

Special Issue: Platformisation of News and Interactions – Regional Contexts of Crisis in Trust

Edição Especial: Plataformização de Notícias e Interações – Contextos Regionais de Crise de Confiança".

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This OBS* Special Issue has been organized within the remit of the EUMEPLAT research consortia, which is subordinate to the theme: European Media Platforms – Assessing Positive and Negative Externalities for European Culture. The term ‘externalities’ here metaphorically refers to the logics of platforms that impact media use and sharing, with implications as regards the definition and renegotiation of meanings of European identity, citizenship, community – both physical and imaginary – and belongingness. Distinguishing the European polity, which takes form in European institutions, from European culture, as something much more plural than the polity, Jostein Gripsrud (2007) referred to television as assuming a particularly important role in fostering a sentiment of European-ness, so that ‘European citizens’ may ‘in time have acquired a sense of themselves as also Europeans, not just German, British, Estonian, etc.’ (490). This secondary habitus would correspond to an additional layer in ‘affiliations and affinities’ (Ibid.), similar to national identity albeit less intense. Gripsrud, in fact, does not mention European-ness nor Europeanity, but rather speaks of the European public sphere as a broad cultural community, to which television has contributed on the quotidian level by informally disseminating factors and contexts that are an integral part of the construction of European identity, without challenging the sociocultural distinctions between nation-States.

If television, as Gripsrud flags up, was essential to the construction of the European public sphere in the first decade of the 21st century, now the debate has been somewhat recentred on the potential role of social media platforms in fostering this development. Indeed, alongside understanding the differences that stand out between countries in sharing and discussing issues pertinent to European citizenship, the focus of research on the European Public Sphere can now be that of its emergence through citizens’ conversations online (Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022: 389). In short, how do European citizens talk about Europe? Hänska and Bauchowitz (2019) highlight the transnational quality of social media (more specifically, Twitter): by facilitating interactions across borders, social media may contribute to the emergence of an ad hoc, issue-based European public sphere, with repercussions on agenda-setting in legacy media, general public discourse and public opinion.

Interestingly, despite the technological evolution spanning the timeframe between Gripsrud’s article, published in 2007, in which television was very much center-stage, and today’s context, in which

platformization prevails, even for access to TV programs, the problems with which the EU grapples continue to be very much the same, revolving around issues of mistrust, democratic deficit of EU institutions and lack of political engagement of EU citizens. According to Gripsrud (2007: 480), referring to the EU's 2001 White Paper on Governance, 'The EU is worried that the European public has lost interest in its political process, and that there is an increasing distrust in politicians and their institutions within the general population'. At the time, this loss of trust concerned the perception of the ordinary EU citizen of the EU's inability to deliver on policies, as well as the remoteness of European institutions. Likewise, Koopmans & Statham (2010) foregrounded the challenges that agents from civil society face in gaining visibility and framing issues in a European context, indicating a democratic deficit in the European Public Sphere. The fact that public discourse in the European Union (EU) primarily remains organized along national lines, rather than on a genuinely transnational basis, defies the concept of a public sphere in the EU. Kunelius and Sparks (2001) attribute this democratic deficit to a 'communication deficit' (13) that originates in the lack of ability of national media to communicate a transnational perspective.

The expansion of social media platforms over the past decade has contributed to the reduction of the EU democratic deficit in institutional terms, namely through the creation of the *together.eu* platform, sponsored by the European Parliament, geared towards promoting the participation of as many people as possible in the democratic life of the European Union, with particular emphasis on increasing voter turnout, since 2019, in the elections to the European Parliament. However, the rise in nationalist and populist movements throughout Europe in recent years has simultaneously led, according to Carpentier et al. (2023), to a conflict between Europeanization and de-Europeanization discourses within the EU, the latter challenging the core principles of the EU's foreign policy. However, as Smith (2021: 648) has noted, such challenges have not resulted in a departure from the established normative framework of EU foreign policy. In short, despite the EU having taken advantage of the opportunities for democratic engagement provided by social media platforms, the national political contexts are generally less optimistic and permeable to Europeanisation.

On the basis of a Habermasian approach (Habermas, 2001; Splichal, 2006), the formation of a European public sphere is crucial for transforming the European Union into a post-national democracy that promotes reciprocal recognition of differences between national cultures. Despite recognizing that the idea of a European public sphere may be hypothetical and utopian, Habermas considers it a solution that addresses the issue of inadequate social integration in the processes of Europeanization, while contributing to the consolidation of a well-informed and critical public that can engage in democratic discourse with political and bureaucratic powers.

Trust in the EU has suffered various downturns in recent years, raising doubts about its future. These challenges include matters concerning its economic policies and border security, along with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukraine War. Since the UK decided to leave the EU in 2016, which stands as a turning point in the legitimization of Euroscepticism, there has been ongoing concern about possible 'spillover' Brexit effects in other countries (De Luca, 2023; Rivas-de-Roca & García-Gordillo, 2022; Vasilopoulou, 2016; Walter, 2020, 2021). Indeed, challenges to further European integration persist due to both internal structural factors and external issues, with national aspects playing a key role in guiding the process of European integration. Hence, the fostering of a supranational public sphere (Koopmans & Statham, 2010) through harmonization of the communication sector, according to EU regulations, in what

has been termed as 'Eu-isation' (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2023) is of particular importance to ensure the cohesion of the EU polity, standing beyond and above 'vague nations of Europeanisation' (Ibid., 2023).

Indeed, in the era of platformization and convergence of media systems, characterized by the entry of predominantly US-based technology giants into the market, individual member-states are increasingly dependent on a European framework, which recognizes 'both national boundaries and the citizens of the European Union' (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2023) so as to respond to the challenges that lie ahead and that present themselves at a global scale.

In a context in which journalism is increasingly being accessed through social media (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016) and in which traditional gatekeeping is diminished, the processes of journalistic production allegedly become more democratic, opening themselves up to contributions from wider society. The mechanisms of participation, increasingly dependent on new technologies and digital platforms that are accessible to the generality of citizens, foster the widespread voicing of personal opinion, with concomitant distancing from professional journalistic ethics routine, based on traditional norms of impartiality and the collection of verifiable facts. The dilution of distinction between facts and opinions is indeed one of the hallmarks of an algorithmic culture that capitalizes on users' ability to drive content and redefine the originally programmed flow (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

These transformations that derive from the use of new media are threefold. Firstly, they have bearing on journalism, through a media logic (Strömbäck, 2008) that is essentially commercial and based on what appeals to the highest number. Secondly, they impact on democracy and how politics is performed and enacted (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Thirdly, they reconfigure public opinion through mobilization effected more on the basis of emotions, such as reactionary anger (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), than that of rational public debate. But this is not necessarily negative, taking into account that the fear pervasive of the television era (cf. van Zoonen, 2004), that of audiences being reduced to passivity, is countered by an apparent return of publics. These are 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015), who ostensibly have greater social awareness for ongoing conflicts and capacity for connectivity and solidarity.

Indeed, as we have seen above in the discussion on the democratic deficit in the EU, traditional institutions of representative democracy tend to be characterized by a deficit of voice (Couldry, 2008) and have been increasingly unable to truly represent citizens, culminating in sub- (or post-) politicization (Beck, 1997). While successful in circumventing these tendencies, social media have nonetheless contributed to widening a gap in the intersubjective domain, concerning issues such as hate speech, polarization, and the echoing effects of fake news. The connection between individuals and the norms of reciprocity and trust that could ensue from those connections (Couldry, 2004) thus finds itself on shaky ground. Politics, the economy, social and environmental issues cannot distance themselves from a generalized crisis in trust that impacts the exercise of traditional authority and transforms the status of public opinion and publics.

The democratic manifestation of publics stands in contrast with the global platform ecosystem, according to which a reduced number of big-tech companies are dominant in the worldwide distribution of data (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018), with social, economic, political, cultural and interpersonal implications. This means that the celebrated globalization agenda that marked the rise of the platform society is indeed regional in scope. Dominant regional players take the lead in the datafication of social transactions and daily life, thus impacting the dynamics through which identities are discussed, negotiated. and constructed online. The associated commodification of data resulting from classification practices allowed by social media

architecture can feed into political processes (e.g. Cambridge Analytica scandal case), allowing for the delivery of customized products that cater to – and reinforce – consumer preferred habits and behaviors.

This Special Issue explores topics of common concern in a globalised but regionally inflected world as they unfold on social media platforms, in a context of widespread crisis of traditional institutional authority. The articles here presented seek to inquire into the extent to which platformed interactions impact interpretative, representational, discursive, and rhetorical practices, shaping public opinion and the formation of citizenship. The first three articles focus on the EU context, stemming directly from the EUMEPLAT project. The opening article, authored by Andrea Miconi et al., holds that the Eurosceptic discourse on social media platforms in the Italian context, during the Covid-19 pandemic, revealed a surprising twist: pro-Europe actors insisted on the unique prerogatives of the Italian case, while populist actors took on a pan-European perspective by comparing Italy's restrictive measures with those of other EU countries. Over the background of the EU polycrisis (immigrant, Euro, COVID-19, Brexit) and Greece's thorny Europeanization process, the second article, by Ioanna Archontaki et al., seeks to critically examine whether a space for European concerns can be said to exist in Greek online discussions. Their study reports that the Europeanization of the Greek public sphere pivots heavily on the institutional aspects of Europe, with European peoples, territories, and values having limited prominence comparatively. José Moreno et al. address, in the third article, how Southern European political actors used social media in 2021 to cover prominent European issues, with the following results: Facebook is the most popular platform; the most addressed European issues are related to Economics; social media are used by populist politicians to increase engagement. The authors conclude by discussing Europeanization as a process of synchronized reporting and issue framing, albeit without constructing a European identity and remaining within the logics of national political struggles.

Situated within the context of contemporary Russia, the fourth article, authored by Balishyan et al., focuses on 'platform spiritualities', offering a model of contemporary individualistic spirituality based on thematic analysis of the Instagram posts of top female Russian bloggers. In contrast to traditional and religious spiritualities, platform spirituality encourages individuation through design elements centring on self-presentation geared towards the attainment of goals. This promotes a depoliticized and self-absorbed notion of subjectivity in the context of the Net's attention economy, allowing for navigation external to the political and social obstacles experienced in the offline domain. The fifth article, by Laara Carneiro et al., consists in an intricate analysis of the discursive performance of Bolsonaro on his Twitter account during Brazil's 'day of fire' environmental disaster in Amazonia, 2019. Drawing on the discourse archetypes of risk communication and populist communication, the authors argue that Bolsonaro's discursive performance aims primarily at the containment of the media event rather than the socio-environmental disaster. This is achieved through the construction of an external enemy and securitization of Amazonia as the sovereign nation's capital, thus revealing incompatibility with the prevention and mitigation of socio-environmental risks.

Contrary to the articles which flag up the dangers of algorithmic logics, the sixth article, by Foà, argues that crowdfunding service providers (CSPs) have transformed the "wisdom of the crowd" into "wisdom about the crowd" through data analysis, aggregation, and retention. To examine how platformization plays out in different crowdfunding ecosystems, Foà focuses on the implementation of non-financial crowdfunding models, business and innovation strategies, governance mechanisms, and their consequences. The

interactions and data generated by the crowd are indeed considered valuable and are utilized by CSPs to improve their platforms and support creators.

The seventh article, authored by Nicoletti and Figaro, adopts a different take on platformization, drawing on the Brazilian Journalist Profile 2021 survey data to examine the challenges that professionals confront today. The platformization of journalistic work exacerbates difficulties, with platforms influencing advertising budgets and dictating productive routines, placing the burden of responsibility on individual journalists rather than on business strategies or models. Overall, platformization has increased precariousness in journalistic work, emphasizing the need for collective organization to protect working conditions and maintain quality information.

As for the eighth article in this special edition, the author, Fabrício Mattos, offers an overview of the present trends in the platformization of news and the emerging news ecosystem in Portugal. Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of an emerging news media regime in which intermediary actors such as social media, search engines, and news aggregators dominate ways of discovering and consuming news, with the potential to shape the way journalistic content is produced and presented. To conclude, the article by Peschke et al. explores how platformed interactions shape public discourse in contexts of uncertainty and diminished trust in institutional communication, characteristic of moments of crises.

All in all, the comparative focus of this special issue embraces different regions and complementary perspectives, allowing us to highlight the contribution of the research presented to a theorization alternative to that of an Anglo-American bent. Indeed, the wide-ranging perspectives here presented, spanning Southern Europe, Latin America, and Russia, can add to a decentred outlook on the platformized effects of news and interactions of various kinds, allowing for reflection on the convergences and dissonances in the analyses undertaken.

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