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Useful websites links:

Council of Europe Internet Website

Pestalozzi Internet Website

Pestalozzi_platform

European Youth Center Website

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The use of social media for democratic participation

Intro: Social Media in a changing world – hopes and fears.

The question of democratic participation through social media does not refer only to a single goal or a mission, but to a widely discussed reality filled with experience, initiative, innovation, hope, risk taking, fear and fast changes. Many popular protests have reignited debate on the role of social media in facilitating political participation and active engagement of citizen and have brought social media and the question of democratic participation in the news worldwide. Blogs, the micro-blogging site Twitter, the social networking site Facebook as well as mobile and locative platforms play a key role in facilitating active political expression in the form of demonstrations and public discussions. Topics like high rates of unemployment, poverty, rampant government repression and corruption become important in the public eye through social media communication. Different forms of protests are driven through Twitter, Facebook and BlackBerry Messenger. Citizen-led engagements, such as responsible consumerism, global awareness and resistance to lobbies… largely facilitated by social media, show the potential of social media platforms to drive political participation. Very often young people are important players, maybe because technological knowledge is their field of competence. In many cases young people know more about social media than their elders be they parents, teachers, employers or fellow citizens. Others are still far away from using them or even having access.

The discussion however, has also to be engaged considering the context-specific challenges we are faced with. One of the key challenges facing social-media-driven citizen participation is the increasing fear of social media by governments. Various regimes have blocked, censored, or threatened to block or intercept the use of social media platforms. Following violent riots, in which social media have played a key role, some governments reacted strongly against these social media. The proposals to block the use of social media during future civil unrests have become quite common. These proposals get widely criticised by civil society as threatening the right to freedom of speech and expression. At the same time, presidential and other political candidates are using social networks more and more to develop their campaign strategy and, to many, an election today hinges on these online happenings.

Discussing the use of social media for democratic participation can therefore be informed by the different ways, governments, schools, families deal with the power and the potential of these communication tools.

1. WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

The term social media broadly refers to Internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. It is this interactive or collaborative nature of these tools that makes them *social*. Web-based tools now facilitate a social connectivity that enables users to produce, interact and share content online. Internet users have thus

evolved from consumers of web-based content to *prosumers[1]* or *produsers* who both consume and produce content.

This shift has led to the development of many different forms of social media platforms. These web-based tools include Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogs, wikis, podcasts, photographs, videos, rating and social bookmarking. There are six different categories of social media platforms:

• Collaborative project work (e.g. Wikipedia)

• Blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter – real-time information networks)

• Video content communities (e.g. YouTube)

• Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook)

• Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (e.g. SecondLife)

• Picture sharing sites (e.g. Flickr)

With such a variety of tools and new ones appearing at a fast pace, it is important to explore the knowledge, experiences and skills people have before going any deeper in discussion, training and reflection. This is why all participants of this Pestalozzi Module series were sent the link to a survey, so that facilitators could have a snapshot of where all the participants are, and what tools they most use.

2. Democratic participation

To have a look at the possibilities of social media in political processes, we need to have a basic understanding of democratic participation. In our understanding it is a non-static concept with a diverse set of undertakings. It can be defined as citizen acts to influence the actions taken by leaders, responsible persons or political representatives. In other words, political participation can be understood as referring to the various mechanisms through which the (young) public express their political views and so exercise their influence on the political process.

Beyond voting, which is regarded as the most common/traditional political process and most basic form of political action, electoral participation also encompasses various other processes, such as citizens' involvement in election campaigns, attending meetings or attempting to access information on different political parties or elected officials achievements.

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1 The term "prosumer" originated with Alvin Toffler, who first used the term in his 1980 book The Third Wave. Toffler defined the prosumer as someone who blurs the distinction between a "consumer" and a "producer." The term has since come to mean a variety of things.

Arguably, the forms of democratic participation through social media that are most dear to young people include (1) engagement in grassroots politics within their local communities through attending community gatherings and interacting with their local political representatives (2) political participation by attending civil protests or signing petitions on different issues and joining interest groups that engage in lobbying or political advocacy and (3) individual acts such as for example consumer choices, also referred to as 'voting with your money' to influence corporate practices, as an engagement in favour of global ecological issues and sustainability.

One of the major obstacles to citizen political engagement is undeniably the issue of lack of trust, motivation, skills and opportunities to access information and communication that would allow enlightened political choices. Access to information, for example, is a two-fold concept. It involves information that is available and readily accessible, as well as information proactively sought out by citizens. Seeking out information and sharing it is an integral part of political participation and this element is related to the political activity of attending political assemblies. Thus, for citizens to fully exercise their political rights, the political context has to allow access to information. However, freedom of association and assembly related to citizens' right to access information is not that much a given fact (anymore or not yet) in many countries, meaning that the population's ability to actively participate in democratic activities is hindered.

3. THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

The processes needed for democratic participation, and action in the field of Human Rights can be enhanced by the tools at hand; social media can facilitate and magnify our means for cooperation to exchange, plan and organise collaborative action.

Participation of all citizens is essential to a democratic society that develops constantly by finding answers to new challenges like the following ones, which can only be solved by integrating the competences and the participation of all citizens:

- ethnic conflicts and nationalism

- global threats and insecurity

- development of new information and communication technologies

- environmental problems

- population movements

- emergence of new forms of formerly suppressed collective identities

- demand for increasing personal autonomy and new forms of equality

- weakening of social cohesion and solidarity among people

- mistrust of traditional political institutions, forms of governance and political leaders

- increasing interconnectedness and interdependence

In the face of challenges such as these, it has become clear that new kinds of citizens are required: citizens that are not only informed and understand their formal responsibilities as citizens, but also active – able to freely contribute to the life of their community, their country and the wider world, and actively participate in ways that express their individuality and help to solve problems by not just trying to influence leaders, but by communicating through face to face communication or social media with each other. This obviously starts with the participation of young people and this is particularly relevant because in many societies a declining engagement of young people with *traditional* political processes can be seen also and especially in western democracies. Social media have great potential for better access to information, and exchange, encouraging therefore collaborative as well as individual political participation. Accessible social media platforms offer ordinary citizens of all ages the opportunity to interact more directly and actively with their political systems.

Social media tools also possess the potential to allow diaspora communities to get involved in social and political processes back home. People use social media to communicate their views and maybe express anger and dissatisfaction.

Despite the potential shown by social media, there are voices that argue about the downturns of the tools.

One is that Internet actually has also the potential to strengthen existing dictatorships (and strong leadership) and facilitates the control of their populations. It should therefore be noted that social media and networks can also be used for authoritarian and democratic state surveillance by monitoring and filtering.

Another is that, depending on the specific context in which the platforms are being used, and considering that countries are (also technologically) fundamentally different, a realistic understanding of the relationship between social media and the conditions within which the technology exists is essential. The contexts within which the platforms facilitate citizen involvement are characterised by huge socio-economic and political challenges, which impede the full (and equal) exploitation of online platforms. Limits to freedom of expression, freedom of information and freedom of assembly restrict the free use of social media tools and will have a negative impact on citizens' ability to participate in, and may marginalise them from, the political sphere.

Last but not least, some fear that there may still be a huge gap (that for some is insurmountable) between the social media fuelled conversations occurring today in online advocacy group and online based political actions, and actual citizen's participation in the definition / shaping of democratic processes.

Social or/and political?

Being political for the citizenry today means very different things in many different contexts, such as in lifestyle and consumption. The nature of being political has changed from membership in movements and parties, to participation in specific activist events and projects, focused around individual issues rather than political parties. All of these movements are influenced by principles such as *flat hierarchical organisation*, innovative use of new media technologies, bypassing of established political structures, etc. Social media are claimed to be communication-led rather than information-driven - to offer a sharing of

values and beliefs, a sense of ownership and *emotional involvement that speaks to a sense of identity* that is performative and mobile. They are seen to allow or encourage dissent through multiplicity and polycentrality, and to be hard to censor; they are described as predicated on self-communication to a mass audience.

But these characteristics also raise crucial questions: when does communicating to a network of friends become political, for example; does knowing more of the details of a democratic failure really make a difference? Does the paradigmatic shift pointed to by these characteristics really also lead to a radical change in political practices of every day life in schools, neighbourhoods and communities? An alternative view is that social media provide another way for political and economic elites to entrench their power and increase political and economic concentration[2]. In this view, participation in social media mainly allows advertisers and others to target users ever more effectively based on the increased amount of data available online about them as consumers so that social media are a gateway for the establishment of increased surveillance and censorship, and replicate social inequalities.

4. HOW DO WE DEVELOP EDUCATION FOR THE USE OF NEW MEDIA FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION?

Competences refer to what a person is able to do, in three respects that form the core of a person's identity:

- What a person knows and has understood;
- The skills enabling a person to use her or his knowledge;
- The awareness and appreciation of the knowledge and skills that a person possesses, resulting in the willingness to use them both with self-confidence and responsibility.

Competences refer to abilities and potentials "inside" us. They are therefore invisible. Then how can teachers find out what competences their students have?

Here is an example. Noam Chomsky, a linguist, described the language competence of a native speaker. Native speakers permanently create and understand sentences that they have never spoken or heard before. We cannot see the language competence, but we perceive the native speaker's performance, and we must assume that the competence to communicate fluently must be there.

There is no competence without any visible performance, but also no kind of action without competences. Competence can only be measured by judging the performance – what are we capable of doing. Task based learning serves to learn these competences. Teacher educators can develop teachers' awareness of their own learning:

- What thoughts do teachers have in mind when planning lesson or activities using social media for democratic participation?
- How do teachers decide what their students should be able to do?
- What would they aim to achieve, in terms of democratic participation, (that is within their reach) through their practice?

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[2] See: Manuel Castells: Communication Power, Oxford 2009

We suggest lists of possible competences divided in attitudes, knowledge and understand and skills. These lists will help to have a closer look at the projects and teaching material of the participants: what are the competences that will be reached by the students/youth by the end of the project or training unit?

Attitudes:

- *I am convinced that sharing values of Human Rights, mutual understanding and democratic citizenship can influence people's attitudes and behaviours.*
- *I am willing to encourage learner's critical thinking skills and allow them to take responsibility in their learning process.*
- *I am willing to play different roles (as cultural mediator, counsellor, facilitator, human rights activist, member of a learning community, etc) and show flexibility in order to play them successively or jointly.*
- *I am aware of the impact of fast developing internet tools on young people's cognitive experience as well as the consequences this development has on learning today.*
- *I value formal and informal learning*
- *I am willing to appreciate challenge and expect to learn from it.*
- *I believe cooperation has a central role for social cohesion and respect for the individual*
- *I recognise and accept risks linked with the handling of sensitive and controversial issues*
- *I promote and defend ethical attitudes for working collaboratively*
- *I accept to see things from different perspectives*
- *I recognize the challenges and threats for social cohesion in our societies, when citizens are not educated for dealing with diversity*
- *I am convinced of the need to empower learners and, in the classroom, I accept to relinquish some of my power as a teacher.*
- *I consider that knowledge is a mere construction that remains incomplete and subject to continuous questioning*

Knowledge and understanding:

- *I understand the concept of multi-perspectivity in teaching*
- *I understand the need for the curriculum to be affirmative of individual pupil and group identities*
- *I know and understand education theory in general and specifically progressive/socio-constructivist approaches to education enough to adapt them to the context in which I teach*
- *I have knowledge on the projects and publications related to the subjects I am teaching*
- *I understand the potentialities and risks of using ICT in my teaching.*
- *I know about young people's common practices within social networks and the importance they accord to internet.*
- *I develop up to date knowledge on cognitive development, multiple intelligences and learning styles and how my teaching must accommodate them*
- *I develop up to date knowledge on cooperative learning structures and their theoretical underpinnings.*
- *I know the curriculum so as to work collaboratively with other colleagues*
- *I have general knowledge of the main social actors and resources of my community, (NGOs, social and cultural services, political actors)*
- *I know what projects are carried out by my colleagues in my school and I develop up to date*

- *I develop my knowledge of HR and rule of law in the context of new media: freedom of expression, defamation, self-image, personal safety, intellectual property*

- *I get acquainted with key international policies and standards (e.g. Human Rights convention, Children's Rights convention, rights of minorities etc.), as well as the historical dimensions of human rights.*
- *I know that teaching is, like social science, a research, an investigation, a reconstruction of the reality using diverse and often contradictory sources*
- *I know how to evaluate sources and recognize in these points of view, prejudice, bias, exactitude or reliability*

Skills:

- *I promote learning by doing, teaching methods based on real-life, on skill oriented tasks, and active involvement.*
- *I employ project based learning and I can implement cooperative structures in my teaching*
- *I use formal and non-formal learning*
- *I encourage learners to take charge of the learning process*
- *I thrive to develop critical thinking skills in learners: encourage debating, discussing, listening and asking questions, to build constructive assertiveness based on argumentation; teach about generalizations and their limitations, giving examples, establishing connections, coming to conclusions, finding causations*
- *I learn from challenges*
- *I develop personalised learning and use a variety of teaching methods adapted to different learning styles.*
- *I engage students and pupils in active citizenship and community projects*
- *I evaluate sources and recognize in these points of view, prejudice, bias, exactitude or reliability*
- *I sensitize my colleagues to the benefits of cooperative learning.*
- *I am keen on team teaching in order to share the responsibility of developing cooperation in whole school approaches.*
- *I integrate the new technologies in my teaching and learning with students for effective and critical empirical strategies*

5. THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE WORKS ON SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Some important legal instruments of the Council of Europe tackle the issue of new ways of participation based on information and communication technologies. The Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life[3], which was produced by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in 2003, refers to the fact that

"information and communication technologies can offer new possibilities for informing and allowing the participation of young people. They can be used to exchange a wide variety of information, and thanks to their inter-activity, to increase the participation of young people."

In 2004, the Committee of Ministers - the highest authority in the Council of Europe - have issued a recommendation on electronic governance, looking at the technological side of the

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[3] http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Coe_youth/Participation/COE_charter_participation_en.pdf

development of our societies, and made a number of proposals, reflections and recommendations for the Member States.

More recently work in both, Education for democratic citizenship and human rights as well as in the field of information society and media.

The Pestalozzi Programme has offered different types of activities in the past years such as a module series on media literacy development and human rights (2008/2009) and a ThinkTank of "Living together in a connected world" in December 2011. You can also find a collection of reference texts and standard setting texts in the Pestalozzi website.