Assessing Participation Online: Youth and Their Involvement in Social Media

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The role of political participation and civic engagement as the backbones of modern deliberative democracy is challenged by new opportunities for involvement online. Fundamental societal transformations, facilitated by new technologies, are changing the way we interact, communicate, produce and exchange knowledge. By nature being a bottom-up experiment, social media are more and more involved into the everyday communication practice and become one of the major political communication channels.

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature analysing the democratic citizens' engagement and political participation in the era of the Internet, particularly focusing on the involvement of young people in the decision-making process. Moreover, a pilot case study is presented, reflecting the practices of politically active young individuals in the online communicative space. The data available are analysed to shed some light on the debate and to focus attention on several aspects of youth participation. Looking further, the questions are raised: is the Internet an attractive channel to enhance political interest and discussion among the youngsters? What impact may online communication practice via social media have on civic and political participation of young people offline?

Key words: *social media, political participation, democratic engagement, political communication, Internet, youth*

Introduction

The citizens' engagement is defined as a multifaceted concept consisting of political interest, political discussion, and political knowledge (Mossberger et al., 2008). Without question, the advent of new information and communication technologies (ICT) has attracted considerable attention of scholars in the field of political communication: these technologies stimulate new discussions about the possibilities for democratic citizens' engagement and po-litical participation; a considerable amount of research is devoted to the analysis of various aspects of social media for personal, organizational, corporate and public use as well as to the political engagement and participation practices online. In this context, youth is usually perceived as a very special group – highly influenced by the Internet, captured by an extended democratic participation sphere, eager to use less formal, more open channels for political interaction. The wide scope of en-

gagement possibilities online (from interest group formation to deliberative forums or e-voting) raises the question: do online forms of democratic engagement already compete with the traditional interactions offline among the youngsters?

Today the social media – as the media transformed by digitally interactive ICT and based on online social networking platforms as well as open source tools – expand beyond the mass media and include the Net as well as various other forms of personalized media consumption (De Vreese, 2010). Compared with the classical forms of participation, the computer-mediated versions of activity offer more interactive, two-way communication flows for the participatory actions in society. There is a body of research discussing the issue: even though the levels of online activity and engagement are not as high as in traditional offline activities, they are not negligible, and online participation is routinely included in academic assessments of political participation (e.g., Zhang et al., 2010; Anduiza et al., 2008; Newman, 2009; Proulx, 2009; Dahlgren, 2007, etc.). Researchers in the field have both optimistic and pessimistic reflections on the relationship between participation and the socially oriented Internet. Some of them support the argument that social-network-based online communication tools help to stimulate interest towards politics, suggest new ways of information sharing without mediators, offer more specialist (political) information, more means of exchange and deliberation, bypassing the restrictions of traditional news media and officially organized communicative spaces, help to make an informed decision relying on regular as well as alternative sources of information (Davis, 2009; Nyre, 2009; Newman, 2009; Dutton, 2008). On the other hand, there are also more pessimistic viewpoints, and researchers admit the dangers associated with information overload, unequal access, mediatisation of political communication, and colonization, commodification of alternative information spheres as well as their failure to influence real-life interactions (Davis, 2009; Gurevitz, Coleman, Blumler, 2009; Best, Krueger, 2005; Balčytienė, 2008; Anduiza et al., 2008).

Recently, more research analyzing specific groups of young individuals and their democratic engagement online has been involved into scholarly inquiry (Bennet et al., 2011; Gaiser et al., 2010; Vromen, Collin, 2010; Quintellier, Vissers, 2008). However, scholars still express their concern for more in-depth studies aimed to understand the dynamics of these complex socio-political youth participation issues. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the contribution of young people to the online communicative space, the social media in particular, as an interactive, bottom-up, easily accessible medium. In the beginning, the literature review reveals scholarly insights into the problem disclosing special aspects of youth democratic engagement in the Internet era. Further, an overview of the experimental pilot study is presented, in which performances of politically active young individuals in social media (such as Facebook) and their perceptions of the political engagement online are analysed. Finally, the questions for the future research are raised, trying to complete the picture of youth's democratic engagement via social media.

Defining the problem: youth participation in the Internet era

We live in a new economy which has three fundamental features: it is informational, it is global, and it is networked (Castells, 2000: 10). Innovations in web development, computing technology, the proliferation of broadband and new forms of media contribute to the extent of Internet applications that have never been seen before. A number of on-going changes due to the increasing use of networking technologies in contemporary society are observed: liberal democracies are facing a crisis of legitimacy, public trust and understanding; the media involve decentralized grassroot communication forms into their content; social media tools give opportunities for a meaningful civic engagement and political participation; the social dimension moves the communicative power away from singular dominant sources of communication (Gurevitz et al., 2009; Dutton, 2008; Dahlgren, 2006). Consequently, the need to understand democratic participation primarily as a communication process becomes even stronger.

Young people's participation and involvement in political life via the Internet and social networking tools has received a great public as well as academic interest: numerous data reveal that youngsters are the most avid users of networked tools for communication, since they have been socialized with the Internet since childhood (Mossberger et al., 2003; Quinteller, Vissers, 2008). The majority of youth in Lithuania willingly engage into various activities online. According to the 2011 Internet Survey, 98.5% of those in the age group 15–19 and 89.5% in the age group 20–29 had access to the Internet and used it at least once during the previous six months (TNS, 2011). Moreover, social networking sites are most popular in the age group 15–29: eight out of 10 Internet users use them. For those engaged into social media, visiting social networking sites becomes almost as popular as checking e-mail; when connected to social media sites, individuals in this age group usually spend time communicating with friends, family or collegues, checking news about their friends and acquaintances (TNS, 2010).

Recently, there has been a lot of discussions on the influence of new communication technologies on democracy (Bennett, 2008b; Coleman, Blumler, 2009; LeDuc et al., 2010). Young people are more enthusiastic about the possibility than the older generation to engage into political activities. However, at the same time youth dissatisfaction with conventional political engagement opportunities is widely documented: they express general disinterest, apathy and scepticism towards politics, the political involvement of young people is usually labeled by impatience with politics, disenchantment with political commitment, and individualization (Bennett et al., 2011; Vromen, Collin, 2010; Geiser et al., 2010; Quinteller, Vissers, 2008). General research shows that young people are among those least likely to see the democratic process as relevant to them; they display a low level of political participation, feel estranged from the political system, underrepresented in more traditional forms of participation (Coleman, 2008; Dahlgren, 2007; Anduiza et al., 2008; Gaiser et al., 2010). The existing agendas reinforce the top-down, adult-managed, structured, and formal forms of youth participation (Vromen, Collin, 2010).

Socialization strategies are also incorporated to bring (young) citizens closer to the political process (Quintellier, Vissers, 2008). Publics, social relations, communication networks play an important role in forming and enacting social identities of the young (Boyd, 2008). Scholars provide various insights into youth disenchantment with politics, drawing links to socialization issues, since "adults are frequently negative about politics, the tone of the press is often cynical, candidates seldom appeal directly to young voters on their own terms about their concerns, politicians have poisoned the public well with vitriol and negative campaigning, and young people see the media filled with inauthentic performances from officials who are staged by professional communication managers" (Bennett, 2008a: 1).

The aspiration for a more legitimized democracy would lead nowhere without public participation by ordinary citizens: for democracy to work properly, it is essential for the citizens to express their opinion on the political system and to see that the system is responsive to this opinion (Anduiza et al., 2008; Nyre, 2009). From the liberal perspective, the relation between civil society and the state is the cornerstone of democracy, which "depends on the existence of solidary bonds that extend beyond political arrangements" (Alexander, 2006). Thus, the excluded youngsters are important targets of institutional politics (Coleman, 2008). Youth political participation broadly refers to numerous ways of involving young people in the decision-making process as "those activities performed by citizens alone or together with others, which they voluntary engage in to influence political deci-

sions" (Kaase, 2002: 350, cited in Gaiser et al., 2010: 435). More opportunities for private citizens to affect the decision-making processes as well as the development, implementation, and enforcement of public policy through government are offered (Oblak, 2003; Delli Carpini, 2004; Theocharis, 2011). The hopes are pinned to the social networking sites whose social dimension might potentially bring young voters back to politics.

The sharing and discussion of political information might be perceived as a tool for the formation of opinions that ultimately translate into political participation (Mossberger et al., 2008; Wright, Street, 2007; Gonzalez-Bailon, et al., 2010). With the advent of the ICT and Web 2.0, more opportunities to access, challenge single politicians or political institutions, and discuss with the governing authorities are being documented. Online social networks (with bottom-up citizen-designed projects) become a very attractive tool for the citizens to be engaged, having in mind various forms of activism. Activism online may go far beyond the traditional forms of participation (e.g., voting) and offers diverse types of everyday extra-institutional activism – civic-oriented acts, which are undertaken on a more regular basis than elections, or other acts that lie within the institutional framework (e.g., signing petitions, boycotting certain products or marching against racism) (Theocharis, 2011). Mobilization theories suggest that the Internet and 'virtual democracy' potentially attract previously underrepresented individuals to the new forms of horizontal and vertical communication, thus reducing social inequalities in social life (Norris, 2000). Various new opportunities for participa-

tion, lower costs of engagement, quick access to up-to-date information, possibility to build social ties with the citizen make social networking sites an attractive sphere of political interaction. Consequently, online social networks are becoming important sources of political information and are believed to be tempting engagement alternatives for youngsters who usually are not attracted to politics. In fact, they are sometimes described as the 'cure' for the democratic deficit that political institutions have been recently experiencing.

Even though the online communicative space – and the social media in particular – seem to fuel the democratic process in different aspects, reinforcement theories suggest that the Internet strengthens the existing patterns of social inequality and widens the participation gap between those who are engaged and politically interested and who are not (Norris, 2000). However, the debate now is shifting further, analysing the impact of social networking tools on various groups using the Internet for political participation. Concerning the democratic participation issues, particularly youth participating online, a lot is being discussed on decreasing the engagement in the Internet, its use particularly for entertainment, as citizens have less time for civic and social activities in the off-line/ real world (Dahlgren, 2009; Chistensen, 2011). These reflections on the negative aspects of democratic engagement could be summarized by the term *slacktivism* described as "little activities that do not express a full-blown political commitment", referring to the activities that are easily performed, but they are considered more effective in making the participants feel good about themselves than to achieve the

political goals (wearing political messages in various forms on your body or vehicle, joining Facebook groups, or taking part in short-term boycotts) (Morozov, 2009, cited in Christensen, 2011). Online-based activities may even distract citizens from the other, more effective, forms of engagement.

Of course, from the historical point of view, participation had been a topic before the appearance of the social media. However, the social media moved participation to another level. At present, it is obvious that the social media (as a collective, user-generated, unmediated platform) could serve as an alternative space for civic engagement; consequently, social networking tools (as a phenomenon of the last decade) inevitably influence contemporary society. Therefore, the field of the social media and the questions of various forms of conventional and nonconventional democratic engagement are of particular importance in terms of research. Moreover, even though the studies deal with democratic engagement in relation with the aspects of political communication worldwide, in Lithuania, the aim to analyse the role of the social media for a particular group of young adolescents in the process of political communication is still quite a new area of research. Young adolescents are the most avid users of all new tools, especially the social media. What are the characteristics and motives of this participation?

Politically active youth and their democratic engagement online (pilot case study)

Seeking to explore the possibilities and cases of participation changes due to the social media and digital technologies, a

qualitative pilot case study is presented, in which young and politically active individuals' experiences of participation and interaction in the social media are analysed. It is an effort to investigate the views and practices of this particular group of youngsters concerning their political engagement online, to explore the experience of social media interactions and the perceptions of the communication process online.

Method and data

Due to the areas of interest, the main groups of the study questions were the following: (a) participation via social media practices – *do politically active young citizens use the Internet to encourage other young people to political participation?* (b) motivations to participate – *why do they choose to participate online/ to use social media?* (c) the expected outcomes of the influence on engagement off-line – *what are the aims of communication?* This small-scale study was an effort to investigate the views and attitudes of politically active young citizens as regards their political engagement online, to explore and compare the experience of social media interactions, perceptions of the communication process, and to shed some light on the most intriguing question: does politics matter online, in the social media?

A very specific group of politically active young individuals was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the explicit political interests make this group an attractive target to analyse the aspects of their political participation. Another reason was that, being active in social media networks, these individuals proactively engage in building networks of deliberation and cooperation and in this way naturally use the logic of network society. Moreover, young and actively communicating online adults might be treated as the opinion leaders, some kind of experts for other youngsters. Although this strategy of interviewees' selection is quite limited and does not cover all aspects of youth participation, the pilot study has allowed some interesting insights into the complex phenomenon of youth participation in the social media and suggested ideas for the further research.

Data collection for this project involved a pilot study in which three qualitative interviews were made. The interviewees were targeted using a purposive sampling when "researcher actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research question" (Marshall, 1996: 523). The age, offline political activity and the online activity in the social media networks were the main sampling criteria of this experimental study. All informants were aged 24–29 years (2 males, 1 female); all of them were politically active individuals, i.e. they were members of a party/political movement or participated as candidates in the elections (local or national). Semi-structured interviews were held with the participants with a minimal moderator involvement; the interviews lasted 30 minutes to one hour, were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were carried out in March 19–23, 2011.

The limitations of this small-scale qualitative pilot study are obvious: the extent of the data is not sufficient to make overarching conclusions, and the interview material cannot be generalized to all young people in the population. Since the interviews were based on a few individual interviews and the represented group was exceptional in its characteristics, the study

was likely to give quite a subjective picture. This attempt was rather descriptive, used to identify the relationship among communications, the social media and political identity of the youngsters, as well as to draw implications for the future research. In the following paper, an overview of the participation practices of politically active young citizens will be given, with a particular focus on the motives to participate, on the one hand, and the effects they personally seek from their interactions via social media, on the other hand.

Critical reflections on communication and involvement in social media

On the whole, the Internet might be regarded as a powerful tool for influencing the habits and willingness of citizens to participate and engage in the democratic processes. Scholars agree that the Internet may reinvigorate civic life by increasing access to political information, facilitating political deliberation, developing social networks, and offering an alternative venue for political expression and engagement (Boulianne, 2009: 195). Starting with the interview analysis, we can see that young and politically active people generally perceive the social media as a very important sphere for deliberation and opinion sharing; they stress the deliberative aspect of the participation online:

> *Public discussion via a newspaper or TV? No, it is not a real discussion as you have no direct feedback from society! I am sure that in this case Facebook or other social media would be the best [channel]. (...) I really think that the social media are the best channel to use for the public debate. I think this is the only place where people engage in a real conversation* (Interview 1, male).

Generally, the social media in the context of political engagement have a potentially informal and fluid status. The Internet is an "empty space of power which is both vulnerable to state-centric (and, for that matter, corporate) strategies and open to occupation by citizens who have few other spaces available for them to express themselves in constructive democratic ways" (Coleman, Blumler, 2009: 9). The social media may serve as alternative sources of information. As a literature review confirms, the social media are widely used by the younger generation of audiences, who are ICT-literate, have new media skills, understand the global dimension (Mossberger et al., 2008). The informants argue that the Internet has increased the available space and possible choice of subject matter for publishing political news; furthermore, the new media offer an important extra layer of information and diverse opinions. The Internet is open and accessible to everyone; young people are the main group that is most likely to go online for a variety of activities. Current interviews of the pilot study support this idea, as actors understand the growing importance and usability of the new media technologies and invest their communicational activities to the online space:

> *Social media reconnect politics and society. It is a huge advantage to have a possibility to communicate directly [with people in politics]* (Interview 2, female).

Generally, the overall awareness of the social media as a powerful political communication tool is emphasized in the findings. For this reason, it is important to discuss the representation issues. The 21st century communication operates in a more integrated media culture where "new, digit-

al technologies of mediation make possible more indirect techniques of representation, which do not transcend the necessity for representing or being represented in a political democracy, but serve to democratize representation by making it a more direct relationship" (Coleman, 2005: 178). This leads to an inevitable loosening of control over political agenda, forcing politicians into an increasingly responsive mode rather than the proactive, agenda-setting role they would prefer to adopt (Gurevitz et al., 2009: 173). As the exploratory study has shown, politically active youth especially stress the social media as a tool for direct communication with their counterparts in the social media. In other words, all interviewees (being politically active) produce the content that is audience-oriented and representation-driven:

> *Of course, the people [who follow me on Facebook or on Twitter] are very important. When I write something on my 'wall' I always think about their interests* (Interview 2, female).

> *I am always thinking what I post on my Wall [in Facebook]. (…) I have no strategy how I should communicate via the social media, but I definitely think that you should have such [strategy] if you are in the political sphere. That's my mistake [that I do not have any strategy]* (Interview 1, male).

These quotes reflect the tendency for the growth of strategic communication and political public relations that further on imply a result in the so-called permanent campaign and mediatisation of politics: the mediated publicity has become a 24/7 presence and the techniques of professional media management are increasingly applied to everyday politics; governing and campaigning are fused within a perpetual relationship (Norris, 2000; Coleman, 2005; Gurevitz, Coleman, Blumler, 2009).

The pilot study has demonstrated that even in this era of the new media the aim to manage the meaning and citizenry, to control the public opinion is still very powerful in the group of politically active young citizens. Generally, most of the state's (as well as politicians') interaction with its citizenry is reduced to election periods largely shaped by political public relations and marketing as well as special interests groups and characterized by choice within a narrow spectrum of political opinion (Castells, 2008: 79). The interviewed people were aware of the political communication process behind the scenes of regular involvement into the social media. The interviews revealed that this issue could be assessed critically: discussing the social media as a public relations tool, the interviewees were unanimous:

> *I definitely agree that any kind of social media is a good tool of public relations. I have used it. It helped* (Interview 3, male).

The Internet is a place where people are constantly exposed to new ideas. As the interviewees have discussed, the Internet users have a greater overall exposure to more political information and arguments. Despite this fact, the interviews show that these young citizens tend to use the social media to confirm the ideas they already have:

> *Usually, I discuss with the people who have the same values that I have. It is very important [for me]* (Interview 3, male).

Scholars claim that "politics, for those already engaged or interested, is becoming denser, wider, and possibly more pluralistic and inclusive. At the same time the mass of unengaged citizens is becoming subject to greater communicative exclusion and experiencing increasing disengagement" (Davis, 2009: 2). In this aspect, the effect

of social media is similar to that of the traditional news media, then, through repeated use, those most politically engaged will be reinforced in their civic activism, and, on the contrary, those most politically disengaged will be largely immunized from political messages; online spaces and forums fill the gap only for those already engaged (Norris, 2001; Davis, 2009). Contrary to the notion of the overarching public sphere, the new media might also lead to the fragmentation of citizens' opinions, disappointment and frustration.

It has been more than once found that political participation is disproportionately exerted by the socially privileged, such as those from higher socioeconomic background, having liberal preferences (Best, Kueger, 2005; Anduiza et al., 2008; Mossberger et al., 2003). All the interviewees noted the unequal access to technology (due to age, skills, etc.) as the main obstacle for the social media to flourish.

The literature analysing participation issues document the change when citizens – particularly young citizens – shift from the traditional citizen-oriented participation actions (related mainly to institutions, elections and parties) towards cause-oriented participation (generally described by specific issues and policy concerns, consumer politics, petitioning, demonstrations, and protests) – they have "broadened towards engaging in 'consumer' and 'life-style' politics, where the precise dividing line between the 'social' and 'political' breaks down even further" (Norris, 2003: 5). In conclusion, all of the interviewees were very enthusiastic about the possibility to use social networking tools for political engagement. However, the social media are seen mostly as a channel for self-pres-entation and political self-identification. Even though the deliberative aspect of the medium was declared in the interviews, the possible discrimination of another, different opinion might be noted. Respondents are optimistic about the potential of the social media to become a powerful communicative tool; in their opinion, the social media have the possibility to become a kind of 'medicine' for the deliberation and engagement practices in overall society, at the same time treating the information online as a kind of commodity.

Discussion: hopes, doubts and dilemmas

Generally speaking, we might conclude that even though communication has become more efficient in the era of the Internet, we cannot assume that it became more democratic. Even though participation (as such) is not a unique feature of contemporary society, the social media stimulate new discussions about the possibilities of citizens' engagement and political participation; they influence the habits and willingness of citizen to participate and engage in the democratic processes. Being enthusiastic about the new opportunities for the involvement via social networking sites, young people establish their political participation models. These transformations raise the questions of the participation and engagement effects not only online, but also in the off-line world.

The results, together with the literature review, suggest some interesting aspects to be discussed. The pilot case study is a great starting point to reflect the implicit engagement practices, understanding the perceptions of the young audiences' participation in the process of communication

as well as the imagined effects of communication via the social media. We may talk about the potential of the social media to activate, catalyze and mobilize responsible citizenship online. However, we have to acknowledge that the social media are not the universal cure for politically disillusioned young citizen (or for the whole society). All in all, much research still has to be done to detect or measure the impact of various online social networking tools used for real-life actions and decisions. Further research in the field hopefully will help to answer the main question: how does the political communication influenced by interactive ICTs change the overall civic engagement and deliberation processes in contemporary society?

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DALYVAVIMAS INTERNETE: POLITIŠKAI AKTYVUS JAUNIMAS IR JO KOMUNIKACIJA SOCIALINĖSE MEDIJOSE

Lina Auškalnienė

S a n t r a u k a

Informacijos ir komunikacijos technologijų plėtra yra viena pagrindinių charakteristikų, apibūdinančių socialinius, kultūrinius, ekonominius XXI a. demokratijos procesus. Fundamentalūs kaitos procesai veikia ir politikos komunikacijos sritį – neišvengiama pokyčių, įsitraukia nauji veikėjai, naudojami nauji įrankiai, kinta komunikacijos įpročiai. Šio straipsnio tikslas – apžvelgti literatūrą, kurioje nagrinėjami iššūkiai bei galimybės, siejamos su piliečių įsitraukimo bei politinio dalyvavimo praktikomis socialiniais tinklais ir ryšiais grindžiamoje virtualiojoje erdvėje. Straipsnyje taip pat pristatomas bandomasis tyrimas, analizuojantis politiškai aktyvių jaunų žmonių demokratinio įsitraukimo praktikas socialinėse medijose. Keliami klausimai aktualūs ir ateities tyrimams bei diskusijoms: ar socialinės medijos galėtų tapti patraukliu kanalu, prisidedančiu aktyvinant jaunų auditorijų politinio bei pilietinio dalyvavimo praktikas?