Online Political Participation by Fridays For Future Graz

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Abstract. Fridays For Future (FFF) is one of the most successful social movements when it comes to motivating young people worldwide to participate in protest actions. In this regard, they effectively reach their target groups through digital platforms, where they spread knowledge about climate change and connect with allies.

Behind the scenes, however, the organizational teams are small. The active members often have to take on many tasks simultaneously. To better distribute this workload, FFF faces the necessity to motivate further young people not only to demonstrate but also to engage in organizational tasks.

Against this background, I explore different possibilities to support the organizational teams of FFF based on a case study of FFF in Graz, Austria. I started my fieldwork with ethnographic observations and informal conversations at demonstrations and networking meetings. There, I came into close contact with the social media and communication teams of FFF in Graz.

We (the communication teams and I) developed the next steps of our joint research in two workshops. Using methods from the field of content strategy (mainly card sorting), we discussed which topics or challenges were most relevant to them. It has become apparent that, above all, researching their existing and reaching new target groups is an important issue.

As a result, we developed approaches for researching current and thinking strategically about future target groups. I will summarize the most important opportunities for action in research and further pathways in this paper.

1 Introduction

Young people, in particular, are in a unique situation, as they are confronted with the reality of a changing climate, and the consequences of this crisis will affect their own futures. Awareness of the climate catastrophe is generally on the rise in this age group, as evidenced by the recent pan-European Climate Change Survey. 64% of 15 to 24-

year-old participants claimed they had taken action on climate change – an increase of 7% from 2019 (European Commission, 2021). However, when looking at specific actions, it is apparent that these tend to be individual and easy-to-implement actions (such as recycling or avoiding plastic) rather than aimed at overall societal change. Activism is therefore still underrepresented.

With this in mind, this paper explores the communication and participation on digital media of those young people who are not only interested in issues related to climate catastrophe but also want to take active action against it. Since Greta Thunberg's first school strike in 2018, the Fridays For Future (FFF) social movement has galvanized millions of people around the globe to take action and protest for just climate policies to combat global warming. FFF is unparalleled in its scale and ability to motivate young people to participate (e.g., Wahlström et al. 2019; Wallis & Loy, 2021). According to FFF, 30,000 people participated in the last global climate strike in Austria in March 2023. FFF's main demand is to achieve the goal of the Paris Agreement, i.e., to keep the global temperature increase below 1.5 °C and to ensure climate justice. The activists consider their approach to be highly political, with impartiality being crucial (fridaysforfuture.org).

Together, we investigate the communication and especially the use of social media within FFF and with their target groups through a card sorting process focusing on the challenges FFF describe when interacting with their target groups on social media. In this process, the activists help to shape the focus, methods, data collection and evaluation according to their individual motivations. Together, we explore different possibilities for research and support for the organisational teams of FFF based on a case study of FFF in Graz, Austria.

2 Background – Activism and Political Participation on Social Media

The term "climate activist" originates from social and behavioural environmental research (SGuin et al., 2021; Hunecke et al., 2011) and is intended to describe the personal commitment of citizens who influence the environment and environmental policy through their involvement in environmental organizations or the private sector. Individual political actionism at the legal level means making one's voice heard and taking action. Collective activism means networking and participating in demonstrations, protests, and rallies (see Ekman and Amnå 2012).

To classify climate activism, O'Brien et al. (2018) developed a scheme of "dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent." These are to be understood as gradations – from actionism within existing institutional spaces to initiating, developing, and realizing alternatives that challenge structures and systems and support long-term transformations.

All three levels are relevant to society as a whole and have their own strengths and weaknesses: "Dutiful dissent", for example, uses the possibilities within current structures and systems, but does not question them and never goes beyond them. "Dangerous dissent" presents holistic ideas that go beyond a concrete climate measure (such as "transition towns"), but rarely reaches the masses due to its radical nature. Since FFF criticise and want to break up the existing structures, but at the same time want to appeal to the broad masses and do not commit themselves to more radical forms of protest, the movement can be classified as disruptive (FFF Austria, Statement Letzte Generation; Neas et al., 2022).

When considering social media participation, I want to draw on the concept of digitally networked participation. It is defined as a "networked media-based personalized action that is carried out by individual citizens with the intent to display their own mobilization and activate their social networks in order to raise awareness about, or exert social and political pressures for the solution of a social or political problem" (Theocharis, 2015, p. 6). This quotation indicates that digitally networked participation is based on traditional forms of (political) participation, such as taking political action oneself and, in addition, encouraging others to participate. However, it goes beyond giving these forms new outlets. The term "digitally networked" describes technical possibilities that shape political participation and enable new modes of networking and behaviour, such as sharing information globally, forming groups online, using protest hashtags, etc. For this purpose, the concept of political participation has to be opened, allowing for new forms and taking into account not only very active expressions but also cognitive political participation such as finding information online (Waeterloos et al., 2021). Climate activism begins with lowthreshold actions such as promoting cycling in one's own neighbourhood, which are relevant in their entirety and oftentimes can be even more impactful than more disruptive forms of activism (O'Brien et al., 2018).

What is very interesting here are the so-called spill-over effects from the online to the offline world and vice versa e.g., forming an online group after a demonstration, connecting online to then protest offline, etc. Not only can these forms coexist and inform each other, but can also be interconnected, for example when posting live from a strike (Vissers & Stolle, 2014). This digitally networked participation is especially interesting for research with young people: There is this notion that they are passive and have no interest in political issues, when in fact they are just using other channels and opportunities for participation (e.g. Crowley and Moxon, 2017).

3 Methods

I initiated this case study through ethnographic observation and informal conversations at demonstrations and networking meetings (Gobo and Molle 2017, Kozinets 2020). The aim was to learn about FFF's existing structures and networks and to identify research pathways relevant to both the activists and me as a researcher. As the focus of the project is on social media participation, FFF Graz proposed to work primarily with activists participating in their social media and communication working group (ASMCs). Further steps were based on content strategy.

The discipline of content strategy encompasses a broad spectrum of methods and tools for the user-centred development of web content. The focus is on ensuring that it meets the needs of users while supporting the goals of organizations or individuals who created the content (Halvorson & Rach, 2012). Mesibov (2019), for example, notes that user engagement with digital platforms has increased significantly through the use of content strategy methodologies. What makes content strategy so interesting for research with young people is that most of the methods are low-threshold, practical to use, and provide quick results. To this end, I conducted two workshops in which I adapted the innovative method of card sorting (Bergold & Thomas 2010; Best et al. 2021; Bloomstein 2012) to the needs of FFF.

The workshops took place in late 2021 and early 2022. The first workshop was held twice – once online and once offline – with a total of 6 participants, and the second was held online with 3 participants. 2 of them attended both workshops. At the time of the first workshop, they had been involved in the FFF movement for between 1 month and 2.5 years and were attending schools or universities in Graz. They were between 14 and 30 years old.

In the first workshop, I engaged participants to freely identify topics in participation and social media to specify issues that were relevant to FFF. Participants noted topics on cards, discussed them and ranked them by priority and feasibility. After this workshop, we agreed on the focus of researching the target groups of FFF (for details on how this focus was chosen see **Sec. 4.3**).

In the second workshop, we further concretized the topics and formed research questions to define where exactly we lack knowledge about the target groups. I asked participants to begin by openly formulating questions they had about their current audiences. Later, they grouped these questions into clusters. For this step, we used the categories developed by the Youth Participation Action Research Hub (https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/): demographic, knowledge, attitude, behaviour, and belief (see **Fig. 4**). In the end, we discussed opportunities for further actions in research and other areas. These

opportunities were suggested by me and the participants gave feedback on them, assessing whether they would achieve their communication goals and whether they were feasible in terms of their possibilities (see **Sec. 4.4**).

The whole process was audio recorded and transcribed with a smoothing out of the flow of speech. In addition, I used screenshots and photos of the card sorting process as data. I conducted a content structuring qualitative analysis, forming categories a priori and based on the material (Kuckartz, 2018). Direct quotes and figures have been translated into English by me.

4 Results

4.1 FFF in general

Although the FFF movement motivates thousands of people to protest, the core team is much smaller: about 20 to 30 people in Graz take care of organizing strikes and other actions, fundraising, design, mobilization, social media, etc. These areas of responsibility are organized into working groups with people usually working in several working groups. The working group concerned with communication and social media activities consists of two to five people.



Figure 1: The FFF movement is successful in motivating people to participate in demonstrations. This photo was taken during the September 2021 global climate strike in Graz, Austria.

In the subsequent sections, I provide an overview of the ASMCs' description of their communication activities and their assessments of FFF's content performance, and then focus on the challenges they face as these challenges lead to the second workshop and the card sorting activity.

4.2 Overview of Communication Activities

ASMCs use various channels and platforms for communication with their target audiences. In the latter case, Facebook and Instagram are particularly noteworthy. ASMCs' descriptions of their target groups, why they use these platforms and whom exactly they want to reach on these social media platforms remain vague: They use Facebook primarily for events and communication with (older) target groups, whereas Instagram is intended to reach all target groups, but is seen primarily as an important platform for students and young people. Very similar, if not the same, content is posted.

ASMCs are very clear about their communication goals. They want to shed light on the climate crisis and inspire more people to get involved in the movement. To achieve their goals, they use a content mix consisting of topics related to demonstrations as well as more substantive topics such as the carbon footprint, the most affected people and areas of the climate crisis, the eco-social tax reform, etc. In this context, it is important for the activists to communicate not only the crisis but also possible solutions. They want to show that, as a political movement, their primary goal is not to change individuals (and their climate-conscious behaviour), but the system. To do this, they are also joining forces with other social movements as allies under the motto "one struggle, one fight".

4.3 Content Performance and Challenges

ASMCs identified topics that are important to them and ranked them in order of priority and feasibility. I conducted this workshop twice (once offline and once online). Comparing the two, it is noteworthy that participants in the offline workshop focused more on topics they wanted to address more often in their communication activities but were struggling with, such as most affected people and areas. They described these topics as complex and therefore challenging to address in a single social media post. Participants in the online workshop focused more on organisational tasks and strategy, such as having a publishing plan and creating more content, for example for YouTube. (see **Fig. 2** and **Fig. 3**).

According to ASMCs, strike-related content, such as calls to action, showing "people in action" (P1), or slogans on the signs, tends to generate high levels of audience interaction. Formats such as appealing graphics, videos with "more effort" (P3) such as strike recaps with clips and photos, collages or live reports are also well received.

In contrast, ASMCs describe content-rich topics as receiving much less attention. They are conflicted about the reasons for this. They suspect that the platforms' algorithms, but also the fact that these topics have a more negative spin, are responsible for the moderate success: "Such a strike is basically positively afflicted, there are many people there, there is a good mood and then comes such an explanatory post (...) I think it really has to do with the fact that the content posts are usually not so positive" (P2).

In terms of participation in the movement, they are satisfied with how many people they reach from their "bubble" (P2) and with how many of them attend demonstrations. However, ASMCs are concerned about how to reach more people on the one hand: what formats to use, where to find them, and how to communicate with them. On the other hand, since the workload of individuals in the working groups is often very high, they urgently want more people to participate in the working groups and to get more involved than merely attending demonstrations. For example, ASMCs often struggle to create enough quality content for their platforms. In other words, spill-over effects from participating in demonstrations to helping with (online) content creation and other organisational tasks can only be observed in a very small and highly motivated group of young people.

ASMCs have tried to motivate others by offering open meetings that anyone can attend, but so far this approach has not been as successful as they would like it to be. Activists suspect that many people who are interested in the movement think that they have to live a perfectly climate-friendly life in order to participate in the FFF movement. However, they describe their approach as somewhat different, arguing that the current system does not allow, or makes it difficult, for people to live 100% climate-friendly. They also addressed this topic in postings. Also, as mentioned above, the FFF movement, in general, does not primarily aim to change individual people, but the system.



Figure 2: Ranking of topics by priority and feasibility: The participants in the first workshop (offline version) focused more on topics they wanted to display more but struggled to.

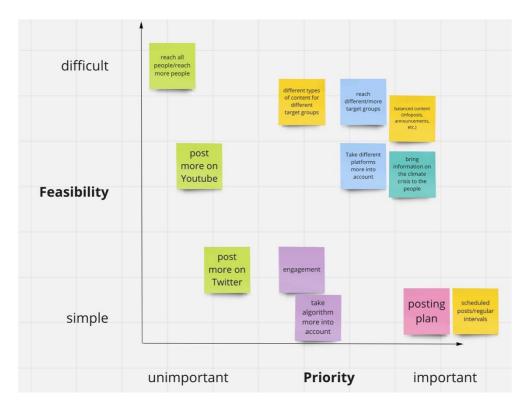


Figure 3: Ranking of topics by priority and feasibility: The participants in the first workshop (online version) focused more on organizational tasks and strategy.

In conclusion, this initial evaluation shows that ASMCs are very united and specific about their own goals, but are often in doubt about what works well for their target audiences, how to reach more and different people than they already do, how to communicate substantive issues, how to motivate people to join working groups, etc. Their initial description of who they want to reach and who they actually reach on Facebook and Instagram remains vague (see **Sec. 4.2**). During this first workshop we concluded that the fact that ASMCs do not know enough about their audiences is at the root of many challenges. As a reason for this, they describe the little time they have to deal with their audiences – either currently (who they are reaching) or strategically (who they might want to reach in the future) (e.g. Halvorson & Rach, 2012; Bloomstein 2012).

Therefore, the next card sorting process was dedicated to defining detailed gaps in knowledge about their audiences and exploring further actions to research their current audiences and implement strategic thinking.

As described in **Sec. 3.**, in the second workshop the participants drafted open questions about their current audiences and grouped these into clusters: demographic, knowledge, attitude, behaviour, and belief (see **Fig. 4**).

- 1. Demographic: Who feels engaged by the content on FFF's social media channels and why? How can FFF reach additional audiences?
- 2. Knowledge: What do the target audiences know about the climate crisis (e.g. activism, climate justice, climate-conscious behaviour, systems change)? What channels do they use to gain knowledge? Do they gain knowledge through FFF's social media channels?
- 3. Attitude: How do target groups perceive FFF's content? Are the topics understandable, relevant, and varied? What else do they want to see?
- 4. Behaviour: How and why do audiences interact with posts (like, share, save)? What content format (video, photo, graphic) triggers the most interaction? Is the text of social media posts being read? Do target groups recommend FFF's social media channels?
- 5. Belief: Who do audiences believe could join the FFF movement and its working groups?

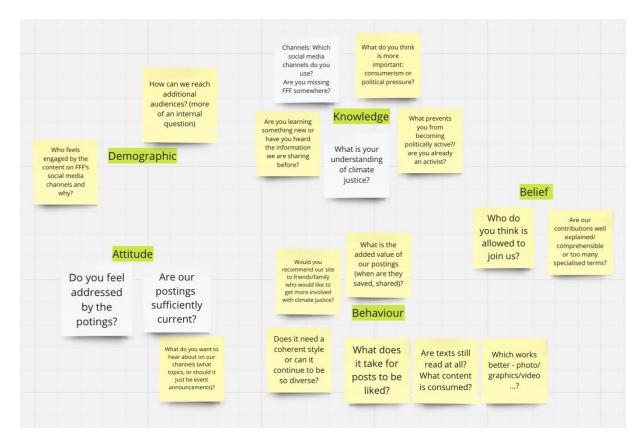


Figure 4: Second workshop: open-ended questions about FFF's target audience's demographics, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs

4.4 Opportunities for Further Actions in Research and Other Pathways

Based on this process, we worked together to identify opportunities as well as specific methods and ways to help ASMCs address their key challenge: to find out more about their current audiences and, based on this knowledge, to come together and think strategically about whether they want to reach these people or whether there are others they want to address. To do this, we took a content strategy perspective, as one of the goals of content strategy is to research user needs and implement strategy while keeping the methods practical and delivering results quickly. The latter is especially helpful given the tight timeline of the ASMCs. For each method, advantages and disadvantages are listed in relation to the specific requirements of the FFF movement and the activists themselves.

4.4.1 Online survey

Especially after the second workshop, an online survey would be a logical next step, as existing questions could be further developed and refined for use as survey questions.

Advantages:

- *Distribution*: The survey could be distributed through the various channels that ASMCs already use to reach their target groups.
- Overview of target groups: An online survey would allow ASMCs to collect a larger amount of data from their current target groups. This could give them an overview of their target groups and serve as a starting point for further methods that go more in-depth.

Disadvantages:

- Distribution: Getting people to participate in a lengthy online survey could be a challenge, especially in fast-paced social media. In addition, algorithms on some social media platforms tend to rank posts with external links lower than other types of content, as they do not want people to leave their platform (e.g. Chawla and Chodak, 2021).
- Time: The setup and especially the analysis could take time ASMCs do not have.
- Experts: To set up and analyse the survey correctly, researchers may also be needed to assist ASMCs.
- "Get to know" your audience: Many content strategists advise you to put yourself in the shoes of your audience to develop the exact content that they need (e.g. Halvorson & Rach, 2012; Casey, 2015). This would require direct interaction with the audience, which is not possible through an online survey.

4.4.2 Autoethnography

An autoethnography can be described as a combination of self-reflection and exploration of others. As a first step, a participant does ethnographic work about themselves. For example, a person may self-reflect on their own information or social media behaviour. As a second step, the person compares themselves with others in order to gain new insights about themselves (Chang, 2016; Ellis et al., 2010). I would advise ASMCs to get representatives of their target groups to go through an auto-ethnography process with them.

Advantages:

- Creative & engaging: An autoethnography can be conducted using diverse and creative content formats. Participants can express their behaviour through videos, photos, text, drawings, etc.
- Comparison of results: The comparison with other participants and the related discussions can lead to relevant insights. In these discussions, ASMCs can interact with different target groups and learn about their behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, or knowledge.
- Content for channels: An autoethnography can be very creative in terms of content creation. Since activists are always looking for new content for their channels, they could ask participants if (part of) their autoethnography could be published on their channels.
- Competencies: When discussing methods during the workshops, one ASMC mentioned that they had learned about this method in their studies and would be motivated to practice it with FFF's target groups.

Disadvantages:

- High participant commitment: An autoethnography requires time and effort from participants. It may be a challenge for ASMCs to find people who want to make this commitment, especially from target groups that are not already highly engaged in the FFF movement.
- High workload for ASMCs: As this is a qualitative method, the sample should be well chosen. It should include representatives of different target groups to obtain solid results. Organizing and analysing would require time and commitment to the process, which may not be possible for ASMCs.

4.4.3 Usability testing

In usability testing, the researcher observes users while they perform a specific task, such as interacting with a piece of content, a website, a product, etc. (Krug, 2010; Lazar et al., 2017). While performing the task the researcher asks the participant to think aloud (Konrad, 2010). This process is recorded and analysed. User needs are clarified and subsequently usability problems can be identified.

Advantages:

- Simple & fast: The process does not require much time or preparation.
- Quick results: Results are visible to ASMCs as they watch participants perform a task.
- Information about target groups + content: Usability testing allows ASMCs to
 work closely with participants on a specific task. They would gain information
 about their target groups and get feedback on their content.

Disadvantages:

 Audience participation: The commitment and effort to participate in usability testing would not be as high as for an autoethnography, but participants would still have to set aside a couple of hours of their time for it and possibly meet ASMCs in person. Again, the sample should be well chosen.

4.4.4 Group Discussion and Informal Meeting

Group discussions involve a number of participants discussing a topic or (social) issue, such as climate change or activism in the case of FFF (e.g. O.Nyumba et al., 2018). This reflects the attitudes of individual people and the debates among participants.

Advantages:

- Group setting: With a single appointment, ASMCs can engage with a group of people, exchange views and gather feedback. For example, they could show participants a piece of content and ask them to talk about both the subject matter and the form.
- Familiar setting: FFF activists often discuss various topics related to climate change during their meetings. Opening this up is something they have tried before but have not been successful in doing. Putting more effort into recruiting a sample might be beneficial.
- Content for channels: Again, this method might inform content decisions, as ASMCs could gain insight into their current strategy and be inspired by the discussions to include topics that would also be of interest to participants.

Disadvantages:

- Audience participation: Again, participants do not need to be very engaged, but they still need to participate in a discussion (in person) and share their opinions. Also, the sample should reflect different target groups and opinions to create a lively discussion.
- Moderator: One person needs to lead and moderate the discussion. This person should have some necessary communication and social skills, such as the ability to lead a group, active listening, and flexibility (O.Nyumba et al., 2018). For example, FFF activists are experts on their topics of interest, which may make it difficult for them to listen openly to people who are not as well informed without interfering.
- Social dynamics: As with any group setting, social dynamics should be considered. For example, the group opinion might not reflect the single opinion of every individual as some people might be more outspoken than others, some might not feel comfortable saying what's on their mind, etc. (O.Nyumba et al., 2018).

4.5 Strategic Thinking

Once the current target group results have been collected, a final step is essential for meaningful content strategy work to continue: strategy (e.g. Halvorson & Rach, 2012; Casey, 2015). This involves relating the findings on target audiences to the communication objectives of the ASMCs. As described above, they are very clear about their own communication goals: to shed light on the climate crisis and to inspire more people to get involved in the movement (see **Sec. 4.2**). The question now is whether the current target groups are the right ones to achieve these goals. To determine this, the following questions, among others, were included in the research: What do the target audiences know about the climate crisis? Who do audiences believe could join the FFF movement and its working groups? (see **Sec. 4.3**).

The next step is to strategically assess whether the target groups already correspond to the objectives of the FFF or whether other or more target groups should be reached. This could be done, for example, in a workshop of different FFF working groups with the ASMCs, where the results are discussed or clustered using the card sorting methods described above (see **Sec. 3**). As a result, a short paper or core strategy statement (Casey, 2015) can be produced that answers the questions: What are our communication goals? Who do we want to reach (more)? This statement can guide the further content creation process. It helps to address challenges such as how to create content-rich topics that resonate with target audiences and how to motivate people to become more involved in the movement (see **Sec. 4.3**). At the same time, ASMCs ensure that the content meets the needs of the users.

5 Conclusion

In this research approach, I worked closely with activists from FFF Graz's social media and communication working group (ASMCs). Using content strategy methods, we first defined the main challenges ASMCs face in their approach to digital political participation and communication with their target groups. We concluded that many challenges have their origin in a lack of knowledge about their target groups. Therefore, in the second step, we defined more precise knowledge gaps by formulating questions and discussing opportunities for activities in research as well as further pathways. I summarised the main advantages and disadvantages of each pathway, taking into account the requirements of the FFF and my background as a content strategist. I recommend to the ASMCs that they plan an activity that:

1. Allows them to engage with their target groups (in person),

2. Does not take up too much of their resources (mainly time and effort in

organisation and analysis),

3. Allows them to either collect content for their channels during the activity or at

least gives them feedback on their existing content.

This would enable ASMCs to collect relevant results while making efficient use of their scarce time and resources. Subsequently, they need to be strategically rethought in order to use the results in a meaningful way. ASCMs need to consider whether the audiences they are currently reaching are in line with their communication goals, or whether they want to reach more people. Based on this, they can design content for their social media platforms that is user-centred and pursues strategic goals. Overall, this paper has applied content strategy approaches in a methodologically straightforward way to the case of

FFF.

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Acronyms

FFF: Fridays For Future

ASMCs: Activists participating in the social media and communication working group of

FFF Graz

P1, P2, P3: Participant 1, 2, 3

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- **Fig. 3**: Ranking of topics by priority and feasibility: The participants in the first workshop (online version) focused more on organizational tasks and strategy.
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