

Editorial

The Digital Agora of Social Media: Introduction

In ancient Greece, *agora* was the assembly of freemen within a community—a physical district in an urban settlement in which political, religious, and economic interactions took place (Kolb, 2006). Within the context of our modern-day digital environment, we perceive *agora* as the multiple spaces in which Internet users can relatively freely discuss various topics related to socio-political domains of society. These communication spaces are a part of social media; i.e., the “group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow for the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

Social media is both changing our habits regarding communication in public about private matters and shaping our understanding of public matters, such as news issues and, more generally, the dynamics of societal conditions. In the recent literature, several authors have addressed the issue of participation in both professional media and social media, describing the various and complex ways of participation used for different objectives (see, for example, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Chovanec and Dynel, 2015; Frobenius, Eisenlauer, and Gerhardt, 2014; Thornborrow, 2015). The nature of participation in this contemporary digital agora fundamentally differs from the participation in the public sphere before the Internet and before professional broadcast media went online. Their audiences are similarly heterogeneous, representing a broad range of backgrounds, interests and viewpoints. Thus, their concerns regarding moral or ethical stances, social goals and values vary considerably. Yet, unlike their predecessors, today’s fragmented social media audiences are also *networked* publics whose “network ties [are] made explicit” and in which information is distributed and negotiated “mainly in a conversational mode” (Schmidt 2014, p. 4). At the same time, Internet users have a much greater capacity to access, select and display information “according to personal relevance” (ibid.). A further important difference to traditional media participation is that the heterogeneous backgrounds of Internet users tend to have an immediate impact on their digital encounters: Participation is highly individualized and affective, very often taking a negative orientation (Papacharissi, 2015). According to Papacharissi (2014, p. 110), many Internet users express civic cynicism, distrust, and frustration. The lack of real-life influence and accountability seems to have made the present-

day digital agora a site of conflict rather than a place to solve societal matters. In light of this reality, the current special issue investigates the diversity of the digital agora and how its public discussions take place.

The online spaces named here as digital agora are spaces of public discussion that do not necessarily have political influence or power since they lack a connection to political and societal institutions. The connectedness of various forms of public and political discourses both offline and online has been examined in recent research—creating, for instance, a research agenda on follow-ups as communicative acts that accept, challenge, or negotiate prior acts (Fetzer, Weizman and Berlin, 2015; Weizman and Fetzer 2015). Social media provides a variety of ever-changing, dynamic communication spaces that serve as interfaces between online and offline public debates, events and broader social life. Social media thus transforms the roles of actors in public communication; for example, it may bring together professional institutional players, including journalists and users, in shared online spaces. In response to this change, professional journalists are forced to position themselves in new ways in public communication spaces, as official public journalism appears to be losing its gate-keeper role. In addition, ordinary Internet users occupy a new position in public sociopolitical discourse, as they are now ratified participants who can position themselves in different ways in relation to journalists/journalism and mainstream media. This transformation of roles and spaces has affected the selection of which political and social issues become the subjects of public debates, as well as the manner in which these issues are discussed and debated in terms of broader cultural and social norms and models. Thus, the emphasis of this special issue lies on new forms of digital sociopolitical participation that have developed within a dynamic landscape of newly emerging online genres and subgenres.

Digital Agora: from traditional to polymedia

This special issue discusses how both the professional media and social media are increasingly enhancing and connecting new ways of sociopolitical participation, allowing users to diversify their interactional practices in line with their communicative goals and their need to express their opinions. The articles focus on two online genres within which sociopolitical discussion takes place: forum discussions and Twitter. Both genres have been found to share a “bridging function”: They are situated at the intersection between

mainstream media content and its top-down commenting and the formation and distribution of opinions of the broader and networked public.

Forum discussions belong to the most traditional online spaces that date back into the early days of technologically mediated communication in the 1990s. Although they may be used by participants for a variety of purposes, such as sharing information, giving advice, and presenting opinions, forum discussions have become an important space for public discourse on a wide range of topics, especially online political discourse (Lehti and Kallio; Weizman and Dori-Hacohen; this issue). Yet, in forum discussions, the link between user-generated content and news coverage by the professional media is rather indirect: Although the forums serve to highlight ordinary persons' perspectives on news events (Johansson, this issue) and have become sites for voicing political and societal problems "from below" (Fetzer, 2013), often echoing official mainstream media coverage (Kleinke and Avcu, Lehti and Kallio, this issue), online forum discussions are not part of the actual news reporting of the professional media. Furthermore, their heterogeneous patterns of participation and the mostly face-sensitive topics of political online discussions enhance disagreement, confrontation, derogatory language, deliberate misunderstandings, and provocation (Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Johansson; Kleinke and Avcu; Weizman and Dori-Hacohen, this issue).

Twitter, a micro-blogging site launched in 2006, can be described as a global news and political conversation hub, streaming news and people's reactions to events from different domains of life (politics, sports, disasters, etc.) around the world (Giaxoglou, this issue). According to Hermida (2014, p. 360), Twitter is an ambient news network, disseminating and receiving "material from [journalists and the mainstream media] ... [as well as] ... short fragments of information from sources outside the formal structures of journalism, creating social awareness streams that provide a constantly updated, live representation of the experiences, interests, and opinions of users." Unlike discussion forums, however, Twitter allows for nonreciprocal patterns of participation systematically, rendering interaction even more fragmented: "One user can follow the broadcast of another without that user following in return" (Draucker 2015, p. 52). Despite the fact that Twitter is not directly attached to one specific media provider, its interactional framework perfectly matches the new instantaneous, intertextual, transmedial and vernacular modes of sharing and storytelling formats of news coverage (Giaxoglou, this issue). The characteristics of Twitter feed into the digital agora at least in two ways relevant to this issue: Firstly, its instantaneous mode of interaction allows for new forms of collective story-telling that reflect and create news content (Maireder and

Ausserhofer 2014; Giaxoglou, this issue). Secondly, Twitter also accompanies mainstream TV formats such as social TV, which is based on the idea of TV forums opening up political discussions to ordinary viewers (see Atifi and Marcoccia, this issue). Here, Twitter creates at least a potential framework for true interactions between politicians taking center stage in political TV programs and the tweeting audience of the show, potentially representing the broader public. Thus, when social TV meets political discussion, it takes on a kind of hybrid format at the intersection of TV forums and online political participation.

It goes without saying that these dramatic changes in patterns of public participation have also had an impact on mainstream media actions. Online newspapers have not only opened up multimedia news sites, but their reporting is increasingly shaped by these online spaces (Miscione and Landert, this issue). As a result of this change, journalistic and publishing practices have changed radically. Journalism has become liquid, as it is increasingly driven by the interests of individual readers (Deuze, 2006, 2008). The online context not only allows users to consume the news according to their own interests and needs (ibid.). In addition, media outlets can feed news content immediately into social media and information-sharing platforms and websites, such as Twitter and Wikileaks, and thus address global audiences directly, inviting users to post their opinions, which creates yet another level of new forms of public participation. Such patterns of sometimes immediate online participation of social media users force the mainstream media to draw on new forms of data-journalism and citizen-journalism, raising new questions as to how user-provided data are incorporated into mainstream and professional journalistic work (Miscione and Landert, this issue).

Presentation of the articles

This special issue brings together papers presented in a panel session at the 14th International Pragmatics Conference in Antwerp (July 2015) and one paper presented at the 1st International Conference on Approaches to Digital Discourse Analysis in Valencia (November 2015). The digital agora presented in this special issue is linked to the following journalistic and professional media outlets: *The Guardian* (UK), *The Times* (UK) *Le Monde* (France), *France 2*, the *Washington Post* (US), NRG (Israel), the BBC (UK), and nine different newspapers from Finland, including the country's most read *Helsingin Sanomat*. Thus the articles of this issue deal with online discussions in British and American English,

French, Hebrew, and Finnish and comment on a range of news events, such as the US presidential elections in 2008, Wikileaks, and Eurotalks during the Greek Crisis in 2015.

The articles utilize theoretical and methodological frameworks of computer-mediated communication, computer-mediated discourse analysis, digital discourse analysis, pragmatics of political discourse, media analysis, and argumentation analysis. The authors investigate, at the linguistic level, how messages are constructed, what their functions are, and how users share and articulate their views. They all address different aspects of the digital agora in specific ways, characterizing it in different sociocultural contexts.

In her study of news discussion forums as social interactions in a digital context, **Marjut Johansson** analyzes a type of everyday public discourse that originates from news readers' private sphere and thus focuses on a concrete intersection of readers' and journalistic views on news events. Her theoretically oriented paper discusses news discussion forums from three perspectives. Firstly, viewing news discussion forums as part of a *genre pair* (Johansson, 2015), in which the comment section is a dependent genre, it considers news discussions as public vernacular discourse. Secondly, it characterizes news discussions as content-based and knowledge-building social interactions. Finally, the author focuses on how users refer to their sources of knowledge in their posts and discusses examples from a case study of a discussion related to an editorial on the online news discussion forum for the French national newspaper *Le Monde* for illustration.

In their study of the changing role of journalists after Wikileaks and Snowden, **Gianluca Miscione** and **Daniela Landert** examine how journalistic practice is impacted by individuals leaking newsworthy information online without having to rely on journalists as intermediaries. Their analysis focuses on the British *Guardian* and examines the way leaked data are provided on *The Guardian* website, how readers are invited to interact with these data, and how journalists present their own activities in this process. Furthermore, a detailed content analysis of the leading articles reveals how the stories are framed and how much prominence is given to the leaked data and to the various actors in both instances. In the context of Wikileaks and other forms of online whistleblowing, the results of their study show how the roles of professional journalists have changed from gate-keepers controlling what and how much information is passed on to the general public to data management,

interpretation, contextualization, and interpretation of data leaked onto the Internet by individual users.

In her article, **Korina Giaxoglou** examines a Twitter leak posted by a professional journalist on his feed related to *The Guardian*'s coverage of Eurotalks during the Greek Crisis in 2015. She investigates the leaked story of the so-called Moscovici Draft and how this story was shared as a breaking news story. Her analytic approach examines the Twitter leak on two levels: the individual tweets and the sequence they form. By scrutinizing the informal style of a selection of the tweets she illuminates how the audience is not only networked and knowledgeable, but also motivated to react affectively to this topic. The paper sums up different features relevant to Twitter stories, such as instantaneity and recency, emergent and cumulative patterning, and orientation to polymedia audiences (Madianou and Miller, 2012).

Hassan Atifi and **Michel Marcoccia** investigate social TV as a new agora in their study on the role of viewers' tweets in French political TV programs. Social TV is characterized as a transmedia way of communication that hybridizes television and the Internet. The analysis, focused on the pragmatic functions of the tweets in question, is based on theoretical and methodological frameworks that build on computer-mediated discourse analysis and the pragmatics of computer-mediated communication, as well as on the pragmatics of political discourse in the media. The authors consider both the production and reception formats of the messages as well as the functions of the tweets. By categorizing tweets according to the types of acts performed in the tweets, the different roles taken on by the Tweeters becomes evident: expressive and evaluative acts are undertaken by the *citizen as judge* (evaluator), challenging and summoning acts *citizen as activist*, and analyzing and decoding acts by *citizen as analyst*.

In their study on comment sections following opinion editorials (op-eds), **Elda Weizman** and **Gonen Dori-Hacohen** compare the face work in two comment sections in two different languages: the *Washington Post* (American English) and NRG (Hebrew). Altogether, they analyze 495 comments, building a coding scheme based on the rhetorical notions of *logos* and *ethos* with which they analyze the object of criticism and the degree of threat to negative face. In their quantitative analysis, Weizman and Dori-Hacohen show that comments criticizing the legitimacy of the columnist are more frequent in the Hebrew language material (NRG) than in the American English data (the *Washington Post*), suggesting that the NRG comment section features stronger face-threatening than that of the *Washington Post*. In

terms of the use of irony, they show that there are no quantitative differences between the two sets of material. However, the complexity in the use of irony overall in face work opens many avenues for future research.

Sonja Kleinke and **Elif Avcu** present a study of long-term intercultural ethnic conflicts in public online forum discussions in the context of British immigration policy. Their study shows how private non-elite participants use the digital space to voice their opinions on a highly controversial topic and how the digital communication space enables public intercultural encounters in which participants express their positioning toward their respective cultural groups. With the notions of identification and *topoi* derived from critical discourse analysis, they examine the linguistic strategies with which the participants of these online forums construct minority/majority identities for themselves and for others. The study investigates comments related to immigration on the BBC's message board "Have Your Say" and on the discussion forum UKDebate and shows that membership in the ethnic majority in Britain is mostly expressed in an implicit manner, e.g., with zero-nomination and with a rather indefinite use of the pronoun *we*. In contrast, membership in a minority is expressed with explicit techniques of self-nomination, such as providing biographical information. In addition, the study considers the participants' positioning vis-à-vis mainstream media and reveals how mainstream media content and practices are criticized by participants from both majority and minority groups.

Finally, **Lotta Lehti** and **Johanna Kallio** study two aspects of our digital agora related to news discussion forums: opinions in participatory journalism as patterns of argumentation and their relationship to patterns of participation. Their case study examines how users in nine comment threads of news sites discuss a news item related to social workers' opinions concerning the causes of poverty in four Nordic countries—a social policy study harshly simplified by the press as concluding that Finnish social workers are rude. Lehti and Kallio's analysis concentrates on three argument schemes justifying this conclusion: personal experience, irresponsibility of social office clients and Finnish temperament. The high frequency of postings alluding to personal experience indicates an increased participation by recipients of social allowance, a minority that has traditionally kept silent in public discourse. On the other hand, the lack of "argument from authority" suggests that experts in the field actually do not participate in the discussions. These findings highlight the role of journalists in establishing a framework for the formation of public opinion in online discussions.

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