cooperation between government and citizens to create better services and use of the data where small citizen initiatives can act in more agile ways than institutions:

With open data it seems quite clear that hacktivists and civil society organizations are just way better and faster than government agencies in performing some of the related operations

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The way these initiatives have proliferated so far is in many cases that a group of citizen enthusiasts manages to get in contact with an "insider" who is either knowledgeable in software or just enthusiastic about the idea. An example from the Italian "Spaghetti Open Data" initiative showed how "a couple of civil servants joined forces with hackers from the Open Knowledge Foundation and the Guardian's datablog to release a fantastic dataset on public expenditure in a fully open and interactive form".²⁵

²²See for example Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (Yale University Press, 2006).

²³Neal Gorenflo, "Interview with a Sharer" (2011), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/share-your-ryde/mission_case/interview-sharer.

²⁴Alberto Cottica, "Spaghetti open data: a little thing that feels right" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/hacking-change/mission_case/spaghetti-open-data-little-thing-feels-right.

²⁵Ibid.

Another example from Edgeryders where open data is combined with a structure for participation is the concept of "Participatory Budgeting". Participatory budgeting is a process by where citizens take part in deciding how a public budget should be allocated. The process involves citizens in both deciding priorities, working on spending proposals and voting for proposals.

Participatory budgeting is an attempt to, in a systemic way, structure the interaction between governing institutions and citizens. This is not without its critics and participatory budgeting has been criticized sometimes for being too much of a top-down initiative that is focused on improving and enriching the work of political institutions rather than focusing on citizens own initiatives. This view is expressed in a comment on Edgeryders:

My strong critique is that PB is [...] just like a nice tool in the hand of politicians to better involve citizens, and not the contrary. [...] Therefore, citizens come to award them, rather than themselves, and keep thinking [PB] as a service offered [rather] than a right achieved!

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An alternative to both top-down and bottom-up approaches is spelled out in the report about Kyopol, which is described as follows: "Kyopol promotes the development of "high quality" civic initiatives, by providing tools, methodologies and teaching resources that promote a participation which is transparent, informed, balanced, profound and documented."

Kyopol works, in short, as a decentralized and transparent "Facebook of civic engagement", which would be regularly used by citizens and institutions of all kinds, to inform (/inform themselves) about civic initiatives taking place in the places they care for, and deal with subjects that matter to them.

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They call what they do "from-the-middle-and-out" where citizens and institutions participate on equal terms.

Experts have long indicated that e-Participation systems promoted "top-down", from governments, are inefficient, technologically backward and unable to fulfill the real needs of its users. This is why the EU has not obtained much results, despite having invested more than 100 million euros in the last 10 years.

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²⁶Stefano Stortone, "Participatory Budgeting worldwide!" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/reactivating-democratic-institutions/mission_case/participatory-budgeting-worldwide.

²⁷Pedro.prieto-martin, "Creation of Kyopol System (aka: 'Symbiotic City):' the Internet as a catalyst for civic engagement and citizen's activation - ckyosei.org" (2011), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/share-your-ryde/mission_case/creation-kyopol-system-aka-symbiotic-city-internet-catalyst-civic-engag.

²⁸Ibid.

2.2.3 Social innovation and direct improvements

The final category is what I call social innovation and direct improvements. Like the name suggest, this is about initiatives that directly try to improve the living conditions in a certain situation, together with other peers and without going through the representing phase of trying to influence a decision makers within a political institution to do something about the problem. Social innovation has become something of a buzzword lately and can refer both to innovation processes that are social and innovation that has a social end. Related concepts are also social entrepreneurship that is innovation that both improve social conditions *and* make profit. However, the way I interpret the term, it doesn't have to involve making a profit. The profit can be there to enable the project to sustain itself over time and this can also be accomplished through other means such as public funding or by volunteer efforts.

An example of social innovation is found in an Edgeryders report from Sicily about the Addiopizzo initiative.²⁹ This can be described as a variation on the *Fair Trade* motif but being about supporting Sicilian restaurants who refuse to pay bribes to the mafia. The initiative is started by a group of young people in Palermo.

Addiopizzo is a non-partisan movement and a volunteer association that opposes the Mafia System. It promotes a virtuous economic system free from the control of the Mafia through a project called "Critical Consumption" [...] Critical Consumption is a project that wants to support merchants who do not submit to the extortion racket, creating a network of aware consumers who commit themselves to go to those merchants for their purchases.

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Addiopizzo incorporates several characteristics common to social innovation projects.

- They start in a single — but radical — issue or demand.
- They present an achievable solution but that is challenging structures
- They involve multiple stakeholders, tend to go viral, and are based on building a community
- They practice "Design in use"³¹ in the sense that they adapt, improvise and expand issues as more stakeholders become involved

Social innovation is also the form of political participation that blends most with other aspects of life. It can be hard to distinguish social innovation as political participation from other ways of simply improving ones living conditions together with

²⁹ Alessia Zabattino, "Addiopizzo. Aware consumers against the Mafia system." (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/reactivating-democratic-institutions/mission_case/addiopizzo-aware-consumers-against-mafia-system.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ E. Björgvinsson, P. Ehn, and P. A. A. Hillgren, "Participatory design and democratizing innovation," in *Proceedings of the 11th Biennial Participatory Design Conference*, vol. 7, 2010, 41–50.

others. An example of how a social innovation initiative that directly improves living conditions is the one of the occupation of Teatro Valle in Rome, which is part of a series of theatre occupations across Italy. The mission report about this occupation paints a picture of how what started as occupations to try to prevent the closure of theatre turned into a hub for social experimentation in the neighborhoods where they were located:

Meanwhile, every day these spaces are clean, open and alive with a varied, continuous, hybrid programmation, accessible to all with the help of all the artists and workers, including some of great fame: workshops, performances of all kinds, Sundays for children, after-school care for children (in Sicilian spaces), the barter markets (Naples), seminars on copyleft and creative commons, a desk to legal support and business planning support (Coppola Theatre), history lessons (Nuovo Cinema Palazzo), readings, projections, trump tournaments in the summer for the elderly (Nuovo Cinema Palazzo).

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Through direct improvements of living conditions, new forms of participation and political relations can emerge:

The social and cultural value is produced because these spaces have become places of artistic and sociological research and experimentation, places where we take care of his own cities and citizens, places where you implement new social policies based on cooperation and identification of real urgencies.

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2.3 Analysis of Participation on Edgeryders

2.3.1 Where is politics located?

One striking aspect of the mission reports about political participation is that the political can turn up anywhere in relation to other practices of life. Political participation is not seen as a special sphere of life and it does not have a designated time and place such as it would have if one would engage in a political organization after work or school.

There are clear examples of this on Edgeryders, for example a post called "Being paid for doing what you like - still impossible"³⁴ where the mission report starts out with a quite personal discussion about the dilemma of having to choose between getting paid for doing a job you are not comfortable with and doing what you like

³² Alessia Zabato, "The Legitimate Illegality. Culture As A Commons. A Journey Through The Italian Spaces Occupied By Knowledge Workers # 2" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/protecting-and-enhancing-commons/mission_case/legitimate-illegality-culture-commons-journey-through-.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lucyanna, "Being paid for doing what you like-still impossible" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/quest-paid-work/mission_case/being-paid-doing-what-you-still-impossible.

but not get rewarded financially for it. The options that the poster sees is only getting by with temporary jobs while trying to find time for ones passion or moving away to a place where one can live of very little. The discussion in the comment field however quickly turns to a discussion of the political situation that brought this dilemma about and political actions and alternative economic systems that could solve this it such as time-banks, alternative currencies, ways of sharing resources.

2.3.2 Process, outcome and continuity

Most of the examples of participation on Edgeryders, although there are exception, could be called *process oriented*. Rather than using any means to work towards a well defined goal, they aim to establish procedures and forms of interaction where political discussions and actions are made possible. This can be seen in protest movements as well as the system building and social innovation. As is expressed in an interview with a participant of Los Indignados posted on Edgeryders,³⁵ in examples such as occupy and Indignados, this has been criticized from outsiders as a weakness. But from within the movements it is rather seen as an indication that they are trying to address the roots of the contemporary political situation rather than trying to fix problems on the surface.

One can link this to a larger societal trend of moving from formal modes of interaction to experiment with open-ended forms of participation. Not only in political action but also regarding for example innovation in the business world where firms are encouraged to constantly innovate and change their structures.³⁶ This is of course correlated to the rise of networked communication technologies enables their users to create new forms of organization and information exchange.

For political action though there are problems associated with this form of participation such as a widespread problem with continuity. Since participation is mostly based on time- and resource consuming volunteer efforts and a process-oriented practice is based on continuous involvement without ever really reaching a plateau where political gains are institutionalized and secured, it can easily lead to individual and collective burn-out. For the corporate world, this is rarely a problem because they have an abundance of resources to throw at this process year after year, but in the time- and resource scarce world of volunteer political engagement, this becomes a real problem.

Open-ended, networked and process-oriented participation is often successful in getting things started, gathering people, spreading information and working up an energy for a new form of participation in the beginning of a project, but after the initial phase it can be problematic to solidify the initial achievements. In the comment section of the post on Addiopizzo this is discussed:

finally, it's also a metter of energy and forces: at the very beginning AD-
DIOPIZZO was something innovative and very fascinating, now there
are less people involved (for different reasons...) : the increase in the

³⁵Paola, "Indignados: 'A methodological revolution' - interview in Brussels."

³⁶Eric von Hippel, *Democratizing Innovation* (MIT Press, 2005).

number of shops in the list was much higher in a couple of years and it was not proportional.

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This problem is also recognized in my field of design research where participatory research projects that work with social design intervention in people lives have become more common the last years. Sometimes called *the project fallacy*,³⁸ a recurring problem is that between interventions that require long-term commitments to achieve the desired impact and funding structures that premiers short-term contracts. As a result, many projects end up involving a lot of stakeholders in a promising effort, but when the funding is drained and the project ends, the situation goes back to what it was before the intervention and no change has actually been achieved.

Edgeryders user “demsoc” describes this problem in his work on the UK initiative “We Live Here” that “tried to create a civic space by networking the networks that already exist in the community”.³⁹ Projects initiated from the outside of communities can be seen negatively by the affected participants.

Innovation can sometimes come across as “testing our brilliant idea on you”, particularly in communities that have had a lot of different projects tested on them.

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What “We Live Here” instead did was to map and make use of already existing networks:

We asked local public services for the names of the five people they thought were particularly active in that community. We went to find them and asked them who they spoke to about their neighbourhood, who they trusted for reliable information about their neighbourhood, and who they would recommend to someone who was new to the neighbourhood. Then we asked the people they named the same questions.

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There is also a scaling problem with many of the Edgeryders projects that stay as local initiatives (some of the systems solutions though is scalable in an information system sense).

There are several reasons why scaling issues are absent. One is that edgeryders, as other people, are most engaged in what is immediately relevant to them and their communities. That means that examples of direct improvement of local conditions is present to a large extent while global climate change, melting of polar ice or regional

³⁷Zabatino, “Addiopizzo. Aware consumers against the Mafia system.”

³⁸L. Georgiou, “Impact and additionality of innovation policy,” *Innovation Policy and Sustainable Development: Can Innovation Incentives Make a Difference* (2002): 57–65.

³⁹Demsoc, “Networking the networks” (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/reactivating-democratic-institutions/mission_case/networking-networks.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

waste management is less present (except as a background story). Another reason is that there is a skepticism that the scale necessary to solve those issues will be a viable path. Either that working on that scale, for example with the state, is closed, or that those larger networks and supply chains necessary for action on that scale will simply break down and local communities will have to manage their own resilience, as described in the report on the resilience session at the Edgeryders conference.⁴²

One way to look at it is that political institutions, such as the state, is necessary to handle the scaling issues of multiple local initiatives and to ensure bigger impact. Another is that the purpose of small initiatives is not to scale but to multiply and big impact is reached when enough people are involved in local initiatives. What remains as a problem then is the information load of coordination, something that a larger actor in a hierarchical model is capable of handling since then every entity does not have to communicate with each other. This however comes with the cost of reduced complexity, flexibility, and speed of reaction and adaption.

2.3.3 What participation is missing?

As I mentioned in the introduction, what I present is inevitably a simplified overview of how political participation is presented at the Edgeryders platform, but it must also be said that the stories of the edgeryders are not covering all the forms of political participation that youth in Europe is active in. It can be worthwhile to ask also who is and is not present on Edgeryders and what forms of political participation is missing from these accounts.

Since Edgeryders is a technical platform on the internet and a platform that one becomes aware about mostly through social media, there is naturally a risk that non-techsavvy communities becomes excluded. Communities that are either don't have access to or are unable to use computers and the internet as well as people who use the internet but are not well-connected or are connected in other ways than with those links that lead to the Edgeryders platform. Perhaps people who mostly use media for consumption rather than interaction. It is also quite telling that most forms of participation presented on Edgeryders make heavy use of social media and other internet tools to organize or communicate.

The other forms of participation that potentially is excluded from Edgeryders are the ones that are not represented in a public way, either because they are illegal or because there is a social stigma associated with them. While it is possible to use pseudonyms on Edgeryders, most users have their real name and/or a profile picture showing their face. In both cases it is rarely hard to find out who is behind a post. As an example, while people on Edgeryders are open about participating in protest movements such as Occupy and Los Indignados, I find no accounts from any of the young people that took part in the 2011 London riots. While I am sure many policy makers would denounce that activity, their voices are important to get a full understanding of the desires and feelings of young people in Europe today and what view they have on formal political institutions.

⁴²LucasG, "Report on Resilience Session: Resilient Health through Networks" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/help-build-edgeryders-p2p-school-resilience/mission_case/report-resilience-session-resilient-health-.

Beyond being a problem of representation, many of the accounts of political participation on Edgeryders deal with responses to the current economic crisis and some the communities that are not present are perhaps the young Europeans that are hit the hardest by the crisis, already being in vulnerable living conditions and without much space for social maneuverability. This is also problematized in the ethnographic report on Edgeryders by Rebecca Collins and Valentina Cuzzocrea:

Although participants in this project have represented a diverse set of backgrounds and experiences, they have also been a self-selecting group of privileged actors, which means that inevitably some voices are missing. Furthermore, the mission reports have been shaped by the questions posed within the campaigns and, as a result, Edgeryders stories have usually been framed around the positive actions they are taking as they navigate their transitions. In short, it must be acknowledged that there is a risk of reading these stories in too positive a light.

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3 Overview of Youth Policy on Participation

3.1 State of youth and participation

Before getting into how European youth policy view political participation it is important to understand how policymakers understand the new landscape of young people. There is a widespread notion that the life of youth today is radically different than previous generations, a change fueled by information technology, media and markets. As summarized by Linda Herrera:

There is indeed something new about youth and part of this newness, as articulated in the World Youth Report 2005, can be found in the ascendancy of youth oriented media, markets and ICT worldwide, in the formation of ever newer forms of youth cultural production from music to fashion and film, the emergence of new forms of political organization and social movements, and consequently, new patterns of youth socialization.

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Another dominating theme in youth policy apart from this new landscape is the notion of crisis. As the European commission writes in the report "An EU Strategy for Youth":

Globalisation can bring growth and jobs, but it can also bring about specific challenges for vulnerable workers such as youth, as demonstrated by the crisis.

⁴³Rebecca Collins and Valentina Cuzzocrea, "On being Edgeryders A picture of young Europeans navigating their transition to an independent life" (2012).

⁴⁴Linda Herrera, "Whats New about Youth," *Development and Change* 37 (2006): 1425–1434.

Youth, with little work experience, has been hit hard by the crisis. Some youth is more vulnerable than others, but as cuts in education affect who is able to go into studies when the job market for young and uneducated is poor, more and more young people become part of the group of youth that the crisis affects hard.

This all leads to a situation where youth is facing great uncertainty, which is reflected in the concerns of the youth policies. As summarized by Titley in a background paper to "8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth":

Indeed if there is a core theme running through the different issues youth policy and work will have to address in relation to the work priorities, it may well be the idea of precariousness.

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Yet, in this precarious situation, Titley recognizes "the new range of opportunities and possibilities many young people have in what can loosely be termed our knowledge societies"⁴⁷ and that there is "[a] strong tendency towards freedom of cultural expression, creativity and individualism paves the way for young people today, who identify themselves as cultural producers and carriers of innovation and new forms of expression".⁴⁸

This situation with crisis and uncertainty on the one hand and new opportunities and a new culture of participation on the other hand leads to a complicated relation to traditional political participation. Titley again:

Young people are highly positive towards democracy, although they are often critical towards the way institutions work

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In the light of this, the challenge for youth policy could be said not to be so much about activating youth to participate (although for certain youth groups this could be the case) but to find a way to align the work of political institutions with the expectations and practices of today's young people in order to regain legitimacy among them.

The most important problem is the aging of the political. There are always the same people in the [institutions]. The young people that would to enter in the policy, they are blocked and exploited

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⁴⁵European Commission, "An EU Strategy for Youth Investing and Empowering A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities" (2009).

⁴⁶Gavan Titley, "The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020" (2008).

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Emiliano Fatello, "Live not Survive | Edgeryders, Project Website" (2011), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/bootcamp/mission_case/live-not-survive.

This lack of trust in political institutions is partly due to disappointing experiences with engagement in political institutions and partly due to a feeling the political institutions are not capable of handling the new, complex issues that the world is facing today. Titley again:

The decline in memberships in formal organisations is often related to notions of individualisation in late capitalist societies, where people - not just the young - are compelled to fall back on biographical resources and solutions in response to wider structural and social issues, and where collective action does not seem possible in relation to opaque and distant agency in questions of economy and social resources.

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Edgeryder Jonathan Sundqvist exemplifies this sentiment with his experiences with working with citizen journalism for the climate meetings at COP15

Perhaps it was around that time I started to feel that I wasn't able to do enough or the right things. It was the most stressful time of my life participating during those meetings. So much going on all the time, but at the same time, nothing. It was moving at a snail's pace.

Sheer frustration.

People were talking. But nothing was happening. As you may know it's still going on, with little movement forward.

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The reluctance to engage in institutional politics is also due to a gap between what is perceived as distant social forces and the lack of influence over these from the institutional bodies. In the light of this it makes sense that youth participation both take on more local forms that directly improve living conditions and more global forms which rises over what is considered the day to day administrative labour of institutions.

This situation creates some challenges for youth policy since many areas outside of the traditional concerns of youth policy influence young peoples attitudes towards the political sphere. As the European Commission writes in the above mentioned report:

Difficulties in education, employment, inclusion and health, further combined to problems in finance, housing or transport, make it difficult for young people to achieve autonomy, a situation where they have the resources and opportunities to manage their own lives, fully participate in society and decide independently.

⁵¹Titley, "The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020."

⁵²Jonathan Sundqvist, "Getting lost inspite of my passion for the environment" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/share-your-ryde/mission_case/getting-lost-inspite-my-passion-environment.

As can be seen, many of these areas have neither to do with participation, nor with youth per se.

Another concern for youth policy is that within the globalized world of new networked subjectivities and new means of participation, a significant part of young people participate in reactionary movements that hardly embrace the new times.

A major concern is how to ascertain the conditions without adult mediation, which type of youth identify with a given movement, for they range dramatically on the spectrum from peaceful, creative and progressive, to reactionary and violent.

3.2 Intention of Youth Policy

EU programs for youth policy has been in place since 1988, however the intentions behind youth policy has varied.⁵⁵ Sometimes, youth has been seen as problematic collection of people that needs to be guided through the transition to adulthood so that they don't fall into any traps.⁵⁶ If this fails, the youth justice system has to take over and try to get the youth back on track.⁵⁷

Not all policy has this view of youth though. The report "An EU Strategy for Youth" from the European Commission has the following to say:

Young people are not a burdensome responsibility but a critical resource to society which can be mobilised to achieve higher social goals.

The Council of Europe share a similar view on youth:

Fundamentally, the approach of the Council of Europe's youth sector to youth policy is one that aims to support young people's participation as a citizen and their - often complex - transition to autonomy.

⁵³Commission, "An EU Strategy for Youth Investing and Empowering A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities."

⁵⁴Herrera, "Whats New about Youth."

⁵⁵Commission, "An EU Strategy for Youth Investing and Empowering A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities."

⁵⁶T. Besley, "Governmentality of youth: Beyond cultural studies," *I: Peters M. Fl, Red, Governmentality Studies in Education, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers* (2009).

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Commission, "An EU Strategy for Youth Investing and Empowering A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities."

⁵⁹Titely, "The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020."

In the article "Moving youth participation forward", O'Donoghue et.al. states that "[y]outh development researchers have noted a shift in youth work in the past two decades from prevention (programs designed to treat and prevent the problems of "at-risk" youth) to preparation".⁶⁰ Youth are to be prepared to face the challenges of the transition to adulthood in a self-governing manner. In this preparedness, political participation is seen as a key:

Europe's youth need to be equipped to take advantage of opportunities such as civic and political participation, volunteering, creativity, entrepreneurship, sport and global engagement.

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The importance of participation from the perspective of youth policy is also reflected in its inclusion in the United Nations "Convention on the Rights of the Child".

The figure of the youth seems to embody the fears and hopes of our society. As Linda Herrera states in an assessment of youth policy:

It is more likely that youth has been propelled into the development spotlight due to the mounting awareness of the potential roles of young people in forging more stable, democratic and economically prosperous societies. Conversely, when development goes awry, they can also represent forces of instability, radicalism and impoverishment.

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Youth are seen as crucial actors living on the edge, invested with the responsibility of determining the future direction of our societies. Today, knowledge and education, entrepreneurship and initiative, innovation and creativity are projected on the youth. Precisely the properties that society hopes to see in the future.

3.3 The Idea of Participation

While it is considered a key factor for youth policy, it is still often unclear what is meant by participation. It can both refer to policy that "empower adolescents to take part in and influence decision making that affects their lives"⁶³ or supporting youth to take their own initiatives that shape their own future.

The distinction matters because it leads to very different perspectives on youth policy. Consider this quote from a European Commission report on youth policy:

Policy-makers must adapt to communicating in ways receptive to young people - including on civic and European issues - particularly in order to attract unorganised or disadvantaged youth.

⁶⁰J. L. L. O'Donoghue and Benjamin Kirshner, "Introduction: Moving youth participation forward," *NEW DIRECTIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT* 2 (2002): 15–26.

⁶¹Commission, "An EU Strategy for Youth Investing and Empowering A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities."

⁶²Herrera, "Whats New about Youth."

⁶³O'Donoghue and Kirshner, "Introduction: Moving youth participation forward."

This sentence suggests a perspective where the working of the European institutions are in no need of change. It is only required that they communicate in such a way that it convinces young people to be attracted to the institutions way of working.

Titley also expresses something similar in his report for the Council of Europe:

The unique co-management system in the sector - where governmental and youth representatives have equal votes - is evidence of meaningful experience in youth participation.

Government and youth representatives have equal influence over the decisions being made, but this still says nothing about how the agenda is formulated and what decision to be made is decided or how the policy is worked out. Youth representatives are participating as a sort of focus group that should give their view on already formulated proposals.

There is reason to be careful of how the concept of participation is used so that it does not end up in participation without influence. As O'Donoghue et.al. Says:

Inserting one or a few youth into an adult-created and adult-driven process runs the risk of involving youth as tokens or "decorations".

Simply participating in a process that is already defined does not guarantee real influence. The Council of Europe charter on youth policy broadens the view of participation:

Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election . . . , it is about having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.

The definition of participation is broadened here to include "means" and "space" to participate in "actions and activities" that "contribute to building a better society". This also encompasses engaging in activities that influence the scope, agenda and process of political participation.

⁶⁴Commission, "An EU Strategy for Youth Investing and Empowering A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities."

⁶⁵Titley, "The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020."

⁶⁶O'Donoghue and Kirshner, "Introduction: Moving youth participation forward."

⁶⁷Zaneta Gozdzik-Ormel, "Have your say! manual on the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life." (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Pub., 2008), <http://www.mylibrary.com?id=213170>.

3.4 Differences between Youth Policy and Edgeryders

3.4.1 When does one act politically?

As seen in the section describing the mission reports of Edgeryders, youth engage on a daily basis in initiatives that aim to better the lives of them and their peers. Political participation is not seen as a separate activity set apart from other matters of everyday life but an ongoing collective effort to improve conditions of life.

Youth policy, on the other hand, tends to view political participation as a special form of activity that constitutes a clear break with everyday life. It is almost as if youth is understood to have to take a break from their lives to be able to engage in political participation.

3.4.2 Who sets the agenda?

One observation from the Edgeryders platform is that many of the issues that edgeryders engage with are issues that in mainstream politics are not considered as political issues. The way this generation has politicized copyright and intellectual property is an example and we are now seeing for example new concerns for the commons as an extension of this. A major issue with youth policy is therefore how to provide spaces for the formulation of these new issues.

As it stands now, youth policy is focused on fostering participation in decisions within areas that is already defined as influencing the lives of young people. The problem however is often not (only) that the wrong decisions are being made, but that there is no policy working on the issues that young people are discovering as important. The youth active on Edgeryders would hardly settle for being included as taking part in decision at the end of a process where the problem has already been formulated.

3.4.3 Where is participation taking place?

The natural perspective from youth policy is to think of participation as meaning participation in the political processes of institutions or in campaigns initiated by the political institutions. However, what we see on Edgeryders is that youth today is creating their own spaces for participation, creating their own platforms for expression and debate and are perhaps on their way of inventing new kinds of institutions.

Youth policy tries to bring young people into their political processes by various campaign and initiatives to increase participation while edgeryders are already active in their own spaces and platforms.

3.4.4 Should youth policy even exist?

When formulating new perspectives on youth policy, one has to also grapple with the whole concept of "youth" and how that category is changing. The category of youth is a historical construct that changes meaning in different eras. As Herrera points out in her examination of youth policy:

The notion of youth as a cultural group emerged in the post-World War II era when young people with access to markets and goods were distinguished by certain tastes, lifestyle choices and patterns of consumption.

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Youth assert themselves as a category when radical societal shifts map themselves onto generations. Youth is not a fixed age category, but a social phenomena whose age span varies over time. Today, rapid shifts in technology, new communications, media and new organizational tools as well as a particular position in relation to the current economical crisis makes it possible to speak of youth today. Although it must be said that this category is not mapped on a specific age group more than statistically in the sense that most people falling in the category of tech-savvy, precarious Europeans are of a relatively young age, but Edgeryders shows that this social group also consist of people up into their 40's.

Likewise, not all young people fall into the social group represented on Edgeryders. Titley elaborates on the difficulty of diversity of young people for youth policy:

This diversity is a constant challenge for the work of the youth sector; to maintain an overall vision of the political, economic and socio-cultural processes which impact on young people without allowing these broader patterns to obscure local, national and regional differences, not to mention the specific material conditions, identities and life possibilities of young people in their environments.

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Youth participation should not have as an objective to represent a common voice for young people, since such voice does not exist. Perhaps instead of youth policy, it would be better to have policy especially for emerging forms of participation, whether that came from young people, senior citizens or from something in between.

4 Suggestion for Policy

4.1 Aim of this section

The aim of this section is to provide suggestions for how the gap between edgeryders and current youth policy can be bridged in a way that take into considerations the experiences of Edgeryders and the new participatory environment that edgeryders are creating. Since I am both speaking for myself as a researcher here as well as trying to sound the voices of Edgeryders, I will clarify what the aim of this section is.

The purpose of this section is not for me as a researcher to suggest a specific policy improvement that I am in favor of. Neither is it to select a few of the many initiatives on the Edgeryders platform as suggest to implement them. Rather, my aim is to describe a process that could bridge this gap by highlighting 4 key themes or areas where policy needs to change.

⁶⁸Herrera, "Whats New about Youth."

⁶⁹Titley, "The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020."

4.2 Thematic suggestions

4.2.1 Foreground and background

The first theme is about the question whether institutions should be in the foreground or reside into the background of youth political participation. It used to be that youth policy around participation was focused on bringing youth into the institutional forms of participation. Herrera:

In the past, political parties and formal youth organizations such as youth councils with links to formal government structures represented the standard form of youth participation, but this is no longer the case.

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What we have seen on Edgeryders is how youth are active in creating their own initiatives and spaces that work with different kinds of procedures and practices than institutional politics. Can there then be a new role for institutions as background support for these initiatives, rather than trying to orchestrate a political participation?

Institutions have several downsides that makes them less fit to take charge of the process of participation. Compared to new forms of communication and organization they are slow and they are not prone to experimentation and taking risks. However once they turn to action they have an impact that small grassroots initiatives have a hard time aggregating.

Many of the initiatives displayed on Edgeryders is about creating new social infrastructures based on commons and sharing. Here is a possible point where institutions could provide support. To try to create policy that is fit to these new lifestyles as well as trying to see what support structures are suitable. An example of edgeryders recognizing the infrastructural role of institutions can be seen in the mission report "Interview with a Sharer":

And second, the time you free up by sharing and living more simply can be used to get engaged in issues that affect your lifestyle. For instance, going car-free is a lot easier if there's plenty of bike lanes and good public transportation. These are community issues that you can't work toward alone. You have to get involved in your community to make sure your tax dollars are spent in ways that make simpler living possible.

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Even though voting levels are declining, young people still seem to value the democratic foundations that institutional politics provide. As highlighted by this quote:

While voting levels have declined in many countries, it is clear that young people have voted in significant numbers when elections are seen

⁷⁰Herrera, "Whats New about Youth."

⁷¹Gorenflo, "Interview with a Sharer."

to be central to continued democratic functioning, and where single issues become closely associated with particular governments.

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This shows that institutional politics for youth is a recognized important backdrop, a political infrastructure of sorts, but is unlikely to be the primary target for political engagement since youth find other more meaningful ways of engaging. Perhaps the issues of young people are both more global and more local than the national or regional level of institutional politics.

It becomes a problem if young people are working more and more effectively in non-governmental and informal organizations, building up new capacities for actions, spreading ideas quickly and form new networks; while at the same time the public institutions remains fixed and are not influenced by this capacity. The further this goes, the less possible it will be to form dialogues and make the informal organizations able to influence policy.

The question is if this needs to be a matter of bringing young people *into* the public institutions or if the public and the informal organizations can cooperate in hybrid spaces around common matters-of-concern without having to take place within the umbrella of the public institutions. An example of this would be learning. Compare the difference between young people influencing school policy and the way their schools work versus young people creating new learning spaces outside of the school system altogether such as hackerspaces, reading groups, free schools and on-line based learning communities.

Looking at the Edgeryders platform it seems as if it is the latter, to create alternative spaces, that is the one where young people see opportunities today, aided by digital communication and networking technologies. Although young people are developing alternative spaces, it does not mean that they are not influenced by decisions taken within public institutions but that it is not always decisions within a narrowly defined compartment that affects them the most. For example it might not be policy on education that influences the creation of alternative learning spaces the most, but urban development, property prices or intellectual property. This highlights a need for multidisciplinary and multi-institutional approaches to looking at issues that youth cares about.

4.2.2 Common spaces and concerns

If we forget a while about separating between participating in institutional politics on the one hand and self-organized initiatives on the other hand, there seem to be a common concern in reactivating a collective care for the commons in society. Tittley suggests the term of "democratic partnership"⁷³ and I choose to adopt it here to name a process consisting of a common space where institutions and citizens share common concerns and collaborate to solve problems.

⁷²Herrera, "Whats New about Youth."

⁷³Tittley, "The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020."

These spaces blossom spontaneously anywhere when citizens find a "matter of concern"⁷⁴ and it is not always the formal political organizations that spawn this activity, as the anti-ACTA protests in Poland shows:

What is essential (and very interesting in and of itself), these were completely spontaneous, grass-roots activities, not associated with NGOs that had been bringing up the ACTA problem for years.

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A challenge for institutions is therefor to be active and find out where there are ongoing activities where there are common concerns between their work and citizens initiatives where dialogues can be established without having to subsume the activities within institutional frameworks.

On the other hand, the spontaneous initiatives might need the institutions in order to make sure the initial enthusiasm translate into lasting political change. There is in general a considerable lack of knowledge among young people as to how the public institutions function and what their role and purpose are. As well as how to reach and influence them effectively. O'Donoghue writes:

In other words, supporters of youth participation must be open to the unique voices and contributions of youth, but they also must help youth learn how to recognize the norms of the public arena or the specific practices of the field in which they hope to participate. This is not so that youth will merely adopt these norms, but so that they can be effective in shaping broader arenas.

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Political institutions can also have a role in making sure that the space of common concern is open to everyone and that citizens are not only represented by a tech-savvy elite among young people. Titley recognizes this:

In order to ensure full and equal participation of all citizens, special priority should be given to special needs groups. This may involve encouraging more spontaneous and non-traditional forms of youth participation, and creative and innovative activities which are beyond the usual scope of established programmes.

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This is especially true when political participation rests on the ability to individually locate and build active networks of participants, mostly by making skilled use of information technology. While ICT has made communication and organizing widely

⁷⁴Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How To Bring the Sciences Into Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁷⁵Rysiek, "Anti-ACTA in Poland - seen from the inside."

⁷⁶O'Donoghue and Kirshner, "Introduction: Moving youth participation forward."

⁷⁷Titley, "The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020."

accessible, cheap and easy, it is important to remember that all youth don't have access to these tools or the knowledge to use them. Information technology should not become a social sorting filter. Titley again:

While knowledge-based economies tend to privilege young people in the labour market, they may also tend to disproportionately provide increased opportunities for the socially privileged while amplifying the vulnerability of the socially disadvantaged.

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4.2.3 Open Government

A potential common space of which there are some examples on the Edgeryders platform is what goes under the umbrella term of "open government". Here we find several kinds of initiatives that aim to open up governance to a more transparent and participatory ways doing. I will reflect on this term here, give positive examples as well as highlight some critique of the idea of open government which could be solved by the right kind of institutional involvement.

In a comment to a post discussing open government and lack of trust in institutions, Alberto says:

bridging this trust gap with information and open conversation is exactly what open government does best

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By making governance transparent and creating tools for involving citizens in governance processes, open government hope to bridge the gap between citizens and political institutions. Open government is also seen as a way to depart from an idea of participation where the citizen is not engaged as a active equal of the government in managing the affairs of the state.

I also consider that it should go without saying, for citizens to co-manage the affairs of the state, in collaboration with the government. This is why I firmly believe in the open government philosophy.

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Open government also offers a space for bi-directional learning where citizens learn the way a political institution operates while the institution learn the way citizens (especially edgeryders) want to do things. That the learning is bi-directional is something that O'Donoghue stresses as a benefit of increases youth participation:

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹MarukomuC, "Feeling a part of the political process" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/spotlight-open-government/mission_case/feeling-part-political-process.

⁸⁰Cottica, "Spaghetti open data: a little thing that feels right."

youth participation in decision making leads to changes in the organizational climate and a deeper commitment by adults to youth development principles.

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The benefit of youth participation should not only be considered as a one-way approach where it is the life of the young that needs to be influenced by institutions. Also the life of institutions is in need of guidance and change, a transition even. Perhaps the most impact will be in how youth participation changes the institutional life, rather than how it changes the young. It can be beneficial to turn the perspective on its head like this and instead assume that it is the public institutions that should participate in all the activity that the youth networks construct. As seen in the part on open data in the section on Edgeryders in this paper, it is often on citizen initiatives that open government projects begin which is later adapted by institutions.

Herrera also stresses this point:

What's more, socialization processes are becoming more bidirectional with youth playing a more intensified role in teaching and socializing the older generation to adapt to new technology and cultural patterns associated with globalization.

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Youth participation forces institutions to become more democratic and live up to their ideals. At least it becomes a pressure for this. This can be seen in the protests around the ACTA treaty when it was protests from the outside, with a majority of young participants that led to the European parliament asserting pressure on the European commission to release unredacted versions of the negotiated text.

4.2.4 Prototyping cultures

Edgeryders engage with others in political participation not primarily as that of citizens of a state or members of an institutional body, but more as what Isabelle Stengers calls "user movements".⁸³ By users she refers to individuals who are connected to each other by means of common concern, linked because some *thing* concerns them collectively. User communities are linked together due to material exchanges, such as physical proximity of neighbours, or common dependencies on a set of resources. Users react strongly to *abuse*, to the miss-use and miss-administration of what is perceived as a common resource; be it the internet, the city or an ecosystem. Thus, the action of users are always embedded in some local situation where they are directly entangled with others.

⁸¹O'Donoghue and Kirshner, "Introduction: Moving youth participation forward."

⁸²Herrera, "Whats New about Youth."

⁸³Philippe Pignarre, Isabelle Stengers, and Andrew Goffey, *Capitalist Sorcery : Breaking the Spell* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Each movement is particular and is thus exposed to the accusation of ‘particularism’, that is to say, to the type of mistrust generated among radical thinkers by movements ‘betraying’ the necessary universality of mobilisation. [...] Left to themselves, isolated, considered with suspicion, they have every chance of disappearing or of being absorbed by logics of management.

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However, due to the interconnectedness of social and material systems, different groups of users often find common grounds (or equally likely find themselves in conflicts of interest).

The idea of user communities is also reflected in the experiences told by *demsoc* in a mission report about the “We Live Here” project, mapping civic networks in Brighton.

People don’t think about “democracy”, they think about needs. Although people felt that there were issues that they wanted to raise with the council and with public services, the civic activists we spoke to were largely uninterested in “democracy” conceptually. They were interested in getting solutions to community needs, and expressing community voices - goals that actually would need to be delivered by democracy.

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The same sentiment is reflected in the fact that edgeryders in their mission report talk about their and their communities needs, projects, networks and issues, but their political participation is rarely if ever framed in term of Europe and European youth. Political participation is not approached from the perspective of being a citizen within an abstract political entity such as a nation or Europe. One can however find the European perspective as motivation from the part of the organizers of Edgeryders.⁸⁶

The role of what Benedict Anderson called “imagined communities”,⁸⁷ such as Europe or nation states, seems to have been replaced by communities formed around material connections and common concerns. National or regional borders matter little here unless they also mark the borders of some sort of material exchange.

The metaphor of the users should however not lead us to view edgeryders as consumers that passively expects services to be provided for them. Users are also active in co-creating what they are using. This is not at least seen within the free software movement where any user is able to modify the code of the software that they are using to suit their need. Or why not think of peasant *users* of common land. The user is associated with a certain *care* for a thing.

⁸⁴Ibid., 119.

⁸⁵Demsoc, “Networking the networks.”

⁸⁶See for example the blog post Vinay, “At the beginning of the end, or the beginning of a new Europe?” (2012), <http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/blog/2012/06/at-the-beginning-of-the-end-or-the-beginning-of-a-new-europe/>.

⁸⁷Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 2006).

Edgeryders has throughout the platform showed that they are a community that are engaged in much experimentation concerning a wide variety of problems and are oriented towards solving these, collaborating amongst their peers, in innovative ways.

There is a great opportunity for institutions in tapping in to the resources and creativity of the kind of policy innovation, if we can call it that, that edgeryders all over Europe are doing. This quote from the report on Spaghetti Open Data highlights this:

I think what is happening is this: the civil society is emerging as an allied of the innovators within the public sector. They can go to their bosses and say “look, these guys are hellbent on this stuff. Either we move fast or they will move first and leave us looking like idiots. The good news is, we can ask them to help us, and they will! So we can appropriate some political benefit releasing data, and everybody wins”.

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The outcomes from what the Edgeryders are doing is not ready-made solution that can be adopted as policy right away. Instead it amount to what could be called a “prototyping culture”.⁸⁹ A prototype in design is an early model aimed to test or demonstrate a concept and acts as a communication and thinking device. A prototype is by definition an unfinished thing, a snapshot in the middle of a process and its form invites critique and further development, rather than certainty and closure. The difference between a prototype in a design process and what edgeryders are doing with political participation is not so big as it may seem. First of all, as for example Lucy Suchman,⁹⁰ Helen Karasti⁹¹ and Rosalind Williams,⁹² have emphasized, technological systems are already socio-technical and their development are just as dependent on organizational changes as the are on technical interventions. Second, our contemporary societies are made up of technological systems. As Lawrence Lessig said, “Code is Law”,⁹³ meaning that the way information systems and other technical infrastructure is organized and designed has as strong, or even stronger, impact on the possibilities of social organization as policy and law.

The new forms of political participation that the prototyping culture of edgeryders is made up of are adapted to uncertainty, chaotic organization, experimentation and trial and error. This form of participation is experimental in its character, examines different ways of doing things and questions the overarching goals. O’Donoghue echoes this when she says:

⁸⁸Cottica, “Spaghetti open data: a little thing that feels right.”

⁸⁹Suchman in N. Calvillo et al., “PROTOTYPING PROTOTYPING,” *Anthropological Research on the Contemporary Anthropological Research on the Contemporary Anthropological Research on the Contemporary* 1 (2010).

⁹⁰Lucy Suchman, Randall Trigg, and Jeanette Blomberg, “Working artefacts: ethnomethods of the prototype,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 53 (2002).

⁹¹Helena Karasti and Karen S. Baker, “Infrastructuring for the long-term: Ecological information management,” *Proceedings of the 37th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (2004).

⁹²Rosalind H. Williams, *Retooling : a Historian Confronts Technological Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

⁹³Lawrence Lessig, *Code : and Other Laws of Cyberspace* ([New York, N.Y.]: Basic Books, 2000).

These organizations often do not face the same sets of constraints as public institutions, and as a result, they may offer young people the type of alternative spaces that they need to reflect critically and build capacity for action.

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By participating in youth-led initiatives rather than in formal decision-making processes, young people learn not just how the world works today and how the political process is structured today, but also how it *could be* structured and they learn to critique the current models for political participation.

Edgeryders are *prototyping* the new society, but they still can't do it without institutional support. Or rather, the civil society version will be a working prototype – good enough to make an impact but could be made better with the right kind of support. Again from Spaghetti Open Data:

I personally love that Spaghetti Open Data is created by civil society itself, is the best way this portal offers useful service to society. But also acknowledge that if the government gets involved much better, especially because it is who has more data and better quality, as well as financing for the portal.

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A concrete example of a prototyping culture with institutional support is the "Transition Towns" movement that James Beecher mentions in his mission report on practical resilience

For 6 years I have been involved with Transition Stroud - one of over 300 [Transition Towns] initiatives globally attempting to deal with the issues of climate change, peak oil and economic turmoil through practical local projects and community-building.

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He cites several ongoing projects such as a farmers market, a car club and an edible gardens project. While Transition Towns are community initiated and led, they often are able to gather support from local municipalities. Part of this reason seems to be how they are able to have a holistic systems perspective of the interactions and exchanges in a town and recognize how all involved stakeholders have a part to play in the "transition".

Prototyping culture also has a performative element in it in the sense that a prototypical form of social organization is presented and put on display as a possibility, there to be critiqued or to inspire. This is directly suggested as a method in a mission report by James Hester suggesting that edgeryders make use of "applied history methods" to enact future scenarios and ways of living.

⁹⁴O'Donoghue and Kirshner, "Introduction: Moving youth participation forward."

⁹⁵Cottica, "Spaghetti open data: a little thing that feels right."

⁹⁶James Beecher, "Practical Resilience: Experiments In Resilience In A Small UK Market-town" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/practical-resilience/mission_case/experiments-resilience-small-uk-market-town.

It could be a portrayal of a London flat living a 1-planet lifestyle, an off-grid and fully self-sufficient farm, or even an entire neighbourhood operating on an alternative currency. [...] We get a group together and come up with a scenario. We do the research on what that scenario would actually, practically, look like; gather data, crunch the numbers, make informed hypotheses. We experiment, and see if some of our theories actually work. Then, armed with what we've come up with, we set up a place where we will portray that scenario, as accurately as possible, and invite people to come, see for themselves, and ask questions.

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Aspects of this can be seen in several projects that edgeryders are involved in – a sense that something made possible in a small scale or for a short while gives a hint to a possible future model that can be scaled up. Beckery mentions several in her post about resilience⁹⁸ and writes:

And this is the third sense in which I think that Edgeryders are already demonstrating their skills for resilience – by acting as role models, hubs of knowledge, or co-ordinators of local efforts. By communicating their own experiences and showing that someone has trod a similar path before, Edgeryders are well-positioned to contribute to the safety-nets that are essential to encourage others to follow their lead.

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5 Concluding Remarks

5.1 Summary of analysis

In this paper I have compared ideas and experiences of political participation as it manifests on the Edgeryders platform with the current perspectives on European youth policy. It has been shown that there are significant differences between the two and that edgeryders view and practice political participation as something more integrated in their everyday lives and something more experimental that takes many different forms. Youth policy tend to rely on a perspective where participation equals participation in formal political processes, while for edgeryders this is just one way of embarking on a collective process to change the conditions of society.

5.2 On changing relations between youth and institutions

The conclusion from these differences is that it is not simply a matter of formulating a new youth policy, but what is needed is a re-negotiation of the relation between youth

⁹⁷James Hester, "Portraying the Future: 'Historical Pre-Enactment'" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/practical-resilience/mission_case/portraying-future-historical-pre-enactment.

⁹⁸Beckery, "Leading the way to resilience?" (2012), http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/where-edgeryders-dare/mission_case/leading-way-resilience.

⁹⁹Ibid.

and political institutions when it comes to political participation. The traditional institutions are unable to direct youth today. As Herrera says:

Young people in the contemporary period acquire cultural and political dispositions through new avenues of participation. Adult authorities, including parents and teachers, and institutions such as schools and universities, while they retain a degree of authority, hold less sway over the socialization of young people than in even the recent past.

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This shift in relations is not as simple as to say that governments should move out of the way and let youth determine their own lives. This perspective is strong in our contemporary society and is something Foucault has called "governmentality".¹⁰¹ This perspective, which has been translated as a critique of youth policy by Besley¹⁰² stresses on the one hand the self-governance of youth and the entrepreneurial self that makes its own future and on the other hand discourses of risk, security and control.

While globalization and neoliberal policies are reducing the impact of public institutions in favor of market-driven ones, young people take their own initiatives to make up for the losses and create participatory alternatives. Perhaps this can lead to new kinds of common institutions.

It is with this in mind that the youth sector argues that youth policy approaches to human rights, anti-discrimination and participatory citizenship must engage with the precariousness inherent in current labour markets, and the difficulties young people face in substantiating their right to decent living conditions.

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This precariousness must also be considered when looking at political participation and we can see how current networked forms of participation is already adapted to this by not having formal hierarchical structures with one person filling one role, but more fluid organizing that allows different levels of engagement and allows people to move in and out of activity depending on how much effort they have available in their current life situation. If people have to take (yet more) jobs or suddenly get other engagements they can without notification drop out of the activity and be replaced by someone else, or have the organization transform to adapt to the loss of activity and more the focus to other spaces.

A lot of this new ability to organize comes from making use of the internet. Both directly as a tool and indirectly by being inspired by some of the protocols that internet based participation has relied on, such as coming from the free software movement.

¹⁰⁰Herrera, "Whats New about Youth."

¹⁰¹Michel Foucault et al., *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76* (Penguin Books, 2004).

¹⁰²Besley, "Governmentality of youth: Beyond cultural studies."

¹⁰³Titely, "The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: AGENDA 2020."

A particular mismatch between edgeryders and policy lies in the mereology of political participation, that is in the understanding of the relation between parts and wholes. Edgeryders neither work alone nor are interested in participating in already established structural participation. They are constantly involved in forming alliances with their peers. These alliances are always shifting depending on the task at hand and does not resemble the traditional political organization with stable and clear membership. As Latour says “Unfortunately for those who make systems, actors do not stand still for long enough to take a group photo”.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, edgeryders do act in collectives, but these collectives constantly change shape with individuals going in and out of them, being an actor in one today and another tomorrow.

In that sense there is an individualism at work, the individual does not have a special loyalty to one group. However, it is very different from an individualism where the individual does not cooperate or care for others

Actors – individuals, groups – form clusters that use their common force to act on an issue. Once the act is performed they disperse only to form again is another act is needed. This act can be anything from working on a document, spreading a piece of information, sharing some knowledge to actually gathering physically for a demonstration or a conference. This creates a constant pulsation of action by clustering actors. They do not have to know that they are in a particular cluster, performing a particular act together. A link on twitter can become a trending topic by being retweeted by a network that had no idea they were taking part in a unified action with others.

Institutions are not used to dealing with this kind of activity and there kinds of associations. As Carlien Roodink comments on a mission report:

Politicians (I am a member of the city council of Amsterdam) and government are used to cooperate with legal entities which are easily to define. For example: we know who the members of the board are of a foundation. In the case of a labor union we know the number of registered and paying members. Social networks and online communities can be far more vital and effective than those old organizations but are less clear to define.

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There seem however to be some light in the end of the tunnel. Glimpses of a recognition that the edgeryders and the institutions need the support of one another. Despite some criticism of the event,¹⁰⁶ one of those shining beacons of light can very well be considered to be the Living on the Edge conference and in fact the Edgeryders project as a whole.

¹⁰⁴Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge [u.a.]: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 206.

¹⁰⁵Edgeryders, “Reactivating democratic institutions.”

¹⁰⁶See for example this blog post by Smári McCarthy Smári McCarthy, “The Center as seen from the Edge | Smári McCarthy, Project Website” (2012), <http://www.smarimccarthy.is/2012/06/the-center-as-seen-from-the-edge/>.

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