

Representation, participation and societal well-being

Addressing inequality in agency in Europe

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This chapter employs the idea of “inequality in agency” and examines it in the context of representation studies. With the help of the European Social Survey data from 2016,¹ the chapter claims that, across Europe, individuals are confronted with dissimilar contextual conditions (political cultures and media functioning habits and traditions, socio-economic environments and social norms) and express different feelings and individual capacities (such as self-confidence and social trust as well as personal and social capital endowments) to pursue and appreciate societal well-being in its fullest sense. As suggested here, “inequality in agency” arises as a result of “inequality in representation”, which is linked with underlying differences between the dominant political and media systems, on the one hand, and the civil society structures, on the other. This study predominantly considers public perceptions of political and social inclusiveness and representation and examines them in connection with the media and digital information environments existing in different European countries.

As popularly inferred, modern democracies across today’s Europe are performing on the margins of the customary understanding of representative democracy (Parvin, 2018). Among the most commonly identified trends is a decrease in political trust, signalling a broader systemic crisis of representative democracy in the Western world (Lefkofridi et al., 2012). Across Europe, conventional political ideologies and standard party politics are slowly giving ground to populist movements and other types of associational formations running on individualist and performative claims (Aalberg et al., 2014). In some of those, predominantly in the region of former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where democracies are still defined as young and weakly consolidated, nationalist ideologies infused with populist and protectionist catchphrases seem to be playing one of the dominant roles, further eroding fragile democratic institutions and ushering in hyper-partisanship and nationalist neo-authoritarianism (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017; Balčytienė, 2015; Vobič et al., 2014). In

1. ESS Round 8: European Social Survey Round 8 Data (2016). Data file edition 1.0. NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC.

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other regions – mostly in the Western European democracies – conventional party ideologies “strengthened” with populist extremism and radicalization are gaining ground, constituting a challenge on an unprecedented scale to the liberalist ideals of democracy and representative forms of government (Bergmann, 2017). Southern European countries (Italy and Spain) are preoccupied with yet another phenomenon, namely further polarization of party relations that increase political battles and societal conflicts, expand social cleavages, intensify political and economic turmoil and contribute to overall disruption.

Though various studies have explained the fiascos of equal political representation in Europe (Lefkofridi et al., 2012; Parvin, 2018), most of those accounts neglect the appeal and engaging character of contemporary digitized environments and information in general. Exposure to news and political information – an indispensable process from a democratic decision-making perspective – appears to be challenged repeatedly and radically through intensified networked communications and the decline of the dominance of conventional news media and professional journalism in the daily informational accounts of the European public. Though established news media still have a relatively respected and reputable position in some countries, intensified information consumption and production on the side of the audience appear among those critically important issues that need to be addressed in more detail (Cardoso, 2011).

The research questions addressed in this chapter are as follows: How do media and digitized environments contribute to the shaping of the twenty-first century citizenship? Do people feel more informed and experienced and hence do they act as politically engaged citizens or, conversely, do they feel more uncertain and insecure, controlled and manipulated and inclined to stay away from politics? How do such performance differences, variations and eventually inequalities come about, and what effects do they have on daily democratic life across Europe?

Enhanced populist political polarization appears as a commonality among the recognized political shifts in all European countries (Mancini, 2013). Though there might be various issues (such as socio-economic background, education and other reasons) acting as causes of increased ideological divergence and group conflicts, media and networked communications play an important role in their uprising. Hence, we aim to suggest that specificities of the dominant political and communication culture, originating within and preserved by both political and media systems of a country, also play a significant role in the creation of conflicts, clashes and divisions.

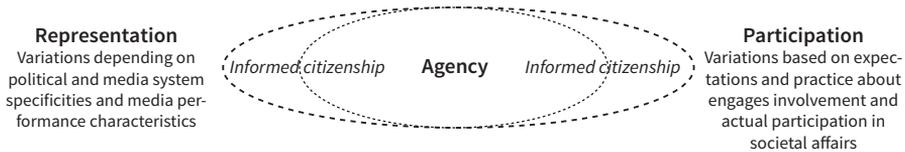
One presumption that we would like to test in this study is that societies (predominantly those in the southern and eastern–central parts of Europe) with stronger aspects of personified politics and a more openly expressed conflictual political culture and political parallelism (cf. Hallin & Mancini, 2004), thus manifesting higher degrees of political and social polarization, will be polarized even further due to intensified informational exchanges applied in networked structures of modern communication systems. It also seems plausible that networked communications will trigger self-expressive means of political self-actualization and engagement, especially in

countries where the conventional news media are elite-oriented and focused on clientelist interests, neglecting the voices of ordinary citizens (Curran, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Örnebring, 2012).

With these factors in mind, we posit that dominant media systems and information environments in certain European countries contribute to and create inequality of representation across Europe. According to classical visions of democracy, unequal representation and a lack of institutional and interpersonal trust are critical for democracy. If the interests of some groups of people are neglected and represented unequally, even by elites and general social institutions, it means that representative democracy does not live up to its ideals and principles of a fully socially inclusive, that is, empowering, society.

In this chapter, we follow the conventional idea that “inequality in agency” – outlined here as variations in people’s actions expressing their individual power – arises from information and representation inequalities, which further translates into “participatory inequality”, indirectly contributing to the stratification of the effective use of political rights across contemporary Europe (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The interplay between representation, agency and participation



We understand that this is indeed an ambitious and broad perspective that might lead to further inquiries regarding whether democracy (and which version of it) survives when the role of conventional news media and journalism seems to be degraded further and even supplemented and replaced with other types of information production and distribution. We limit ourselves to a more focused inquiry here. We base our presumption on the idea that engagement and participation in political debate are an important component of a functioning political system. Such an activity, however, rests on a set of presumptions, namely inclusiveness of the political system and individual capacities. The variations observed in the application of that activity in different countries invite us to question which types of stratification, inequality and variation are arising across Europe as a result of intensified information exposure and use of news media and networked communications.

As will be shown in the following sections of the chapter, growing distrust, uncertainty and feelings of powerlessness permeate public perceptions and popular discourses in many countries of today’s Europe. Increasing discontent related to informational ignorance and lack of equality among views and voices in the media might eventually reduce political equality – without which a fully democratic society is at risk.

Conceptual framework

Our discussion here opens with a classical viewpoint that inspects a number of the underlying normative preconditions and prerequisites for democracy, predominantly those of a free flow of information, equal representation and active and engaged citizenry (Calhoun, 2011; Curran, 2014; Putnam, 2000; Silverstone, 2004).

This normative viewpoint on democracy – and hence on social and political equality and well-being – expects people to base their political activities and engagements on an informed and deep understanding of political issues. Following such a vision, people are expected to be competent to act individually and engage in politics rather than only to relate shallowly to information by forming spontaneous and arbitrary political reactions. This logic forms the basis of both democratically functioning media and a capable, responsible and engaged “informed citizenship”.

As this idealized vision of the media and journalism foresees, journalism should provide a forum for public criticism and comment. Journalism is envisioned as a primary catalyst of opinion formation and participation, and this line of thinking verbalizes the classical procedure of news production, consumption and knowledge formation. Likewise, people should be active and engaged media users. They should be curious about their surrounding environments as well as about the bigger world. As citizens and media users, they should take part in public discussions about civic issues and should form an understanding about how to participate in democratic life. In short, the free flow of information about social issues, as well as equal representation and the expression of differing views, is treated as a precondition for meaningful political participation.

The above vision suggests that (a) the use of news and information and (b) participation in politics are positively correlated and that democracy’s vibrancy and vitality depend on the availability of both professional news media and sufficient means and channels for self-expression and participation (Verba & Nie, 1987). It follows that the quality and intensity of political decision making and, hence, of democracy – such as voting in elections and referenda, taking part in political consultations and deliberation or the formation of communities of interests – depend on the qualitative features of the information provided in the media (as well as on other socio-economic features, such as social standing) and on the degree of public engagement with the media and politics. However, the question arises – to what extent do the media systems in different European countries fulfil this purpose of equality and representation? Do members of the European public engage with online information environments? Do they actively comment and share their views and opinions online or, contrariwise, do they abstain from the assumed advantages of the new modes of political and civic commitment? What evidence do we have to explore further the supposed variations across European countries?

Though providing important guidelines, the normative view is indeed quite idealistic. Quite a few of the most recent studies demonstrate that intensified news

consumption hinders rather than enhances people's willingness to participate in public life (Woodstock, 2014). According to these analyses, the previously dominant and normatively shaped cycle of dependence between news and politics, and, accordingly, between representation and participation, seems to have changed. In the same way as the media system was hybridized, incorporating both conventional media channels and individualized communication options (Chadwick, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2012), and the dominant communication paradigm has shifted from mass to individualized and networked communication (Balčytienė & Wadbring, 2017; Cardoso, 2011), participatory forms and formats of politics might appear to be distorted as well. Such an opinion contradicts the conventional assumptions about news consumption as fostering civic engagement (cf. Putnam, 2000). Nonetheless, it needs to be examined, especially in a time of arising requests to rethink the perception of what is "established", that is, conventional, in contemporary political participation and to design a new directory of citizen involvement and participation actions, covering a broader spectrum of participating activities, such as "monitorial participation", "monitorial citizenship" or even "online self-expressionism", to mention a few (Davies, 2011; Grabe & Myrick, 2016; Graves, 2017; Imbrasaitė, 2012; Parvin, 2018; Schudson, 1998, 2006; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). As assumed, such an attempt would be of high significance and need, particularly in times of heightened individuality and the domination of networked communications and interactive media. Whether such a claim appears to be relevant and applicable within all political and media contexts (political and media cultures) will be explored in the next section of this study.

Citizenship and societal well-being

As stated, the idea of "citizenship" generally perceives news and information as primary catalysts for engagement and participation, indirectly implying access to information from a plurality of sources. Obviously, an informed person is one who informs him/herself on what he/she is interested in at a certain moment in time (which can be many things). Democracy needs engaged, active and contributing members. Equally, participation in communal matters and experience sharing appear to result in rewarding feelings of meaningful fulfilment, satisfaction and happiness.

Normative views, extensively examined in the academic literature, accentuate a close and mutually supporting linkage between the ideas of an informed and responsible citizenship and the quality of "daily democracy", that is, democratic life and general "societal well-being". Societal well-being is a broad concept encompassing the essential ideals of an equal and just society and appears to be among the highest priorities and concerns and the qualitative indicators of democratic life (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). As a theoretical concept, societal well-being has emerged as an indicator applied in general societal quality descriptions that extend far beyond the economic performance markers (such as the GDP, which mainly deals with matters of wealth and economic

growth). Though financial security and employment as well as good health appear to be essential attributes of welfare states and social policies in modern states, societal well-being aims to consider such components as an attractive social environment, strong and supporting relationships, involvement in communities, emotional fulfilment and happiness and the like.

The idea of well-being (also often widely labelled as the notion of a “good life”) appears to be a good point of departure for the identification of observed societal changes. We approach the idea of well-being as both a rational and an emotional state that deals not just with general happiness and life satisfaction but touches specifically on the idea of “belongingness”, explained as the human emotional need and desire for social attachment, connectivity, engagement and interpersonal trust, and thus also informal representation (i.e. a condition that might be identified through the existence of communication rights and freedoms such as the right to learn about life, the right to be included in social interaction, the right to be seen and shown, among others), which might designate active attachments to community life and involvement in decision making and processes of change of existing conditions.

Naturally, the changes in European politics identified in the introductory section of this chapter also manifest variations in publicly shared ideas of what constitutes a responsible and informed citizen. New scholarly analyses seem to suggest that the notion of an “informed citizen” no longer appears to be based on the idea of idealized determination to serve democratic ideals by actively participating in political and public life (Grabe & Myrick, 2016). As identified, contemporary social and political realities are much more complex and polarized and much less inclusive and “publicly oriented” – in other words, inequality in representation appears to be shared and widespread across the European context (Lefkofridi et al., 2012). News media and journalism, on their part, though still attempting to adhere to the classical vision of professional reporting – and, hence, freedom, equality, social inclusiveness and representation of different voices – appear to be greatly influenced by financial obstacles (profit orientation and managerialism) in the industry, while journalists themselves delve into branded communications and performativity. Citizens follow similar trends as, by actively engaging with digital networks, they implicitly remain in groups and circles of likeminded users.

In the end, in contemporary networked societies, information is produced not just to inform and represent the users but also to generate further knowledge and information. Eventually, this might have civically empowering outcomes, such as better-informed and knowledgeable citizens and skilled professionals. Contrariwise, it might contribute to audience fragmentation and disintegration and withdrawal and alienation from societal affairs. The latter tendency, regrettably, seems to be among the most plausible ones (Woodstock, 2014).

So how do Europeans perceive themselves in terms of democratic agency? Do they express feelings of contentment as well-informed and happy citizens or do they feel that their needs, interests and voices are being neglected and ignored? What types of

variations are observed across Europe? How is the perception of agency affected and transformed by the existing structural and cultural differences among the European media systems, and how do intensified information exposure and networked experiences contribute to this?

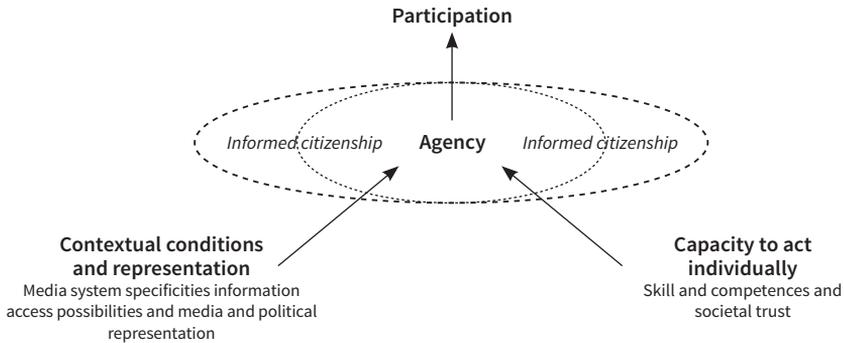
Inequality in agency across Europe

Media and information usage, in general, should be studied from the viewpoint of agency, that is, as a participatory activity and a social and political process that is shaped through both contextual conditions and individual and social practice contributing to human experience and acquired competencies for further actions (which might lead to participation and engagement in public life or withdrawal from it). In the available analyses, however, very little attention is being paid to information exposure and access as a morally charged and civic activity (cf. Silverstone, 2004). Though contemporary societies are indeed actively using varied types of both conventional media and networked communications, the question is whether such a free flow of diversified information, reaching people through mixed channels, acts as a socially inclusive arena ensuring the development of knowledgeable and engaged citizenry.

While adhering to the previously raised questions, it also needs to be remembered that the classical ideals of informed and active citizenry and democratic participation have emerged within the Western cultural tradition. These ideals were developed and sustained within reasonably fair, firm and stable (political and economic) conditions. Academic studies of democratic functioning and political and social inclusiveness also specify a strong correlation between a general sense of social justice and equality in a society, on the one hand, and engagement in political and societal affairs, on the other. Vice versa, the more socially and economically unequal and vulnerable a society is, the less politically engaged is its citizenry. Hence, bearing these arguments in mind, we wish to suggest that the defining determinants of differences (and inequality) in agency across Europe will be structured by contextual (defined by conditions for media functioning) and individual (defined by individual status, acquired social competencies and citizenship roles) issues (Figure 2).

Thus, the notion of “inequality in agency” needs to be studied in accordance with two prerequisites, namely (a) the existing (political, economic and legal) conditions of information accessibility and (b) trust, social capital and the participatory competences of the public. The latter aspect, specified here as the “capacity to act individually”, which refers to individual self-confidence, competences and social trust, will be grounded empirically in the following section.

Figure 2. Agency context and the building of participatory skills and competences



Digitized encounters with social reality

Conventional news media are still observed as a core pillar and social institution of contemporary democracies. However, it needs to be acknowledged that today's news and information environments have been significantly hybridized, functioning on multiple logics and serving different goals (Chadwick, 2013). The exceptionality of contemporary information environments materializes in several aspects. Information exchanges and communication are sustained through various mechanisms of individualized reach, production, manipulation and distribution of information across multiple mediums and platforms. The digitalization of content supplied with novel technological affordances permits access to and integration of various thematic areas, ranging from institutional information and scientifically verified data to amateur expression and communication. Shifting communication paradigms – from the mode of transmission and control to the mode of self-expression and networking – naturally enhance the appearance of more individualized and grassroots, participatory and deliberative modes of communication (Balčytienė & Wadbring, 2017; Cardoso, 2011). New ICTs have the potential to determine the character and amount of social contact that people have, influencing, as noted, the quality and nature of their communication within the society.

There are studies suggesting that the use of social media can decrease social exclusion, increase participation and in other ways contribute to dynamic societal processes (Ellison et al., 2014). These studies advocate that having access to digital devices and social networks contributes to social connectivity, creates new learning possibilities, raises career opportunities and, along with this, positively contributes to social well-being and other qualitative improvements in societal and political life. Still, as previously identified, these many assertions have already been challenged. Rather than functioning as arenas in which different interests meet and visions are consolidated, the algorithmic logic of most networks acts as a factor that contributes to polarization and societal disintegration (Brandtzaeg, 2012; Tsatsou, 2011). The ongoing

shifts and transformations experienced in the European conventional media sphere as well as the surrounding interactive digital environments result in ongoing societal re-configurations and regroupings that suggest new forms of communalization and identity formation through the use of alternative, semi-alternative or niche channels. In such a context, naturally, new modes of citizenship and social responsiveness are expected to arise. Do people feel more empowered by these new techniques? What variations of political engagement are detected in different countries in Europe? What are the main obstacles to more engaging political practices?

The fact that socio-economic stratification factors are closely related to inequality in political participation is a classical issue (Jottier & Heyndels, 2012; Verba & Nie, 1987; Verba et al., 1978, 1995, 2003). By applying the notion of “inequality in agency”, we would like to argue the following: although all of these aspects of societal stratification (such as those imposed by age, gender and various socio-economic factors) remain in digitized encounters with information and participation, more nuanced ingredients, based on information and representation inequalities as well as variations in individual competencies and feelings, contribute to the rise of political participatory inequality and shifts in political life in contemporary Europe.

Empirical evidence from the European Social Survey Round 8 (2016) shows different patterns of online engagement and political participation in selected European countries, including both old and young democracies (Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK). As can be seen, political engagement in online interactions is correlated with the level of democracy and inclusiveness of the political system. In countries and regions with higher levels of transparency, accountability and responsiveness, citizens are more active on online political platforms. For instance, supportive democratic regimes of the Nordic countries encourage citizens to exploit alternative practices for political participation and representation more actively. Conversely, the lack of representativeness and inclusiveness of political systems in the central-eastern and southern parts of Europe does not evolve into participatory action but rather leads to isolation and withdrawal from political and public life (Figure 3). The existing structural barriers are also linked to the individual capacities, self-confidence, supporting communal ties and emotional well-being of citizens. As demonstrated, younger democracies are challenged by the lack of confidence and skills among their citizens to engage in meaningful online participation (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Political engagement and interactions in online media by the inclusiveness of the political system (ESS08, 2016)²

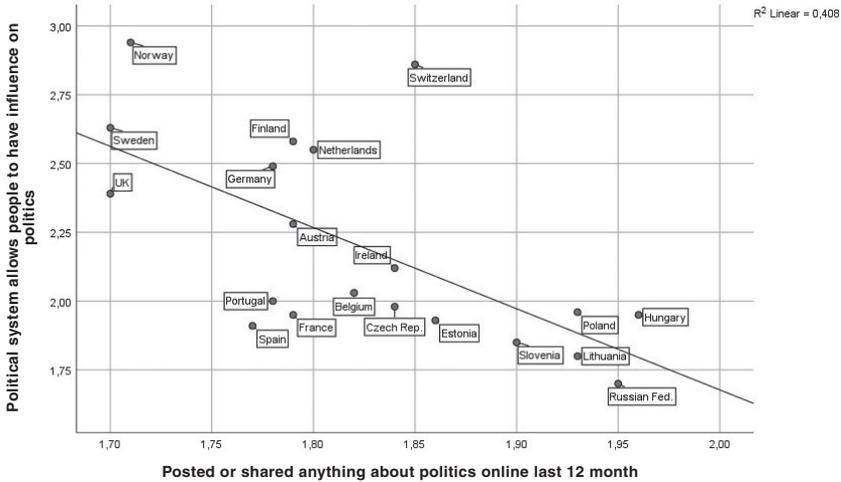
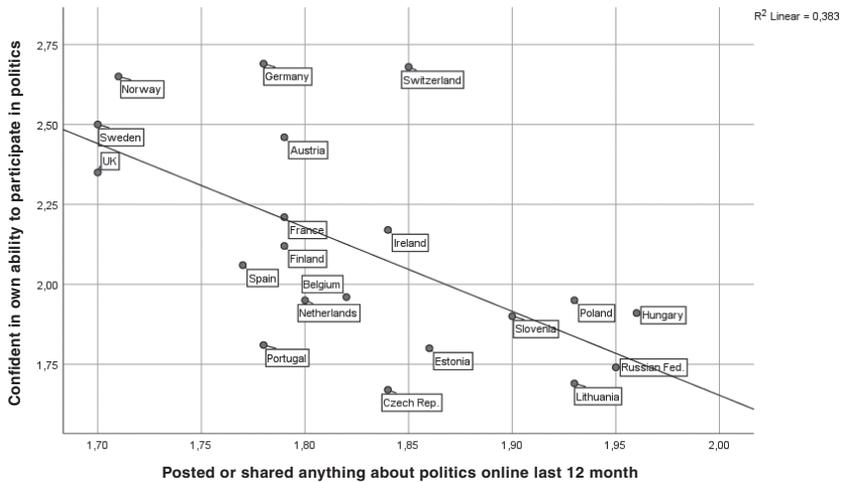


Figure 4. Political engagement and interactions in online media by confidence in one's own ability to participate in politics (ESS08, 2016)³

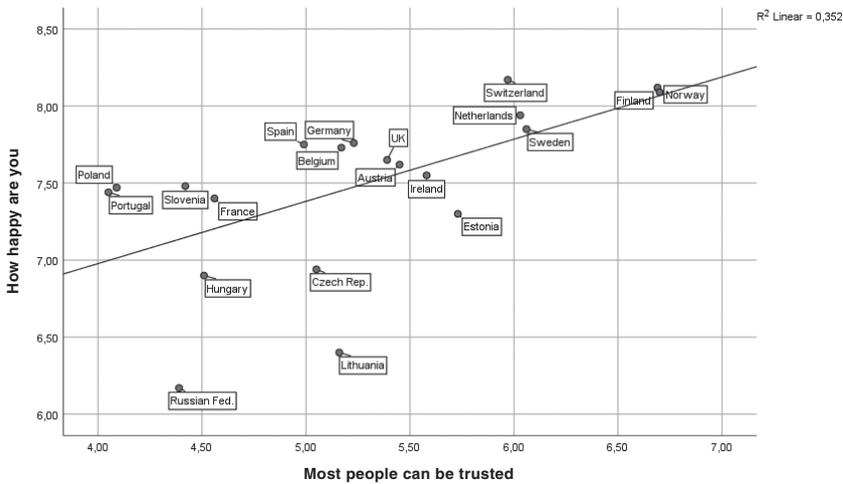


2. Political engagement in online media was measured through the following question: “During the last 12 months, have you posted or shared anything about politics online, for example on blogs, via email or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter?” The possible responses were 1, meaning “yes”, and 2, meaning “no”. The inclusiveness of the political system was measured using the statement that the “political system allows people to have an influence on politics”. The responses were recorded on a 5-point scale, where 1 denotes “not at all”, 2 “very little”, 3 “some”, 4 “a lot” and 5 “a great deal”.
3. Political engagement in online media was measured through the following question: “During the last 12 months, have you posted or shared anything about politics online, for example on blogs, via email or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter?” The possible responses were 1, meaning “yes”, and 2, meaning “no”. Confidence in one’s own ability to participate in politics was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for “not at all confident”, 2 for “a little confident”, 3 for “quite confident”, 4 for “very confident” and 5 for “completely confident”.

Based on these illustrations, we claim that, despite the fact that, in formal terms, political equality has been institutionalized across Europe, its effective use clearly appears to be stratified. In addition, online modes and techniques appear to have no major influence here – limited engagement in real life translates into reduced online interactions. Apart from the global world trends of growing inequalities, polarization and uncertainties, younger European democracies have been struggling with the cultural and structural challenges for democracy and welfare development, including a lack of social and institutional trust, disenchantment with the political establishment, civil rights and legacy media. These challenges are also evident when using alternative means of accessing information and media.

Broadly speaking, scepticism and disappointment with the established political structures dominate across Europe, a trait that is further supplemented with an absence of satisfaction, happiness and emotional well-being (Figure 5), a lack of social integration and interpersonal trust (see Figure 6) correlated with general feelings of powerlessness and unequal representation (Figure 7).

Figure 5. Social trust by personal feelings of happiness (ESS08, 2016)⁴



4. Social trust was measured through the question “Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” The responses were provided on a 10-point scale, where 0 refers to “you can’t be too careful” and 10 refers to “most people can be trusted”. Personal feelings of happiness were measured through a question that asked “How satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?” The answers were recorded on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 stands for “extremely dissatisfied” and 10 stands for “extremely satisfied”.

Figure 6. Social trust by satisfaction with democracy (ESS08, 2016)⁵

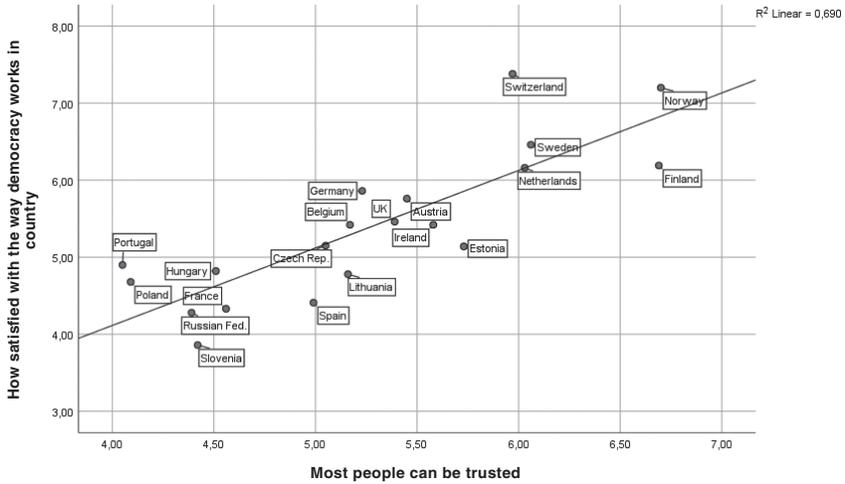
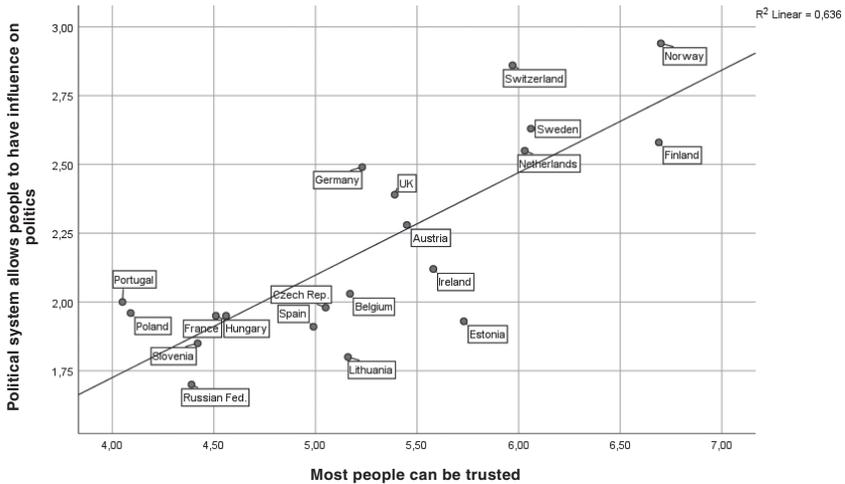


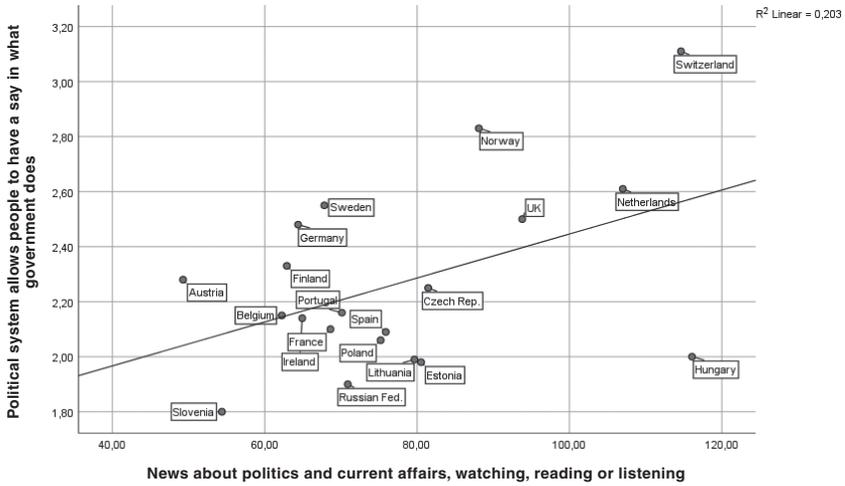
Figure 7. Social trust by the inclusiveness of the political system (ESS08, 2016)⁶



- Satisfaction with democracy was measured through a question that asked “How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the country?” The answers were recorded on a 10-point scale, where 0 stands for “extremely dissatisfied” and 10 stands for “extremely satisfied”. Social trust was measured through the question “Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” The responses were provided on a 10-point scale, where 0 refers to “you can’t be too careful” and 10 refers to “most people can be trusted”.
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As seen in Figure 8, exposure to political news and information is also more pronounced in the established democracies of Western and especially Northern Europe rather than the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia and Russia. Due to the less supportive political environment, citizens of the latter group of countries rely less on both conventional and alternative media sources.

Figure 8. Political news consumption by the inclusiveness of the political system (ESS08, 2016)⁷



The empirical trends identified support the conventional arguments that social and economic inequality translates into rising participatory inequality in political life, such as marginalized conventional engagement in politics. Furthermore, a lack of representation in both state and elite-oriented politics as well as legacy media lead to public disaffection with political life and media coverage, while broader representations of different voices in society significantly increase political efficacy (Curran, 2014). With a few exceptions, we can identify regions of Central and Eastern Europe where these trends are proliferating even more due to the lack of supporting cultural and structural conditions, which are contributing to the increasing divide and inequalities between established and new democracies.

7. Political news consumption was measured through the question “On a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs?”, answered in hours and minutes. Political inclusiveness was measured via the statement that the “political system allows people to have an influence on politics”. The responses were provided on a 5-point scale, where 1 means “not at all”, 2 “very little”, 3 “some”, 4 “a lot” and 5 “a great deal”.

Trust, social capital and participatory competences

As noted, media usage, communication and interactions have intensified and increased noticeably in all European countries. However, whether such practices are working in favour of informed citizenry and quality of democracy appears to be questionable. Traditionally, civic life is characterized by civic engagement, political equality, solidarity, trust and tolerance and a strong associational life. The density of civic life rests on interpersonal trust and social capital, which is composed of social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from those networks.

People form and cultivate communities on the basis of shared ideas and values. The media, generally, have always been (and, in many ways, still are) treated as a means for cultivating and exposing societal dialogues and indirectly bringing people and the nation together. As implied earlier, the media do not just transfer information but also build strong emotional ties between citizens. These ties affect the connection that the citizens feel with one another as well as with the whole society and the country. As Benedict Anderson (1983), referring to the classical meaning of print media and communications, explains:

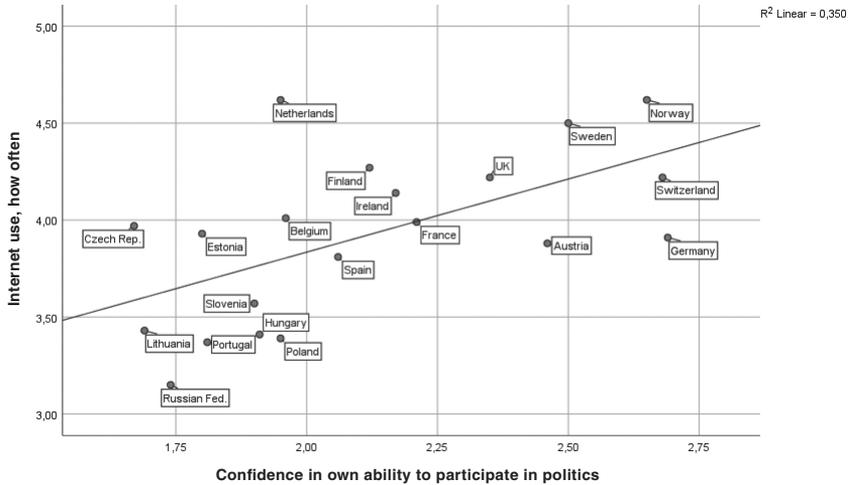
The novel and the newspaper were seen as technical means and potential to represent the nation as an imagined community living in homogeneous time. Millions of individuals might interact with one another, but they share, by virtue of their participation in the mediated culture, a common experience and a collective memory. (Anderson, 1983: 24-25)

It could be rather straightforward to transfer such an idea to social networks. However, there are also a number of drawbacks to such an approach. To be informed, people need access to verified information, which is news. However, different people have different preferences for news. Since not all published news is reliable, people need adequate resources, such as confidence, knowledge and skills, to guide their news selections. In social networks, communication revolves around “mass self-communication” preferences, that is, the wants and desires of the individual user (Castells, 2013). Hence, the framing of the online political identity of different users is shaped by their activities, that is, their roles – that of passive follower and spontaneous consumer and that of active user and content producer and distributor. As a result, in such – networked – communications, the guidance, support and mentorship ideally provided by the mentoring of professional journalism appear to be lost.

Though the inequality between European states with regard to access to digital networks and their various uses (facilitated through e-business, e-government, e-learning and other services) is slowly diminishing, there are still clear differences among richer and less economically affluent nations. As noted in comparative analyses (Cernison & Ostling, 2017), the variation in the median income can explain the variation in both digital skills and regular internet use. In other words, there is a clear correlation between the (economic) wealth of the country and the promotion of information and communication policies and practices in media education. To be more specific, people

in high-income countries tend to know the digital environment better and use the internet more; they also express high levels of confidence in democracy in general as well as in their own ability to take part in politics (see Figure 9).

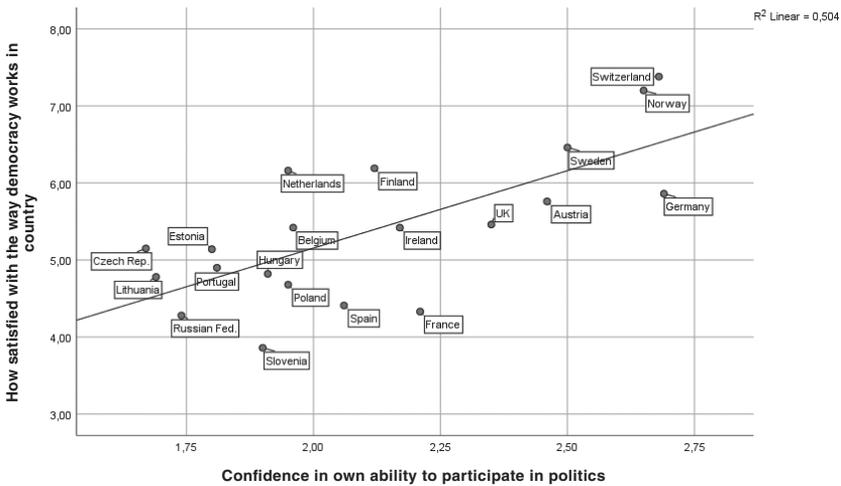
Figure 9. Confidence in one’s own ability to participate in politics through internet use (ESS08, 2016)⁸



As stated earlier, politically informed citizens are essential for democracy, yet conventional media use and traditional news consumption are experiencing a steady decline across Europe. Despite the growing availability and intensity of daily usage of the internet in news consumption, becoming an assured, familiarized, informed and accustomed citizen is not self-evident. In addition, as shown by public perceptions (Figure 10), there is an increase in general uncertainty regarding people’s self-confidence in their own abilities to participate in politics, especially in the younger European democracies.

8. Confidence in one’s own ability to participate in politics was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means “not at all confident”, 2 “a little confident”, 3 “quite confident”, 4 “very confident” and 5 “completely confident”. The use of the internet was defined by asking the question: “People can use the internet on different devices, such as computers, tablets and smartphones. How often do you use the internet on these or any other devices, whether for work or personal use?” The responses were provided on a 5-point scale, where 1 denotes “never”, 2 “only occasionally”, 3 “a few times a week”, 4 “most days” and 5 “every day”.

Figure 10. Confidence in one’s own ability to participate in politics by satisfaction with democracy (ESS08, 2016)⁹



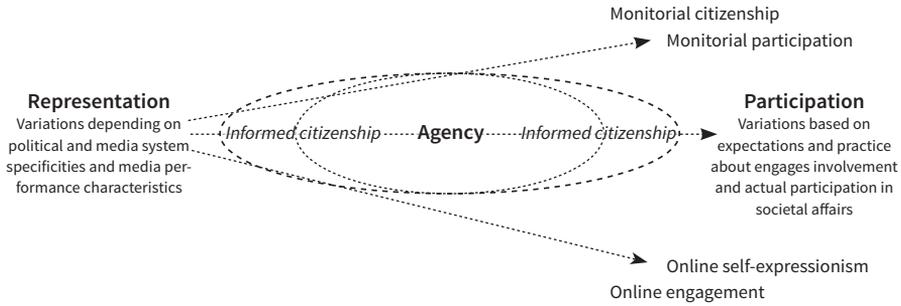
The trends identified in the above illustrations (Figures 9 and 10) propose contrasting public perceptions of democratic performance and political engagement across Europe. The countries with liberal democratic traditions (older European democracies) demonstrate stronger support for citizens’ involvement in public and political life, while, in other countries (in Central and Eastern Europe), the lack of a favourable political culture and civil society traditions, as well as dominating uncertainty and distrust, creates a problem of increasing alienation and disengagement from both formal and informal political activities, such as voting, involvement in associations and citizens’ groups, demonstrating, volunteering, accessing information and using political news.

This outcome indeed challenges the previously asserted plausibility (see Figure 11) about the potentially engaging and civically empowering character of new participatory channels in socially varied contexts.

In conclusion, what is observed here is that, among the most significant outcomes of changes in information access and use in different countries in Europe, there are changes in political identity formation and (informed) democratic participation, that is, political and civic agency. To boost meaningful participation in political and public matters, the development of citizen agency is of paramount importance for sustainable democracy.

9. Confidence in one’s own ability to participate in politics was measured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means “not at all confident”, 2 “a little confident”, 3 “quite confident”, 4 “very confident” and 5 “completely confident”. The question “How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in the country?” was answered on a 10-point scale, where 0 stands for “extremely dissatisfied” and 10 stands for “extremely satisfied”.

Figure 11. Variations in representations, agency and participation



Democratic agency and multiple voices

In this section, we would like to summarize some of the core arguments outlined in the previous sections of the chapter. In general, equality in agency appears to be a key detector of an accessible, plural and participative society as well as an inclusive and responsive media system. We used the notion of “inequality in agency”, which addresses not only the issue of access to information, inclusiveness and representation and plurality of the views exchanged (which also refers to the existing conditions for media operation) but also strongly emphasizes the issue of skills and competencies (as well as the levels of social trust) needed by citizens to enjoy fundamental communication rights fully (such as freedom of access to information and communication, the ability to appreciate professional news journalism and the capacity to express one’s vision and ideas and communicate in safe informational exchanges).

Essentially, the abundance of new media and information sources requires new competencies and skills from all media users. Increasing concern about cybersecurity, fake news, information operations, psychological wars and opinion strategic narratives are threatening young and old democracies and lead to the need for a critical and analytical understanding of different media-related processes, including news making, discourses and effects. To be able to act and participate in an information-saturated environment, one needs specific skills and competences to navigate complex and permanently changing technological networks and media applications. For citizens who are estranged from political life, resources of active citizenship, including social capital, a sense of citizenship and civic infrastructure, are necessary to encourage their capacity and willingness to participate in democratic politics and to reverse the deepening participatory inequalities.

Conclusion and policy implications

This analysis, generally, centred on a clearly identified conflict between the expansion of possibilities to acquire knowledge about varied societal and political issues,

on the one hand, and fluctuating public participation, engagement and commitment to collective issues and communal matters, on the other (Grabe & Myrick, 2016). As such, this study attempted to take the first step towards the classification of European democracies from the perspective of news and information usage and perceived self-confidence in individual political and civic abilities.

News and media play a decisive role by informing people and enabling them to make sound (democratic) decisions. Though it might be the case that digital communications are more flexible and open to intervention on the part of all members of society than more traditional media, as demonstrated here, it is indeed questionable whether they are more inclusive or collectively empowering.

The normative perspective envisions communication as a prerequisite for informed and active citizenship and participation in political life, leading to logical and informed political choices. As shown in this chapter, the reality appears to be more complex than the idealized visions imply. In digitized, networked and hybridized news and information environments that mostly function as user-centred media channels, the function of responsible usage, connection and relationship building appears to be the responsibility of the audience. As explored here, the ability to assume that responsibility does not automatically emerge in parallel with new techniques but requires proper contextual conditions, for example strengthening the competencies of individual users and encouraging objective, professional journalism. As revealed, some Europeans already master this competence and actively engage in networked communications in which they are inclined to enjoy their fundamental rights fully, such as freedom of expression and access to information. Though people actively use media and ICTs and access information through countless channels, their political choices are questionable from a normative perspective on democracy, and the effects on an ostensibly democratic way of life are quite controversial: support for democratic institutions is decreasing, and voting rates are in decline. People's knowledge of political issues is also debatable; they consistently express discontent and dissatisfaction and doubt their capabilities for meaningful political participation. Therefore, these tendencies need to be addressed on national as well as European policy levels, promoting democratic values of freedom of information, diversity, representation and participation.

To conclude, digitization and networked communications cause serious effects and democratically significant reconfigurations in all European countries. As shown, the availability of information and appropriate conditions for communication and relationship building appear to be significant influencers in this process. The capacity to access and use information is among the key determinants of equality and social inclusion in emerging knowledge societies. How these rights are being applied in reality, however, varies across different European countries.

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