



## Lab 7 - Bursting Social Media Echo Chambers

### *Moderators:*

Ms Corina **CĂLUGĂRU**, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Moldova to the Council of Europe  
Mr Mukunda NEPAL, Communications professional, Nepal

### *Initiatives:*

Empowering users and community by opening Facebook echo chambers, "Tracking Exposed" (Italy) by Mr Claudio AGOSTI, Founder of Facebook Tracking Exposed

A Toolbox for Digital Citizens, Nupinion (United Kingdom) by Ms Denise XIFARA, Co-founder and Data scientist, Nupinion

The Read Across The Aisle app (USA) by Mr Nick LUM, Co-founder of Read Across the Aisle

### *Discussants:*

Ms Khedir MABROUKA, Tunisia, video journalist, correspondent and reporter for Deutsche Welle

Ms Milena SANTERINI, Italy, Member of Parliament and Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

## The lab in brief

Social media echo chambers are posing a clear problem for healthy civic debate, and this manifests differently in different parts of the world – e.g. presenting stories from only one side of the political spectrum or providing a platform for populist attempts to denounce traditional sources and news outlets. In an effort to counter populist narratives, a number of initiatives are building tools that help people to assess their “information diet” by seeing the full story, what they might be missing and where news outlets fall on the political spectrum.

Understanding one’s “information diet” can be a way to increase healthy debate by reframing the issues and exposing people to different perspectives. As new tools are being developed to help people understand these different perspectives, it will be important to recognise and compensate for inherent biases (use of artificial intelligence, underrepresentation of certain voices) in their design and to also ensure that they do not undermine trust in the media. They will also have to take into consideration that not everyone has the desire or the capacity to open up their echo chambers. Toolmakers should try to account for psychological factors that may determine why people would be motivated to use their products.

Real investment is required for these kinds of initiatives to succeed, and not just financially, as start-ups, partnerships and funding sources are as essential as building a user-base. If bursting social media echo chambers is the goal, it will take a greater effort on the part of other actors to get involved – including institutions that are able to hold private interests to account.

The lab examined the detrimental effects of social media filter bubbles and algorithms and explored solutions to make readers more aware of their reading habits and help them to integrate different worldviews.

## About the initiatives

Empowering users and community by opening Facebook echo chambers (Italy)  
Facebook Tracking Exposed is a browser extension, which looks at what content Facebook is giving to a person and also showing what is hidden from others. The decision about what is seen and what is hidden is not in the user’s control. The presenter emphasised the need to empower citizens to have more control over their own “information diet” and explained how they should keep algorithms accountable. He also warned that technology will not solve a political problem, but it can be used to help people to become more politically aware.

### A Toolbox for Digital Citizens (United Kingdom)

Nupinion is a platform that delivers different news sources from across the globe and the political spectrum, without depending on any personal information about the reader. Demonstrating the various filters that Nupinion offers to readers, the platform aims to increase media literacy and help people to make up their own minds about what they can trust and need to know, and more broadly, to foster empathy and healthy debate.

### The Read Across The Aisle app (USA)

The Read Across the Aisle is a tool that encourages people to read news more fully, to understand the scope of their media intake, and to seek perspectives from sources that they may not typically read. Despite the increasing usage of this tool, it faces some of the challenges for start-ups that are trying to address these issues – going global, building partnerships, and finding funding. Many start-ups are able to get kick-starter funding to

begin their projects, but growth and sustainability will depend on finding new resources, institutional partnerships and support.

## Key points issues by the debate

Manipulation vs. Information. Challenges to civil discourse exist all over the world and populist sentiment spreads more easily through the manipulation of social media platforms. Tunisia is the example of a country, where misinformation and vilification of the media are occurring all too often. Populism is the means for corrupt politicians to come to power, taking advantage of social media platforms for disseminating their messages. This is having a detrimental effect on democratic processes, with increasing voter abstention and declining trust in journalism.

The problem that populism is perpetuating is an "us" vs. "them" mentality. The customisation from social media platforms is transforming politics into a commodities market, facilitating the control of information, and leading people to believe certain things and to only talk amongst themselves. Democracy is built together, sharing different points of view, so initiatives like those presented in the LAB are a useful way to create empowerment through direct access to news sources and a broader media diet. However, two critical issues have to be considered: 1) that initiatives should be careful not to undermine the media's impartiality, and 2) that it's important to consider the underlying psychological motivations for staying within one's filter bubble. Not everyone wants to change their information diet.

Empowering users. How can we encourage a critical mind, while also being aware that people may have already formed opinions and biases around an issue or news source? What kind of outreach is used and needed for those that may be unreceptive? It is important to acknowledge that being useful and not alienating potential users, as well as finding information on where sources lie on the political spectrum are important elements for producing an effective impact. All presenters are exploring different ways to improve their tools, through artificial intelligence, adding dialogue and debate or voting options. However, as start-ups, these initiatives need to focus first on certain elements to get off the ground before they can add new functions, particularly when funding relies on the development of a reliable product. Bursting social media echo chambers is not easy, especially when social media platforms are becoming a primary source of information. All presenters still believe that it is possible to reach people at the far sides of political spectrums with efforts that increase awareness of opposing views and help to reframe the issues.

The role of institutions. With so many interconnected agendas and interests, institutions can play a part in the accountability of private companies and visibility for small projects that are aimed at supporting an informed and healthy public dialogue.

## Recommendations

- ✓ To encourage critical mindsets and to raise people's awareness on all unconscious tendencies and on all mechanisms produced by algorithms.
- ✓ To sustain and give visibility to projects that create and disseminate alternative algorithms to facilitate access to diverse viewpoints.