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Why we need a social network for Europe

Europeans talk past instead of to each other. Johannes Hillje argues that a publicly-funded social network may finally build a European public sphere

Read this interview in German or Russian.

You recently published your new book *Plattform Europa* [in German], in which you advocate a publicly-funded social network as an antidote to the current toxic debates in Europe. Why do you think the European Union's reputation is so bad?

In recent years, public debate in Europe has become trapped in a vicious circle of crisis, news and nationalism. During this period, European crises have always been between individual or several member states. In other words, they have been internal European conflicts, not external conflicts. And conflicts are newsworthy. If a conflict arises, the media are going to report it. On one occasion a Sky News Italy reporter repeated the journalistic cliché "If it bleeds, it leads". The thing is, she was referring to reporting about Brussels, not reporting in general. In other words, if you want to arouse interest in European politics, some sort of conflict has to be involved.

And these conflicts have caused people to revert to the national dimension?

The way these conflicts are reported tends to involve cultural clichés. It's not been confined to substantive issues, such as loan programmes or the allocation of refugees. It's often used also for positive or negative comparisons between nations. Remember the stereotyping of Greece and other southern European countries during the euro crisis.

This kind of debate was also carried in question of how to deal with migration. Some countries are reproached with not showing enough solidarity, while Germany is condemned for its moralising approach. There's a strong tendency to interpret conflicts about really important

and substantial issues in terms of national stereotypes. We can see from Euro-Barometer surveys that, in countries such as Greece, Portugal and Spain, national identity or attachment grew, while attachment to the EU diminished. In the migration debate, this has repeated itself in the Visegrad states.

Nevertheless you claim that the internet is tailor-made for European democracy. Why?

The internet is a borderless space for communication. Before the internet, media such as newspapers and radio were strongly bound to national borders and national public opinion. For the first time, the internet offers us a space that can function independently of national borders. The internet's very structure and technology provide favourable conditions for a form of transnational communication. Many people have recurrently said that Europe needs its own public sphere and a European medium. There have been attempts along these lines in the traditional media, for example, Euronews and Arte. They leave a lot to be desired. No comparable venture has been tried in digital space, however, as far as I'm aware.

Are there any examples of this? Come to think of it, the global network of right-wing populists has taken it furthest so far…

Absolutely. I would even argue that, to date, right-wing populists have come closest to creating a European public sphere. Some civil society actors have managed it on single issues. There was large-scale mobilisation against TTIP. There has also been a major mobilisation on the reform of EU copyright law. In Europe, too, interest groups manage to mobilise on particular issues. But right-wing populism has also succeeded – on a big scale.

We saw this in the debate on the UN Migration Pact. A real wave of communication sloshed through various European countries. It started in Austria, where the right-wing populist alternative media pounded its drums against the pact. Then it went mainstream via Germany's right-wing populist media. As I said, European right-wing populists have at times come very close to forming a European public sphere. They have become adept at exploiting digital communication structures to their advantage.

What about traditional parties and institutions?

Established and institutional actors, such as traditional political parties, have behaved very differently. Hitherto they have rather neglected the internet. They tend to regard it as just one more option that they would rather not have to bother with. They prefer

traditional media, to which they still have institutionalised access. Think of Germany's federal press conferences. You can also see at the European level that established actors, including the European institutions, have been asleep. Right-wing populists are already far ahead.

Is one of the main reasons for Europe's emerging nationalism really just poor communication, then?

I would rather say that criticisms of and unease with the European institutions also arise because we do not have a European communication space. In practical terms, the European institutions are not very approachable. Digital technology could make it much easier. But little use has been made of the available options so far. That's one reason why discontent with the European institutions has grown. For most people, the EU is rather remote. No serious effort has been made to overcome this distance using digital communication options. That's a mistake.

On the other hand, right-wing populists have made skilful use of the different possibilities for communicating. They've developed a strong presence in digital space. They disseminate their narratives, directed against the EU institutions, very effectively. Positive, pro-European narratives, by contrast, are lacking.

One of the EU's key legitimacy deficits stems from its market-friendly economic and social policy. What could the creation of a digital European public sphere really do in such areas, apart from better PR?

It's not about PR. It wouldn't really help to set up a kind of European state radio either. What we really need is a European space for communication. That also means providing a space in which people can voice criticisms of European policies, for instance the lack of a social dimension in the European Union. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as first and foremost a space in which political consensus-building can take place. Where the exercise of power can be monitored but also legitimised. First of all, we need to develop a European discourse and consensus-building. Then we can think about monitoring political decision-making, but also legitimation.

As things stand, national public opinion can certainly question the legitimacy of European decision-making. One example is Viktor Orbán's disregard of ECJ rulings on the allocation of refugees among EU member states. The European institutions have no voice in Hungarian public debate.

If one understands the public sphere along Habermasian lines it's

essential that all actors – citizens, but also institutions and those exercising political power – have access to a European communication space. I don't believe we'll ever be able to establish a real European democracy without a European space for communication.

But isn't that just another project that primarily addresses urban, well-educated and mobile segments of society? How can we ensure that precisely those who regard themselves as losing out from European integration really participate and take advantage of their opportunities?

I propose that all Europeans should be involved in developing such a platform. That's how the technology sector develops new products. It's completely different from the origins of the European Union, which has developed in a very top-down fashion. I would start by asking potential users what kind of content and functionality they want from such a platform, so that they would use it.

I'm convinced that you need a digital platform like this to make it easier for those people to get more involved who, so far, haven't benefited much from European integration. You're absolutely right: at present, it's mainly well-educated and mobile people who benefit from the European Union. Something that should benefit everyone is freedom of movement. But if, for example, you're a 16 year-old student looking for a summer job in another EU member state, you don't have much chance of finding one. One way of helping people who really want to exercise their right to freedom of movement would be to advertise jobs from all over Europe on a single platform and to translate job descriptions into every community language. A platform like that would be extremely useful.

Digitalisation, which promotes simplification and the use of soundbites, is almost tailor-made for populists. It's not such a congenial environment for sophisticated debate. Issues related to Europe's further development can't really be packaged into slogans. What makes you so optimistic that a European digital network could face down populism?

Populists flourish in digital spaces also because of an affinity between how algorithms work on social media platforms and how populists communicate. These algorithms are basically designed for provocation, simplification and polarisation. This is exactly how populist messages function. Social media platforms need them to generate more and more attention among users. Ultimately, that's their business model. Arousing people's attention produces interaction – clicks, in one word. People get hooked and generate

masses of data for social networks. These platforms then exploit this data to target advertising on users. In short, the economics of private digital platforms and the ways in which populists communicate and conduct politics are aligned.

And could a European platform break free from this pattern?

We could break free if we created a publically financed platform. In that way, we could develop algorithms with a public-interest orientation. In other words, we could create a digital media system along the lines of traditional media. There, too, private media and public-service media operate alongside one another. Of course the private media are much more subject to economic exigencies than the public-service media. That's why we see a clear difference between the political reporting of the two media forms.

I just wonder why we've allowed the public sphere in the digital realm to be completely privatised by Facebook, Google and other tech giants. Why are there no public-service platforms in parallel with the private platforms, along the lines of traditional media? Digitalisation seems to have locked the public out of the public sphere. We have to counteract this by setting up public platforms alongside private ones. That would enable us to organise communication and political debate in accordance with democratic rules. We would not be enslaved to economic imperatives like private platforms.

Would such an alternative to Facebook and Google break these giants' market power?

Naturally, you can only compete with Facebook and other platforms if you offer users something better. A public-service platform would not be financed by exploiting user data. That's a major advantage. More and more people are getting worried about this data exploitation. It's also evident that companies such as Facebook are not letting up. If anything they are becoming more aggressive. A public-service platform has the big advantage that it's not dependent on data to make it viable. This way, users can take back control of their own data.

Another proposal is the creation of a European news or a European entertainment and cultural provision on such a platform.

Something like the 'House of Cards' set in Brussels you talked about?

Exactly. We can already see Europe's cultural diversity in the entertainment and cultural domain. Germans, for example, love Scandinavian drama series; they are shown on Arte and sometimes on

ARD and ZDF. What we don't have, however, is something like European cultural unity in the form of joint European productions. Something like a 'House of Cards' set in Brussels could transpose a specifically European culture into a TV series with stories about various Europeans living in the same city. Another idea is a series about Interrail. A European cooking show also comes to my mind.

In other words, depicting not only the coexistence of different national cultures but also what a common European culture looks like. That's something new such a platform or cultural offer on such a platform might be able to provide.

With regard to funding you've mentioned the digital levy that's currently debated. Are there any alternatives?

Another possible source of funding is the current budgets of national broadcasters. In fact, my idea is that the whole thing could emanate from the European Broadcasting Union. This brings together all the national broadcasters. That's the right place to discuss such a publicly funded platform. It would also be more economical if national broadcasters agreed to work together more. If there was more cooperation at European level, with less emphasis on parallel national structures, there would be financial leeway to develop a common platform.

You talked about a bottom-up strategy. Who specifically could take the initiative?

I think that it always makes sense for individual countries to take the lead. Within the framework of the European Broadcasting Union that could be Germany and France. But it's also important that this does not come from governments. When it comes to the media and reporting on European politics, an independent structure is crucial. Otherwise there would be complaints about EU propaganda. Independent content has to be the greatest asset of such a platform.

The interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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