

The Role of New Social and Digital Media in the European Public Sphere

2014

THE ROLE OF NEW SOCIAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA IN THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

In this paper, FutureLab Europe participants explore the opportunities and risks that new social and digital media offer in fostering participation in a European debate. At about the same age as the web itself, these young Europeans express what they believe is needed to facilitate a broader debate on European topics.

Europe has to be a “citizen project” in order to succeed. But how to get everyone involved, regardless of age and nationality? Traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television are often perceived as the stronghold of the older generations. Digital natives, born into the information age, are said to prefer online media. Yet intersections already exist, with the silver surfers catching up, and traditional media conquering young target groups. The obvious place for all to meet and debate seems to be online, in the new social and more traditional digital media.

1. Take the debate to where the citizens are

While the interest in EU-politics appears to be low - as exemplified most recently by the voter turnouts in this year’s European Parliamentary elections - political debates still have the potential to motivate and engage the European public. Europe needs a debate that addresses every citizen and encourages them to participate. However, in order to reach a broader range of the public, these debates need to be taking place on arenas where the people are present and feel comfortable communicating. Social and digital media, with their outreach and emphasis on dialogue, offer a possible channel.

2. Access to information

Social and digital media are valuable channels through which information can be spread to broad layers of society and in a relatively short period of time. This provides an informal counterpart to the formal information communicated through school and institutions. As the task of questioning and verifying any given information and source remains up to each citizen, it is crucial to provide citizens of all age with both media skills and access to the internet.

3. Need for two-way communication

In social and digital media the focus is on two-way communication and user-generated content. Consequently, social media as a tool to exchange information, communicate and network, has a higher potential to foster debates than traditional media that first and foremost serve as broadcasters of information to their audience.

4. Get personal

Social media can increase the level of transparency within the EU not only by ‘tracking’ everyday activities of the European politicians, but also by offering easy access to data and free insight into political discourse and processes. An open, interactive use of social media platforms counteracts the notion of the EU being ‘closed’ and overly bureaucratic - making the union transparent and more accessible, which is a precondition for a democratic debate. In order to achieve a proper dialogue, the representatives have to stop hiding behind their respective institutions – debates are led by people.

5. Legal standards of communication

Unfortunately, openness and accessibility can also breed ‘online violence’ and consequently the violation of rights. This is a danger that needs to be addressed. Concerns are raised regarding the actual modalities of debates in social media, as well as regarding the quality vs. quantity dichotomy. We need legal standards to define and defend the line between protection against harassment and undercutting the right for free speech.

New social and digital media and the European public debate

As of 2014, there are approximately 290 million active social media users in Europe out of the total population of 740 million. This means that social media still engages a relatively small number of people, although their demographic range is gradually widening. Furthermore, even if smartphones and internet connections are now commonplace all over Europe, there are still barriers to fully making use of these opportunities. One key challenge is, notably, not technological, but linguistic. Cross-border debates not in one's familiar language can be difficult and intimidating to take part in.

Nevertheless, many minority groups in Europe have benefited from the increasing possibilities of online participation, as they are generally under-represented in the traditional media, which often represent a rather national point of view.

The new opportunities that online participation provides do not always translate to contributions to a genuine European public sphere. Social media platforms provide their users a way for easy activism. *Slacktivism*, people who solely take action from their couch, take part in the debate through online petitions or other campaigns. Getting them to engage further in the political debate can be difficult, and this kind of a use of social media arguably results in a mere illusion of activism.

Where to find the correct information?

Much of the constant flow of information in the social media is provided by "citizen journalists", often without professional journalistic backgrounds. Active social media users – most of them young and educated – have been calling for metaphoric "truth filters", as the line between true and false information is getting more difficult to draw.

For professional journalists the growth of new digital and social media has been transformative. News production is no longer the privilege of a small group of professionals and their role as a provider of objective and reliable information is changing under the pressure of citizenship journalism. In some media - the yellow press in particular - the role of a journalist is becoming one of merely reacting to and redistributing social media content. Many quality papers have also been suffering under the pressure of competitive media markets; "pay-per-click" journalism for professional writers is already an everyday practice and encourages for the use of sensational titles and manipulated information.

Traditional, digital and social media have nonetheless become so tightly intertwined that professional journalists depend on the social media and vice versa. One example: during the escalation of the Ukraine crisis in the spring 2014 several newspapers/news sites worldwide compiled a list of "Top 10/15/20 Twitter Accounts Worth Following", providing an efficient way for the traditional media to benefit from the social media by screening the most interesting and trustworthy accounts (journalists and non-journalists alike). By leaving their traditional one-way-communication and opening up to start and host debates, "old" media gain new audiences, especially those accustomed to the use of new social media.

Come out of the ivory tower of Europe!

Social media foster a dialogue between citizens and representatives, and open up space for new and alternative perspectives. Through social media it is possible for political stakeholders to gain a direct connection with citizens, one which is perceived to be more personal than what has been possible through traditional media. On the European level this is of particular importance as many citizens consider

Brussels to be an “ivory tower”, too removed from the public. It can be difficult to fully understand how EU-politics work and how political decisions can influence the individual. In this respect, the act of following tweets from the everyday life of politicians can help disillusioned Europeans to get a better picture of the issues and processes that affect them.

Yet, how much interaction and engagement is possible with an institution? The European Parliament is promoting itself on Facebook but remains impersonal. Most citizens would rather contact a representative, a minister and a local representative with their questions and remarks. Here social media is at an advantage, as it works the same way as humans communicate offline: amongst humans. There are already politicians who successfully used the opportunities that social media offer to reduce the gap between voters and delegates. One example is Dutch MEP Marietje Schaake, nicknamed “Europe’s most wired politician”, who appears personally on social media and thus becomes much more accessible.

Social media opens up a new public space for debating the European Project. It has the potential to involve a large number of people, through channels that can be more effective than those of national news outlets (be they broadcasters or newspapers). Social media is less dependent on profit, as users are at once consumers and creators of content. Furthermore, social media has the potential to overcome the language barriers that up to this point have fragmented the European media landscape. Twitter, through allowing the interaction of multiple conversations concerning pan-European issues, is better at facilitating a common understanding of identity and participatory democracy. The defined length of no more than 140 characters calls for a less complicated and easier to understand language. There will never be one narrative of Europe, nor should there be, but online

there is room for be an exchange of ideas that has been unprecedented. These new tools help promote democracy, legitimacy, ownership, and a common understanding of the challenges we face and the things that unite us. In a few years, new technologies should be able to add subtitles even to live debates.

Citizen’s initiatives gaining momentum through social media

Social media already provide numerous opportunities in ‘communicating Europe’. Using the power of social media, citizen’s initiatives can have a huge impact on society, bringing people together and transforming them into one stakeholder with a clear message.

Romania, for example, has since 2012 stepped into a new era of active and participatory citizenship. Two bottom-up movements – the electoral campaign of Nicusor Dan in Spring 2012 (an independent candidate to the Mayors’ Office of Bucharest and activist seeking to protect the city from corruption and abuses of power), and the Rosia Montana movement in Autumn 2013 (opposing the building of a gold mine in the Carpathians) brought important changes to the Romanian society, raising awareness on several issues that representatives and officials have made a decision on despite large public opposition.

In both cases, clear-cut messages distributed over social media became viral, travelling between groups and communities, reaching a critical mass fast and thus managing to keep people engaged over a long period of time. People with a special interest in protection of the environment, of their city’s historical heritage, ecology, urbanism, biking lanes, public spending, transparency, integrity, European legislation or respect for rule of law and democratic values were all of a sudden united for a common goal. Nicusor managed to raise 70.000 votes (9,5% of voters) with

almost no budget and Rosia Montana movement stopped the gold mine project after three months of protest with dozens of thousands of people on the streets of Romania.

Diversity of perspectives: challenges and opportunities

Through social media, the amount of ideas and perspectives communicated increases. No debate should be limited to highly educated professors or public figures with an opinion in the comment section of a major newspaper. As interesting as such an exchange of ideas can be, this form accommodates a very limited number of participants. Social media has the potential to introduce many more perspectives to the debate, by lowering the barriers for entry so anyone can join in. While language differences are still a challenge in Europe, trans-national debates are taking form. During the European Elections earlier in 2014, Twitter did provide a space for continent-wide debates about candidates and issues.

Having such a diverse range of sources of information and perspectives makes it at the same time harder and easier for an individual to gather all information. To sift through all possible information in order to find the aspects relevant to form one's own opinion could be herculean task. Yet multiple and diverse perspectives also enable an individual to gain as much insight as possible while providing transparency.

Freedom of speech - at what cost?

An open European debate inviting citizens to share their opinions also implies the risk of discrimination, harassment, and violent or hateful remarks. Protected by physical remoteness, anonymity and lack of supervision, some commenters seem to lose all sense of tolerance and propriety.

Recently the Norwegian Union of Journalists (NJ) and the Norwegian Editors' Association (NR) conducted a research study to measure the extent for harassment on the Internet. It showed that 34 percent of the journalists and 43 percent of the editors had been harassed. Respectively 20 and 31 percent were subjected to threats, while 2 and 3 percent had been victims of violence. It became clear the ability to criticize journalistic work had grown to be a major democratic problem that we must address quickly. How can we avoid that this also becomes an issue in cyber activism? Is it possible to hold the individuals behind harmful and threatening comments accountable for their statements?

Anonymity can contribute to a diversity of voices and debates, where name, title or domicile is not a hindrance to take a stance. One can argue that on the one hand, anonymous debates are freer and more honest. However, the opposite seems to be the case: many of those who claim anonymity also use the harshest words against their opponents. In that way they drive others away from online debates. The voices of women and young people disappear, experts are unwilling to spend their time on hardly civilized arenas, and immigrants and other minority groups seldom participate. Rather than to encourage more open debates and inclusiveness, anonymity appears to limit freedom of expression and participation. Recently, many Norwegian newspapers have addressed this challenge: all debaters are now obliged to sign with their full name. Apart from the obvious effect in the protection against harassment based on one's opinion, the openness also seems to serve another important goal: a survey from 2012 shows that anonymous online comments have less influence than posts written under full name. By removing the option to be anonymous when commenting on their articles, these newspapers are laying the groundwork for a more constructive public debate.

Conclusion

Europe needs a public sphere, where citizens can debate their ideas and perspective on European topics. These debates have to take place where the citizens are and new social media offer the best possible means for it. The basis for such debates is the availability of transparent, reliable information covering multifold perspectives. In order to manage the broad variety of information, citizens have to be

provided with substantial media skills. Traditional media, such as radio, television, print media and their online outlets, as well as institutions, have to open their current one-way communication and start to interact with their audience. This interaction has to be personal, because communication and debates take place between humans. To protect citizens from online violence, common European legal standards of communication need to be defined and implemented.

This position paper is a collective product of FutureLab Europe, a programme for ambitious bright young professionals who want to play an active role in shaping the future of the European project. FutureLab Europe is a project of the European Alliance for Democratic Citizenship, affiliated to the Network of European Foundations and coordinated by the Körber Foundation. It is operated by the European Policy Centre. Follow us on www.futurelabeurope.eu, on Twitter [@FutureLabEurope](https://twitter.com/FutureLabEurope) and on facebook.com/FutureLabEurope.

C/O EUROPEAN POLICY CENTRE
14-16 RUE DU TRÔNE
1000 BRUSSELS - BELGIUM
E-MAIL: INFO@FUTURELABEUROPE.EU
TWITTER: [@FUTURELABEUROPE](https://twitter.com/FUTURELABEUROPE)
WWW.FUTURELABEUROPE.EU

FutureLab Europe is a project of the European Alliance for Democratic Citizenship, affiliated to the Network of European Foundations. It is operated by the European Policy Centre.

EMPOWERING
YOUNG
VOICES