

# Module 5 (Part 1)

## Active Voices: Digital Media as Catalysts for Civic Engagement

Developed by the Fundació Solidaritat UB



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# Digital activism in Europe

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In the digital age, **activism has taken on new forms**. From the Arab Spring to the Indignados movement and the #MeToo movement, the use of technology and digital platforms to spread messages, create spaces for people to meet and debate that can grow into communities, generate a critical mass capable of driving political change, amplify citizens' voices and much more, has become not only commonplace but also essential.

Digital activism—the practice of using digital technology to initiate, support or participate in social or political movements—has **enabled individuals and communities to mobilise quickly, influence political debates and challenge traditional power structures**.

Activists across Europe face a complex reality: **unprecedented access to digital tools** for mobilisation and expression, coupled with **growing barriers** such as disinformation, government surveillance and ethical dilemmas surrounding data and privacy.

# Digital activism in Europe

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Widespread access to and use of social media, combined with the ability to receive, send and create content instantly, has profoundly transformed the dynamics of activism in Europe.

The immediacy and potential reach of messages shared by users and activists have given a voice to millions of people and brought to light issues that were previously absent from the social, political or media agenda.



# Digital activism in Europe

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Thanks to digital activism, all kinds of issues can potentially find a space for public debate. Discussions can take place and collective action can be taken both locally (on the streets) and globally (on digital networks), breaking down traditional physical barriers and promoting coordinated global action.

Digital platforms and social media have become the new 'agoras' (public squares) and have facilitated new forms of socialising, new and innovative forms of mobilisation, new communication strategies and new ways of building collective identities, thereby expanding the possibilities for participation and collective action.

# Digital activism in Europe

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It is a fact that digital activism appropriates and reinterprets the web, digital platforms and social media with a transformative purpose in a spontaneous, sometimes unexpected or unforeseen way.

Social movements in the digital sphere have created and developed a set of values, language, symbols, rituals and myths. All these elements contribute to a collective and distinctive identity.

# Digital activism in Europe

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Some examples of the use of language, symbols or myths associated with social movements that involve digital collective action include:

- The use of protest hashtags. Examples include #MeToo, #FridaysForFuture and #JeSuisCharlie. Following the attack on Charlie Hebdo in France, the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie became a symbol of solidarity. Subsequently, the formula #JeSuis has been extended to include the cause with which a person stands in solidarity



# Digital activism in Europe

Cyberactivism has adopted elements of media culture:

- The most iconic is the Guy Fawkes mask, also known as the V for Vendetta mask. It was used by the Anonymous movement, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and also in online and offline actions in other contexts.
- Other iconic messages have been used in online campaigns, such as those related to 'Star Wars' or 'The Handmaid's Tale', which depict resistance against a 'dark' power and despair.



# Digital activism in Europe

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Some of the challenges facing digital activism are as follows:

- Censorship and self-censorship
- Misinformation/information overload. This can lead to information fatigue.
- Digital repression
- Algorithmic policies and transparency; and how to avoid algorithmic invisibility
- Finding the balance between playful activism (which uses entertainment formats to convey messages) and spaces for reflection, communication and building a strong community
- Protection against hate speech.

In the next module, we will explore these topics.



## Exercises

Identify a current digital campaign whose theme is related to human rights (migration, gender equality, access to housing, etc.). Read carefully the sections explaining the campaign (organisers, objectives, actions, etc.) and:

- Identify the name of the campaign and the geographical area in which it is being carried out (if applicable).
- Analyse:
  - Which platforms or social media channels does the campaign use?
  - Who is its target audience?
  - Does it use specific language (such as the term 'Resistance', for example) or symbols/images that set it apart?
  - Has the campaign generated enough material for activists to take ownership of the message and spread the word about the campaign's activities?
  - Do you identify any ethical dilemmas?

# Resources. Videos



**BIG  
THINK**

BT

Hashtag politics: 4 key ways digital activism is inequalitarian | Jen Schradie | Big Think

<https://youtu.be/n6xT0smHeX0?feature=shared>

Jen Schradie, author of 'The Revolution That Never Was', discusses the limitations of digital collections and marginalised groups.



<https://youtu.be/OiYH1tiML3s?feature=shared>

The future of social movements: online activism and the media, by Ben Rattray, founder and CEO of change.org. The video is 41:30 long, but is divided into sections. Please refer to the chapter section, where you will find sections such as 'The media as a source of inspiration for change' (min. 17:31), 'The Guardian' (19:22) or 'What happens when a campaign is unsuccessful?' (35:16)

## Support and resources. Topic 1. Digital activism in Europe: opportunities and challenges for citizen participation.

Name of the initiative and link	Content
<a href="#"><u>United Nations Network on Migration</u></a>	❖ Repository of practices
<a href="#"><u>The Commons. Social Change Library</u></a>	❖ Digital campaigns. Tips and resources
<a href="#"><u>YEE (Youth and Environment Europe)</u></a>	❖ How to create a successful digital campaign. The resources focus on environmental issues, but the elements covered can be applied to other areas.
<a href="#"><u>Countering Disinformation: Your Essential Digital Tools Guide</u></a>	❖ This guide aims to provide activists and organisations with practical knowledge and tools to enable them to identify, analyse and actively counter disinformation.

# Module 5 (Part 2)

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# Thematic area 1

Effective strategies  
for digital political  
campaigns and  
citizen engagement

## The use of social media for social change: best practices and ethical considerations

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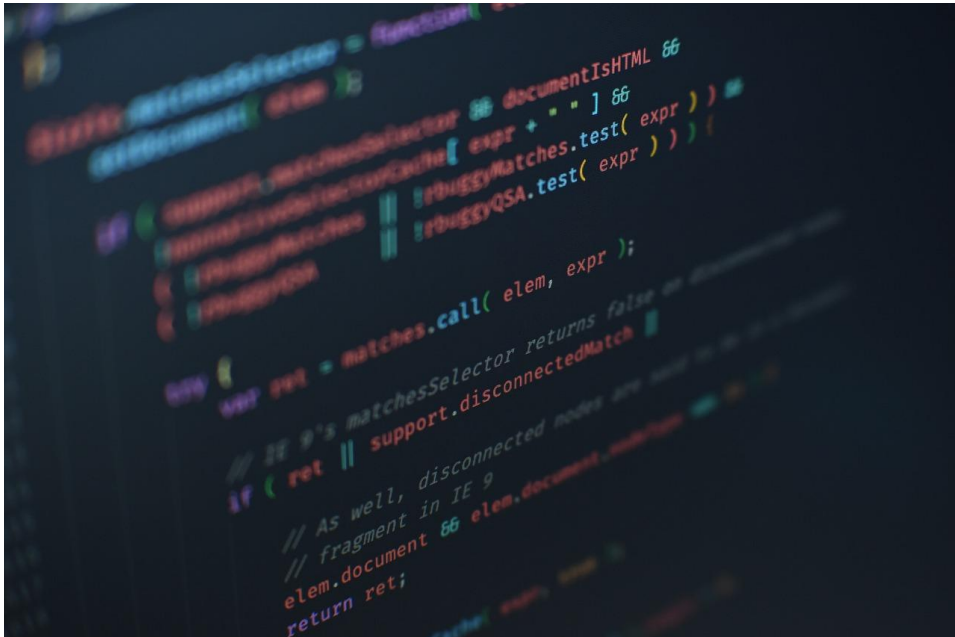
Digital platforms and social media have completely transformed the landscape, the rules of the game and the strategies of social activism, particularly political activism. Political parties, NGOs and social movements can now connect directly with wider and more diverse audiences in real time.

Through digital platforms and social media, they can share information, mobilise sections of the population through calls to action, or generate a wave of public opinion, thereby creating social or political pressure on a specific issue.

The legal frameworks, cultural characteristics, accessibility situation and use of the media in each country, as well as the target audience, also influence mobilisation strategies.

# The use of 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 mixed results



In the following slides, we will outline some of these strategies, specifically the following:

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

# The use of social media for social change: best practices and ethical considerations

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- ❖ **The use of social media platforms** such as Twitter (now X) or Facebook.

During the 2010s, the use of Twitter and Facebook made it possible to organise mass social movements. This was the case with protest movements such as 15M in Spain, the Arab Spring, the Maidan protests and the global movements through #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo.

However, it is important to note that some researchers highlight that Twitter played a role more focused on the call to action than on the joint construction of a discourse.

# The use of social media for social change: best practices and ethical considerations

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- The use of **decentralised social media** for organisational purposes.

Decentralised social networks “operate on independently managed servers, rather than on a centralised server owned by a company”. Decentralised social networks make up the Fediverse, a space in which decentralised networks (and their users) can interact with one another. 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 features of these decentralised networks are:

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

# The use of social media for social change: best practices and ethical considerations

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Examples of successful social movements that have used decentralised social media:

- Mass demonstrations in favour of independence led by the Catalan movement Tsunami Democrático. Tsunami used Twitter and decentralised social media to call for action. Tsunami also used a bespoke app. The combination of both allows the movement to organise mass collective actions, bypassing the usual surveillance channels of the security forces.
- The pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong were characterised by the decentralisation of the protests and the crucial use of social media-based communication, combining various social media platforms such as Telegram (with its encrypted chats) and LIHKG. 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”.

# The use of social media for social change: best practices and ethical considerations

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## ❖ Use of **untraceable technologies**:

Pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong communicated with each other via a Bluetooth app. The fact that they did not need an internet connection to communicate was key to evading 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 various European countries, including Spain, Italy, France and Finland. In [Finland](#), 'forms and implications of citizen participation in publicly funded participatory innovation platforms'.

# The use of social media for social change: best practices and ethical considerations

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- ❖ The 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 has been clearly identified, particularly against migrants and refugees, but also against people on the basis of their sexual orientation, with the aim of fuelling fear of others and social animosity and benefiting far-right political parties that espouse exclusionary rhetoric.

This type of hate speech has also been identified against candidates for elected office.

# The use of social media for social change: best practices and ethical considerations

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

The [European Centre for Electoral Support \(ECES\)](#) has developed and is implementing a specific methodology for monitoring 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 offers specific guidelines for analysing social media during electoral processes.

# Module 5 (Part 3)

## Active Voices: Digital Media as Catalysts for Civic Engagement

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## Thematic area

### 1

Digital platforms as tools for civic engagement and democratic education

## Digital participation and engagement of under-represented groups: fostering democratic involvement

Online digital platforms are opening the door to new forms of citizen participation, civic engagement and democratic education. They enable people to connect and interact with one another, with other organisations and with public administrations at various levels. They also provide access to information and knowledge and, in some cases, generate new forms of both.

The potential of digital platforms for the inclusion of under-represented groups is enormous, but it is important not to underestimate or ignore the impact of the digital divide and the danger that some people will be left behind in digital participation processes.



## Thematic area

### 1

Digital platforms as tools for civic engagement and democratic education

## Digital participation and engagement of under-represented groups: promoting democratic participation

Next, we will examine the potential of the internet and digital platforms for the inclusion of under-represented groups, which is particularly important in the following areas:

- Accessibility
- Breaking the monopoly on spaces for information, meeting, debate and participation
- The emergence of new forms of collective action
- Empowerment of under-represented groups.

We will now analyse each of these aspects.



## Thematic area 1

Digital platforms as tools for civic engagement and democratic education

# Digital participation and engagement of under-represented groups: promoting democratic involvement

- **Accessibility.** Reducing barriers to participation and access to information. Traditional barriers related to time, physical access to venues, identifying the appropriate channels, etc., disappear in the virtual environment. The incorporation of reliable machine translation tools, the use of screen readers, the ability to access information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and the ability to manage one's own time, amongst other factors, help to broaden the range of opportunities for participation in general, and for under-represented groups in particular.



## Thematic area

### 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for civic participation and  
democratic education

## Digital participation and engagement of under-represented groups: fostering democratic involvement

- **Breaking the monopoly on spaces for information, meeting, debate and participation.** The emergence of the Internet (remember that the World Wide Web was created in 1989 and that the first social network emerged in the 1990s) gave rise to new spaces for interaction, organisation, communication and participation. The tension between the monopoly of companies that own platforms and social networks (Meta, X, etc.) and those who champion open source and a different understanding of freedom and autonomy implies the emergence of new spaces and norms.



## Thematic area 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for citizen participation  
and democratic education

# Digital participation and engagement among under-represented groups: promoting democratic participation

- **The emergence of new forms of collective action.** Technology, its development, its opportunities and its limitations combine with the creative capacity of digital activism. In this way, collective action adapts, utilises new forms and incorporates technological elements to promote interconnection, debate and action.
- **Empowerment of under-represented groups.** Whilst the existence of the digital divide is recognised, it is important to note how groups that may have felt excluded from traditional channels of participation, or whose issues were not part of the political agenda, are gaining visibility and relevance.



## Theme 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for citizen participation  
and democratic education

# Digital participation and engagement among under-represented groups: promoting democratic participation

The potential of digital platforms for citizen participation and democratic education may be limited by the following issues:

- Persistence of the digital divide
- The lack of adequate content moderation
- Online data trading
- Lack of digital accountability
- The environmental impact of using digital platforms

Let's take a closer look at these issues



## Thematic area 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for civic engagement and  
democratic education

## represented groups: fostering democratic involvement

- **Persistence of the digital divide.** As seen above, barriers to digital participation, including online censorship, disinformation and accessibility, mean that the virtual environment replicates the inequalities of the physical world. It is important to bear in mind the persistence of these inequalities.
- **Lack of adequate content moderation.** The lack of adequate content moderation contributes to the spread of disinformation, manipulation or hate speech. It also amplifies misconceptions and polarisation.



## Thematic area

### 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for citizen participation  
and democratic education

## Digital participation and engagement of under-represented groups: promoting democratic participation

- **Online data trading.** The irregular collection of data, the sale of data without people's knowledge, and other illegal or quasi-legal marketing strategies involving the data and content of users of digital platforms and networks are highly sensitive issues. This is even more so if this data is used for political micro-targeting.
- **Lack of digital accountability.** The lack of transparency on the part of both state and private operators regarding the use of data and other applications of technology (the surveillance of digital activists, for example) is a problem that must be addressed.



## Thematic area

### 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for citizen participation  
and democratic education

## Digital participation and engagement among under-represented groups: promoting democratic involvement

- **Environmental impact of digital platform use.** The carbon footprint of every action taken in the digital world (sending instant messages, emails, search engine queries, interaction with artificial intelligence, etc.) consumes energy and leaves a carbon footprint. It is important to be aware of the impact of digital media consumption and to strive to find a balance between sustainable digitalisation and collective digital action.



## Thematic area 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for civic participation and  
democratic education

# Digital participation and engagement of under-represented groups: promoting democratic participation

Digital tools can serve as platforms for various initiatives. Among these, the provision of verified and balanced information to under-represented groups stands out. Some examples include:

[Infomigrant](#) provides migrants with reliable, verified, objective and balanced news and information about their countries of residence, transit and destination.

[Refugee.info](#) provides clear, accurate and up-to-date information to refugees and asylum seekers about their rights, available services, etc.

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## Thematic area 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for civic participation and  
democratic education

# Digital participation and engagement of under-represented groups: promoting democratic participation

- [U-Report](#) Europe. U-Report Europe provides information that saves lives and improves the quality of life for young refugees and their families, and fosters ongoing engagement with young people. It also supports the mobilisation of young people to actively participate in building better societies.



## Thematic area

### 1

**Digital platforms as tools for civic engagement and democratic education**

## Digital participation and engagement among under-represented groups: promoting democratic participation

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Furthermore, in addition to the ability to verify information or obtain data on under-represented groups, we can find opportunities to

Furthermore, in addition to the ability to verify information, the internet and digital platforms also offer opportunities for mentoring and community building.

Mentoring is a strategy that facilitates both the transfer of knowledge and the process of acquiring or learning skills, as well as contributing to the building of social networks. Powerful digital tools designed for the development of mentoring programmes can be found online.



## Thematic area 1

Digital platforms as tools  
for citizen participation  
and democratic education

# Digital participation and engagement of under-represented groups: promoting democratic participation

Digital platforms enable the creation of communities and, as such, contribute to civic participation and can facilitate social change. There are numerous online initiatives dedicated to community building. The emergence of decentralised digital networks adds an element of greater diversity.

# #NiUnaMenos (Spain)



## Background

The #NiUnaMenos movement, which originated in Argentina, aims to raise awareness of and denounce gender-based violence, particularly femicide. It also demands justice for victims and promotes the prevention and eradication of gender-based violence. The movement has gained a strong foothold in Spain.

Various collective digital actions have been carried out under the hashtag #NiUnaMenos.

Key aspects:

- #NiUnaMenos is a transnational movement that adapts to the specific social, economic and political context of each country. In Spain, it is linked to the feminist movement and to widespread outrage resulting from the country's economic, political and social crisis.
- Synergies between mobilisation in physical spaces (demonstrations, rallies, etc.) and online actions, particularly via Facebook, Instagram, etc.

# #NiUnaMenos (Spain)

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## Key points:

- The movement has succeeded in raising awareness of the social problem of gender-based violence both in the traditional media and on the political agenda.
- Progress has been made in raising social awareness of the issue through a shift in discourse, the normalisation of concepts such as patriarchy, and the highlighting of the many forms of violence suffered by women.
- It has organised and continues to organise mass demonstrations.

# #NiUnaMenos (Spain)

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Read the following texts:

- Giraldo-Luque, Santiago; Fernández-García, Núria; Pérez-Arce, José-Cristian (2018). 'The thematic centrality of the #NiUnaMenos movement on Twitter'. *El profesional de la información*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 96–105 <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.ene.09> (Spanish)
- Piatti-Crocker, Adriana (2021). The spread of #NiUnaMenos in Latin America: social protests in the midst of a pandemic. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(12), 7–24.
- Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss12/2> (English)
- Ending violence against women and girls: If not you, then who? UN Women [https://youtu.be/W\\_ZPHPutN-c?si=MJF7WLqeW0rHpS0p](https://youtu.be/W_ZPHPutN-c?si=MJF7WLqeW0rHpS0p)

# #NiUnaMenos (Spain)

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Reflect on and answer the following questions:

- What were the main contextual factors (social, political and technological) that drove the creation of these digital movements in their respective environments?
- How did the prior existence of offline activist networks influence them?
- How did digital engagement (likes, shares, hashtags) translate into meaningful collective action both online and offline?
- What obstacles (repression, the digital divide, sustainability, misinformation) did they face or continue to face?



## Exercises. Topic 3

**Encourage the active and conscious search for under-represented voices on social media or digital consumption platforms.**

### Instructions

- Choose a digital platform you use regularly (Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, etc.).
- Spend 15 to 20 minutes actively searching for accounts or content creators belonging to an under-represented group (migrants, refugees, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people, etc.) that you'd like to know more about or whose perspective you don't usually see in your feed.

### Reflection

- Which group or groups did you choose to look for?
- Did you find it easy or difficult to find these new voices on the platform? Why do you think that was?
- What kind of content do the accounts you've started following share? What do you hope to learn or discover by following them?
- How can this act of actively diversifying the people you follow contribute to a greater understanding and visibility of different realities?

# Module 5 (Part 4)

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## Thematic area

### 1

Building digital bridges: the power of the media in fostering peace and social cohesion

## The role of digital media in strengthening civic dialogue and social movements

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The emergence and development of digital platforms and spaces, such as online forums, social media and participatory websites, have drastically and irreversibly changed the way in which civic and political debate takes place.

The virtual realm has become a space where ideas are debated and disseminated, and where people interact directly, without traditional filters or mediation. In the virtual realm, a wider audience can access these spaces and bring their issues to the agenda. At the same time, polarisation and disinformation also find fertile ground.



## Thematic area

### 1

Building digital bridges: the power of the media in fostering peace and social cohesion

## The role of digital media in strengthening civic dialogue and social movements

Key aspects:

- Expanding the audience. And, consequently, enabling groups with less access to the media and to political parties or organisations to express their opinions and concerns.
- Facilitating democratic dialogue through the implementation of e-democracy and e-participation initiatives

Among the various experiences in the field of e-democracy, we would highlight:

- Have your say
- European Citizens' Initiative.
- Decidim

Let's take a look at them!

# The role of digital media in strengthening civic dialogue and social movements



## Thematic area

### 1

Building digital bridges: the power of the media in fostering peace and social cohesion

- The European Commission has a dedicated online platform called 'Have your say', which gathers citizens' views on current laws and policies.
- European Citizens' Initiative Forum The European Citizens' Initiative is a hub for specialist advice, practical guidance and the exchange of citizens' experiences. The ECI has a discussion forum where participants can share their views on various topics in their own language. There is also an ECI online community.
- At **local level**, participatory platforms have also been developed, such as those already mentioned in other sections, for example, Decidim.



## Thematic area

### 1

Building digital bridges: the power of the media in peacebuilding and social cohesion

## The role of digital media in strengthening civic dialogue and social movements

What are the advantages of digital democratic dialogue?

- **Greater accessibility and inclusion.** Digital platforms can facilitate access to participation for groups that are very familiar with the virtual environment, for example.
- **Greater transparency in the decision-making process.** The fact that citizens can propose and contribute to the political agenda is a key factor.
- **Greater legitimacy** of political decisions. When citizens feel that the policies implemented meet their needs, the democratic process and existing institutions are more likely to be legitimised.



## Thematic area

### 1

Building digital bridges: the power of the media in peacebuilding and social cohesion

## The role of digital media in strengthening civic dialogue and social movements

What are the challenges facing digital democratic dialogue?

- The digital divide remains the greatest challenge facing digital platforms. The lack of access and of digital knowledge and skills amongst significant sections of the population could lead to them being doubly excluded from decision-making processes.
- **The quality of political debate.** Online political debates are difficult to manage or moderate; they can be superficial and end up being monopolised by a few, which discourages the majority.
- **Trends.** If participation platforms are developed simply because they are fashionable, but do not ‘take root’ in the dynamics of information and participation, they lose all their usefulness and may have a delegitimising effect.

# Case study. Freedom of expression versus hate speech

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## Context

Below is a hypothetical situation on which students should reflect, following the relevant instructions.

In the comments section of an online newspaper article on climate migration, the following text appears, posted by Patriot95\_I:

*This is ridiculous. 'Climate migration' is nothing more than another woke lie to justify people from other countries, who just want to steal from and abuse our education and healthcare systems, coming here to take our jobs. We pay and they enjoy the benefits. We should kick them all out and close the borders NOW!*

A conversation quickly springs up around this comment. The comment receives 'likes' and prompts further comments that reinforce stereotypes. Others attempt to refute the claims with data. Some comments call for the post to be removed, but this is countered by users invoking freedom of expression.

# Case study: Freedom of expression versus hate speech

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## Objective

- To apply reference frameworks (such as the checklist based on the Council of Europe guidelines) to identify hate speech and disinformation in online comments.
- To analyse the ethical dilemmas associated with engaging (or not engaging) with comments based on hate speech and disinformation.
- To critically reflect on the balance between freedom of expression and the responsibility to maintain a safe and respectful online environment.

# Case study. Freedom of expression versus hate speech

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Case study materials:

- Toolkit for analysing a case of hate speech <https://rm.coe.int/advanced-guide-toolkit-how-to-analyse-hate-speech/1680a217cd>
- **Dangerous speech and what we can do about it – Susan Benesch**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP42auFOSW8> (min 1-43:56)

# Case study. Freedom of expression versus hate speech

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Analyse the comment using the information provided in the study materials, following these guidelines:

- Identifying hate speech: Does the comment contain elements of hate speech according to standard definitions? Which ones?
- Identifying disinformation: Does the comment contain false or misleading claims about climate change and migration? Which ones?

# Case study. Freedom of expression versus hate speech

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Consider the ethical dilemma of participation:

- Is it helpful or counterproductive for other users to engage in direct debate with the user who posted the comment?
- Are they being given a platform, or is their discourse being effectively countered? What are the risks of ‘feeding the troll’?
- Freedom of expression versus responsibility: Where is the line drawn between protecting freedom of expression and preventing the harm caused by hate speech and disinformation on a European news platform?