

The Shaping of the Public Opinion: Social Media between Populism and Convivialism. A Comparative Study of Austria, Sweden, and the UK [†]

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[†] Presented at the IS4SI 2017 Summit DIGITALISATION FOR A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY, Gothenburg, Sweden, 12–16 June 2017.

Published: 8 June 2017

Abstract: Social, political and economic features of Austria as well as Sweden and the United Kingdom show similarities such that they can be examined in parallel and compared. Cultural differences in these countries are transmitted in a variety of situation, but they do not necessarily refer to the same social distinctions. Moreover, our observation of common features among these three countries will target the rise of right-wing political parties, invoked by the “crises” from Middle East. Furthermore this study aims to observe the reaction of the citizens of these three countries respectively, the sympathizers as well as those who disagree with such populist proclamations. Such social and cultural issues arise attention and, at the same time call upon the empirical focus in anthropological studies. We are suggesting this parallel examination with regard to the anthropological science and its methods that will help to carry out our research. This research will contribute results with a critical discourse analysis in combination with empirical research methods and analysis.

Keywords: social media; populism; public opinion; Austria; Sweden; UK; convivialism; right wing

1. Introduction

We are currently facing a rather unstable era within Europe. Recent events that take place on a global scale, such as conflicts in Middle East, disintegration of the European Union, political debates and the rise of right-wing in politics are challenging political institutions as well as beliefs that until recent past seemed to be solid and secure. Some of these challenges are questioning issues such as crossing borders, international migration and national security. These problems are widely represented in our society and one can no longer ignore them. At the same time, the rapid increase of social media's usage is becoming more and more significant, especially currently that its content seems to be overflowed by a huge amount of terms such as “crisis” and “conflict”. This content has the ability to shape our opinion about current issues in society. By enforcing such emotionally loaded terms, content on social media becomes a powerful tool in creating public opinion. Therefore, it is imperative—now more than ever—to examine people's behaviour on social media, mainly on Facebook, as Facebook has become a regulated medium.

This research focuses on Austria, Sweden and the UK with the ambition to answer how social media shape the public opinion in these countries. Within social media we will consider Facebook content posted by two streams, namely the populists on the one side and the self-organized institutions and movements on the other side. Populist oriented right-wing parties we aim to observe are Facebook profiles of right-wing parties leader's in above mentioned countries, namely Heinz-Christian Strache from the Freedom Party of Austria, Jimmie Åkesson from Swedish Democrats, and

Nigel Farage from party UK Independence Party. On the other hand, there are opponents to this anti-migrant and anti-EU politics organized in various non-governmental or self-organized groups, extensively less represented, almost invisible, such as, for example, DiEM25 on international level. This organisation suggest abandoning “us” and “them” distinction and reaching towards the meta-level of global consciousness. In other words, this approach is promoting inclusion rather than exclusion. Although it is extensively less represented, this other side is nevertheless important and crucial for creating a critical public opinion.

We recognize this imbalance between these two main streams and cope with it as a possible problematic in the ongoing social and political debates in Europe. Our research aims to address this current problem as well as to suggest possible solutions in re-creating the balance that is needed. Our argument is that this balance is needed in order to create a better and peaceful image of European society and less represented groups to be included. With this research we aim to apply the most relevant methods that will enable us to tender the balance between the two streams, to prototype “us” and “them”, and to suggest a solution for an improved and harmonious society applying proposed theories of meta-reflexives and convivialism.

The main contribution of this research is to reevaluate public opinion on social media, predominantly shaped by populist representors, and to suggest a discourse in the sense of convivialist movements that aim for a better and peaceful future of contemporary societies.

Therefore our research question is the following:

How does the content used and constructed on social media, influence and shape the public opinion in Austria, Sweden and the UK, in times of political and social changes?

That these two phenomena, namely changes in political and social landscape and the public opinion on social media are intertwined is confirmed by many scholars [1–3].

2. Methods

The project combines two sets of methods, namely empirical and analytical methods. Empirical methods we will use in this research are: participant observation that include semi-structured interviews. Analytical method is critical discourse analysis.

2.1. Participant Observation

Participant observation, is a method where a researcher is “participating in everyday life and becoming well known to the informants” [4]. Firstly, we will gain access to the official Facebook profiles of three above mentioned right-wing leaders. Secondly, we will access the official Facebook profiles of European movement DiEM25.

We will conduct participant observation online by observing and if necessary participating (commenting) in online discussions and debates that are taking place on chosen Facebook accounts. Since we are researching public opinion, the primary data for our analysis will be comments and discussions on posted and shared content. We will collect our primary data by using Software Tool NVivo. We will use NVivo because it supports qualitative and mixed methods research. It’s designed to help you organize, analyse and find insights in unstructured or qualitative data like: interviews, opened survey responses, articles, social media and web content [5].

2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA aims at revealing the relationship between language, society, ideology and power. It extends beyond a mere linguistic analysis that often excludes socio-political contexts and provides an ideological-critical reflection of texts (re)production [6–8].

In this project, CDA will be utilised in order to examine how politicians’ discourses construct people’s beliefs in a political, social and economic context of generalised crisis. Emphasis will be given to the words and metaphors politicians utilise in their Facebook accounts in order to impose their values and dominant ideologies to those who are less powerful. In this way, we will understand how they construct and distribute their dominant discourses in order to prevail in society. At the same

time, a closer look will be given at the comments produced and disseminated by anti-migrant and anti-EU Facebook groups, so as to realise the ways in which counter-power is created and opposes to dominant ideologies in an unstable environment, like the current one in Europe.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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