EUROPEAN
POLICYBRIEF

REINVENTING DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE: YOUTH DOING POLITICS IN TIMES OF INCREASING INEQUALITIES

Youth Doing Politics in Social Media

FEBRUARY 2020

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief builds on the findings of a social media study that has been conducted within the framework of EURYKA's **WP7**. It investigated young people's ways of doing politics online and the impact of inequalities on this, by exploring the use young people make of social media (Twitter) and how digital participation and representation may (or may not) provide the seeds for reinvigorating democracy in Europe.

The coordinated study has been carried out in the nine countries participating in the project (France, Italy, the UK, Germany, Poland, Greece, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland). The goal was to see how young people in these nine different countries participate and interact in the public debates around two important issues: the climate crisis and feminism. In order to make data retrieval operational, two case studies were selected: Twitter debates on #ClimateStrike (a global movement, studied at the country/language area level) and the local campaigns or movements on feminism taking place in each country/language area.

The partners agreed upon the most relevant hashtags for both topics (carefully searching for equivalents in each country). The tweets were retrieved using Kalium, a tool developed by Eurecat that allows one to efficiently and flexibly manage the tracking of social network data in real-time. This system was used to retrieve information from the Twitter streaming API[1], monitoring the hashtags identified as relevant for each country. Data about Twitter users found in the tweets (authors, mentioned, and retweeted) were then anonymised,

---

[1] See https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/tweets/filter-realtime/api-reference/post-statuses-filter

processed and enriched with additional demographic information, namely gender, age range and geographic location. The gender and age range of users were estimated using the state of the art library M3Inference.[2] The tool relies on a deep learning model trained on multilingual data to infer gender and age range of users based on the user name, the short bio text and the profile picture of the user. In addition, the tool also infers whether a user account is a personal account or corresponds to an organization. The tool returns estimations as the probability of a user to belonging to a given class (male/female, age range, organization/not organization).

Retrieved data include all the tweets posted between July 12th and September 30th, 2019, which contain at least one of the agreed-upon hashtags. This period is especially relevant for the #ClimateStrike movement that organized massive global strikes and demonstrations between September 20th and 27th. In this regard, our dataset contains the process of the formation and growth this movement over two months, including the preparation and the celebration of the strikes and demonstrations in the last week of September 2019.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Main findings of the social media study: the importance of differences

Country differences

- The study shows considerable differences in the use of Twitter by young people in different countries. This can account for the importance of the cultural context, in which the appropriation of this social media by the youth is inscribed.

- The big size of the networks created for the UK may be interpreted in light of high levels of Twitter activity in the country and of engagement in social movements, together with the fact that the language of the country corresponds to the global language of the movements, so the criterion used for generating the UK dataset, i.e. tracking global hashtags and then considering conversations involving at least one user located in the UK, has resulted in big datasets in both cases, and especially in the case of the climate strike movement.

- The Swiss networks, which were created in the same way, are also of considerable size in comparison with the limited population of the country, highlighting a high presence on Twitter and high participation with global hashtags also in Switzerland, especially in the climate strike movement.

- Smaller networks were obtained in the Polish and Greek cases, suggesting lower online participation, although it is possible that some conversations were missed due to additional local hashtags that we were not tracking.

Age differences

- In general terms, our results show that young people tend to be less central in the Twitter networks. Older cohorts were much more active compared to younger ones.

---

[2] See https://github.com/euagendas/m3inference

- Specific age differences were found regarding the degree of centrality of female tweets on feminism. In the case of Spain, for instance, the youngest women were much more central than the oldest women.

Gender differences

- The gender composition points out a higher presence of men in the conversations; interestingly, this result also holds, although to a lesser extent, for the case of feminism, a topic on which one could expect women to be more active. Italy and Spain present a different scenario: the presence of women is higher in the case of feminism and comparable to the presence of men in the case of climate change (only slightly lower). The presence of women is comparable to the presence of men in the conversations on Feminism in the UK and Switzerland networks.

- As a general trend, we observe a higher level of homophily (in this case the tendency to favour interactions with users of the same gender) for women, in line with previous literature. This is true in particular in the French, German, Italian, UK and Swedish networks, where homophily is generally quite high for women, and lower for men. Interestingly, in the countries where the presence of women is higher, and where they get to be a majority in the conversations on Feminism (Italy and Spain) the homophily among men and women is comparable and close to neutral. In the Spanish conversation networks on Feminism, men are a minority and tend to have a higher homophily.

- The analysis of inequalities by gender unveils that men are not only a majority in most networks on Climate Change, but tend also to be more active and central in these conversations, with the exception of Spain and Italy. In the networks built for Feminism, instead, women are often less active in terms of number of tweets, but equally or more central than men in the networks of mentions and retweets; this is the case for most countries, and specially marked for Spain, where women's centrality overcome men's centrality by a big margin.

Main contributions and challenges

The main value of the work developed in WP7 is that of proposing a data collection and analysis methodology for a cross-country study covering nine European countries, and creating datasets and results for each country.

This has implied a special effort for accounting for the intrinsic differences between the scenarios of the different countries, and the issues associated with special cases. We had to define special strategies to deal with countries that cannot be identified with a language, such as the UK, with English spoken at a global level, or Spain, with Spanish widely spoken in many Latin American countries, or Switzerland where various languages are spoken, overlapping with other countries. In these cases, the ability to detect the country from the user location indicated by the users was essential in order to filter messages and users by country. We also had issues with Greece, for which due to low level of activity in Twitter it

was hard to retrieve a sufficient amount of data, and different criteria were combined to create the dataset.

Another critical point was that of developing a demographic analysis of inequalities, without any demographic metadata being explicitly associated to the users (due to Twitter internal policies regarding access to personal data). In fact, social media analysis was limited to Twitter and did not include Facebook (as initially planned) because of the impossibility of reaching any personal data from this last social media. The ability to infer demographic data for each Twitter account through the methods presented above was fundamental to allow for a deeper analysis of inequalities across countries. Even so, the results for age differences are less representative, as age range could be inferred with sufficient accuracy only for a minority of users, so the underlying patterns may remain in part uncaptured.

As stated above, we chose to focus on two relevant demographic variables (namely age and gender) and two main metrics quantifying activity and centrality (namely the number of tweets and the in-degree in the interaction networks, respectively). Notwithstanding the challenging and huge investment of effort to analyse this specific data, data regarding other variables were also retrieved: on the one hand, metrics of individual relevance or centrality that were computed for each user, such as pagerank, outdegree or k-index in the interaction networks; on the other hand, user attributes retrieved or inferred for each user, such as being an organization or not (as estimated through the m3inference library for inferring demographic information), seniority (based on the registration date or on the total number of tweets posted), influence in the social network, in terms of number of followers, growth in the number of followers during our observation period, geographic location. All of these variables are included in the datasets generated with this document, and may be leveraged for extending the results presented here with further analyses.

We believe that a geographic analysis could be particularly relevant for assessing to what extent the debate within a country may be centralized in big cities, in urban areas, or in specific regions. This kind of analysis would be possible with the datasets we have produced, that includes a mapping of user self-reported locations to countries and cities, providing homogeneous locations.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- It appears to be very important to **address differences between countries** regarding the uses of Twitter **as a space for political participation of young people.**

- It is necessary to **go deeper into the processes that are generated around the use of social media by young people**. Paying attention to these processes implies taking a closer look at the languages, the topics of interest of the young people themselves (instead of looking for the voice of the young people and their positioning regarding the issues defined by the public-adult agenda in each country).

- It is necessary to **change the policies for promoting the online participation of young people**. Rather than investing in technological innovations, more effort must be invested in reversing structural dynamics that limit participation opportunities to a mere issue of accessibility and technological literacy.

- The European Union should devote **greater attention to youth initiatives regarding their own way of claiming a place in the online public sphere**. This implies recognizing their ability to lead political debates on issues that not only concern them as specific generation, but that have a significance for the future and the transformation of society as a whole. This is true not only regarding specific issues such as climate change or feminism, but also addressing crucial aspects concerning the right of education, the right of accessing a good job or a minimum guaranteed living conditions regardless the nationality, the origin or the colour of the skin.

- Any policy that aims to promote the political participation of young people through social media must necessarily contemplate **geographic multi-scalarity**. It is important to **observe the opportunity to raise local actions to the field of global debate**, as well as the opportunity to **translate a global campaign into deliberative processes at the regional or local scales**.

- Any policy to promote the political participation of young people through social media must necessarily **address geographic inequalities regarding urban/rural scenarios**. Local authorities, especially in deprived rural areas, often do not have/provide enough resources to include/invigorate the voice of the youth.

- **EU policies on youth political participation should apply the gender perspective**. The Twitter study demonstrates how the voice of young women is acquiring centrality in public debates. The challenge is not to apply a mere quota policy in relation to the presence of young women in the deliberative online spaces, but to recognize the qualitative transformation of these spaces from the moment when women exercise their management. The key question here is to not just "let" young women participate, but to admit that a transversal management from a gender perspective can really open and transform the spaces of (online, networked) participation.

EURYKA is a cross-national research project which aims to provide systematic and practice-related knowledge about how inequalities mediate youth political participation in nine European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. EURYKA has three objectives:

▸ To provide systematic evidence on how inequalities are experienced and mediated by young people, exploring the coping mechanisms which are embedded in how they do politics. These coping mechanisms are manifested in multiple forms, i.e. as either political (dis)engagement and contestation online and offline or as (trans-) national democratic innovation and experimentation.

▸ To provide evidence on the conditions and causes underpinning youth political participation. This involves an examination of their values, expectations, and behaviours regarding democracy, power, politics, policymaking, social and political participation (online and offline).

▸ To make various, novel suggestions to strengthen democratic life in Europe, with particular emphasis on those that are more inclusive for young people – and especially those with fewer opportunities.

The project's methodology has three main components:
- A multidimensional theoretical framework that combines macro-level (institutional), meso-level (organizational), and micro-level (individual) factors for explaining youth experience of inequalities and the differential aspects of how young people do politics in Europe.
- A cross-national comparative design that includes nine European countries with different degrees of exposure to inequalities and different policy regimes.
- An integrated methodological approach based on multiple methods of analysis, such as:

Policy analysis: Tracking public policies and practices which promote youth participation and inclusion in the nine countries as well as at the EU level.

Political claims analysis: Studying how young people and their particular ways of doing politics are dealt with in the media, as well as the presence of organized youth in the public domain.

Organizational analysis: Investigating youth political participation by examining the networks and (youth-led) organizations that are active in the fields of youth inclusion, participation, national and transnational democratic innovation and experimentation.

Panel survey analysis: Conducting a panel survey in all the nine countries to collect information on young people's values, expectations, and behaviours regarding democracy, power, politics, policy-making.

Experimental analysis: Conducting survey experiments to capture young people's experience of inequalities and their support for social and political change to strengthen democratic life in Europe.

Biographical analysis: Conducting biographical interviews with young people to collect information on the individual trajectories of young people since their childhood and how inequalities impact young people's ways of doing politics.

Social media analysis: Investigating youth political participation online and the impact of inequalities on this by examining the use young people make of social media and how digital participation and representation may (or may not) provide the seeds for reinvigorating democracy in Europe.

PROJECT NAME
Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities (EURYKA)

COORDINATOR
Prof. Marco Giugni, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland, marco.giugni@unige.ch

CONSORTIUM
- European Alternatives, London, United Kingdom
- Sciences Po, Paris, France
- Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, Italy
- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain
- University of Crete, Rethymnon, Greece
- University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland
- University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom
- University of Siegen, Siegen, Germany
- University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland
- Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

FUNDING SCHEME
Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020), Societal Challenge 6 – Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies", call REV-INEQUAL-05-2016, topic: "Inequalities in the EU and their consequences for democracy, social cohesion and inclusion"

DURATION
February 2017 – January 2020 (36 months).

BUDGET
EU contribution: 2,595,720.00 €.

WEBSITE
www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/euryka/home

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Marco Giugni (University of Geneva), marco.giugni@unige.ch

Anna Clua (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), annacluai@uoc.edu

FURTHER READING
EURYKA Integrated Report on Youth Online Participation (Deliverable 7.2) prepared by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya project team (led by Anna Clua)

The full report can be found on the project website: https://unige.ch/sciences-societe/euryka/outputs/deliverables/

Disclaimer

The content of this policy brief does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the author.