

Module 5 (Par 2)

Active Voices: Digital Media as a Catalyst for Civic Engagement

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Module 5 (Part 2/4)

Using Social Media for Political Engagement: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations



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Module 5

Active Voices: Digital Media as a Catalyst for Civic Engagement

This module explores how digital media enhances civic participation and the involvement of underrepresented groups in democratic causes.

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Structure Of Module 5

MODULE 5 (Part 1)

Topic 1 (47 slides)



Digital Activism in Europe: Opportunities and Challenges for Civic Participation

examines the role of digital activism in shaping political and social movements in Europe, while addressing challenges such as censorship, surveillance, and misinformation.

MODULE 5 (Part 4)

Topic 4 (37 slides)

The Role of Digital Media in Strengthening Civic Dialogue and Social Movements

Assesses how digital media enables inclusive civic dialogue and mobilises grassroots movements through impactful campaigns.

MODULE 5 (Part 2)

Topic 2 (51 slides)



Using Social Media for Political Engagement: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Examines how social media can be used effectively and ethically for political engagement, while addressing risks such as misinformation, data privacy, and polarization.



MODULE 5 (Part 3)

Topic 3 (45 slides)



Digital Participation and Engagement of Underrepresented Groups: Encouraging Democratic Involvement

Evaluates how digital platforms enhance democratic participation and address digital literacy barriers.

Focus Areas (4) – Each of the 4 Topics covers 3-4 Focus Areas, with – Introduction, Context, Case Studies, Videos, Tools etc.

Resources Section: Each topic has a Resources Area complete with a set of digital tools, exercises and resources to assist learning application and to provide a deeper interactive level of understanding.

Conclusions: Provided on each topic at the Module in Part 4.

Module Overview

This module explores how **digital media enhances civic participation** and the involvement of underrepresented groups in democratic causes. It focuses on the use of **digital activism and crowdsourcing** to mobilize communities and **promote social change through online platforms**. It also examines the role of digital media across Europe in fostering political participation, civic engagement, and advocacy for social transformation.

01

Digital Activism in Europe: Opportunities and Challenges for Civic Participation

02

Using Social Media for Political Engagement: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

03

Digital Participation and Engagement of Underrepresented Groups: Encouraging Democratic Involvement

04

The Role of Digital Media in Strengthening Civic Dialogue and Social Movements

Module Snapshot



Focus Area: Digital Activism & Governance

Aim: Focuses on the **involvement of underrepresented groups in digital activism to mobilise communities around democratic causes**

This section explores how digital media **empowers civic engagement and involvement of underrepresented groups in democratic causes, leveraging digital activism** and crowdsourcing to mobilise communities and drive social change through online platforms

Key Words: Activism, Underrepresented groups, Digital Activism, Civic Participation, Political Engagement, Democratic Causes, Crowdsourcing, Online Digital Campaigning, Community Mobilisation, Digital Activism, Social Movements, Advocacy



00

Page 9

Overview

01

Page 13

Effective strategies for digital political campaigning and citizen



02

Page 21

Challenges in ensuring ethical political participation on digital platforms

03

Page 73

Case studies on the role of social media in European elections and political activism



04

Page 43

Resources



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Module 5 (Part 2) Interactive Learning Elements

-  **51 Slides**
-  **01 Exercise**
-  **02 Videos**
-  **03 Case Studies**

-  **4 Digital Tools**
-  **04 Toolkits & Guides**
-  **04 Articles & Reports**
-  **3 Real World Examples**



Overview

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Significant segments of the population receive information almost exclusively from digital media or digital social networks. **This is evidence of the importance of the virtual realm and how it can condition the way we engage and understand participation for social transformation.** This section examines the **impact of social media on political engagement**, exploring how individuals, political organisations, and grassroots movements utilise digital platforms for **advocacy and civic mobilisation**. It highlights best practices and **ethical considerations in online political participation**.

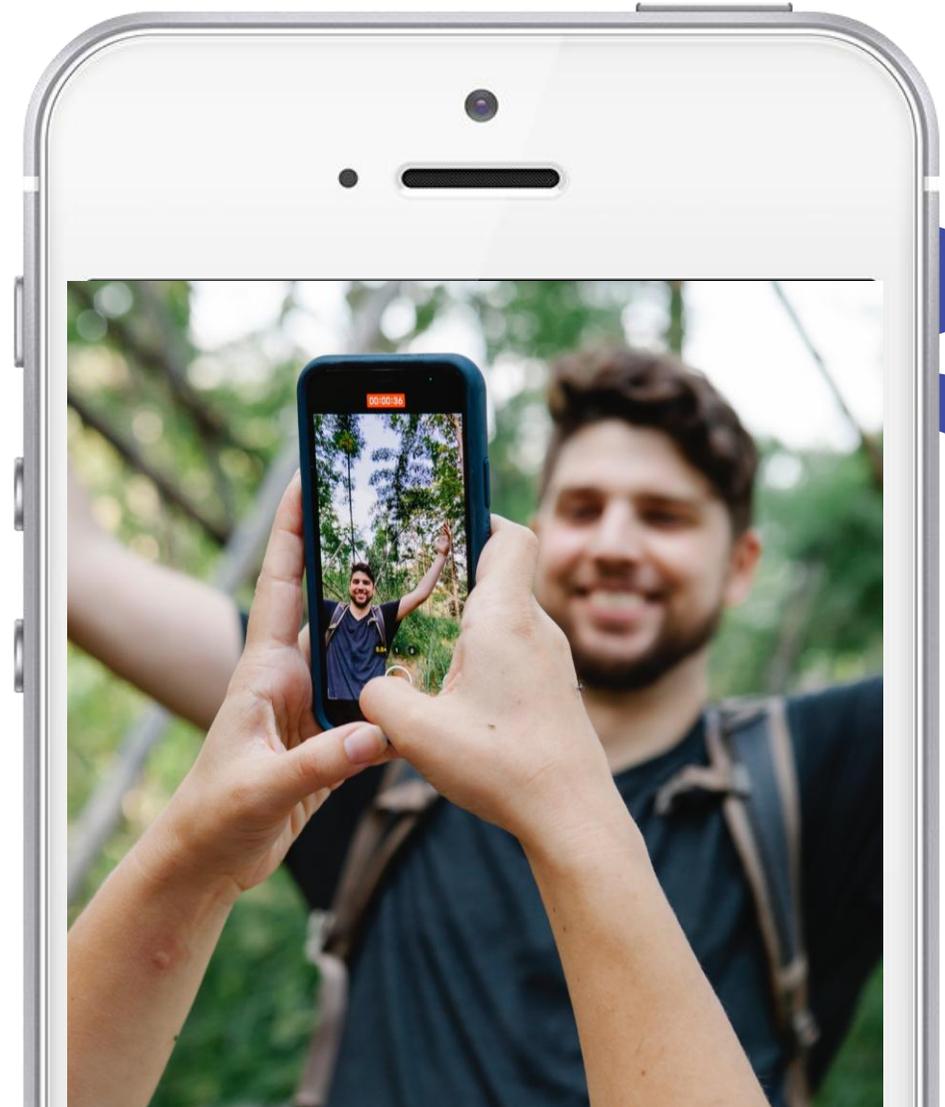
Learning Outcomes

Using Social Media for Political Engagement: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

- Identify effective strategies for leveraging social media to engage in political activism while ensuring ethical responsibility.
- Analyse the risks associated with online political engagement, including data privacy concerns, misinformation, and polarization.

The Key Concepts

- **Digital Campaigning:** Strategies for engaging audiences and mobilising support through online platforms.
- **Social Media Ethics:** Responsible use of digital platforms for political advocacy.
- **Transparency in Online Engagement:** Ensuring authenticity in digital political discourse.



Exploring 3 focus areas to Use Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

1. Effective strategies for digital political campaigning and citizen engagement
2. Challenges in ensuring ethical political participation on digital platforms
3. Case studies on the role of social media in European elections and political activism



Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Focus Area 1

Effective strategies for digital political campaigning and citizen engagement

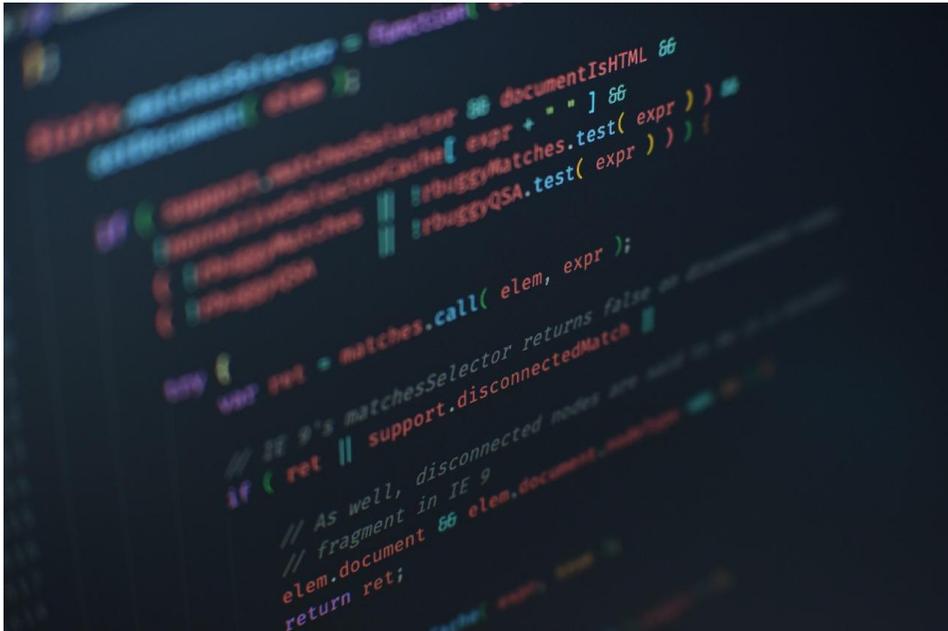
Digital platforms and social media have completely changed the landscape, the rules of the game and the strategies of social activism, particularly political activism. Political parties, NGOs and social movements can now connect directly with wider and more diverse audiences in real time.

Through digital platforms and social media, they can share information, mobilise sectors of the population through calls to action, or create a current of opinion, generating social or political pressure on a given issue.

Legal frameworks, cultural characteristics, the situation in terms of accessibility and use of media in each country, as well as the target audience, also impact mobilisation strategies.

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Political and civil society actors have adapted their mobilisation strategies through social media and platforms in different ways and with unequal results



In the following slides we are going to show some of these strategies, in particular, these ones:

- ❖ **Use of social networks**
- ❖ **Use of decentralised social networks**
- ❖ **Use of non-traceable technologies**
- ❖ **Use of participatory platforms**
- ❖ **Use of digital campaigns against hate speech and disinformation in electoral processes**

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

- ❖ **Use of social networks** such as Twitter (currently X) or Facebook.

During the 2010s, the use of Twitter and Facebook enabled the organisation of massive social mobilisations. This was the case with protest movements such as the 15M movement in Spain, the Arab Spring, Maidan protests and global mobilisations through #BlackLivesMatters and #MeToo.

However, it is important to note that some researchers emphasise that Twitter played a role that was more focused on calling for action than on jointly constructing a discourse.

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

- Use of **decentralised social networks** for organisational purposes.

Decentralised social networks 'operate on independently run servers, rather than on a centralised server owned by a business'. Decentralised social networks form the Fediverse, a space where decentralised networks (and their users) can interact with each other. The opposite example is X and Facebook: an X user account cannot interact with a Facebook account or an account on another social network.

The main characteristics of these decentralised networks are:

- They enhanced privacy and security
- They are considered as open spaces for communications
- Their philosophy focuses on the user and their control over their data and online experience

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Examples of successful social mobilisations using decentralised social networks:

- Massive pro-independence demonstrations led by the Catalan movement Democratic Tsunami. Tsunami used Twitter and decentralised social networks to call for action. Tsunami also used a tailored app. The merge of them allows the movement to organise massive collective actions, avoiding the typical channels of surveillance of the security forces.
- The pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong were characterised by the decentralisation of the protests and the instrumental reliance on social media-based communication in which various social networks such as Telegram (with its encrypted chats) and LIHKG were combined. It is considered that the use of both “may have provided protesters not only with a space for coordination, but also for collective negotiation and deliberation”.

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

❖ Use of **non-traceable technologies**:

The pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong communicated among themselves using a Bluetooth app. The fact that they did not need an internet connection to communicate with each other was key to bypassing the Chinese security forces and allowing the protesters to remain untraceable.

❖ Use of **participatory platforms**:

The use of participatory platforms in local decision-making processes has been identified in different European countries, among them Spain, Italy, France or Finland. In Finland, “forms and implications of citizen involvement in publicly-supported participatory innovation platforms”.

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

- ❖ Use of **digital campaigns against hate speech and disinformation in electoral processes**

The polarisation and radicalisation of political positions find an ideal breeding ground in electoral processes. On some occasions, hate speech directed at specific social groups, particularly migrants and refugees, but also at people because of their sexual orientation, has been clearly identified, with the aim of stirring up fear of others and social animosity and benefiting far-right political parties that articulate exclusionary discourses.

Such hate speech has also been identified against candidates for elected offices.

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

The incorporation of social media monitoring processes and the establishment of early warning systems (EWS) during electoral processes are considered good practices. Some of them are:

The [European Centre for Electoral Support \(ECES\)](#) has developed and is implementing a specific methodology to monitor hate speech on social media in the context of electoral processes. Media monitoring 'consists of observing media content through long-term quantitative and qualitative analysis and is essential for assessing media coverage of the electoral process, pluralism and citizens' perceptions of electoral management bodies (EMBs) and the electoral process'.

The [Council of Europe](#) has produced a document entitled Monitoring media coverage of elections, aimed at civil society organisations, which provides specific guidelines for analysing social media during electoral processes.



Focus Area 2

Challenges in ensuring ethical political participation on digital platforms

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Political participation in digital media raises numerous ethical questions. The immediacy, reach of information, and algorithmic intermediation that conditions access to or exposure to certain content are some of the characteristics of digital platforms and social networks.

While social media has provided an opportunity to democratise access to information, to place certain previously excluded issues on the political agenda, and in some cases has allowed access to political decision-making processes, it can also be a space for manipulation, exclusion and disinformation through, among others, microtargeting and algorithmic manipulation.

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Ethical challenges

Microtargeting for political purposes. Political microtargeting is defined as “a technique of political communication based on the use of data and analytics to tailor messages to a subgroup or individuals via different channels (mail, phone, canvassing, direct mail, and social media advertising, etc.) in order to build a relationship with prospective voters and supporters”. Regarding its impact, Almong and Stephan state that “personalised political ads tailored to individuals’ personalities are more effective than nonpersonalised ads.”

In terms of its political use, “microtargeting is an effective technique and can be automated using off-the-self generative AI”. The use of microtargeting to manipulate specific individuals by sending them political messages tailored to their profiles, fears, and hopes is already a reality

The article shows the potential and large-scale harm that microtargeting manipulation can create and highlights the need to contain these risks. Risks that affect people’s privacy and data protection rights and jeopardise the process of democratic participation.

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Artificial intelligence and algorithmic manipulation

The role of artificial intelligence in the generation of disinformation during electoral processes is an issue that generates ethical debate and poses technical and social challenges.

Algorithms are designed to ensure that the content received by users matches their preferences. This concept can lead to what are known as 'filter bubbles' or 'identity bubbles'.

These bubbles expose users to information that reinforces their beliefs and can even encourage hate speech.

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Some ideas to overcome ethical challenges:

❖ **New instruments for regulating digital platforms and media.** Growing concern about the manipulation of public opinion and the spread of hate speech and disinformation has led to calls for the creation of regulatory frameworks to ensure content moderation, protection of rights, transparency and fairness in the virtual sphere.

In this regard, the European Union has approved the following documents:

- [Charter on Digital Rights](#)
- [EU Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online](#)

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

❖ **Digital civic education.** Ethical challenges can be overcome through the promotion of awareness of citizens' rights and responsibilities in the virtual environment, promoting civic skills, and especially critical thinking, in the exercise of active digital participation.

Data literacy and citizen empowerment in this area enable informed decision-making and the implementation of mechanisms to identify manipulation, which could reduce the impact of hate speech.

❖ **Accountability and democratic monitoring.** Monitoring social media and public institutions, as well as other influential actors in the digital sphere, is key to reduce or eliminate online hate speech and to ensure the accomplishment of legal regulations. This is the line of work of the [*European Digital Rights \(EDRI\)*](#) network that advocates for ethical digital political engagement policies.



Focus Area 3

Case studies on the role of social media in European elections and political activism

Using Social Media for Social Change: Best Practices and Ethical Considerations

Digital platforms play a crucial role in shaping political debates and voter mobilisation while are also a fruitful environment for misinformation, disinformation or online polarisation – especially during political campaigns.

For this reason, this section seeks to examine the polarisation and the use of technology in political campaigns and communication through 3 study cases: the Brexit campaign, the Catalan referendum and the case of Alternative for Germany.

Brexit campaign

Case study

This case study will address the ethical considerations of using technology, in this case digital social networks and social bots, and political marketing aimed at influencing public opinion. Issues related to data misuse, algorithmic targeting, echo chambers, and factors contributing to polarisation and disinformation will be examined.

The objective of this case is to reflect on the ethical considerations of the use of personal data, social bots, and microtargeting techniques.

Brexit Campaign

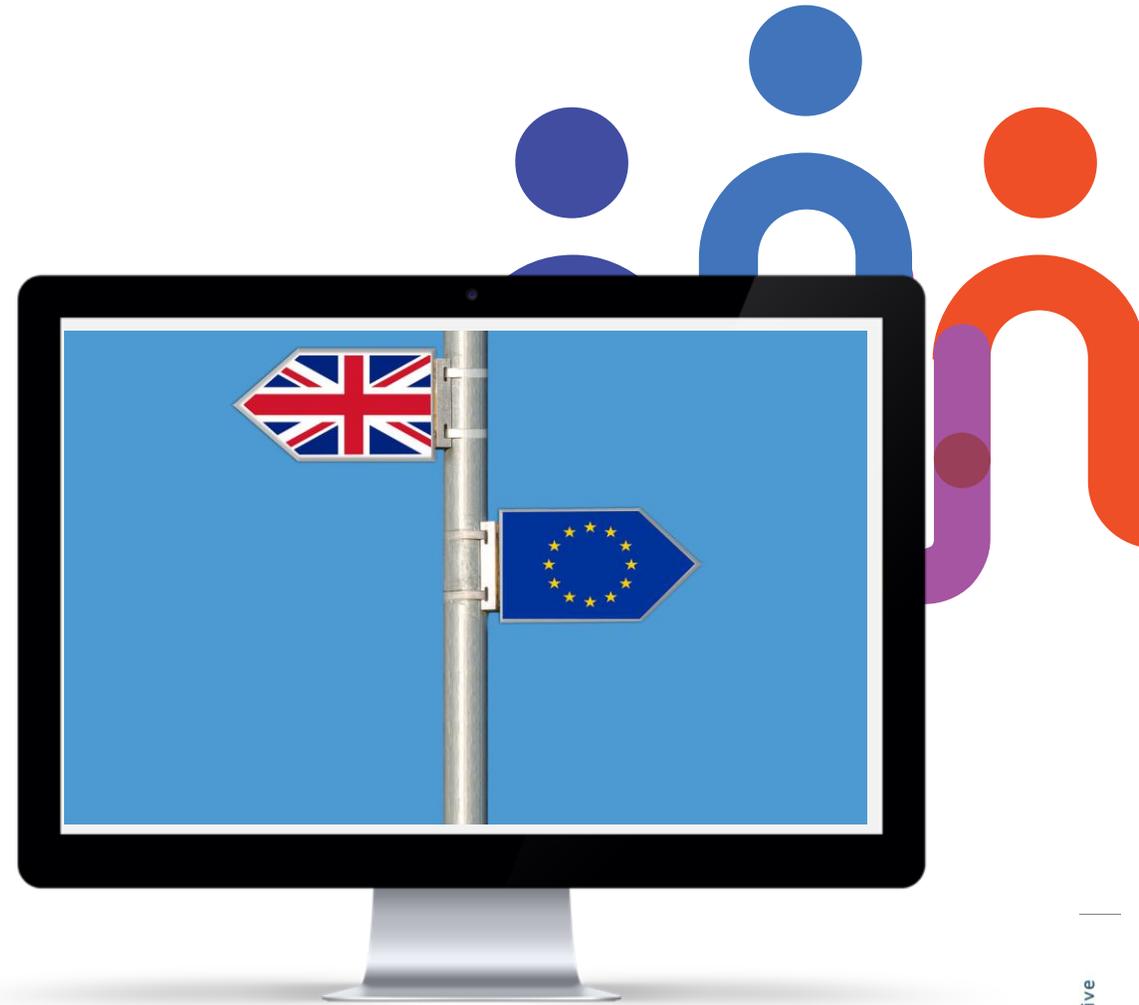
Theme: Data-driven microtargeting and misinformation

Overview

In 2016, the so-called Brexit referendum was held. This popular vote decided whether the United Kingdom would remain in the EU or not.

The defining feature of the campaigns was the polarisation between the two positions: the Leave (the EU) campaign and the Remain (in the EU) campaign, in a context in which digital media and the information, communication and interaction they provided played an important role in shaping political opinion.

On the other hand, this campaign has been an example of the profound impact of digital technology on political campaigns.



Both the Leave and Remain campaigns leveraged social media, data analytics, and media micro-targeting to influence public opinion.

Brexit campaign

Key Aspects:

- Presence and lack of distinction among Social Media Agents. Social Media Agents are: Real users (human beings creating, disseminating and interacting with content) and social bots (which generate messages on social media automatically, simulating human behaviour). Social bots can be controlled by people or by so-called 'click farms'. But during the Brexit campaign was difficult to distinguish among them.
- Echo Chambers. Individuals tend to interact with messages that are in line with their political ideas or beliefs. Messages generated by bots, whether feelings or beliefs, as well as disinformation, generated interactions with humans with the same feelings or beliefs. This phenomenon can reinforced ideological biases.
- Polarisation: The Brexit referendum caused significant polarisation and social divisions. According to [Gorodnichenko et al](#), 'bots were used during the campaign we study to energise voters and, according to our simple calculations, bots could marginally contribute to the outcomes of Brexit'.

Brexit campaign

Key Aspects :

- Use of political digital microtargeting: this technique was used during the Brexit campaign with the aim of reinforcing opinions and beliefs, and/or inducing emotions that could be politically exploited, such as insecurity or fear.
- Digital activism: expressed through different strategies, including the creation and dissemination of memes, the launch of digital petitions, etc.

Brexit campaign

Consult the following materials:

- Cambridge Analytics. The power of big data.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8Dd5aVXLCc&list=PL9Aax2CRFIXhbqmqDmEzALcKDHk-N1IAD8>
- Brexit Podcast, p. 32: Isabel Gahren on how social bots manipulate our political opinions https://www.ivoox.com/en/ep-32-isabel-gahren-on-how-social-bots-manipulate-audios-mp3_rf_16039108_1.html
- Facebook's role in Brexit by Carole Cadwalladr
https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare
- BBC: micro-segmentation and Brexit <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-44966969>

Brexit campaign

Answer and reflect

- What impact did social media (Facebook, social bots,...) have on public opinion during the referendum?
- What are the ethical risks of using social bots and microtargeting in political campaigns?
- Should the use of big data-based communication techniques such as microtargeting be regulated?
- Should be regulated the use of social bots that simulate human beings?

Catalan referendum

Case study.

This case study will address the use of communication technologies and social media in highly polarised environments and how the use of these technologies influenced the organisation of protests, the dissemination of information and polarisation during the Catalan referendum on 1 October 2017.

The aim of this case study is to reflect on the strategies and use of communication technologies and digital activism.

Catalan referendum

Theme: Digital activism and the use of new communication technologies

Overview:

The 2017 Catalan referendum, declared illegal by the Spanish government, was a significant event in the development of the Catalan pro-independence process. It was marked by intense communication activity through both traditional and digital media, as well as significant social polarisation. Those involved coordinated actions, shared information and mobilised the population. All this took place in an environment of high social and political tension.



Catalan referendum

Key Aspects:

-
- Use of digital platforms for mobilisation: Catalan activists used WhatsApp, Telegram, and Twitter to coordinate protests and communicate referendum logistics under Spanish government restrictions.
- Government Crackdown: The Spanish government censored websites, blocked apps (including voting apps), and raided tech offices. This led to a surge in decentralised and encrypted communication tools.
- Blockchain and Decentralisation: Tech-savvy activists turned to blockchain domains and IPFS (InterPlanetary File System) to keep voting information online.
- Polarisation: Media and social platforms became battlegrounds between pro-independence narratives and Spanish unity defenders, often fuelling mutual hostility.

Catalan referendum

Consult the following materials:

- Twitter as a political communication tool in the context of the Catalan independence referendum: citizen associations versus public institutions
https://icono14.net/ojs/index.php/icono14/article/view/1134?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- Coromina, O., & Padilla, A. (2018). Analysis of misinformation about the 1 October referendum detected by Maldito Bulo. Quaderns del CAC 44(XXI), 17–26. Retrieved from:
https://www.cac.cat/sites/default/files/2018-08/Q44_ES.pdf
- Laurie Clarke Catalonia has created a new type of online activism. Everyone should pay attention <https://www.wired.com/story/barcelona-riots-catalonia-protests-news/>

Catalan referendum

Answer and reflect

- How was the coordination of protests and actions by the independence movement organised digitally?
- What role did social media play in the dissemination of information and disinformation during the Catalan process?
- What lessons can be learnt about the use of digital technologies in contexts of high political and social polarisation?

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Alternative for Germany

Case study.

This case study will examine the presence and use of digital media by the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The AfD has capitalised on discontent with the political system and 'traditional' political parties and has effectively employed nationalist and anti-immigration narratives, especially on social media, and specifically on platforms such as TikTok and X.

The aim of this case study is to reflect on the strategies and use of digital social media and their potential to mobilise, as well as their potential to incorporate anti-immigration discourse as a means of mobilising and attracting voters or supporters.

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)

Alternative for Germany

Theme: Far-right digital mobilisation and algorithmic amplification

Overview:

Alternative für Deutschland, founded in 2013, it initially appeared as a Eurosceptic party but has clearly drifted towards the far right with anti-immigration positions that include 'remigration', which involves the mass expulsion of migrants.



Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Alternative for Germany

Key Aspects:

- **Social Media Strategy:** AfD's rise is linked to effective use of Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram, where it spread anti-immigrant rhetoric and capitalised on user engagement algorithms.
- **Bot Networks and Trolling:** AfD-linked networks employed bots and trolls to flood comment sections, manipulate hashtags, and harass journalists and opponents.
- **Meme Warfare:** AfD supporters created shareable content targeting younger demographics, often mimicking ironic or humorous formats to push extreme views.
- **Polarisation:** The AfD's digital strategy heightened divisions in German society, mainstreaming far-right narratives and forcing other parties to respond or shift rhetorically.

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Alternative for Germany

Read the following materials:

- Classen, K., Kollmer, A., Schlage, M., Schöpflin, A., Winkler, J., & Witterspan, H. (2024). Right-wing populist communication by the AfD party on TikTok: To what extent does the AfD use TikTok as part of its communication to win over young voters? In A. Godulla, C. Buller, V. Freudl, I. Merz, J. Twittenhoff, J. Winkler, L. Zapke (Eds.), *The Dynamics of Digital Influence: Communication Trends in Business, Politics and Activism* (pp. 100-122). Leipzig <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-94713-2>
- Juan Carlos Medina Serrano, Morteza Shahrezaye, Orestis Papakyriakopoulos, and Simon Hegelich. 2019. The Rise of the AfD in Germany: A Social Media Analysis. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Social Media and Society, Toronto, ON, Canada, 19-21 July 2019 (SMSociety '19)*, 10 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3328529.3328562>

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Alternative for Germany

Answer the following questions:

- What specific strategies does the AfD use on social media to attract and mobilise its followers?
- What are the ethical implications of the use of digital strategies by far-right parties such as the AfD?
- What measures could be implemented to mitigate the disproportionate influence of certain political parties on digital platforms?

04

Resources

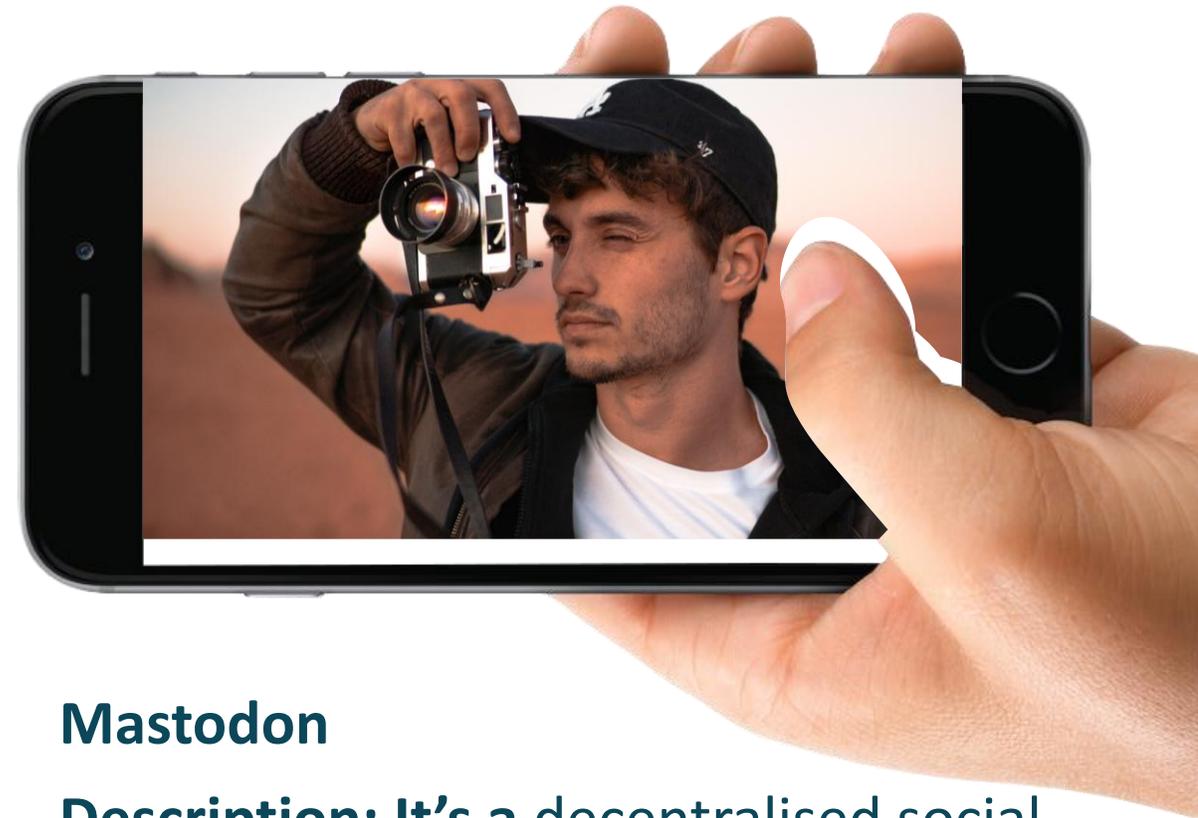


Digital Tools

Fediverse

Description: It is a 'federated' social network running on free open software on a myriad of computers across the globe.

Link: <https://fediverse.party/>



Mastodon

Description: It's a decentralised social network similar to Twitter, offering features like microblogging and content sharing.

Link: <https://joinmastodon.org/>



Exercise. Topic 2

Define your personal guidelines for more ethical and conscious online political or civic participation.

Instructions:

Personal Action Plan

- Write at least 3 principles or specific actions that you commit to trying to apply in your digital participation to make it more ethical and constructive. Ideas: check the source before sharing; try to read another user's content with different perspectives; identify emotions you feel linked to particular virtual interactions.
- Why did you choose these particular principles/actions?
- How do you think they will help you better navigate the challenges of disinformation and polarisation?

Resources. Videos



Kpop Stans and TikTokers Use Digital Activism to Protest

This video shows different strategies of digital activism that highlight how the algorithm tends to marginalise those already marginalized voices and introduces the ethical concern about the culture of cancellation.



Dr. Emiliano Treré on digital activism, democracy and disconnection. Though some of the digital collective action might be considered 'small' and might appear insignificant, they are all acts of 'digital activism', and their combined impact might be huge.

Interview



Interview with Simona Levi, Director of Xnet (Institute for Democratic Digitalisation) and codirector and designer of the postdegree of "Technopolitics and rights in the digital era".

Topics:

0:07. Introduction of Simona Levi

0:45. Main challenges and opportunities for cyberactivism in Europe

05:09 Strategies for a fruitful activism: participation in mainstreaming and protection/well-being: the use of independent networks

7:15. Social participation and risks for digital activists

8:24. How can we be effective in our digital activism?

How to reach non-convinced with new narratives

11:57. Strategies for meaningful conversations with those who are not sharing our same vision as activists: mediation and generosity

Support and resources. Topic 2.

Name of the initiative and link	Content
<p><u>Toolkit on combating hate speech during electoral processes. Council of Europe</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ The toolkit covers applicable international standards and instruments for countering hate speech and incitement of hatred during electoral processes, strategies for election management bodies to prevent and respond to instances of hateful speech effectively, hate speech and disinformation and sexism.
<p><u>Márquez Muñoz, L. (2024). Las plataformas de participación en las capitales de las comunidades autónomas, en Cuadernos de Gobierno y Administración Pública 11(2), e97009</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ Describes the experience of local e-democracy in Spain

Support and resources. Topic 2.

Name of the initiative and link	Content
<u>Monitoring of media coverage of elections</u>	Toolkit addressed to civil society organizations that provide civil society organisations with detailed methodology of how to implement a monitoring project of media coverage of elections.
<u>Simmons, C., Balint, K., & Frances-Wright, I. (2024). <i>Votes and Vitriol: Online abuse targeting women candidates in the 2024 French legislative elections.</i> Institute for Strategic Dialogue</u>	This article explores the nature of online violence targeting women candidates on TikTok during the French legislative election campaign, held from 9 June to 7 July 2024.

Module 5: Active Voices: Digital Media as a Catalyst for Civic Engagement

You have completed **Part 2 (Focus Area 2)**
**Using Social Media for Social Change: Best
Practices and Ethical Considerations**

Next is **Part 3 (Focus Area 3)**
**Digital Participation and Engagement of
Underrepresented Groups: Encouraging
Democratic Involvement**

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Any Questions?



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