3. AI and information dissemination: Challenging citizens’ access to relevant and reliable information

INTRODUCTION

Designing a personalized ranking system for more than 2 billion people (all with different interests) and a plethora of content to select from presents significant, complex challenges. This is something we tackle every day with News Feed ranking. Without machine learning (ML), people’s News Feeds could be flooded with content they don’t find as relevant or interesting, including overly promotional content or content from acquaintances who post frequently, which can bury the content from the people they’re closest to. Ranking exists to help solve these problems, but how can you build a system that presents so many different types of content in a way that’s personally relevant to billions of people around the world? We use ML to predict which content will matter most to each person to support a more engaging and positive experience. Models for meaningful interactions and quality content are powered by state-of-the-art ML.

(Lada, Wang, & Yan, 2021)

As more and more citizens are connected to the internet through their smartphones and other web-browsing devices, information is disseminated quickly and widely. In the European Union, about nine out of ten netizens use search engine websites at a minimum once a week, and six out of ten use an online social media platform at least once a week (European Union, 2021). In a digital age, individuals, organizations, and governments have access to a wide array of communication and communication technologies (ICTs), channels, and techniques to produce and share information. As Sidjanski (2000) argues, “[w]e are moving from a logic of energy, exclusive and leading to centralized hierarchical systems, to a logic of information based, like biological systems, on complementarity, synergy, and interdependence” (p.203). The generalization of ICTs, and in particular online platforms, triggers the emergence of new patterns of interactions among these actors, based on the values that Don Tapscott identified in 2008 as transparency, participation, and collaboration.

The European Commission acknowledges that online platforms play a key role in today’s social and economic life by enabling European citizens to
access information online, and for businesses to benefit from e-commerce advantages. Although internet penetration rates are not the same throughout Europe, the majority of the EU population is connected to the internet and uses social media platforms on a regular basis. Most social media platforms only require an email address and an internet connection to join (Fuchs, 2012). In other words, they are accessible and offer a large array of tools to interact, network, and debate. Hence, social media platforms are potentially the ideal context for people “to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives and publish their own opinions” (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p.759).

The generalization of social media platforms and the rapid adoption of smartphones in the European Union (EU) are indicative of the high levels of internet penetration and almost constant connectivity of citizens. These platforms were created to foster dialogue among citizens from diverse backgrounds and origin, or as Facebook puts it “[to] give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” (Facebook, n.d.). However, online platforms have not only offered a new creative space for self-expression and participatory communication (Jenkins, 2006a), but they have also redefined communication (Langlois & Elmer, 2013).

In 2018, it was estimated that 56% of individuals living in the European Union (EU) take part in social media, and 48% used social media platforms every day or nearly every day in 2019 (Statistica, 2020). According to the Global Web Index, in 2020 internet users aged 16 to 64 spent an average of 2h24m daily on social media on one device or another. In terms of number of active users in the world in January 2020, Facebook (2.4 billion) still dominates, followed by YouTube (2bn), WhatsApp (1.6bn), FB Messenger (1.3bn), WeChat (1.1bn), and Instagram (1bn) (We Are Social, 2020). We cannot fail to notice that the Facebook group owns four out of the six top social media platforms with the most users in the world (Facebook, WhatsApp, FB Messenger, and Instagram). As Nieborg (2015) argues:

All platforms are equal, but some are more equal than others. Facebook’s capabilities to leverage network effects are infinitely bigger than any other platform currently up and running in the social media universe. (Van Dijck & Poell, 2015, p.4)

The concept of online platform\(^1\) describes a broad range of applications. The EU Commission argues that “[o]nline platforms share key characteristics including the use of information and communication technologies to facilitate interactions (including commercial transactions) between users, collection and use of data about these interactions, and network effects which make the use of the platforms with most users most valuable to other users” (European Commission, n.d.). Artificial intelligence, and more precisely machine learning algorithms (MLA) are the core piece of the functioning of online platforms,
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and allows them to generate wealth and provide their services to individuals and organizations. For instance, Facebook’s newsfeed algorithm selects the most relevant content for each user to show in priority in their newsfeed (Lada, Wang, & Yan, 2021).

Algorithms are used to govern many aspects of our society and economy (Janssen & Kuk, 2016). As Osoba and Welser IV (2017) argue, an algorithm can be defined as “a computable function that can be implemented on computer systems. Machine learning algorithms can also update their behavior in response to experience (input data) and performance metrics” (Osoba & Welser IV, 2017 cited in Hoorens & Lupiáñez-Villanueva, 2019, p.21). They can be described as automatized decision processes, or step-by-step instructions to process inputs into outputs (Stone, 1971). Today, most algorithms consist of an aggregate of numerous algorithms that function as a computer program (Sandvig, 2014). Some of these algorithms, including the ones considered in this book, are powered by AI, which means in simple terms that they have the capacity to learn from data and adapt their code accordingly. This is what we refer to as MLA. And MLAs are at the core of the success of social media platforms. It is indeed not possible to study social media platforms without considering MLAs.

The OECD (2001) recommends that governments use digital technology to strengthen the citizen–government relations through three types of actions: (1) enhancing access to information so that citizens are well informed, (2) enabling citizens to express their views on projects and societal issues that affect them in consultations, (3) engaging citizens in decision-making processes. These three types of action must also be designed and implemented according to the principles of equity and inclusion, in order to avoid any discrimination within the population, and between the actors involved in the policy-making process. This chapter focuses on the first type of action recommended by the OECD (2001) to strengthen citizen–government relations: ensure that information is “complete, objective, reliable, relevant, easy to find and to understand” (p.11) for citizens. Since a large number of citizens access information through online platforms, this chapter explores how AI affects information distribution on online platforms. On social media platforms, information distribution is indeed specific. AI and more precisely MLAs enable social media platforms to automate information distribution flows. In these digital spaces, citizens adopt specific behavior and information is diffused differently from other media.

Online platforms have had an impact on policy making (Chun & Luna Reyes, 2012) as they provide a new channel that facilitates social networking, crowdsourcing, and interactive dialogues between citizens and other stakeholders in the policy-making process. This chapter first briefly discusses the conceptual challenges to define social media platforms. Then it examines the specific characteristics of information flows on social media platforms, and the
role of AI in selecting, filtering, ranking, and diffusing information. Finally, it examines advocacy efforts from civil society organizations and social movements to creative advocacy tactics and strategies on social media platforms to have their voice heard.

A CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE

The development of the internet enabled many other technologies to emerge, including the World Wide Web and social media platforms. Web 1.0 and web 2.0 are often used to describe two eras: one where technology only enabled content to be produced and posted on a website for others to “read only”; the latter which allows the audience to interact, respond, comment, and even produce new content. Web 2.0 is based on the new capacity offered to users to self-generate content online and to interact with other users without the interference of elite media and traditional sources of authority. The previous version of the web only allowed one-way communication; the online user was a passive consumer of information. With web 2.0, online users have become both consumers and producers of information.

Social media belongs to the second era, but is rooted in the first. Therefore the separation between the two is not as clear-cut as sometimes presented: it is more a continuum “from one that prioritizes a social imagination of indefinite strangers, to one that vacillates between imagined strangers and numerable, identifiable, individuals” (Ankerson, 2015, p.11).

Social media platforms present many challenges as an object of study, among which is their conceptualization. This is not without consequences. Indeed, for citizens and political leaders to reach an opinion about a new technology or an issue, they must be able to clearly identify it, delineate its scope, and assess its positive and negative consequences.

Social media platforms emerged at the beginning of 2000. From 2005 until 2010, most studies concentrated on the user and the new creative space offered. The following five years focused on the professional use of such platforms by public and private organizations, as well as social movements (Van Dijck & Poell, 2015), to promote products and interact with their audiences in order to raise awareness and advertise for products, and coordinate actions.

To study social media platforms, the researcher faces four challenges. The first one is the conceptualization challenge of social media platforms, which is difficult due to both the perpetual transformation of the social media landscape and to the opacity of the activities of some large corporate social media platforms such as Facebook (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Social media platforms are indeed perpetually evolving, making it difficult to identify precise boundaries around the concept. These platforms include a large range of computer- and smartphone-based applications, with specific cultural and national features,
that are continuously being launched, relaunched and abandoned in different countries in the world. Moreover, other technologies also provide the same service as social media platforms – connecting people in the world; in other words, should we consider the phone, the fax machine or email as social media platforms?

To respond to this conceptualization challenge, Obar and Wildman (2015) identified some key characteristics in the literature that can help distinguish social media platforms from other information and communication technologies (ICTs).²

• First, social media platforms are web 2.0 internet-based applications. In the 1990s, the services provided through the internet were mainly reading on the World Wide Web (Web) and consuming audio and video clips on commercial media. The change occurred with the emergence of the social web, also called web 2.0. This technological advance and ideology change (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) contributed to enabling users to also interact with others and the content they produced. Hence, users are what Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) call prosumers. This is why web 2.0 is a place where content can be “continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61).

• Second, user-generated content is the lifeblood of social media platforms. The content produced and shared by users, whether a blog entry, a photo on Instagram, a high score on Candy Crush, or a “like” on Facebook, is the backbone of social media platforms. Without this content, social media platforms would actually become a ghost town.

• Third, profiling is the backbone of social media platforms (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Although the forms of identification differ from one social media platform to another, they either require users to create a user profile in order to use their service, or they create a profile in their database.³ This profiling allows social media platforms to connect users with each other, and offer services that users expect such as comparing between gaming scores, sharing voting results, liking content, etc.

• Fourth, social media platforms connect users with each other either by creating a list of individuals to connect with (Facebook and Snapchat call them friends, Twitter and Instagram call them followers, and LinkedIn connections) or through location-based or content preference (such as Yik Yak). “The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p.211).

However, even with these four criteria, it remains a challenge to define the limits of what social media is today.
Social media platforms can be categorized according to their geographical scope and utility. On the one hand, “universal” social media platforms, such as Facebook, provide users with a new digital space on a global stage where they can either create personal profiles or an official page for an organization. This type of platform allows for personal but also for professional interactions. Intimate conversations can take place, as well as business transactions. Users write comments, share views, post and watch videos, play games, respond to quizzes, and so on. On the other hand, some specialized social media platforms cater either to dedicated geographical parts of the world population (e.g. WeChat in China and some parts of Asia) or certain professions (e.g. LinkedIn for professionals or ResearchGate and Academia for academics), while others offer tools for specific activities, such as publishing videos (e.g. YouTube), photos (e.g. Instagram), text content (e.g. Blogger) among others.

The second challenge to studying social media platforms is the opacity of most activities of social media platforms. As Langlois and Elmer (2013) argue, social media platforms may well look like a transparent platform where a large array of communication acts take place. However, their transparency is limited to these communication acts; in fact, this is the only aspect of all their activities that is visible. Actually, content production and networking are only the tip of the iceberg: the business model of Facebook for instance is to collect as much data as possible from its users. In this context, Facebook not only records content produced and distributed on its platforms, but it also collects a large spectrum of metadata, including:

[S]pecific information about the profile of the user sending out a message, the users receiving that message, about how users interact with a message by reading or not reading it, “liking” it, sharing it (…) time lapses, time spent on a page or scrolling, pauses in the communication process, silences that might seem non-communicational but that still yield information as to what a user is reading or deciding not to react to, as well as previous communication acts that give a specific communication act a discursive and social context (…) content users access and interact with at different times of the day and night and in different social settings (at work, home, or with friends), but also of how users themselves act on different platforms and how they share content across a multitude of platforms. (Langlois & Elmer, 2013, pp.2–3)

Through the big data collected, Facebook intends to “enhance, format, encode and diagnose communication” (p.4) with the purpose of not only promoting for-profit content, such as advertising, but “to tap into everyday life in order to try and refashion it from the inside” (p.4).

The third challenge is ontological, meaning that researchers need to focus their attention away from what is being said to how it is being processed and rendered. As Langlois and Elmer (2013) contend, “We must expand from the
study of communication as signs or discourse, to include the study of communication as data collection, storage, and processing” (pp.2–3).

Finally, the fourth challenge is methodological: how to analyze the different layers of data collected and produced on and by corporate social media platforms, including content that is not available to the researcher. The answer that Langlois and Elmer (2013) propose is through the concept of digital object: “Digital objects, as previously explained, are the elements that compose social media platforms in specific context: a ‘like’ button is a digital object, for instance, as is a comment or any other kinds of text” (p.11).

The digital object counts three layers or characteristics. First, it is a media object: digital objects are constituted of content and form. Second, it a network object: digital objects connect informational networks: “‘Liking’ a news story usually means that other hidden informational networks are activated: profiling networks, for instance, that will then adapt the content of the ads on a news website to the Facebook profile of the user” (Langlois & Elmer, 2013, p.11). Third, it is a phatic object (Miller, 2008): it is an action of presence; it positions users within their network, and establishes position and relation within this network of users and digital objects.

As discussed in this section, social media platforms present many challenges as an object of study. This definition challenge is not without consequences. Indeed, for citizens and political leaders to have an opinion about a new technology or an issue, they must be able to clearly identify it, delineate its scope, and assess its positive and negative consequences. This is particularly challenging when the concept is vague and encompasses a large variety of applications.

AI AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Over the years, and more recently with the UK referendum Brexit, concerns associated with the rapid adoption of social media platforms, and the transformation of their business models into advertising giants and data brokers, led the general public and policy makers to change their perception of social media platforms and question their role in society. For instance, in 2012, a popular TED video of academic Eli Pariser (2012) called upon the experts and tech companies of Silicon Valley to adapt their services and products so that citizens could have access to pluralist sources of information and opinions. More recently, The Guardian unveiled the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). This section examines key characteristics of information distribution on social media platforms.
Information Overload

On social media platforms, users can both consume and produce information (Fuchs, 2012). Citizens contribute for the most part to the content published online by recording videos and taking photos that are posted on social media (Goldkind, 2015). User-generated content greatly increases the availability of information. Emotional messages and images attract the attention of users on social media (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), and can increase the momentum for a specific issue. This is particularly true when health is threatened by the issue at stake, and when messages are illustrated by tragic images of individuals suffering. A news item will tend to spread across numerous online clusters and networks, with comments added to original framing. It may create momentum, a buzz, and become viral. In that case, it provides a space for many actors to intervene and position themselves. Social media channels offer indeed a space for citizens, consumers, businesses, politicians, and experts to have a say and make their voices heard. In most cases, public figures have an account on Twitter or Facebook, and are often publicly addressed on social media.

The liking, commenting, and sharing on social media trigger a rapid dissemination of news items. Users on social media spread information by reacting to a news item, thus contributing to the emergence of a momentum. This self-reinforcing process is strengthened by the networking nature of social media platforms and how their MLA are designed: MLAs of social media platforms tend to favor viral content, meaning content that triggers an emotional reaction, whether because it is sensationalist or extreme. The distancing offered by online tools, and the feeling – sometimes true – of anonymity, do not favor profound analytical exchange of views: it can be “difficult to keep online conversations from devolving into either name-calling or blather” (Shirky, 2008, p.50).

The feedback loops between a news item and the responses of social media users lead to an exaggeration of reality, often associated with related media hype (Vasterman, Yzermans, & Dirkzwager, 2005) and virality. These momenta represent a new prospect for various social actors to influence the general public and policy makers. The dynamics associated with the global character of the environment and social media platforms imply that local news can quickly become a global issue.

Moreover, this quantitative increase does not necessarily translate into a qualitative increase of information. As Jenkins argues, authors who claim that social media platforms contribute to access to information “make no claims on objectivity; they are often unapologetically partisan; they deal often with rumors and innuendos; and as we will see, there is some evidence they...
Artificial intelligence and democracy are mostly read by people who already agree with their author’s stated views” (Jenkins, 2006b, p.216).

**Filtering Content**

Consequently, citizens and organizations face an overload of information, and there is a necessity to organize and prioritize the information produced. Recommender systems were first developed in the early-to-mid 1990s to address the information overload by building prediction models that estimate how much the user will like each of a large set of items (Konstan & Riedl, 2012). They were progressively developed in public and private settings, including universities and e-commerce websites. Their replacement are the MLAs, which select and rank content for users online. They help internet users overcome the overload of information online, and make decisions in terms of what to read, listen to, or watch.

Since each individual has unique tastes and interests, the information selection must be done at the individual level. This is where algorithms enter into play in information diffusion: their role is to select the most relevant information for each netizen at any particular time. This selection is done through the data collected about each individual in the past, and cross-analyzed with the data about others. This data collection and analysis enable the MLA to categorize each individual user.

However, this categorization is not without issues. For instance, some scholars revealed mismatched face recognition with a racial bias according to the Fitzpatrick skin tones. Wilson, Hoffman, and Morgenstern (2019) conducted a study “on recent examples of ML and vision systems displaying higher error rates for certain demographic groups than others” (p.1). Also, Amazon’s facial recognition technologies were criticized for mismatching members of Congress in 2018 (Snow, 2018). Moreover, while errors made either by human beings while developing algorithms or by algorithms themselves emphasize racism or sexism, there are “several cases that demonstrate how racism and sexism are part of the architecture and language of technology” (Noble, 2018, p.9). Even if “Google’s algorithms have admittedly changed, such that a search for ‘black girls’ does not yield nearly as many pornographic results now as it did in 2011. Nonetheless, new instances of racism and sexism keep appearing in news and social media” (Noble, 2018, p.10). Noble (2018) demonstrates how algorithms are not only biased but can cause harm to gender or ethnic groups.

Moreover, the information selection done by MLAs contributes to keeping individual users in what Eli Pariser (2012) calls filter bubbles. He described the role of MLAs in filtering content accessible to netizens and users of social media platforms. The filter bubble phenomenon highlights the fact that MLAs
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of social media platforms tend to restrict their users’ access to information based on what the user already “liked,” consequently not contributing to the plurality of sources. MLAs use data collected through behavioral tracking and cookies technologies to identify what content is the most relevant for the user at any given time. Their objective is to keep individuals online as long as possible in order to collect personal data and then target them with ads. This is problematic in pluralist democracy, since it does not allow citizens to be well informed, meaning to be exposed to relevant and pluralist sources of information. Eli Pariser gives the example in 2012 of Facebook deleting the comments of his friends who were from the other side of the political spectrum.

Since MLA are designed and managed by private companies, the criteria – at least one of them – of such algorithms is to increase the profitability of the company. It increases its revenue through collecting data from citizens in order to target advertising. This means that from the tech company’s perspective, citizens need to remain online as long as possible. Consequently, the algorithm will provide information that will not necessarily push the citizen to think differently, but rather it will provide easy-to-digest and entertaining information.

This aspect of information dissemination is now well known and documented. As Devaux (2019) contends, algorithms allow large tech companies such as Facebook and Instagram to continuously adapt bespoke content to netizens, positioning these MLA as de facto gatekeepers to information.

A Plurality of Gatekeepers

MLA have become an additional gatekeeper in the information ecosystem of European pluralist democracies: they determine what is newsworthy, rank content according to pre-defined criteria, and filter the access to content. In that context, MLAs of social media platforms play a substantial role in democracy and can have an impact on citizen participation (although it remains difficult to assess it). However, MLAs are not the only gatekeepers today. The press remains a strong gatekeeper, as well as influencers on social media platforms.

The role of gatekeeper also has a direct impact on the press. As Tandoc, Jenkins, and Kraft (2019) argue, “while platforms have provided another channel for publishers to disseminate their content, platforms have also taken audience attention away from traditional news sites” (p.675). Indeed, mainstream media had to adapt to the production and distribution model of content for the digital and social media environment. More precisely, they had to adapt to the algorithms of social media platforms and web search engines to regain the revenue they lost when their audiences shifted from offline paid news to online free news. In many European countries, citizens access news through social media platforms and web search engines, which place the algorithms in the role of gatekeepers.
Mainstream media outlets have adapted their 24-hour cycle of news production to the “online first model” (Vergeer, 2018, p.38). The online first model means that citizens must produce a piece of news faster than their competitors in order to bring revenue to their media outlet. So, journalists had to adapt to this new environment as well; they also had to produce not only reliable information, but fast information (Vergeer, 2018). In other words, journalists need to compete with sensationalist infotainment content that is easy to consume and share – at least so more than analytical or in-depth content. Consequently, revenue generated from advertising disappears from well-researched outlets and flows into sensationalist entertainment or infotainment outlets. In other words, the “online first model,” which is linked to how algorithms were developed, favors information that is quickly produced and quickly online. The current digital environment does not favor well-researched content, which requires time before being published.

On social media platforms, some influencers tend to dominate the online conversations: Barzilai-Nahon (2008) defines this new form of filtering information “networked gatekeeping.” In other words, some celebrities, famous journalists and bloggers, political leaders and well-known entrepreneurs, act as gatekeepers on social networks (Shaw, 2012), filtering communication flows from top to bottom (Castells, 2013, p.71). For instance, an abundance of research showed the impact of some opinion leaders on the virality of content on social media platforms (Nahon & Hemsley, 2013; Wu & Wang, 2011).

As discussed, social media platforms have developed specific tools to automatically select the information most relevant to each user. This is not without consequences for pluralist democracy, since it is based on the assumption that citizens have access to pluralist sources of information. Recently, policymakers, including from the European Union, called upon social media platforms to improve their algorithms accordingly, and some launched campaigns to raise awareness among the population about the critical perspective they need to adopt when consulting information online.

Echo Chambers

Echo chambers are a well-known and well-established phenomenon that appeared on social media platforms, where ideas and beliefs are reinforced by communication and repetition within a homogenous group of users: “What we now know about both links and individual behavior supports the general view that many people are mostly hearing more and louder echoes of their own voices” (Sunstein, 2006, p.55). It is closely associated to the concept of homophily, which describes the fact that we tend to associate with others who are like us (Jenkins, 2006b) and “always move elsewhere if the group reaches
conclusions that run counter to [our] own beliefs or desires” (Jenkins, 2006b, p.231). This happens online and in particular on social media platforms.

Echo chambers and homophily have an impact on the plurality of views accessible to users on social media platforms. Since individuals associate with others who are similar to them, false information can spread very quickly through an individual’s network. There is no one to challenge a piece of news that is shared among peers: one message is reiterated as an echo of one opinion and reinforced over and over again in one community, and without any counter-argumentation (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Hence, access to information is limited in terms of points of view and diversity. Moreover, political debate on social media platforms is often reduced to superficial exchanges. As Halpern and Gibbs contend, “most [social media users] are not debating rationally or deeply in this media. This suggests that political exchanges on social media may be more superficial in nature, rather than being characterized by in-depth debate or deliberation, and calls into question their efficacy” (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013, p.1166). In fact, users of social media platforms tend to leave the discussion before any meaningful exchange between different points of view can take place (Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2018).

Hence, the echo chamber phenomena contributes to the quick dissemination and acceptance of false news. MLA of social media platforms have proven to be as effective for distributing bespoke content as they are for directing advertising and false information. Thanks to the low cost of entry, access to a large audience, and limited accountability, vast disinformation campaigns have occurred in recent years.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND ONLINE ADVOCACY

The great diversity of social media presents a difficulty to conceptualize this phenomenon. However, social media have allowed the emergence of a new space of expression for civil society in liberal democracies. It should be noted at this point that social media have also become a space for surveillance and censorship in some countries. The chapter on surveillance discusses this topic in more detail. In addition, social media have also become a power issue where large-scale disinformation campaigns are launched by political groups and governments. The chapter on disinformation discusses this topic in more detail.

Nevertheless, social media has become a favored place for civil society to express itself. In particular, they allow (1) to reach a wider audience more quickly and (2) to coordinate their actions at a lower cost and without the need for centralized administration.
ICTs reduce indeed the cost of communication, while increasing its speed and outreach. Thanks to the internet and mobile technologies, information is accessible to almost everyone on the planet. Internet and mobile penetration do not cease to increase. New models of organizations emerge with more open, horizontal, and dynamic structures. Civil society organizations have now the possibility to communicate on a global scale, which can strengthen their power (Edwards, 2014). Given their low cost, ICTs were rapidly adopted by the global civil society to coordinate its activities, access information, take part in global debates, raise funds, acquire new members, and organize international events.

Disruptive technologies such as the internet and social media gave birth to the knowledge society and the Net Generation: born with the third screen (Castells, 1996), the Net Generation or digital grown-ups to quote Don Tapscott, do not use mobile phones to call, but rather to tweet, take a photo, record a video and share content. These new generations know more about the dominant technology than their parents (Tapscott, 2008). They are used to produce content and actively customize the information they wish to obtain through Twitter, RSS news feeds, news agency websites, blogs, and Facebook pages. They need unique, tailor-made and real-time solutions that respond directly to their needs and desires. The success of online streaming music and videos is a good example of this change: instead of watching television, they choose to stream their favorite series online when and where they want. Location and time become irrelevant.

Sometimes, the Net Generation becomes more visible: the Arab spring has shown how the use of new ICTs can support the organization of massive street protests. New ICTs provide opportunities for people to be politically active. What trigger these protests are not new ICTs, but rather injustice, lack of jobs, repression, violence and economic disparity. Tools used to fight this revolution are, however, no longer lethal weapons: new ICTs allow the Net Generation to raise awareness, denounce Human Rights violations and call for help. Internet and mobile phones are used by the youth to spread the word, decide on a meeting point, join forces on an issue and influence the society they are living in. These newly created networks give to the population a real sense of participation.

These digital grown-ups represent a large part of society: 80 million in the USA alone, compared to 78 million of baby boomers (Tapscott, 2008). In other parts of the world such as Asia and Africa, they represent an even larger part of society and become a powerful force of change. Public figures have become aware of this new opportunity to be in touch with the general public. President Obama, for instance, created an online platform for his two presidential campaigns, where citizens could discuss issues and make their views available to
The President. This openness and transparency made him very popular among young voters.

This generation with ownership of online tools becomes a powerful force of change: “thus, the industrial society, by educating citizens and by gradually organizing the economy around knowledge and information, prepared the ground for the empowering of the human mind when new information technologies became available” (Castells, 1996, p.31). Similarly to the printing press invention that enabled Renaissance thinkers to share knowledge and planted the seed for the European technological dominance a few centuries later, the generalization of new ICTs contributed to the emergence of a new type of society with new patterns of interaction, namely transparency, collaboration, and participation (Tapscott, 2008) described as follows.

Because they were gradually and massively adopted by all actors, and in particular individuals, social media platforms are composed of multiple online spaces, where traditional stakeholders such as states and international organizations (IOs) interact and compete with non-state actors, including individuals, civil society organizations, and businesses at the local, national, and international levels. It was estimated that in 2020 nearly 60% of the world population will use social media (We Are Social, 2020). A wide array of nonprofit actors uses social media for advocacy purposes, enabling them to set the international agenda, to organize group actions and collaborate on a global scale, and finally to collect information for advocacy purposes, whether marketing or public relations.

Social media platforms can be characterized by their ability to enable many-to-many communication on a global scale. They can be described as a collection of instruments. Previously, interpersonal communication was only possible on dedicated media such as telephones. Similarly, traditional broadcasting media such as TV, radio, and newspapers, delivered information to a large number of people, but this was one-way communication only. Social media is an innovation first in the sense that it blends one-to-one with one-to-many communication streams, but in addition it enables individuals to become producers of information and not only consumers, and allows broadcast media to target its messages individually. Second, social media is an innovation because it allows two-way communication, where organizations and individuals interact on a permanent basis on social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Relationships are at the core of social media platforms (Goldkind, 2015).

Among those who benefited most from the generalization of ICTs and more precisely from computerization, internet penetration, and the rapid adoption of mobile phones, are the individuals and CSOs that gained new capacity to reach out to a larger range of stakeholders (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), such as donors, volunteers, online and offline media, and the general public. The diversity of
the nonprofit community provides an excellent opportunity to examine the use of social media, which differs from one organization to another. Civil society actors have developed a capacity for outreach in order to gain new donors, members, and volunteers. In a knowledge society, information becomes both a resource and a force that transforms decisional and non-decisional processes. Many CSOs have developed web 2.0 public relations campaigns to raise awareness about specific issues, which has triggered the emergence of new online spaces where legitimacy is built through the inclusion of a wider number of stakeholders, starting with the general public. Citizens become actors on the international stage by interacting with CSOs, IOs, states, and businesses on social media. In that context, social media platforms can change how civil society actors relate to each other, as well as the dynamics of their interaction.

This gradual technological shift has also dramatically transformed the media landscape. For example, traditional media, such as printed matter, had to reinvent themselves, adding an online component to the paper version. Most newspapers, if not all of them, have a website, social media channels, and specific content developed for their online audiences. Radio adapted some of its content to podcast formats, and TV channels developed apps and online streaming platforms. Some citizens have become journalists and started reporting on events from the field. Social media, and in particular Twitter, has become the place to be when it comes to finding or publishing the latest information. The most recent news items are no longer found in newspapers but online. In a large number of countries, citizens read the news predominantly on social media.

This rapid transformation of the media landscape became of high interest for researchers and policy makers, since this change affects the role and power of media. In particular, a considerable number of studies analyze the use of social media by CSOs (Roback, 2013), and most argue that CSOs still need to develop additional capacity in order to make optimal use of social media platforms (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009).

The wide variety of social media channels facilitates the exchange of user-generated text, audio and video files, and instruments, and have empowered individuals and organizations to develop and conduct advocacy campaigns (Guo & Saxton, 2014). Social media platforms rely mostly on the content generated by organizations (Tredinnick, 2006) to attract potential donors, members, volunteers, petition signatories, and digital ambassadors who can convey their message to their own personal networks.

According to the Oxford online dictionary, advocacy is to publicly support or recommend a particular cause or policy. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012, p.341) identified three key communicative tactics used by nonprofits for their advocacy work on social media: one-way information, community building and call
to action. First, information is when the organization presents itself, its activities, future events and provides information that is relevant to its audience. Second, community is when the organization interacts with its audience and aims to develop a community. Lastly, action is when the organization sends out a call for action such as to participate in an event, donate, or share a type of media. This is not the only way to categorize social media tactics, but one that corresponds to a general understanding of the three main types of actions found on social media.

Guo and Saxton (2014, p.71) divide these tactics into three similar categories, but with different names. First, reaching out to people corresponds to the information function in the previous model. Advocacy work aims to educate and raise awareness about specific issues. Second, keeping the flame alive corresponds to community and dialogue. It allows organizations to deepen existing relations with their audiences and develop new ties with others. The organization’s aim here is to nurture its audience and build an active community of supporters. Third, stepping up to action corresponds to the organization calling for action and asking its supporters to mobilize. What is interesting to see is the convergence between the two analyses performed on social media, which indicates that these three categories do in fact represent how CSOs manage their social media platforms.

CSOs have increasingly adopted technologically intensive media to influence various stakeholders (FitzGerald & McNutt, 1999); among the most commonly used are social media platforms. Indeed, individuals are more easily approached through these new instruments for a number of reasons. First, social media users can see at the same time and in the same place a mix of personal contact updates and sponsored content that promotes a product, a service, or a cause. This means that the line between personal content and sponsored content is blurred, which can greatly benefit advocacy campaigns in terms of credibility and trust. One naturally has more trust in information distributed in a secure and intimate space than in the outside world. Second, individuals regularly visit social media channels. As mentioned previously, European citizens have massively adopted social media platforms for their personal and professional occupations. This means that the audience on social media platforms is vast, which makes it a valuable space for promotion.

Third, social media proposes a large number of promotional instruments, ranging from ads with highly detailed and targeted segmentation tools, to contests and customized applications. Social media allow CSOs to rapidly and efficiently identify their target audiences, organizations with a common agenda, and empathic individuals. For advocacy professionals, this is a gold mine, since they can segment their audiences at a level unforeseen so far. Fourth, each element of a campaign, whether an application, a message, a post,
or an ad, can be designed for a specific part of the population, and can further be monitored and readjusted depending on the success of the campaign.

What is more, CSOs also use social media platforms to coordinate their actions (e.g. street protests, stunt, boycotts) at a low cost and without heavy and centralized administrative processes. Since their early developments, social media platforms have become a favored space for social movements and facilitated their emergence (although did not trigger them). “Los indignados,” “Les Gilets Jaunes” or “Occupy Wall Street” are some well-known examples of such leaderless movements that aim to give a voice to civil society. Social movements use social media platforms to coordinate their actions and take to the streets to express their concern about global issues, such as the immobility of states in the face of the climate issue. For instance, the grassroots movement “Right To Know Rally” began its activities with one page on Facebook (Adamoli, 2012) and rapidly grew into an international movement spread over 400 cities in North America and Europe. More recently, the well-known movements of “Extinction Rebellion” and “Fridaysforfuture” have made extensive use of social media platforms since the creation of the two movements to reach out and coordinate their actions with very little governance.

Through its multiple platforms, social media allows personal interactions, peer recognition, and the strengthening of group norms (Valenzuela, 2013), which in turn stimulate individual and community identity construction, two crucial components of political conduct. The various aspects linked to the environment, such as use of land, food safety, and ecosystem management among others, are crucial components of identity construction, and have led to the emergence of numerous online communities. Furthermore, individual forms of online protests are increasingly associated with lifestyle elements, which results in the personalization of global issues (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). This implies that in the war of narratives on social media platforms between multinational corporations, governments, and the global civil society, the framing of narratives becomes central and influences the definition of global public issues.

As illustrated in this section, social media platforms enable civil society to reach out to a larger audience through online advocacy campaigns, and coordinate their actions nationally and globally. Although it is true that social media platforms allow civil society to raise awareness and citizens to interact and access information, the picture is incomplete. As a result, over the last couple of years, the narrative associated with social media platforms has evolved to include new concerns as discussed in the next section. MLAs are at the core of these concerns.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

As discussed in this chapter, AI enable these platforms to automate information distribution flows, and in particular to rank, filter, and diffuse information. This leads to phenomena such as filter bubble and echo chambers, which does not support citizens’ efforts to access “complete, objective, reliable, relevant, easy to find and to understand” information. In this context, the algorithms of social media platforms (in their current development stage) do not benefit civil society and its capacity to make well-informed decisions. From this perspective, AI does not strengthen the citizen–government relation.

However, social media platforms also offer civil society organizations and social movements an unprecedented opportunity to develop creative advocacy campaigns in order to have their voice heard. They offer a new avenue for civil society to influence the policy-making process. Leach, Stirling, and Scoones (2010) coined the term policy space to describe these new contexts where stakeholders such as civil society can “influence policy formulation and implementation” by “informal (media writings, campaigns, social media advocacy) means.” From that perspective, AI strengthens the citizen–government relation.

NOTES

1. We will use the terms social media and online platforms as synonyms.
2. ICTs comprise all technologies that help gather, distribute, produce, consume, and store information, including print and broadcast media, channels of communication (satellite, cable), telecommunications (phone, web), computers, and storage devices. Definition from Singh (2002, p.2).
3. For instance, Yik Yak does not require users to provide a real name or real photo when they sign up. However, as indicated in the Yik Yak privacy policy, the platform creates a unique user profile for each individual in their database, and they track the geolocation of the data produced, the mobile device used, comments and the vote inputs. This profiling allows Yik Yak to deliver the functionality that users expect such as location-based messages, profile scores, message scores, etc.

REFERENCES


