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The role of ICT and social media in the process of transition to responsible and sustainable living

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Currently new digital IT and social media have a tremendous impact on our own life and the world around us. It is a powerful tool of persuasion, provoking action and influencing public opinion. The main challenges are to explore how IT and social media affect the responsibilities of consumers and citizens as individuals and community members and how we can become responsible consumer citizens and benefit the society. The study addresses globalized social media as a platform and a tool for the engagement of people. It focuses on modern digital social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace that can empower the public to choose responsible and sustainable lifestyles. The paper examines two kinds of civic participation: 1. participation inspired by individuals; 2. participation instigated by institutions (e.g., governments, corporations, NGO, etc.). It raises the critical issue whether the participation in the “virtual world” via blogging, online petitions and texting micropayment charity can lead to greater consumers and citizens participation in the actual world and make people more socially responsible. Participation of citizens and its impact on politics is illustrated in the context of Latvia in the light of the referendum on the proposal to give a status to Russian as the second official language. Although the draft law “Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia” has not been adopted, it is shown that the outcomes of the referendum may influence the government policy and ultimately may affect a positive change.

Keywords: social media, citizens participation, impact, sustainable living

1. Introduction

Media play a prominent and decisive role in current affairs as the most powerful tools of communication. The media outlets of the 21st century are diversified. They include television, radio, films and videos, print media, photography, electronic and digital media. This spread of media in a globalized world has rendered nearly everyone, everywhere, accessible to one another and to the media. People are spending

more time accessing, consuming and producing media content. Companies and parties are using it more effectively. Media have expanded into a vast network of online newspapers, articles and blogs. These factors have increased the power of the media in forging people's opinions and defining courses of actions.

The rapid growths of social media and new digital technologies have revolutionized the way citizens connect, interact and share ideas. Social media have become one of the most effective ways to reach out for people and a natural way of communication. For example, modern digital media applications such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter are beginning to demonstrate their potential as powerful communication and collaboration tool in social political and educational arenas. These platforms have become increasingly popular means to affect a change in various spheres of life.

The main objectives of the present study are to:

- explore social media in the context of sustainable living
- analyze merits and drawbacks of digital communities and networks
- examine civic participation from a political perspective and illustrate its impact on sustainable/responsible living

2. The differences between digital and traditional media

The differences between traditional broadcast (or “old media”) such as TV, radio, print and digital (or “new media”) have been discussed by many scholars and on a number of web pages of media industry. Within a traditional approach, digital or new media can be seen as interactive, hypertextual, dispersed and virtual (Lister et al. 2009). In the framework of a *novel approach*, new media are viewed as numerical, modular, automated, variable and transcended (Manovich 2001). Digital media can be treated as *innovative* as compared to the media of the past. Its main features include technical processes, cultural form and immersive experience (Miller 2011: 14). It is vital to note that digital media are in the process of transformation since it is constantly being updated, modified, compressed, linked and data based. For example, web pages are acquiring new links, social networking profiles are being updated, “wikis” are getting new entries or revising old ones, etc. Thus, one of the key features of digital media is *constant change*. We share the view that it can be characterized as a *process* compared to traditional media objects (e.g. a film or a book) that have an “object-like” feature (Miller 2011: 14).

It is worth noting that the move to media as a *process* is connected with a new conception of the user. Communication processes are no longer one-directional. This implies the change of the role of the user from a static role of viewer to the role of an active, mobile user or participant. The user has the potential to have some impact on the presentation of the media, or feedback upon it. In other words, the user and the digital media are in an *interactive* mode. In this context, the notion of *in-*

teractivity can be defined as “a measure of media’s potential ability to let the user exert an impact on the context and/or form of the mediated communication” (Jensen 1998: 461 cited in Kiouisis 2002: 368).

In digital age, the Internet has become an integral part of daily life for many people and a new site of all types of social groupings or communities. Now we will make an attempt to consider the idea of digital / virtual communities and analyze the concept of network as a more accurate depiction of relationship with modern society.

3. Virtual communities: benefits and drawbacks

There are a great number of ways in which group relationships are realized online (e.g., chat rooms, forums, bulletin board systems, networking facilities, blogging, etc.). As suggested by Armstrong and Hegel (2000), virtual or online communities fall into four main types:

- Community of transactions facilitating the exchange or buying and selling of goods and information
- Communities of interest bringing together people wishing to interact on specific topic of interest
- Communities of fantasy allowing participants to create new environments, identities or imagined worlds
- Communities of relationship based on personal experience creating networks of support.

There are various views on virtual communities. For example, some scholars argue that online communities are individually and socially beneficial. Other think that they may be destructive for the real world. First, let us analyze virtual communities in terms of benefits.

Virtual communities help to compensate for the lack of community in the real world.

Online communities increase the choice in one’s social relationship. Anyone can get in touch with anyone in spite of the real world situation.

There is a *freedom of engagement* within online communities. For example, their members can choose when and how to engage with other community members. One can perform the role of a frequent poster, a moderator and contribute a lot of time and resources to community or one could be a casual member or rare poster.

Online communities overcome the problem of space and distance as well as the problem of mobility. Membership in a community is not interrupted by the physical movement of people. They can move but still be in touch with each other. This view has been supported in the work of Day (2006).

Online communities do not have material limits. There is limitless number of online communities with a great number of users (Day 2006). However, virtual communities may have some weaknesses as well.

The interests of community members may be destructive or even pathological from the standpoint of society. For instance, there are a lot of suicide forums in the Internet. Such forums share thoughts and exchange advice on effective and pain-free means of committing suicide. They may have a harmful impact on behaviour of people, in particular teenagers. In this context, offline communities try to help the individuals and modify their behaviour to the community norms.

Another disadvantage of online communities is that with respect to ICT access and use there are differences within European societies as well as developing countries. The notion of *digital divide* can be applied for different parts of Europe and across the world. Elderly people who are less educated or especially who live in rural area may be cut off from the so-called information society. Furthermore, European societies differ with respect to *diffusion paths*. These are the ways in which new technologies enter real life (i.e., whether they may be implemented via institutions, or whether they can occur as a result of private initiatives). But in spite of this, we assume that on the whole merits of online communities outweigh their drawbacks.

4. Social media

4.1 Social media: key features

We are currently witnessing the move from groups or communities to a new media trend, in particular social media. The term can be defined as a “a broad category or genre of communications media which occasion or enable social interaction among groups of people, whether they are known to each other or strangers localized in the same place or geographically dispersed” (Chandlers and Munday 2012). There is a shift to specifically technology - enhanced social networks as a form of social organization and microblogging. One can maintain links via social networking profiles where people may get in touch face-to-face. (e.g., posting messages on Facebook or using Twitter to pass on news, etc.). Microblogging as a blend between social networking, text and instant messaging allows peoples to keep in touch through short messages. For example, a popular microblogging service, Twitter, has 140 character limitations.

It is important to note that social media focus on enabling and publishing a conversation *with multiple* parties where the community has a stake in dialogue.

Social media can be characterized by a *user-generated content (UGC)* or *consumer generated media*. It is obvious that the term *USG* is self-explanatory. Thus it

can be defined as content created by users themselves as opposed to corporate media.

The category of *UGC* comprises various forms of online genres, such as discussion groups, social network sites, blogs and wikis. Since the launch of the video sharing site YouTube in 2005 and the high popularity of the social networking site Facebook from 2006 onwards we have witnessed a shift from “passive” to active and interactive media consumption. The users are no longer viewed as receivers of information but also producers of information. In other words, they produce their own news while consuming other people’s opinions. So, the hybrid concept of a “*prosumer*” and a “*prouser*” has been introduced so as to describe a new tendency of media production. The social web technologies allow users to create and edit web pages easily using any Web browser.

UGC includes a range from highly professional institutional actors such as global news providers (e.g., BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera), the websites of newspapers and national broadcasters to non-professional institutional actors such as government agencies, non-government organizations (NGOs), political parties and non-professional individual actors (e.g., private bloggers). It should be noted that their analysis is not included in the objectives of our study.

There is a variety of views on *UGC*. Enthusiasts of *UGC* note that contributions of ordinary people represent a *democratization* of the public sphere.

UGC represents a low-expense editorial source that can provide an opportunity to generate free content.

There is an instant access to breaking news (e.g., Twitter postings made by individuals situated near an event). However, critics condemn *UGC* revealed in Facebook, Twitter, and Wikipedia as a trendy hype. There is a lot of critique of *UGC*.

First, *UGC* is often criticized for being falsified and non-authentic. Second, *UGC* tends to be subjective compared to the journalistic standards of balance and objectivity. Third, *UGC* might challenge editorial standards from the perspective of trustworthiness. For example, some news stories may be based on false information from users. However, according to Bruns (2005), the collaborative news production is based on collective intelligence. This means that active users correct all the mistakes.

It is important to note that social media provide access to infinite amounts of information and possibility for building relations with consumers and citizens in *new ways*. This enables to listen to people’s views, to build networks and relations with citizens and consumers, to answer when contacted, etc. Social media may be seen not as a short-term campaign but as a *continuous dialogue* with people. It may involve active listening, reaction and responding, content management as well as a constructive communication.

Modern digital media applications and platforms (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Draugiem.lv (friends), and Wikipedia) serve as *tools* that can empower consumers and citizens and make them more *socially responsible* and *engaged*.

Now let us make an attempt to analyze main users of social media in Latvia as compared to the situation all over the world from the perspective of statistics (Latvijas Interneta Asociācija 2011) (see *Table 1*).

Table 1: Social media users

<i>Facebook</i> – more than 680 m users across the world / approximately 327, 940 users in Latvia (15. 9% from the total number of population in Latvia)
<i>Draugiem.lv</i> – 1, 208, 200 registered users / 770, 000 users per month (58. 4% from the total number of population in Latvia)
<i>Twitter</i> – more than 200 m users all over the world / 65,000 users in Latvia (3. 1% from total number of population)
<i>Wikipedia</i> – 3, 6 m postings in English / 34,000 in Latvian

As can be seen in *Table 1*, in the context of Latvia, the user number of *Draugiem.lv* (i.e., a Latvian version of social media site) prevails as compared with the use of *Facebook* and *Twitter*. But on the whole, in Latvia social media are in *infancy*.

4.2 Social media in relation to democracy

It is generally acknowledged that social media provide for more democracy.

First, social media are popular platforms for collaboration and quick information sharing. Modern digital applications enable citizens to express their opinions. According to Trappel and Maniglio (2009), social media give voice to citizens and act as a creator of public opinions which should guide decision-makers and power holders to their actions. Second, they provide consumers and citizens with *additional sources of information*.

It can be seen as a prerequisite of critical public debate that can lead to opinion building and common will formation. This function is closely connected to the *freedom* rights, specifically the right to expression and the right to get informed. Thus, social media act as trustee for these fundamental civic rights.

Third, it is generally acknowledged that social media applications and platforms are significant for *mobilizing* people for any kind of cause. In our view, we can speak about *political mobilization*. Presumably protest movements, pickets may be the result of using the most basic application: Twitter.

With regard to the role of citizens in democracy, Nieminen and Trappel state: “Citizens are the prime actors in democracy, both as citizens in their relations to the state, and as consumers in their relations to the economy. In their everyday life citizens are organized in different formations of civil society, in the form of networks, associations, cultural and social groups, etc.” (Nieminen and Trappel 2011: 145).

It is important to mention that ICT and social media enable to support accountability, social movement building and democracy that are developing today. Facebook, Twitter, Draugiem, Wikipedia denote a new site for citizenship. This means

that citizens should have access to the resources and possess competences to allow them to participate in such spaces. As Facer (2011) suggests, such applications offer new resources to enable citizens to effect a change. As mentioned above, they offer resources for opinion shaping, sharing ideas as well as accountability and representations that might help people and their communities to advocate for themselves. The ways in which ICT are used to empower, to control or engage has the potential to structure the quality of public space and to shape citizens' expectations about how democratic practice and civic engagement should play in the socio-technical spaces of the 21st century.

5. Civic participation in digital age: political dimension

As mentioned above, the rapid growth of digital and mobile media technologies have enabled new forms of civic participation, activism and voice. The question posed is whether ICT and social media can increase participation of consumers and citizens or not. We will make an attempt to assess whether participation in the virtual world (via blogging, online petitions, viral messaging, and texting micropayment charity) leads to greater citizens' participation in the actual world and makes consumers and citizens more responsible and engaged. There are a lot of empirical studies. Wellman et al. (2001) found that online interaction supplement face-to-face contact in real life. In general, socially active people online tend to be socially active in real life. They are more involved in voluntarism and politics. Similarly, according to Katz and Rice (2002), online participation has no impact on community participation. There is a relationship between high Internet use and high participation in offline social life. Community oriented or sociable people are sociable online as well as offline. The Internet is a tool with which to be sociable (Wellman et al. 2001; Katz and Rice 2002). In our view, the borderline between online and offline participation is blurred. They are closely interlinked and may be seen as different aspects of civic participation.

Moreover, some aspects of online interactions might fit in with aspects of offline life. For example, as it was mentioned above, some demonstrations and pickets occurring in real life across the world are the results of organizer's efforts online. This can be seen as a political dimension of social media. Let us analyze it.

Twitter as a new public space is beginning to play a role in selection of a president, the support of an opposition regime, development of local civic society, etc. It is a new form of democratic engagement that is currently developing. Some scholars express a skeptical view regarding effects of social networks on changes in real life. For example, Facer (2011: 89) states that "whether such a space can come to involve more than a small percentage of the population, and whether the screams of anger and shouts of optimism that are expressed here will effect change in the physical world in which harm, injustice and violence is done to people and ecosystems,

however, remains uncertain". In our view, participation in social networks has a significant impact on real life.

From the public sphere perspective, the constant growth of group and interpersonal communication may reinforce the capabilities of lobbies and other activist groups to inform themselves and intervene in the discussion of public affairs. These social networking tools have increased the opportunities for the international exchange of information. So, more media intervene in the construction of public sphere.

It is important to note that civil society organizations should participate in governance agreements. In this respect, the author states that "in order to participate in such intensive decision-making process, an organization needs remarkable resources to make its interests not only heard and represented, but also-and more importantly - implemented" (Meier 2011:162). We suppose that implementation of interests may be treated as a *challenge* for civil society. In reality citizens are offered freedom of speech within consultation forums by the governance regime. Meier (ibid.) stresses that consultation structures can be seen mainly as a protest channel without the opportunity to expose and criticize the media power for unsatisfactory provision of public goods (ibid.).

The involvement of civil society in policy decision is a central issue in participatory media governance. It should be emphasized that the aim is not only to consult civil society groups but also to involve them in the *decision-making process*. This can be achieved through some sort of decision rights provided to the participants.

Participatory media governance should contain elements of democracy that will enable civil society groups to co-determine particular policy results. This will allow a more transparent political process. On the role of participatory media governance the author writes that

"Participatory media governance can enhance the legitimacy of the political process, the accountability of media companies and finally provide a better interaction between citizens, civil society, economic interest and the state with benefits for the whole democratic process" (Meier 2011:163).

Now let us make an attempt to illustrate participation and impact of citizens on politics in the context of Latvia in the light of referendum on the Draft Law "Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia" concerning the proposal to give official status to Russian as a second state language (18 February 2012).

Since 1991 (establishment of independence in Latvia), 400,000 of Russian speaking inhabitants (i.e., ethnic Russians and other ethnic minorities) have been deprived of citizenship. This means that they cannot vote in elections, hold public office, work in government institutions, etc. Also, there are limitations in the use of the native language in educational settings (e.g. kindergartens, schools, universities, etc.). The *trigger mechanism* of the referendum was the will of the government to introduce total learning/teaching in Latvian in education (e.g., kindergartens and schools of ethnic minorities).

According to the Central Electoral commission results (Centrālā vēlēšanas komisija 2012), out of 1, 098, 92 (94 %) citizens who had the right to vote and were registered in voters' list of polling stations, 821,722 (74. 80 %) of voters cast their votes *against* Russian as the 2nd official language whereas 273, 347 (24. 88%) of voters were *for* the proposal to give official status to Russian. 3,524 (0. 32%) ballots were recognized as invalid. However, in the eastern region of Latgale the majority of voters approved changes in Latvian constitution to make Russian the 2nd official language. It can be explained by the fact that Latgale is one of the poorest regions in Latvia and it has a high percentage of ethnic Russians and other ethnic minorities.

It is important to note that although the Russians admitted that that they had no chance of winning the plebiscite of making Russian the 2nd official language they hope that the approximate 25 per cent of support will make Latvian center-right government start a dialogue with national ethnic minorities. We assume that it can be seen as a small step *to affect a positive change*. A *step-by-step strategy* may be particularly efficient.

6. Conclusions

As a result of this study we have drawn the following conclusions:

- In a digital age, ICT and social media have become increasingly important in everyday life activity and have enabled new forms of civic participation, activism and voice.
- Participation of individuals in web - based social networks enables people to become informed citizens.
- ICT and social media help people around the world to think critically and behave responsibly. In our view, consumers and citizens should be *proactive* – not only react to changes but also cause changes. Participation of people has an impact on policy and ultimately may affect a positive change in the country.
- The world has entered a period of transition and there will be many opportunities to encourage and channel a positive change.

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