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Youth, Politics & Civic Participation: the ‘Manifesto Machine’

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ABSTRACT

We present the Manifesto Machine, a collaborative writing environment for drafting and designing manifestos. In this instance, we report on a workshop with a group of local youths. We used the environment as a thought probe for provoking reflections on politics and civic participation. Our insights indicate that while there is a tendency to view youths as apolitical, there is scope for using such a tool to encourage active discussion and engage communities around the topics that affect them.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing (HCI): Miscellaneous.

KEYWORDS

Society and HCI; youth; learning; activism; civic engagement; collaborative writing environments.

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1 Introduction

There is a tendency to perceive youths (ages 15 to 24) as disinterested and disaffected from politics and civic life. While this is partially true, recent research [12] [5] suggests that the younger generation participates in new and diverse ways, as recent events in Parkland, Florida have helped to further illustrate [13]. In

response, we present insights from sociotechnical interventions with a group of local youths from Madeira, Portugal.

In a two-part workshop, we introduced the Manifesto Machine (MM) a collaborative environment for drafting and designing manifestos [1]. The MM is intended for a broad audience; nevertheless, here we present our efforts to use the environment with youths as a way of opening a ‘discursive space’ [9] where participants can reflect on what they stand for and why, and how their beliefs intersect with the beliefs of others

2 Youth and Political Participation

In her recent book, Briggs [5] asks whether ‘politics and youth have become an oxymoron’. In Madeira Island, Portugal, the setting of our workshop, this perception echoes the European context [2]. However just as [2] and [5] suggest, recent sociological analysis of youth - and the degree to which they participate in politics and civic life - questions a positioning of this generation as apolitical. In fact, some suggest that a labelling of youths as ‘passive, narcissistic, self-motivated and individualistic’, is simply inaccurate [12]. Instead, studies have shifted towards an understanding of politics as an arena that has lost its capacity to engage the interest of this demographic [2].

EU statistics show that, in fact, youths do not entirely shy away from politics. The latest Eurobarometer survey “European Youth” suggests that 63% of 13,454 young respondents (ages 15 to 30) voted in recent elections [8]. At the same time, there is an indication that younger generations are shifting their attention away from the traditional political mechanisms, such as elections and political parties [2]. Younger generations continue to be vested in civic and social issues, despite a waning interest in ‘mainstream’ [5] or ‘elite’ [2] politics as a way to tackle these issues.

Such a phenomenon is largely owing to the rise of social media, where protesting and campaigning have acquired a new dimension and format [11] [5], such as the rise of #hashtag-driven movements [6]. Instead of enrolling in political parties, younger

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generations prefer to build alliances with like-minded individuals and communities through social media [2] [7] [8]. From the perspective of community-based design, we believe that the above scenario opens a window of opportunity in the design of sociotechnical interventions that, more than a solution, invite communities towards modes of discussion, debate and reflection [3] [4].

3 The Manifesto Machine

In the current iteration of the MM (Figs. 1, 2), phrases often used in manifestos appear in searchable drop-down lists, arranged by rhetorical category on the left of the canvas. The user can drag and drop text elements onto the canvas and position them as desired. Users can also free-type in the canvas and add their own words and phrases to the 'My Words'. Sliders allow the user to choose from a curated selection of open-source fonts, and control size, leading, tracking, and kerning. Color is manipulated in the same way, governing the hue, saturation, and lightness for both text and background. There are additional options to reverse or select a random color scheme (opposite complementary colors, based on color theory), and to save, share or adjust screen size. Font manipulations happen in real time with browsing. For the canvas, both portrait and landscape views are possible, with aesthetic choices extending to the entire interface, including control panels, to minimize distraction.

4 The Workshop

Workshop sessions took place in the city of Funchal, Madeira Island, hosting a total of thirteen undergraduate students currently enrolled in the Design program at the University of Madeira: ten first-year and three second-year students, divided into four groups.

Session 1 opened with an introduction to the manifesto, its history, contemporary examples and fundamental principles. Next, we encouraged participants to run through a set of ten questions (see below). Participants were invited to select the questions they would most like to debate, or alternatively to respond to each one, as the issues raised were interlinked. This activity took approximately 50 minutes, followed by a coffee break, during which we ensured that all groups had the MM working on their personal computers. We also used the coffee break to present the MM collaborative environment. During the final hour of Session 1, student groups used the MM to write a manifesto inspired by the discussion that followed from the initial set of questions.

Questions:

- (1) What are your biggest concerns in life?
- (2) Can you relate your biggest concerns to the broader social political context of your country or region?
- (3) Enumerate some of the key-topics that politicians should address.
- (4) Do you feel that young people have a stake in society?

- (5) Do you feel connected to politics be that on the regional or national level?
- (6) Do you discuss politics? What kind of politics?
- (7) Do you think there should be a greater effort to encourage young people to understand the relevance of politics in their lives?
- (8) Do you consider yourself and engaged citizen?
- (9) Do you think that universities should do more to educate students on politics, governance and civic processes?
- (10) Do you think that the university curriculum should motivate students to be more questioning and challenging?



Figure 1 & 2: The MM collaborative writing environment.

In Session 2, participants were invited to present their manifestos, with a final discussion recap by each group, lasting just under one hour. One of the four groups was not present during this session.

Group A, with three members, selected questions 4, 7, 8, 9 and 10 that focused on the involvement of youth in political life. When writing their manifesto, this group used the notes taken during their discussion (Figure 3). Satisfied with their result, both textually and visually, Group A concluded that the MM helped them to achieve a desired visual language and rhetorical style. During our conversation, participants also pointed out that the questions had helped to direct their discussion. Group A demonstrated relative ease when using the MM to write a manifesto. This group only required extra support when using the color slider. When operating the slider both the color of the background and the color of the letters change in accordance and by presenting opposing complementary hues. Both Group A and Group B (presented below) were not content with this constraint and wished for greater flexibility when selecting the colors of their manifesto.

Group B (Figure 4, 5), with four members, discussed all 10 questions. However, in line with Group A, it was questions 7, 8, 9 and 10 that aligned more closely with their interests, in this case, education and politics. As with the previous group, Group B also recognized that the questions helped guide their discussion which began with a reflection on how youths feel undervalued by the broader society. They believe that this results from a view of youths as immature and inexperienced, an impression that has a negative impact on how adults value their ideas and opinions. As an example, this group pointed to their current education system

that does not sufficiently appreciate or take into account their perspective.

Both Group A and B also felt that universities do little to incentivize students to actively participate in society, and to better understand their civic duties and responsibilities. They believe that this has a negative impact on youth interest and engagement in current politics because it remains an abstract concept for them. Group A further recognized that the present view of politics is bound to an elitist view (i.e. that it is solely the business of politicians) and therefore not sufficiently connected to the real value of democratic politics, which should be much broader and more connected to all aspects of civic life. Finally, this group raised the idea that it is through everyday examples that politics can be valued and better understood by youths. This led to a discussion of the university curriculum, which they believe does little to promote a deeper understanding and involvement in political and civic life among students. Group A's discussion dovetailed nicely with Group B's perspective that the curriculum is a formal tool that fails to connect students' experience to the reality of life and learning.



Figure 3: Group A's discussion during session 1.

Group C (Figure 6) chose to respond to all of the questions, 1 to 10, and only afterwards defined a specific topic of interest. In this case, participants decided to focus on the university curriculum. This group was less motivated to discuss possible connections between the university curriculum, civic participation and political life. Their choice was to focus on a more holistic discussion of how the curriculum prepared them for a career in the field of Design after graduation. This group was not so keen to develop a discussion around the topic proposed for the project which reflected the group's apparent lack of interest in the political domain. However, and just as Group A and B, Group C used the MM with relative ease and did not require extra support when using the collaborative writing environment. However, and contrary to the other two groups, Group C did not identify possible improvements to the MM.

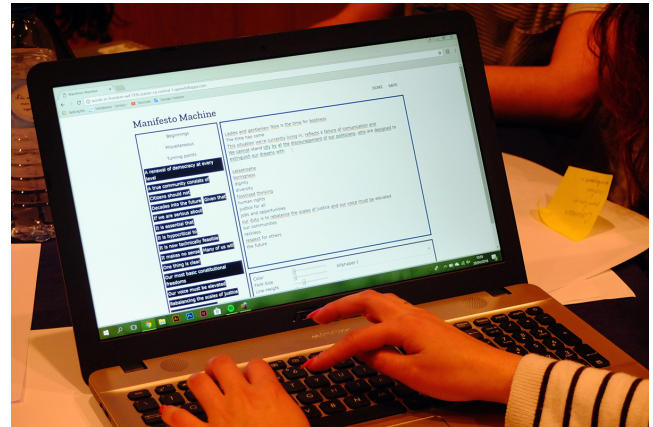


Figure 4: Group B using the Manifesto Machine.

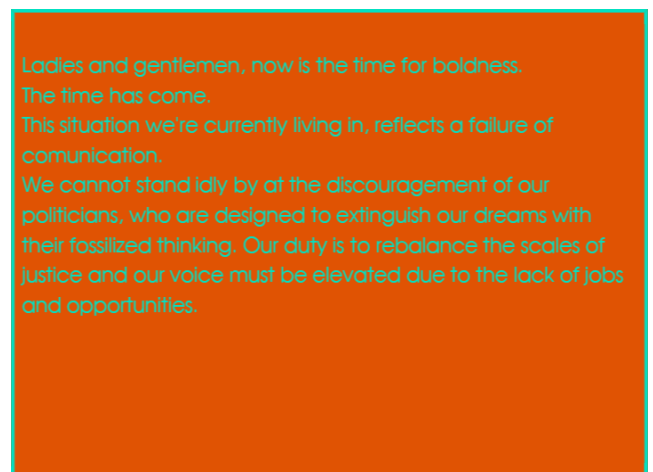


Figure 5: Manifesto Group B.

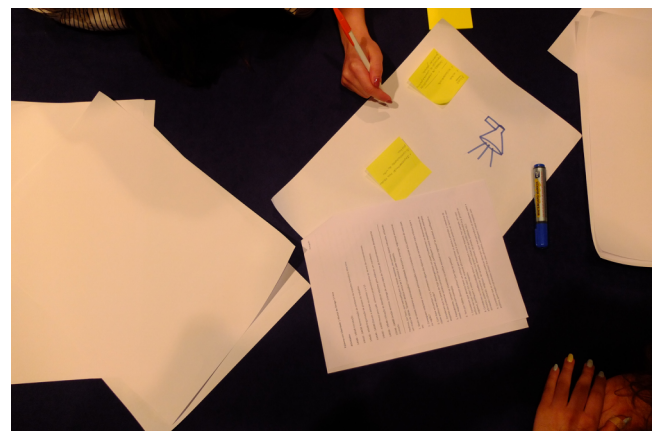


Figure 6: Group C's discussion during session 1.

4.1 Feedback

By the end of Session 1, we invited participants to complete a short online survey, individually, anonymously, and in their own time.

From the 11 responses that we received, it was clear that the majority of participants had never written a manifesto. However, most felt that using the MM to write one was a positive experience. More than half of the respondents identified the actual task of writing a manifesto as the most valuable achievement, while a smaller number said that they enjoyed learning about the manifesto as a means of expressing ideas. In terms of obstacles, respondents identified some points worth considering in future iterations of the environment and workshop design: (1) brainstorming, as it was a novel task; (2) difficulty following some of the questions; (3) limited options in terms of design (currently the MM uses text only and complementary colors); (4) writing the actual manifesto, as well as finding an appropriate language and style; (5) lack of time.

5 Discussion and Future Work

The aim of our workshop was twofold: first, to explore work with a local community as a potential audience for the MM and second, to test whether our approach to the workshop is appropriate for young adults under the age of 25. For this same reason, our discussion will focus less on the technical aspects of the MM.

Not all groups engaged in all sessions and with the theme 'youth, politics and civic participation', although all were able to successfully use the MM's collaborative writing affordances to some effect. Results from the two groups demonstrating higher levels of engagement with workshop tasks show that as a sociotechnical intervention, the MM offers opportunities for reflection on the current involvement of youths with civic and political life.

As for the workshop itself, and in line with an earlier version conducted with a group of adults, our sessions with youths demonstrate that connecting participants to their own stories is a successful way of fueling the writing process. The ten questions posed at the beginning of Session 1 were crucial for kick-starting discussion and helping groups to find a common theme. This insight suggests that key audiences require more direct support for the type of discussion that precedes effective manifesto writing, and that the MM might be enhanced by integrating a set of exploratory questions within the environment itself.

More importantly, working with this group uncovered an untapped potential for the MM as tool to be used by local educational communities. While the students did not acknowledge an immediate link between the MM and the curriculum, we believe that this was partially due to the limited duration of the workshop and the fact that activities were conducted outside of classroom activities. Therefore, our next step will be to explore and position the MM as an educational tool, and one that has the potential for integrating classroom activities in a

way that spurs meaningful discussion of both local and global topics. This next set of efforts will be done in close collaboration with both students and teachers and over a more extended duration.

Finally, we believe that the introduction of the MM into local educational environments dovetails nicely with the reemergence of the manifesto - a genre once considered outdated [10] that is again making headlines [13] particularly as young activists and artists embrace political engagement, discover their voice, and amplify their concerns with both local and global issues through social media.

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