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Chapter

Social Media and Democracy

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the implications of freedom of speech regarding political discussions on social media platforms, such as Facebook. The paper will look at the following aspects: the occasion when social media users have to discuss politics as a hobby and as a means to keep their ideas out of the view of face-to-face social circles, to engage in social issues and even be part of protests, to discuss politicians’ public image, and attempt to change some users’ perception about it. Within social media, we witness debates or simple displays of emotions, allowing users to speak their minds and interact with other users, showing empathy toward them. The benefits of this are related to the therapeutic effects of speaking about what upsets them or angers them and finding like-minded users.

Keywords: protests, ideology, free speech, opinions, public image

1. Introduction

The topic of social media discussions on a political issue is a relevant one, as social media is used for this purpose frequently in our contemporary world. What is more, “Scholars have always been interested in political interactions [1–3], face-to-face and online.” [4]. Politics is, after all, an issue that affects to some extent our everyday lives, and political decisions can impact us negatively or positively. Ultimately, we will have emotional reactions to political decisions, depending on our wishes, general life principles, mindsets, and values. The issue of social media discussions is a frequently discussed one, in both research papers and in articles published online. The present paper will, first of all, sum up the main relevant aspects that are highlighted by these articles. Afterward, the paper will bring to attention significant benefits of using social media for political discussions, for the individual citizens, and community, as well as for the authorities themselves.

To begin with, how do users relate to political discussions on social media, compared to face-to-face discussions? Are they more relaxed than in real life? Do they find the online environment to be safer than the face-to-face environment? According to source [5], the majority of users, which is 84%, agree that they would never say in a face-to-face environment what they say when engaging in political discussions on social media platforms. At the same time, 64% still worry about “speaking their minds about political issues on social media out of concern that they will lose friends or get criticized.” Thus, the online environment does not offer, in all cases, a means of escape and complete freedom for self-expression. While the way users create their accounts on social media should also matter, for instance, some accounts may not
include in the friends list persons that are known and close to the users, or the profile may not include all personal details, generally social media is used for connecting with other users, even if they are not from the immediate, face-to-face circle of friends. There is the issue of a public online image on social media, with certain pages on Facebook giving active fan badges to the most active members, thus reputation counts in the online environment, as well as in the face-to-face one. Social pressure from close friends, even if they are only known virtually, is still present, and generally, political disagreements lead finally to personal conflict and even to the breaking of the relationship. However, according to reference [6], while an agreement with close ones on political issues is expected since they are believed to hold similar views, it also happens to express disagreement in such cases with respect to political issues. According to source [5], 61% of social media users felt that, as they found out the different views of other users, they felt they had less in common with them, while 36% felt that they had more in common with those who disagreed with them than they had expected. Thus, dropping out of relationships due to political disagreement varies. Yet, researchers in source [4] state that “social media news use directly activates citizens’ uncivil discussions and unfriending, while uncivil political discussion directly triggers unfriending behavior.” We could argue that the extent to how serious the disagreement is regarding various political issues depends on the personal values that the users bringing arguments for or against the hold.

The truth is that, compared to everyday, face-to-face discussions on political issues, in the online environment users feel free to disagree and be more honest in expressing their own opinions: “In face-to-face discussions dissent is not too common [7, 8] because individuals often avoid political disagreement [9]. However, in social media ecologies, users are often exposed to diverse content and views shared or produced by citizens from all walks of life, from casual acquaintances to old friends.” [4]. Perhaps this is due to the less pressure they feel when confronted directly in face-to-face conversations. As a defense mechanism, people in face-to-face discussions may tend to be more diplomatic and try to maintain the relationships by seeming neutral or by even agreeing in a formal and polite way with the opinions expressed by others. It can be at times quite difficult to maintain the relationship, while at the same time arguing against the other person’s beliefs. If the beliefs and principles are very strong and part of someone’s mindset, then it may feel as a personal attack to contradict someone’s political opinions and values.

The way in which social media users react when seeing political posts in their feeds is also worth noting. Researchers in source [5] focus on the way users feel about political posts on social media, whether they enjoy the content (20%) or whether they feel “worn out” by it (37%). A percentage of 41% of social media users mentioned that does not mind political content there.

The researchers in Ref. [10] mention the fact that “Because of the efficiency, volume, and timeliness of information, online social networking (OSN), for example, twitter.com, has become an important source of information,” especially for “learning about news,” as well as for sharing them. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are listed among the basic means of keeping up with news: “According to recent Pew Research data, social media platforms, especially Facebook (36%), YouTube (23%), and Twitter (15%), are fundamental sources of news [11].” [4] Social media platforms also allow for the participation of those reading and watching the news. Commenting and discussing are part of the reactions that can be expressed in the social media community. Interactivity is the main feature of social media platforms, unlike reading printed newspapers and just watching television, where interaction
was limited to face-to-face discussions, sometimes with persons that were not even really interested in the topics or not with too much political background. With respect to sharing news on social media, thus, “each user can act as a source and spreader to the information, either forwarded in full or with modifications and additions.” One of the advantages of using social media is the fact that news can be reported faster, especially those of “accidents, natural disasters, and incidents of terrorism.” The discussions related to political issues could be included as reactions to the news, as well as to the other’s comments. Yet, how informative, relaxing, or stressful can such discussions be? Some users can take their time to bring arguments and proofs, while others can simply comment based on their emotions at the moment. According to the survey mentioned source [5], “some 59% of social media users indicate that they find it stressful and frustrating to talk about politics on social media with people they disagree with, while just 35% say that these discussions are generally interesting and informative.” One issue that needs to be taken into account, as Setiawan et al. ([10], p. 3537) advise, is the credibility of information shared on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter: “false information that spreads on social media has serious consequences.” As a result, the discussions on political issues on social media may also bring to the attention of social media users the fact that some news can be fake and that they should be cautious. Once proof for claiming that a piece of news is fake, users can only benefit from the experience of others, instead of starting to argue based on the emotional effect of the news and express how they feel about something fictitious. The strategy of sensationalism in mass media is known for attracting readers and reactions from readers. Regarding sensationalism on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, “findings suggest that ‘hard’ news topics like government affairs and science/technology were treated sensationally just as often as traditionally sensationalized categories like crime or lifestyle and society. In addition, audiences are not necessarily more likely to respond to sensational treatments.” [12].

Social media political discussions are thus an occasion for interactivity, and for connecting with persons from all over the world that are preoccupied with the same political topics. They also allow freedom of expression, to the extent that users feel they have it, as they are always limited by the way they have chosen to reveal details in their social media account profile and connections with more or less close contacts. Some users may also feel that anyone can publicly access their political opinions, gain access to their personal data, and thus ruin their public image and various business and personal relationships as a result. However, at least up to some extent, the connection between democracy and expressing opinions on social media platforms is regarded as a necessary feature of democracy. Researchers in Ref. [13] believe that social media platforms are tools of democracy, since “the key insight at the heart of our ongoing research is that political freedom depends on public debate.” Commenting on various political issues online can achieve this, and make citizens believe that they have the freedom to express their honest opinions on political issues: “democracy is much more than a system of regular multiparty elections. It also requires that citizens feel able, and have the resources, to challenge those in power. Ideally, it requires people to engage in an honest discussion about the best ways to live and work together, and to assess each other’s contributions openly, inclusively, and frankly.” [13].

We can immediately think of a frequently discussed issue that started off as a medical emergency—the COVID-19 pandemic crisis—and which later turned into a political event. This was because the rights of the citizens were restrained, in places where liberal democracies had, until then, been the norm and which ended up in
lockdowns. The western world entered lockdowns and all sorts of restrictions regarding those that were vaccinated against COVID-19 and those that were not. Regarding the topic of vaccination, Facebook groups were opened which were dedicated to COVID-19 vaccination side effects, where various problems regarding health issues after the vaccine had occurred to people from all over the world and to their close ones. Some even knew parents or older relatives that had died from the vaccine and were trying to issue a warning for the others. At some point, however, the group was no longer available. It was against the mainstream trend regarding pro-vaccination, which was held by the leaders of the states. The Facebook page of Romania’s Ministry of Health has presented information for the citizens regarding COVID-19 vaccination and certificates, regarding advantages for the health of yourself and of your close ones. Comments have appeared with negative aspects set forth, such as how the vaccines could have dangerous side effects, in short- or on long-term. Some users believed in conspiracy theories, others believed that the vaccine was experimental and not tested enough to be good, while others believed the vaccine was not available in enough doses to be able to get it. Moreover, the companies producing the vaccines were also discussed, and some were considered better than others due to the reputation mentioned in mass media. For instance, Astra Zeneca was considered dangerous after bad publicity, and some persons only wanted Pfizer, while it was not available at the center where they went. Romania’s Ministry of Health Facebook page also promoted vaccination by showing pictures of various persons, including young ones, claiming they have decided to take the vaccine for everyone’s benefit. Some users praised them in comments, while others believed it was wrong to advertise such cases. Users should also feel the right to express ethical concerns regarding the work of various politicians and feel that they can influence the situation positively by unmasking their corruption. Such opportunities may influence the public image of politicians, yet the citizens should feel that they can do something when needed. Ethical concerns over the work of politicians have been the topic of debate all throughout the ages. People expect politicians to represent them and their interests, while also being fair and correct in their approach. We can only remember various protests against corruption, which, even if at first sight they seem based on a general statement, and not a particular case, reflect the values and interests of citizens. Thus, users can find social media posts as a way to protest against what they disagree with, express their emotions, as well as to try to express an honest argument opinion. Users can also become aware of ideological issues by speaking their minds on social media platforms, and ignoring the common, mainstream trends preaching certain values that users may not agree with. Arguing on social media platforms could be seen as a mild form of protest, and as a less invasive one.

2. Social media discussions as hobby and as a means of escape from the face-to-face social circle

Man cannot live outside a social circle, as well as outside a community. Man, constantly searches for those with common interests in order to be able to interact with them. According to reference [14], social networking sites (SNS) can fulfill the needs of socializing, which can be translated into participating in political discussions: “findings suggest that SNSs satisfy users’ socializing needs [15], assist them in building social capital [16], make it more likely that they will participate in civic life [17], and encourage them to engage in political behavior (i.e., participation, involvement,
and voting).” After all, political issues tend to be part of the welfare of the community one is part of. For example, in a neighborhood, one is likely to be part of the community and contribute to the welfare of the surroundings. Similarly, mayors tend to promote themselves by making better the aspect of the neighborhoods by planting ornamental flowers around the citizens’ houses, green spaces, as well as parks. This is generally seen as a sign that something obvious is done by the mayor and the citizens are likely to vote for him/her. Thus, political issues could be seen as being part of a collectivity, and thus part of collectivist values. According to Hofstede, individualism refers to someone’s personal values and principles, while collectivism refers to values and principles that have in view the good of the entire community [18]. Political issues discussions generally are concerned with the good of the immediate community one lives in, such as one’s neighborhood, when mayor elections get close, or such as the ones regarding the election of one’s city or town’s general mayor. At the same time, electing a president for the country is also a decision that requires the community’s approval, as well as asking about the community’s opinion. The first word that comes to mind when electing a mayor or president is the responsibility, which is responsibility directed to the entire community’s problems and everyone should have in view the solutions proposed by the candidates. Debating and asking about opinions within the community should be a collective effort for electing a new political leader. However, at times, it may happen that a person does not find an approval for his/her own opinion within the immediate circle of the community where he/she lives, thus it may be tempting to resort to finding like-minded persons within social media.

As an example: in 2019, Claudiu Craciun, leader of his own created political party, DEMOS, announced he wanted to candidate for the presidential campaign in Romania. For this, however, he needed a large number of signatures from supporters in order to be mentioned on the voting lists. While he did not make it with his party on the voting lists, he gained large popularity on his Facebook page and that of his party, and also managed to raise awareness of the rule that actually limits the rights of anyone wishing to be on the voting lists to be there, since it was impossible to gather such a large number of signatures. He did a large campaign through Facebook and had placed to gather signatures all over the country. He even traveled personally to raise signatures himself, as well as his team. He found supporters on Facebook, commenting how brave he was, others believed he had a much too idealistic outlook. His focus was on fixing social issues in Romania, such as inequalities, and also on giving more access to a less car-crowded city, with cars parked everywhere otherwise. However, the system was not favorable for him even to be on the list of candidates, which raised debates on his and his party’s Facebook page. This was an issue everyone had noticed, and on Facebook, they had the occasion to discuss it freely. Many Romanians leaving the country during the transition period was also a frequently discussed problem that many were preoccupied with, so discussions followed as Claudiu Craciun raised this issue. Others, instead, disagreed with him, for personal reasons. They believed his approach was too much left-oriented.

The issue of finding like-minded persons with respect to political opinions can be presented in relation to individualism versus collectivism. Those persons seeking the opportunity to discuss with someone that is like-minded with respect to political opinions may find others persons that agree with them online. Otherwise, “political demonstrators in collectivistic countries are socially avoided because they are perceived to be a threat to harmonious interpersonal relationships.” [19]. As a result, in the online medium, those persons that are more conflictual with respect to their political beliefs can find a means of self-expression, by arguing for their
beliefs, instead of doing so in their immediate circle of close persons. In this way, they can argue with other people met online and avoid conflict with known persons in their immediate circle of acquaintances. They can challenge the beliefs of persons met online that they would not meet in the face-to-face environment, and as a result avoid conflict with known persons in their immediate friends’ circle in the face-to-face environment, thus without running the risk of threatening their immediate social relationships, which can be maintained as harmonious. Thus, using the online environment could be compared to avoiding conflict in close, face-to-face circles, due to the fact that the need for confrontational discussions with respect to political issues is satisfied online. The use of online opportunities could be regarded as beneficial, and as psychological compensation for what is going on in real, face-to-face life. Harmonious relationships could be preserved with those contacts that matter, while confrontational political discussions could be moved, instead, online, just as we can find compensation in dreams and fantasies for what we are missing in the real world. This is not simple avoidance of conflict, but dealing with it in a medium where consequences at the social and personal level regarding relationships are minimal if any at all. Close communities are based on common values, and what is more one’s reputation also depends on establishing common ground with respect to agreeing on common values, including political ones.

Most of the time, political issues mean opening up conflictual issues, about which most people do not wish to be confronted. Confronting someone’s political convictions may mean confronting someone’s personal values, which can seem aggressive, and, thus, personal relationships can be affected. As a result, confronting instead persons met online may help provide the person’s need to discuss disagreements with others and at the same time avoid discussing this with significant other persons. Thus, the online medium offers the means to escape the usual, face-to-face social circle any person has at hand. We may not always seek like-minded persons to agree with us; instead, we may seek to justify our own opinions by arguing in favor of them with other persons that we contradict. However, this type of behavior is not recommended in the immediate, face-to-face social circle if we still care about the relationships that we wish to preserve. Therefore, using the opportunity to discuss such issues online can be regarded as a safer alternative. This type of behavior could be regarded as participating in a game, and not as having anything personal against anyone. However, challenging deeply set beliefs and values in other persons can lead them to feel that they are attacked personally and respond in a personal way. Conflictual discussions are difficult to handle, especially in the case of political issues, and those carrying them out should be aware of the consequences at the level of personal relationships. The people met online may not even feel as real, since the possibility of ever meeting them in real life, in a face-to-face setting is a remote one. Thus, the online medium in this case can function as the setting in a dream, or in a fantasy, where there are no threatening consequences. Even if these persons did meet face-to-face, perhaps they would be aware of the causes of their behavior and they would know that their arguing for or against various political issues and political beliefs of others are simple strategies, just as in certain games, and that nothing personal is involved, that no personal attack against someone and his/her beliefs is truly intended.

Such discussions could be regarded as an escape from social conventions, where agreeing with someone else is simply done out of politeness considerations, as well as considerations regarding the preservation of the respective relationship. In the online medium, such social conventions and precautions regarding preserving the public image and social conventions are simply disregarded. The persons involved
in conflictual discussions feel that they have the freedom to express themselves with honesty, without worrying about social rules. This can have a beneficial effect since tension is reduced for the respective person, who can afterward resume his/her usual life. Otherwise, frustrations may accumulate and the relationships with close ones can be affected negatively.

As an example, the Romanian police has a Facebook page where they promote colleagues that can serve as an example of moral correctness and acts of bravery, such as policemen that punish drunk drivers, or that can save old persons or children by finding them in the woods if they are lost or even policemen that find stolen bicycles and restore them to the owner. During holidays, policemen post photos of them surveying roads in helicopters and ensuring the safety of the traffic, or they warn against various weather conditions and give advice to drivers on how to reach their destination safely. They also warn them against using too much speed. All these posts can serve as moral examples and advice. Some users, in the comments section, either agree or start discussing about corrupted policemen, and warn that the Romanian police is trying, in a political way, to promote their image by tricking people into believing their good intention. In context, in the communist period, the police were not popular with the Romanians, as the policemen were part of the oppressive regime. Now, as compensation, Romanian users may allude to the old historical circumstances of communism and express their anger or disapproval.

In this sense, conflictual conversations in the online medium can help satisfy anyone's wish for individualism at some point, anyone's wish for asserting his/her own opinions regarding political issues, while, at the same time, keeping in mind the fact that living in a community means respecting collectivist values. The care for maintaining the harmony of social relationships is a typical feature of collectivist cultures. All cultures, at some point, have a collectivist layer that should be minimally respected in order to live together in a civilized manner in a community, no matter what personal values and beliefs a person may hold. As a result, once these convictions, values, mindsets, or beliefs are expressed in a way that is not harmful, it can be considered beneficial for living together harmoniously in a community. Freedom of self-expression is thus not so simple, once preserving harmonious relationships needs to be taken into consideration. However, expressing oneself freely in the online medium could be considered similar to the concept of carnivalesque, meaning that there is a right time when conventions and rules are broken down and disregarded so that tensions are relieved, people find ways of expressing themselves freely and living out their fantasies for a limited amount of time, and this is all to the benefit of society.

According to reference [20], the carnivalesque, as well as the ritualesque are present in “public events aimed at transforming the attitudes or behaviors of participants or spectators,” such as those in political events meant “to effect social change,” for example, “gay pride parades, northern Irish orange order parades and Bloody Sunday commemorations, and American anti-drunk driving programs.” Certain protests and political engagement acts can be seen as a temporary disregard for rules in a safe environment since some are also supported by mainstream political values. The researcher mentioned in source [21] that has noticed this aspect in relation to street protests: “according to source [22], street protests are carnival-like expression forms,
through which the establishment ensures its survival in power, and that the politi-
cal and media elite in fact encourage, in order to protect the authoritarian system or
the populist regime. Carnival theory explains that the folk celebrations that allowed
treating the authority in terms of humor and parody have offered the oppressed lower
classes a relief from the rigidity of the feudal system." Thus, this is an old strategy of
those in power to ensure the security of their imposing rules and various regimes.
Other forms of disregarding rules temporarily are employed strategically by authori-
ties, such as city mayors. Even closing down streets during the weekend for car traffic
and allowing pedestrians to use them to walk on foot or to use their bicycles, roller-
skates, scooters or other vehicles helps authorities assure citizens that they are allowed
freedom from time to time. In this case, politicians are aware of the fact that citizens
complain of the heavy traffic and of having no place to use their bicycles. In order not
to let citizens build up too much dissatisfaction with the authorities’ decisions, they
let them use during weekends some streets normally occupied by cars to offer them a
feeling of relaxation. There are other examples of cases where authorities are aware of
the necessity of allowing citizens to protest, yet where these protests are kept under
control. They are also reinforcing mainstream values of the current ideology. For
instance, protests regarding the issues of respect for minorities could be regarded as
part of the mainstream agenda of showing respect for diversity. Multiculturalism can
be regarded as a contemporary value held by and also promoted by mainstream poli-
tics. Some protests are the safe choice of simply showing off in a carnivalesque and
ritualized manner, in a way meant to promote certain values rather than to show that
they are not supported by the mainstream trends. Some protests are ritualized forms
of simply reminding everyone that certain values and beliefs are important for society
and that they should be supported, as well as practiced. The practices may remind
of celebrations where, in a way reminding of fantasy, minorities look like the major-
ity, and tend to impose the standards of society. However, their means of using such
events to pretend that they set the mainstream trends remind us of old times’ festivals
where the mainstream order and rules were temporarily reversed. Those watching
such manifestations can simply wonder what if, in fact, the normal world looked like
this, and can serve as a means to question mainstream values and beliefs, and also to
realize that there could be an alternative way of living life and establishing rules. In
fantasies, as well as in dreams, rules can be challenged, and people can, temporarily,
feel free. They can imagine a world where individually held beliefs and values gain
primacy, where liberalism is at its peak.

Previous research has considered connections between carnivalesque, politics and
protests, such as the one mentioned by the researcher in [23], who states that there is
"progressive public transgression,” connected with “carnivalesque protest,” as well as
“critical democratic citizenship.” In the sense in which this paper sees carnivalesque
applied to social media, it can be a means to disregard the rules of face-to-face
political discussions. One can fully express political issue disagreement without then
being rejected by the social circle, as it usually tends to happen when conflictual
attacking someone else’s fundamental values and beliefs. The online medium, at
times, may serve as a space where rules are temporarily abolished, meaning rules that
usually apply socially in relationships with close persons in the community. In the
online medium, one can focus on the arguments for or against a political issue, and
not worry about the personal relationship that has been established with a certain
other person. At the same time, the online medium allows users, to some extent at
least, to express their anger at various political figures and issues in their country or
in the world in a way in which they may not feel free to express themselves publicly
in a face-to-face environment. There is also a reversal of power, from authorities to individual users, also in a carnivalesque manner. All hierarchies are reversed, since individual users, sometimes under the protection of anonymity, if they choose to create an account not using their full name or offer all their personal data, can attack the image of politicians, as well as their decisions on social media. The actions of users can change the perception of politicians or simply be a means for users to express their anger in a way that will not have negative consequences on their meaningful relationships with others, and also will not result in vandalizing the city by protesting in person, in a face-to-face manner. As a result, freedom from the usual rules is one of the features of political discussions on social media platforms, which can be used to the users’ benefit.

3. Social media discussions as a means of social engagement and protest

Social media has, according to research, the effect of engaging citizens to participate in political discussions and also in political life: “participation in online political groups strongly predicts offline political participation by engaging members online. However, we fail to confirm [...] that there is a corresponding positive effect on political knowledge, likely due to low-quality online group discussion.” [24] What is more, since social media usage is most appealing to the young generation, online social media groups and discussions can be regarded as means to engage them to participate in political life: “amidst concern about declining youth political engagement, it is often suggested that social media can provide a solution to this challenge.” [25] However, political interest is generally already present and not necessarily triggered by the use of social media: “social media may be providing a new outlet for some young adults; it is not re-engaging the young adults who have already lost interest in politics.” [25] Political interest may, however, become aroused due to the peer pressure phenomenon. Once someone’s group of friends has an interest in political debate on social media, it is likely that all members may feel pressured to join in the discussions, since in this way they will feel that they are accepted by the group. Groups are formed on the basis of common interests, and in order to maintain the relationships, everyone should be able to join in any discussions and be thus informed on the topic. Political interest is no exception. Otherwise, certain members of the group may feel left out of the conversations and, ultimately left out of the group.

The digital era provides new technology-based tools that can help promote civic political engagement. Examples can include the election campaigns in the USA from 2008 and 2012, as well as Obama’s strategy of using interactive communication and the empowerment of his citizens, which “has led to new thinking around how political communication can be performed.” Thus, at the time, “Obama’s campaign happened against a backdrop of activism” which is described by the researcher in the source [26] as led by participants that are ‘internet-mediated issue generalists’: ‘citizens who populate forums, contribute to blogs, and initiate petitions’” [27]. By using social media, even just by discussing politics and not necessarily initiating various actions, users have the feeling that they can act, and not just be the passive recipients of the political actions of public figures and their decisions. By using social media, users have the feeling that they can make their own decisions, and also launch calls to action for like-minded persons. Otherwise, issues regarding protests and social unrest can threaten the safety of everyone once a protest is started physically. Even protests that occur frequently and are accepted by those in power can be more controllable
and allow the citizens to feel that they have the power to act and participate in political life by standing up for their beliefs. Once such actions are not allowed, citizens may express their dissatisfaction with their life and with the politicians’ decisions by blaming them and by acting violently. In allowing face-to-face protests to be organized frequently, and by allowing users to express themselves freely on social media, the state allows them the right to free speech. Expressing their opinions matters, and they believe that they can in this way communicate with those in power and that they will listen to them. Strikes are another means of communicating citizens’ dissatisfaction with their working conditions and living conditions. However, both protests and strikes that are organized physically cause blocking of various streets for car traffic, public transport deviations, and, in the case of strikes, if those on strike are working in public transport, this can affect various citizens, such as commuters or travelers. Thus, in this respect, using social media for protests instead can be more convenient as it has less consequence, if any negative consequences on everyone’s daily lives.

Why did the diminishing political interest of some persons happen, which led to a lack of political engagement that is usual in a democracy on the part of its citizens? This could be due to the much too great power and authority of the state over the citizen: “It has been argued that with power in the hands of the modern state or global corporations and institutions, rather than the citizen, the lack of knowledge and interest in politics among the citizenry limits participation to voting in processes for electing political elites only.” [27]. Another reason could be the lack of interest in collectivist values, and thus in the interests of the community as a whole. Around the world, there is a change in values, from collectivism to individualism, from the welfare of the entire community to the good of the individual [28].

The very definition of democracy includes interaction between citizens and authority figures, and this is not possible without the engagement of citizens in political life: “democratic participation, although a highly contested concept, may be understood as the extended involvement of individuals in a collective political decision-free and/or decision-making process.” [27].

Among the social media platforms that have been used to organize protests was Twitter, and significant events include the Twitter Revolutions of 2009, which were two protests related to climate change. Such an event shows how social media can influence politics, and organize collective action by engaging others to join [29]. Facebook and Twitter played a part in organizing protests related to the environment in Chile: “In 2011, Chile experienced two massive protest movements—one against the cost and quality of public education and another against the construction of power plants in Patagonia.” [30]. Another example of protest where individuals used social media to communicate and organize themselves is the student protest in 2009 in Austria: “The participants of the ‘unibrennt’ (‘university is burning’) protest movement, which saw the occupation of Vienna’s largest lecture hall by students in October 2009, using social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, to a large extent. Communication, thus, was anchored in the participants’ interconnected individual and personal (online) networks, so both in- and out-group communication took place within a media space that is referred to as networked publics.” [31]. This protest engaged large groups of participants, and it received large attention from the media. Another example of social media use for protests is using social media for the Gezi protests in Turkey, “an environmental sit-in that turned into a social movement in Turkey,” and which “is often compared to the Arab Spring and the occupy movement with regard to the importance attributed to social media.” One significant aspect of these protests in Turkey is “how trust was built and maintained among
the protestors.” Thus, “on one side, technological affordances worked as an interface that facilitated social identification, which helped in trusting the person behind the information. On the other side, technological affordances themselves invited different levels of trust, subject to both physical constraints and technological barriers.” [32].

Another aspect that is worth mentioning as far as the relationship between freedom of social media and the situation of the regime (whether it is more authoritarian or more permissive) is that there are situations where social media users can be free even in an authoritarian regime. This is the case with Chinese social media. Researchers in source [33], “based on a dataset of 13.2 billion blog posts published on Sina Weibo—the most prominent Chinese microblogging platform—during the 2009-2013 period,” find that “a shockingly large number of posts on highly sensitive topics were published and circulated on social media. For instance, we find millions of posts discussing protests, and these posts are informative in predicting the occurrence of specific events. We find an even larger number of posts with explicit corruption allegations, and that these posts predict future corruption charges of specific individuals.” This example could be presented as proof that during an authoritarian regime, citizens need some moments of breaking from authority and from too rigid rules. Chinese authorities could have felt that online social media discussions could function as a means of an outlet for frustrations in some cases, and that freedom of speech and of expressing personal opinions is significant to preserving social order and for making citizens still obey the rules that they are imposed. At some point, self-expression in political discussions could function as confessions to those that feel the same way, and have a therapeutic function. Rather than start acting violently against the rules in society, it is preferable for users to have a space where they can speak their minds freely, and also feel safe among like-minded people. Even arguing in a conflictual manner and writing critically about the current ideology and imposed regime can function as an outlet that is needed for the users to resume their daily activities afterward. However, some discussions lead to organizing actual, real-life protests against political issues that upset the users.

The Arab Spring of 2011 meant a series of uprisings against much too authoritarian regimes, and social media platforms were used for citizens to express themselves and join in the protests. Facebook was used in Egypt for information, for making citizens feel united in their common purpose, as well as to start mobilization among them. The uprising was successful since the authoritarian regime of President Hosni Mubarak was ended.

Political engagement may be prompted by the fact that social media also allows users to create information, not just to read it: “The optimist theoreticians of social media participation [34] believe that, in the web 2.0 age, we are witnessing the transformation of the audience from information consumers into information.” [21] We could say that, through the very way it is built, social media simply prompts reactions from its users, and political discussions and engagement are no exception.

4. Social media discussions and their effect on politicians’ public image

Social media is used not only by citizens but also by politicians themselves. However, politicians are not as interested in discussing with citizens and voters on their accounts, as they are interested in building a good political image [21]. If this is the case, then discussions, if allowed, under the politicians’ posts on social media can be simply disregarded by the user and left unread. However, if comments are
allowed, then citizens are offered an outlet to speak their minds and also to react to other users’ comments and even reply to them. Users can share the politicians’ posts on social media and comment on them with other users. However, these are simple discussions and serve as an outlet for feelings regarding various actions and values of the respective politicians. Those citizens that are against a certain politician, and do not wish to vote for him, will most likely not be influenced by positive discussions of other users on social media. Personal opinions and beliefs can be too strong to be changed, and their source could be the respective person’s interests, values which were acquired individually or from the family circle, the education received, as well as living conditions. Unless a certain politician is accused of corruption, for example, the public image is too strongly built in the media to be changed by users. Public images of politicians are built through planning strategically their actions and gestures, and then having these are advertised. In this way, they can impress the citizens by planting flowers in their city, organizing various events, fixing old buildings, or helping animals, homeless people, or old people. Citizens mostly project on politicians and on their gestures various images they have in mind, and they can like them or not, they can agree with their actions or not, and they can even hope that some politicians will represent efficiently their interests once they vote for them.

All these wishes and hopes can be the topic of political discussions on social media. If a social media user is famous with the community of social media users for his/her political posts, then he/she may have the power to influence certain followers, that rely on his/her posts for being informed about politics. However, this phenomenon is also common to all social groups, where someone manages to establish himself or herself as a leader regarding various opinions, and other members tend to agree with him or her.

The example of Claudiu Craciun’s promotional campaign for being on the voting lists for president in 2019, as well as his later attempts to include his party, DEMOS, on the voting lists, can be given as becoming widespread due to Facebook. Those agreeing with him would share and promote him and his party’s ideas, while others would disagree with his perspectives and express their opinions. The sharing of his intentions has managed to make him quite known, at least within a certain circle. Claudiu Craciun is a lecturer in political science at the National University of Political and Administrative Studies in Bucharest, Romania. Other professors at the same political science faculty also have Facebook pages where they present their ideas, commenting about what is going on the political scene. Oana Baluta, senior lecturer, and professor Mihaela Miroiu are preoccupied with gender inequality issues. Oana Baluta is also concerned with human rights in general, and also with protests. The two professors offer their perspectives on these issues, and users interacting with them may agree or disagree, not just with them, but with political personalities, they are either promoting or criticizing with regards to their ideas. Other political analysts sharing their views, from the same faculty, include professors Andrei Taranu and Cristian Pirvulescu, who tend to take a more detached view in their analysis of the events. However, users’ reactions to their posts show their subjectivity and personal issues in dealing with authorities of all kinds.

During the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022, social media posts, as well as mass-media posts, made Putin look as evil and Zelensky, together with his people, as heroes. This is a matter of image, however, which is not necessarily accepted by all social media users. Some users have indeed sided with Ukraine, while other users argued against them, especially in Romanian context. One of the main issues was that for the Romanians in Ukraine there was no education in schools offered in the
Romanian language. For nationalists, this was a problem. In this case, the image of political leaders is projected in a certain way not just by social media users, but also by mass media published articles, which are then shared on social media platforms.

In the meantime, the image of the politician may also be used as a scapegoat [35]. Many users blame for disagreeing with the society’s values and principles, for the economic and cultural situation of the country, and for various other disappointments of various politicians. They may mention various politicians’ names in a negative manner and present their frustrations in online discussions on social media. Politicians, however, do not engage in dialog in such cases, and the dialog may take place among various users that agree or disagree. When voting for a politician, citizens can place their high hopes on the promises made by the politician to improve their lives. Afterward, various disappointments are blamed on the politicians’ actions or even lack of actions. However, most of the time, political discussions are a simple means of blaming various disappointments in personal life on external circumstances that are not under the citizens’ control, and which are made up of consequences of authorities’ decisions.

Therefore, political discussions on social media may have the function in this case of creating for users the illusion that they are in control of what is going on at a political level. Once they are informed about what is going on, they may feel the need to share this knowledge with others, in the hope that they can act in order to do something about the current situation. By debating they feel that they are raising awareness about significant political issues of public interest and that they can control the way others can react after reading what there are commenting on. Some comments may be against the mainstream values, which they view as impositions, and as means of authority figures to control the citizens and use their actions for the interest or against the interest of the state, or the European Union. Some users may also try to fight against fake news and raise awareness on what information is fake and what information others should ignore. By discussing politics on social media, thus, some users have the feeling that they can influence others in reacting in different ways which could be beneficial to their interests. Some social media users can be very persuasive, and truly lead others to react in a way that may or may not be the best choice. There are many sides to the actions of politicians, to the way they build up their images, to their promises, and, finally, to the results of their actions. Some strategies may prove to work, while others not, in both the case of politicians and of leading social media users. Many sides to the problem need to be considered in order to devise an efficient strategy with respect to political action. What is more, unexpected incidents may happen, and then the strategy can be compromised. For instance, leading other users and engaging them to take part in a protest may seem a good strategy; however, what they ask for during the protest may be impossible to get, such as higher salaries, when the economic state of the country is not very good.

By accessing a politician’s social media profile, citizens can also look at other users’ comments and try to predict if he/she could be elected, or could have success in his/her actions in the future. For this, politicians need the citizens’ support and vote.

5. Conclusions

Social media offers citizens a means of expressing themselves and also interacting with others in order to understand the current political situation, try to raise others’ awareness on various issues, to try to organize protests, or simply speak their minds
and offer arguments for their opinions regarding what is currently going on. What is significant is the necessity for the existence of such places actually as a strategy to maintain social order and preserve the mainstream rules. Once citizens feel that they can speak freely, they have moments when they express their revolt, but otherwise, they maintain the social order established and conform to it. Social media political discussions can be regarded as emotional outlets, yet it can also happen that these discussions result in organizing protests. Social media has the power to help users connect with many others from various parts of the country or of the world in order to discuss, present, argue in favor of an issue, or simply learn about other users’ predictions about future political situations and analyses of events.

Just as with any issue, political issues may seem to get better once the person upset by them starts feeling better. Discussing with someone else may lead to a better state of mind, just like confessing to anyone about what is on your mind. A therapist may not receive a patient that is preoccupied or troubled by political issues, since there may not be much to be done about them. A therapist may simply suggest to such a person to be less involved in issues that are beyond his/her control. However, any case and any person are different. Others may simply enjoy discussing politics online and see it as a pleasant activity, as a hobby. Others may feel better once they share their concerns regarding the political situation with other users. Others still may feel well after letting go of everything that is on their mind and that they cannot do in their immediate social circles.

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