Some Citizens Are Ill Informed and Lack Basic Knowledge of Politics. Should We Limit Their Right to Vote?

Maria CERNAT

Abstract: *This article tries to examine some of the anti-democratic messages that appeared in social media during the Romanian presidential campaign of 2014. My hypothesis is that the idea of limiting the right to vote gained the sympathy of the middle class – highly trained and remunerated individuals as a result of those messages disseminated during the 2014 presidential campaign. Namely, for the first time the electoral messages did not targeted only a political candidate but also his voters who were supposedly old, poor, ill-informed, dependent of social aid and prone to sacrifice their political power for material benefits. In the first part of my article I shall focus on the way the new media are shaping the political competition trying to find out whether these media are indeed alternative media fostering rational political debate and encouraging political engagement. In the second part of my article I shall focus on some of the onlineanti-democratic messages that were distributed during the first and the second round of the presidential elections. In the third part of the article I shall present the result of an empirical research composed of the semi-structured interviews I conducted having as subjects people working in the IT field. The theme of my interviews was the possibility of limitation of the right to vote.*

Keywords: *anti-democratic messages, social media, presidential campaign, political debate.*

Introduction

As in many cases the techno-logical tools are invested with powers beyond their actual reach. Social media are no exception to this rule. As professor Tim Wu[1] is showing, every time a new communication technology was invented its appea-rance generated waves of enthusiasm. The case of the mass-media is especially representative of this type of reaction. Once the telegraph, the radio or the television were made available to the public these techno-logies were invested with the power of literally changing the world for the better. But the history of the media proved those enthusiasts wrong.

The brave new world of the social media

Every time a new technological tool of mass communication was discovered the scientists behind the discovery did not have de capacity of making it available for the general public. Generally they turned it over to state institutions or to private corporations. Those were inevitably the two important actors that stood between the scientist and the public. This is the thesis of Tim Wu who takes this simple observation and documents it with historical data that proves that every time a new information technology was made possible by the discovery of some genius the waves of enthusiasm were quickly followed by disappointment. The technological discovery is welcomed as a source of social progress but the hopes are almost always betrayed since the state institutions use it for political propaganda and the private corporations for gaining significant profits. The well-being of the public is almost never on the agenda of the important actors that take the scientific discovery and make it available for the general population.

The same pattern was followed in the case of the telegraph, the radio and the television. Of course, the Internet makes no exception to the rule. This new communication tool was invested with far bigger powers than it actually has. It was supposed:

- to bring people closer to political issues and political power;
- to fill the widening gap between the citizens and the political leaders;
- to facilitate political debate and political action;
- to empower citizens as they can become sources of mass-messages and "unprofessional journalists";
- to provide alternative ways of financing the press;
- to develop new forms of political uprising such as "digital activism";
- to facilitate make political activism more appealing.

A lot of scholars devoted their efforts in order to investigate whether these claims are true or not. The opinions are divided between media theorist that believe the Internet has a negative effect on political engagement since it is mainly used for entertainment and theorists who believe that the Internet has a positive effect since it facilitates political action. In 2009 Shelley Boulianne conducted a meta-analysis of the Internet and its effects on political engagement. She identified 166 possible effects of the use of the Internet and analysed 38 scholarly surveys of those effects. Her results did not validate or invalidate her hypothesis. The conclusion of this research is that the Internet has positive effects on political engagement but those effects are not significantly greater than the negative ones: "In sum, this meta-analysis suggests that the effects of the Internet use on engagement are positive, but does not establish that these effects are substantial"[2].

Although there are scholars who tend to believe that "we are entering another important turning point not just in communication technologies, but in social structure and identity formation that affects the behaviours of audiences"[3] I consider that the Internet has little or no effect in generating the long praised public sphere fostering critical debate on political issues. As I tried to show elsewhere, technology cannot lead to social progress by itself[4] and therefore those claims seem closer to the wishful thinking than to the political reality. I shall examine those claims one by one in order to see the mechanisms that work against them. One of the most important theories about the way public opinion functions was elaborated by Noelle Newmann[5]. Her famous "spiral of silence" refers to the fact that media limit the freedom of expression instead of expanding it. From the beginning of the last century the media was supposed to function as a public arena where different points of view could be expressed and debated. But, as Newmann is proving there is a huge difference between *public* opinion and *published* opinion. The published opinion is perceived by the public as the *legitimate* and the *general* opinion. The ideal model of the public sphere where citizens express their points of view ignores in Newmann's opinion one basic characteristic of the public's predispositions: the tendency to conform to what we feel is the accepted opinion of the majority.

Fear of exclusion makes people refrain from expressing their opinion if they feel their point of view is contradictory with the socially accepted one.

The public's deep conviction is that the press expresses the "socially accepted" opinion of the majority. This is why we could end up with unexpected results of elections. People keep their opinions to themselves fearing the danger of social exclusion and creating a "spiral of silence". They vote for a radical candidate they did not have the courage to say they approve. The example of Vadim Tudor winning an unexpected 30% of the votes in 2000 is a classic example of the way the spiral of silence is functioning. Fear and desire to conform are two powerful elements that were neglected by those who believed that the media are able to promote criticism. Instead the main role of the *published* opinion is, in Newmann's view, is to offer social stability, cohesion and integration. Instead of fostering critical debate the media is imposing certain topics of discussion thus arbitrarily framing the social reality[6]. Although Noelle Newmann's study is a classical one it is still taken into consideration when different scholars try to assess the impact of the new media on the political engagement. In 2014, a public opinion survey was conducted by the public opinion research institution The Pew Research Center. This institution was founded in 1990 and since than it conducts public opinion polling,

demographic reasearch, content analysis, etc. The results of the survey proved that although the theory was proposed four decades ago, its hypothesis is still viable and could be tested on the online environment[7]. As stated earlier many media theorists believed that the Internet could be the perfect "public sphere" where people would have the courage to speak up their minds even if they feel their opinion is contradictory to the dominant one. The researchers conducted an opinion survey on a very controversial issue: the release of classified data by Edward Snowden. The reasons the researchers focused on this particular issue was the result of indecision of the public: some believed what Snowden did was treason while other believed it was his patriotic duty to inform the press about the abuses taking place in the NSA. Another survey conducted by Pew Research Center proved that "44% say the release of classified information harms the public interest while 49% said it serves the public interest"[8]. Although it was a very heated debate in the public sphere, the members of the public itself where less inclined to participate. Thus according to the data provided by the researchers

- "People were less willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA story in social media than they were in person. 86% of Americans were willing to have an in-person conversation about the sur-veillance program, but just 42% of Facebook and Twitter

users were willing to post about it on those platforms.

- Social media did not provide an alternative discussion platform for those who were not willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA story. Of the 14% of Americans un-willing to discuss the Snowden-NSA story in person with others, only 0.3% were willing to post about it on social media"[9].

Although many use the social media, taking a public stand on a controversial issue is not likely to occur. Perhaps it is the very nature of the issue investigated that is making people less open to the debate: if the NSA is monitoring every conver-sation people have in private, on their e-mails it is likely their public opi-nions expressed even using a virtual identity can be traced back to its original source, and thus, making the individual more vulnerable. The lack of proper regulations protecting the freedom of expression render the individual extremely vulnerable: even human resources departments can use the information released on the social media networks in the hiring process. The censorship process is far more devious in this case:

- It is self-censorship: the individual is refraining from taking a public position on a controversial issue since it can harm their job
- It is financial, rather than political censorship: people are afraid they can lose their job or find it difficult to find another one at

some point if they get too radical in the social media

As recent research is proving "only 15 percent of companies had policies in place that explicitly pro-hibited human resources department from using the sites as a hiring re-source"[10]. The lack of specific regu-lation preventing companies from using the data posted on the social media networks by their po-tential job candidates makes it dif-ficult for people to truly express their believes. As a recent survey conduc-ted by a job recruitment site[11] shows that 37% of the companies use the data posted on the social media net-works to pre-screen their candidates. So em-ployees no longer fear their political leaders, they fear their bosses, their potential bosses and the human resources departments. The systems of social control have shifted form the political to the financial sector. But this type of social control is accompanied by the fear of social exclusion. As the Pew Research Center is showing:

- "In both personal settings and online settings, people were more willing to share their views if they thought their audience agreed with them. For instance, at work, those who felt their coworkers agreed with their opi-nion were about three times more likely to say they would join a workplace conversation about the Snowden-NSA situation.

- Previous 'spiral of silence' fin-dings as to people's willingness to speak up in various settings

also apply to social media users. Those who use Facebook were more willing to share their views if they thought their followers agreed with them. If a person felt that people in their Facebook net-work agreed with their opinion about the Snowden-NSA issue, they were about twice as likely to join a discussion on Facebook about this issue"[12].

What this study shows is that there are important forms of social control that limit citizen's willingness to overtly express their point of view. Indeed, the social media offers them the possibility of becoming "unpro-fessional journalists", opinion-ma-kers. It appears the social media is a democratic media that offers citizens the privileged position that only a few professionals enjoyed before their appearance. But this is only a super-ficial view on the subject since they are not protected, as the Snowden scandal proved, against monitoring by some security agency or against monitoring form the hu-man resources departments. So, although it is nevertheless true citi-zens can assume journalistic duties and responsibilities they are not protected by the same laws and they certainly do not have the same rights. The law forbids a newspaper to fire a journalist as a result of its political views. The law guarantees the journalist the right to keep his sources secret. Although the citizens may have gained access to the mass-dissemination of informa-tion,

they do not enjoy the same liberties and rights.

Another important aspect is related to the fact that people can choose the type of information they are exposed to. Therefore, the frag-mentation of the audiences makes it even more difficult to convince someone with well-defined political views that they are wrong.

"For example, after the revelations in the news media that the Bush Administration's pre-war intelligence claims were ill-founded, the percentage of Republicans giving an affir-mative response when asked whether the US had found WMD in Iraq remained essentially unchanged, while at the same time the percentage of Democrats giving a "no WMD" response increased by about 30 per-centage points (Kull, Ramsey, & Lewis 2003). In short, the Republicans remained unaffected by a tidal wave of discrepant information"[13].

The "technological skepticism" in terms of the Internet having the power to encourage political engagement is also the result of a very interesting relation between the presence of the media and its credibility. It seems the more media is present in our life the more we become distrustful about the information it disseminates.

There are no clear regulations preventing the secret services or different politicians to use the social media networks in their advantage. Although they use contributor's money, secret services often disregard or misinterpret their duty to their fellow citizens and use different propaganda techniques in order to manipulate them. Politicians are no exception to this rule. The term "poster" (English version for Romanian "postac") is a common noun recently introduced in our language to refer to someone who is paid to express apparently "free" points of view on a particular subject. A recent political scandal involves one of the most important Romanian politicians, Elena Udrea, who was supposedly paying important amounts of money to an "army of posters"[14] whose job was to make sure there are positive comments about her in the social media.

So as a conclusion: Social media is not bringing citizens closer to the political power. Although the media is more present than ever in our lives we are growingly distrustful about its messages and about the political leaders. Devious forms of social control prevent us from entering the political debate in the online environment. The status of "unprofes-sional journalists" has only the costs but not the benefits of that of a professional journalist. Political engagement is not something more present in the case of those who use frequently social media.

Social media and social hatred: "if you have someone in your family that votes for Ponta, be a hero of your country and hide his identity card"

The 2014 presidential elections had some important characteristics that differentiate them from previous elections

- The use on a wide scale of the social media to target specific audiences.
- The appearance of hate messages targeted not mainly on the political adversary, but on his voters

The 2014 presidential elections will remain in the history of the political communication as the elections that divided the Romanian voters in two main categories: the young, technological savvy, hard-working, well-paid Romanians, and the old, disconnected, lazy and poor Romanians. This was the dual perspective that the 2014 presidential campaign imposed in the online media. A huge amount of articles written on mainstream press, personal blogs of influential public personalities, viral messages and Facebook posts had emphasized that it is time for the hard-working intelligent Romanians to go out and vote! As the previous campaigns proved the Social Democrats had a faithful electorate formed mainly of elderly retired people living in the rural area of the country. There are not enough data collected in order to

have a clear statistical analysis of the subject but the media often presented information to shape this image of the elderly voting for the social-democrats in order to get financial aids. A rise in their pensions or a rise in the unemployment aid constituted, in most of our political analysts a good reason to vote for the social democrats. Things were about to change in the 2014 presidential elections. As stated earlier, the online campaign targeted young people with technological skills. But dit is matter? As Alexandru Radu points out, the Romanian elections were also characterized by low rates of attendance and this fact is raising important questions about the political legitimacy of the elected presidents. "If the 1990 elections managed to gather 86% of those who had the right to vote in 2008 only 39,21% of the electors choose to exercise their right to elect their political leaders"[15].

An important Romanian public intellectual, the head of the Romanian Television (the most important Romanian publicly funded press institution), Stelian Tănase, wrote on his blog: "If only the Facebook users would vote, than Johannis would win the elections"[16]. The Facebook community voting for Klaus Johannis was presented as the small but well informed and intelligent community that will be, once again, vanquished by the poor ill-informed elderly people. There are not enough official statistical data, but it seems that, on the contrary, it was the first time the social media

was the primary source of information and that the Facebook community rely made the difference, especially in the second round of the elections. Pictures of Romanians waiting in line in order to vote went viral on Facebook, videos of long lines of people who had to stay in line for hours in order to exercise their democratic right to choose their leaders were distributed and presented even in the traditional media channels. For the first time, the social media seemed to count, but not as an ideal public sphere, but as a political weapon, as a mean of getting people to vote, not to debate. The information presented in the social media was even more polarized that the one presented in the traditional media. The deregulation of these media allowed even for anti-democratic messages fostering social hatred to be distributed. This tendency of the new media and the unprecedented polarization of the political communication is not something specific to the Romanian political space. As recent researches point out[17], the use of new media is not the place for more nuanced and rational political debates. On the contrary, it is the place of selective exposure and anti-democratic messages being disseminated as a result of very loose or absent regulation.

Some believe that the image of the online community formed of well-informed, young and intelligent people was itself a marketing tool. The online community made a difference especially since people were encouraged to think about themselves as the bright future of this country, the heroes that must fight with the poor, lazy, drunken voters of Victor Ponta. "The social-media buble is a majority now" stated one of the marketing analyst of the presidential campaign. In fact, there are 7.2 milion Facebook accounts which represents an important percentage of the population ho has the right to vote[18].

But how and when these anti-democratic messages begun to spread on the social-media networks? It is very difficult to offer a clear answer but the most important episode was the online campaign launched by one of the most important online press institutions Gândul.info that questions the right of the poor to vote[19]. In august 2014, Gândul.info introduced in the public debate the following theme: "Would you agree to limit the right to vote for a person that earns less than 2000 lei (approximately 400 euros)?" The same question was posed a few days earlier by one of the most important Romanian opinion leaders, Moise Guran, during a radio talk-show he is hosting on Europa FM – an important Romanian radio station. Although deeply discriminatory and anti-democratic this type of message was present also in other mainstream press platforms such as Hotnews who tried to emphasize the idea that illiterates should not be allowed to vote[20]. On May 2014 Răzvan Anghlescu the author of "VaxPopuli" published a video that went viral on

the internet. They asked some people that lived in the Romanian villages if they knew the name of their country. He found several people who did not know the answer. Then he asked if they wanted to vote. And they said "yes"![21] This video has 317.296 views and it shows how lack of deontological regulation of the online media could lead to the dissemination of anti-democratic messages. It is not clear whether those people where encouraged in some way to say those things. Răzvan Anghlelescu is showing some ill-informed citizens who want to vote and Ciprian Ciucu[22], a columnist at one of the most important news platforms, is claiming illiterates should not be allowed to vote. The criteria of restraining the right to vote are different: Moise Guran thinks it should be money, Ciprian Ciucu thinks it should be literacy.

What is the problem with these anti-democratic messages? Some may claim they are isolated accidents, unimportant and irrelevant in the broader context. But is it so? Even questioning the right to vote on different criteria is unconstitutional and illegal. As Vasile Ernu[23] points out, these are discriminatory claims that clearly contradict the Romanian Constitution. But there are further dangers attached to such claims. When discussing Noelle Newmann's spiral of silence in the previous section of my article I showed, following the conclusions of Newmann's study, that people perceive the *published* opinion as the *legitimate*

opinion of the majority. This is why it is extremely important to have clearer regulations on the type of messages presented in the media. Because the fact of asking in the mainstream press whether we should renounce the universal vote is loaded with a series of profoundly anti-democratic assumptions:

- It is *legitimate* to ask whether money or literacy should guarantee the right to vote.
- It is *normal* to ask whether a citizen should not be allowed to vote because he is cognitively challenged or poor.

Meanwhile in France a law was passed in order to punish the discrimination against the poor people[24]. So, this type of debate that throws us back into the nineteenth century would be unthinkable in other political spaces. I am not trying to set the Western countries as the perfect example that we should refer to, but it is incredible how media deregulation, social inequality and social hatred can produce a middle class whose frustrations are carefully guided against the most vulnerable categories of the population. Although we have democratic institutions preventing discrimination is not an easy job and the danger of right wing ideology disguised as "populism" is more present than ever before[25].

But social hatred as a result of class inequality was not the only toxic resource used in the 2014 presidential campaign. The conflict between generations was another source of political mobilization. In an

article that created a lot of contro-versy, Răzvan Cornețeanu launched an almost inquisitorial battles against "the failed generation of his father" placing the blame for all the pro-blems Romania faces on the shoul-ders of the people born 60 years ago. The article was debated live on television. B1TV hosted a debate over this article.

A viral joke was also launched during the presidential campaign that sums up the anti-democratic mes-sages: "Is someone in your family voting for Ponta? Be a hero and hide his or her identity card"[26]. This type of humour is the result a social hatred campaign encouraging people to think that:

- There is a good vote and a bad vote.
- There is the "informed" vote and the "illiterate vote"
- There is the "young and intel-ligent" vote and the "old and stupid" vote.

Young people were encouraged to "tech their mothers how to vote" because the elections are a question of competence, that older people, due to their lack of technological skills, cannot possess.

The cherry on the top of this extremely anti-democratic series of messages was the idea that Romanians living abroad who are a source of income in the national GDP are the victim of a devious plan designed by a social democrat poli-tical leader, Liviu Dragnea, in order to prevent them from voting. Although this is not very far from the truth – an investigation being cur-rently conducted – the fact that Victor Ponta did not mobilize his entire administrative prerogatives to organize the elections in such a way that people living abroad could vote sealed his loss. Powerful images and videos showing people staying in line for hours in order to vote made the difference. People were already fed with messages against the "stupid, lazy voters" of Victor Ponta. Now they had the clear proof: all those hard working citizens that sustain the economy are prevented from voting in order to pave the way for the illiterate poor and lazy to "take the country" once again![27]

Another theme of the 2014 presidential elections was that of the poor and the elders who sell their vote for bottle of oil or for a piece of bread. The social-democrats were accused of using their local political mayors to offer social aids in their communities to the vulnerable citi-zens in order to gain their loyalty. Although these allegations are very hard to prove the social media and the online press took that information and created the portrait of the voter so poor and ill-informed that he or she sells his vote for a bottle of oil.

What we are seeing here is not an open space of the debate, but a space of polarized discussion filled with anti-democratic messages where the discussion has no nuances. The deba-te was so intense and the social ha-tred so widely promoted than opposite social campaigns were launched encouraging people to have

a rational attitude towards the elders[28].One of the most incredible titles published by the online platform "Smart-woman.ro" was perhaps "Don't hate your mother because she voted for Ponta". Some comments to this article – paid or free – are even more disturbing: "Why should I not hate her since she is the one that through her vote condemns me to poverty and humiliation?"[29] This is only an example of the hysteria that surrounded the 2014 presidential elections. What are the consequences?

The middle class and the limitation of the right to vote

As a result of this campaign I tried to see whether the well-educated highly paid people, the ones working in the IT sector consider that the less privileged ones should be prevented from voting. In July 2015 I conducted a series of interviews with seventeen people working in the IT sector. I had five questions in my semi-strucured interview:

1. What do you understand by „electoral bribe"?
2. Do you think there are social categories more susceptible to the electoral articles (a bottle of oil, some flower, pencils, T shirts) offered during the electoral campaign? Justify the answer.
3. Do you think that these categories were present in the 2014 presidential elections? Justify the answer.
4. Do you think these categories always vote for a specific can-didate? Justify the answer.
5. Do you think it would be best to prevent such social categories from voting?

The subjects of my research were engineers working in the IT sector earning monthly more than 1000 euros. The definitions they offered for electoral bribe varied from „any product considered valuable when compared to the subject's revenues" to „any kind of product offered during the electoral campaign". While the definitions varied, they all agreed that poor people living in the rural area are susceptible to the offering of appearently unimportant things such as the bottle of oil or a bag of flower. They also agreed on the fact that the vulnerable social categories participated in the 2014 electoral elections and that they vote according to the principle who offers more food products. Among the seventeen engineers five considered that we should restrain the right to vote. One of them pointed out that „the vote of people who pay more taxes should count more than the vote of the ones who don't pay or pay less". He also consideres that a „series of questions should be included on the vote sheet in order to eliminate the retards, something like 1+1-1=? This way we can make sure people voting live on the same planet with us". One of my subjects believes that the IQ testing is the solution for a better society. „An IQ testing cabin should be placed next to the voting

one and the ones with an IQ lower than 80 should be prevented from voting. The ones with an IQ placed between 80 and 100 should have the right to vote, but their votes should be divided by 5. For example, if 100 persons with an IQ between 80 and 100 voted for Victor Ponta, their votes should be divided by 5. This way Victor Ponta receives only 20 votes from the 100 votes expressed by people with the IQ between 80 and 100. The ones having an IQ between 100 and 115 should have the right to vote but, again, the total number of their voted should be divided by two. The ones with the IQ between 115 and 130 should obey the principle one person one vote. The ones with the IQ higher than 130 should obey the following rule: their votes should be multiplied by 1.5. Finally, for the ones having an IQ higher than 140 we should multiply their votes by 2".

Two of my subjects believed that the right to vote should be given only to those who graduate from high-school. Finally one of the five con-sidering the limitation of the right to vote, considered that mental health tests and minimal knowledge of civic problems should be a prior condition of the right to vote.

What my research is showing is that we have well-trained, well-paid people, with high above the media technological skills who believe:

- the myth of objectively measu-ring the IQ[30],
- the myth of the "stupid" people voting for Victor Ponta;
- the myth of the highschool diplo-ma as a guarantee of the correct evaluation of electoral messages.

Conclusions

The believes of the subject I interviewedare proving one simple fact: intelligent, hard-working, well paid and technological savvy citizens can be just as easily fooled as the ill-informed poor and technological illiterate ones. The hatred propaganda worked perfectly in their case making them vulnerable to ideas that shaped the political debate one century ago. Their opinions also prove that the democratic principles and values that many generations fought for should never be taken for granted. The fierce political struggle and the deregulation of the social media pave the way for anti-democratic messages and cam-paign strategies.

Notes

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