Original Article

Digital Realism: a Dialectic Approach to Understanding Digital Media's Social Functions in View of Ethnic-Identity Related Online Activism

Márton Iványi
Corvinus University of Budapest, Doctoral School of Social Communication, HUNGARY

Abstract: Apart from the evident attributes and tendencies of digital media that justify the social and politico-economic criticism of understanding their structure and relevant mechanisms, under certain circumstances they indeed show traits of effective online mobilisation for (sub)political participation. Two case studies are given to demonstrate the mobilisation potential within digital media in the context of ethnic identity-related (sub)political engagement, and to juxtapose such qualities with other patterns conditioned by large-scale politico-economic and international power-related structures and agendas. Such findings that confirm the understanding of digital media as platforms and applications for organic and uncompromised online participation and networking can support reclaiming digital media's optimist aspirations to be a public sphere. Herein a *via media* is proposed between digital optimism and digital pessimism in support of earlier nuanced approaches to the social functions of digital media, which indeed correctly recognised the limits of online environment as a hypothetical public sphere, thus can be referred to as digital realist.

Keywords: digital media; public sphere; internet; public sphere; social participation

Introduction

The debate around the social implications of digital media has become polarised between contradicting notions. Accordingly, digital media has recently been interpreted in the context of certain universalist digital optimistic visions anchored by a form of a hypothetical electronic agora: what is seen as a platform for communities of practice; (Shirky 2009) and/or a forum of unlimited self-expression (Ghoneim 2012) and/or a new public sphere (Benkler 2006; Castells 2009; Wellman 2011) due to its allegedly interactive, emancipatory, democratizing and empowering capacities. On the other hand, opposing views of digital pessimism hold that as digital media intersects other social, political, and economic factors, it becomes compromised as tendencies of information control and surveillance (i.e., Robins −

Webster 1998) censorship and propaganda (Morozov 2011) and/or the politics/economy of digital capitalism (Schiller 1999; Aouragh 2012) can clearly be observed. The first approach, either out of naivety or negligence and/or other reasons, ignores various kinds of power realities Whilst the latter either falls in the trap of an academic paranoia or out of an excessive skepticism, underestimates their capacities for supporting certain grassroots movements, that later, in fact, turn out to be, or seem to be successful without serving, in essence, any "hidden agenda."

Ever since my first forays into the contemporary discourses of digital media (Iványi 2015), I have considered these corresponding, antagonistic arguments reductive vis-à-vis the complex reality of digital media's social implications. On the other hand, digital pessimistic and optimistic views otherwise seem to be valid to a certain degree, as both offer partial truth that needs to be captured and integrated.As this will be shown, a remarkable part of the surrounding discussion is articulated around whether or not digital media constitutes a/the new public sphere. I support balanced approaches (e.g., Habermas 2006; Neuman 2010; Papacharissi 2010; van Dijck 2012; Fuchs 2014), which I hereinafter call 'digital realist' *tout court*, in their efforts to examine and validate optimistic digital arguments about the hypothetical causal relationship between the cyberspace and community engagement. In this context, nothing more and nothing less is at stake, than an alternative public sphere (cf. Habermas, 1962), and this particular model of digital realism owes a great deal to the mentioned, nuanced and complex approaches for setting up an inspirational environment. In this spirit, I seek to identify the objective foundations or ultimate grounds of the social mobilising potential within digital media by focusing on two independent case studies and assessing whether such practices correspond to the existing views mentioned above. This paper at hand thus examines what I believe to be fundamental in understanding social dynamics of digital media, namely group activities without any direct links to politics/economics, such as the online dimension of a movement (practically: an online group on a social networking site) that aims to achieve the goal of bilingual language use in public areas of Southern Slovakia, and another group that intended to boycott a transnational brewing company. Both activities have become important online social fora in Hungary and its neighboring countries so certain conclusions can be drawn about the topic at hand. I specifically chose to tackle action that is expressly related to ethnic identity-related civic participation which constitutes political action in a way but is generally independent of large-scale politico-economic and international power-related structures and agendas. For the idea of focusing on online (sub)political action seems to me to offer the best hope of vindicating the mobilisation potential within digital media without overlooking the general validity of social and/or politico-economic criticism when discussing relevant social functions. Such identified potential can arguably challenge the existing cultural, social, and political realms of status quo by movements untied to power formations identified by digital pessimism (i.a. Morozov 2011; Aouragh 2012; Schiller 2014).

My thesis considers hereinafter the main existing models of digital optimism and digital pessimism and finds them wanting in view of recent experiences, at the same time develops and defends a novel 'digital realist' model as an intellectual middle road. Thus, in view of its pursuit of balance, the present paper follows the intellectual traditions of earlier nuanced approaches, however, it provides a significantly different point of view and field of analysis. Some of these standpoints although draw important conclusions concerning the social functions of digital media, mostly do not attach explicit importance to the component of ethnic identity in their fields of vision.

In this spirit, this paper argues for recognizing digital media as being a viable tool for the expression of self-categorization-based (Tajfel & Turner 1986; McGuire 1988) ethnic identity (cf. McKinley et al., 2014) without being necessarily understood as

cyberbalkanization (cf. Sunstein 2009) and for (sub-)political engagement without being subjected to political factors described by current rather pessimistic or sceptic discourses of censorship, oppression (Morozov 2011), digital capitalism (Schiller 1999) or ICT-imperialism and geopolitics (Aouragh 2012). All in all, this digital realist model at hand interprets digital media as a *limited public sphere* or public spherical (Neuman 2011; Cunningham 2001) and encourages further research whilst offers a *via media* between digital pessimism and optimism.

Nature of digital media and reminiscences of a new public sphere

Advocates of digital media tend to acknowledge these applications and services in question as a new surface, nay, a *condito sine qua non* for an alternative public sphere envisaged by Jürgen Habermas (1962). The intellectual source of such ideas springs from the *opus magnum* of Jürgen Habermas, namely the *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, even though the author himself could hardly have based his thesis on a back then "infant-aged" internet when introducing his thesis in question. Still, the normative notion deployed by Habermas that interprets the public sphere as "a society engaged in critical public debate" (1962: 52) has been projected onto the internet ever since.[1]

Digital optimism

Accordingly, all too often has it been assumed in this "post-Habermasian" tradition that internet *per se* liberates discussion and thus paves the way for egalitarianism and democracy (cf. Fuchs 2014: 57).

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[1] Arguably a reconstructed vision of the original universalist Habermasian (1962) concept determines among other factors the intellectual environment in which digital positivism emerged. As a consequence, the social implications of digital media have been idealistically interpreted although Habermas himself later on discussed the nexus of the public sphere and deliberative politics in a nuanced way, while also pointing out that there are certain critical conditions for the applicability of the communication model of deliberative politics (Habermas, 2006). The original ideas elaborated by Jürgen Habermas and their reconstructed digital optimist heritage evoked significant criticism ever since for being unsatisfactory in terms of recognizing social inequality and being exclusive (Fraser, 1990; Calhoun, 1992; Warner, 2002). This paper does not aim to discover such supposed limits of the Habermasian public sphere. Rather, it focuses on the question in what terms can digital media be understood as the public sphere when at the same time, validity of some digital pessimist arguments also seems to be well-founded.

Parallel to post-Habermasian digital optimistic tendencies, social criticism gave rise to opposite views. Reinterpreting French postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault's (1979: 290) model of a panoptic (Bentham), sophisticated social surveillance (i.e., the power or ability of the state élite "to surveil, to invade the citizens' privacy, gives the state the power to confuse, coerce and control citizens") coauthors Kevin Robins and Frank Webster (1998) suggest that new communication and information technologies (i.e., digital media) give a new meaning to dissemination of power and control.

For instance, American media theorist Douglas Rushkoff (2002: 26–28) celebrated the online sphere's "ability to network human beings" which "is its very life's blood. It fosters communication, collaboration, sharing, helpfulness, and community… The ideas, information, and applications now launching on Web sites around the world capitalize on the transparency, usability, and accessibility that the internet was born to deliver."

Information technology of law professor Yochai Benkler (2006: 272) claims network "allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes." Apparently, Benkler (2006: 213) juxtaposes such hypothetical qualities with the horizon of an already idealized public sphere: "the easy possibility of communicating effectively into the public sphere allows individuals to reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in a conversation."

American writer, consultant, and lecturer on the social and economic effects of Internet technologies Clay Shirky (2009: 190) follows this intellectual path when discussing digital media: "by lowering transaction costs, social tools provide a platform for communities of practice...Communities of practice are inherently cooperative, and are beautifully supported by social tools, because that is exactly the kind of community whose members can recruit one another or allow themselves to be found by interested searchers."

Spanish sociologist and information society expert Manuel Castells (2009: 229) goes one step further, and proclaims "networked movements of our time are largely based on the Internet," and Egyptian author Wael Ghonim (2012) applauded Facebook for having become a "means to express […] opinions, ambitions and dreams, without pressure from anyone" vis-a-vis the experience of the January 25 Revolution in Egypt.

A "doyen" of digital optimism, Canadian-American sociologist Barry Wellman (2011) also claims that use of "multiple means of communication […] affords "a more flexible, less bounded life for many." He goes on to claim "the internet revolution" as he refers to such a complex phenomenon, "has created communication capacities that have dwarfed those of the past [*namely that of traditional media*] […] The proliferation of the internet has facilitated the move to even more networked modes of connectivity." Connectivity insists public discussion, moreover deliberation, which supposed to provide a free vent for political participation.

Christian Fuchs (2014: 57) correctly states, what also can be our synopsis of digital optimism for now, that although different, what such contributions have in common is that they are philosophically idealistic interpretations or revisions of the Habermasian public sphere concept.

While this paper considers certain digital optimist arguments to be valid at the same time, it also should not overlook realities of geopolitical and/or sociopolitical factors (cf. Morozov, 2011, Aouragh, 2012), i.e., patterns of surveillance, censorship, and a self-congratulatory agenda of digital capitalism to be touched upon below.

Digital pessimism

A critical stance towards digital optimism is based on notions and allegations of cyber-sectarianism (Sunstein, 2002) which is the most important for our current thesis, but also intertwinement of corporate complaisance (Aouragh, 2012) and traits of censorship (Nashif, 2017), panopticity, i.e., mass surveillance and geopolitical implications (Morozov, 2011, Robins and Webster, 1998) have been observed. The commodification of the Internet (Schiller, 1999) and transnational collaboration between the state and major companies

(Iványi, 2017) and other various negative or unknown socio-psychological impacts and implications are assumed.

Extensive analysis of such fields of thought is beyond the scope of this paper, so the upcoming part is rather a schematic catalog of the main dispositions of relevant ideas.

It is necessary to stress that some of the relevant authors do not necessarily or exclusively draw pessimistic conclusions. Morozov and Aouragh, while they indeed consider several contextual variabilities and follow nuances approaches, in fact, focus predominantly on the "dark side" of the Internet and "ICT-imperialism" respectively.

Echo chambers and group polarization

American legal scholar Cass Sunstein attributes to digital media a potential to promote "cyber cascades" of like-minded opinions that create "information cocoons" and can even foster or enflame hate groups. The author describes (2009: 94) the phenomenon when users live "in echo chambers of their own design." Such media enclaves scarcely interact. Thus group polarization results in the decay of democracy and the absence of deliberative mechanisms.

Although socio-psychological causes of such tendencies (i.e., group polarization) might be relevant when discussing member attitudes within later introduced experiences of Facebook groups, in our cases the consequences significantly differ: as neither 'Let's boycott the products of Heineken' / Forbidden beer from Csík' [Bojkottáljuk a Heinekent termékeket/Tiltott Csíki sör] nor 'Bilingual South Slovakia' [Kétnyelvű Dél-Szlovákia] groups' members have been inclined towards hate speech or chauvinistic stances etc.

The Panopticon: mass surveillance and censorship

Belorussian-American author and researcher Evgeny Morozov (2011) expressed skepticism about digital optimism and Internet-centrism and pointed out the Internet is a tool that both revolutionaries and authoritarian governments can use. As a consequence, certain regimes remain stable and repressive as ever. Digital media sites have been used in these places to entrench dictators and threaten dissent opinion, making it more difficult to promote democracy.

Morozov, while he does not deny positive effects of digital media, is no doubt focused on a negative phenomenon arising, which he calls the "dark side of internet freedom," which might resolve in an overall judgment reflecting a rather mistrustful attitude towards digital media and its capacities.

Insisting that Robins and Webster's (1998) post-Foucauldian dystopia of a Panopticon might be based partly on reality, Facebook's official *Global Government Requests Report* published on 27 April 2017 revealed that it's receiving more government information requests than ever before. Although USA government removal requests were on a decline, requests for user account data, on the other hand, rose significantly.

ICT-imperialism, digital capitalism, and commodification

Such corporate complaisance is one facet of the political economy of digital media which has different implications. Information and communications historian Dan Schiller published his thesis as early as in 1999 stating networks that comprise cyberspace were originally created at the behest of government agencies, military contractors, and allied educational institutions. Recently, however, a growing number of these networks have begun to serve predominantly

corporate objectives. Under the sway of an expansionary market logic, the Internet began a political-economic transition toward what Dan Schiller calls digital capitalism.

Moroccan-Dutch anthropologist Miriyam Aouragh (2012) investigated how the social, political, and cultural realms of capitalism (superstructure) are both conditioned by and react upon the political-economic base. Here it is necessary to add that although Aouragh (2012) while interpreting the political economy of the information and communications technology within the wider context of Marxist theory claims that the point of her critique was "not to deny the social and political usefulness of new media, but to examine the pros and cons of the internet," she intensely stresses that arguments (or rather assertions) in the context of debates about the power of new media are echoes of earlier suggestions related to peculiar fetishizations of ICT in general and social media in particular. Aouragh also holds that fetishization of digital media and techno-clichés such as "Facebook-revolutions" can well originate in self-congratulatory poses of digital media interests. At the same time, no matter how valid most of her arguments are and how thought-provoking for the general and academic debate over the functions of digital media, she underestimates capacities of the latter to boost civic engagement under specific conditions.

Van Dijck examines the socioeconomic structures that shape social media. While exploring the relevant ownership, governance, and business models, he also points to "economic infrastructures and legal-political governance" (2013: 26) that determine the evolution of networks as *conditiones sine quibus non*.

A dialectic approach to understanding digital media

Online activism indeed can be explained by reference to some form of a political and economic agenda and other social factors, as has already been shown via digital pessimism. Under special circumstances, however, as this also will be demonstrated through the prism of online activism of two separate cases, digital media indeed provides a playground for social mobilization without inevitably serving politics-economy-related or geopolitical agendas.

In light of the prevalence of digital optimistic tendencies of exalting Web 2.0 and Co. in a way that reminisces a Murti-Bing (Witkiewicz, 1930) "hypnosis," and late shift to a digital pessimistic antithesis that deals with computer-mediated technologies almost exclusively on the foundations of social and/or politico-economic criticism, the discourse has been reductive.

I do believe new digital media can have an effect on social processes. What I doubt is whether experiences can *exclusively* be understood as either positive and negative. A number of authors who could well be referred to as digital realists have managed to approach the subject in a balanced way.

Authors, such as *inter alia* Papacharissi (2010); Neuman (2011); van Dijck (2012); Fuchs (2014) conceptualize digital media in a more prudent way than digital optimism as we shall see below. According to Zizi Papacharissi (2010: 167) "new technologies provide opportunities for individuals to engage in social activities, expand the scope of social networks and enable communication." Thus, the combined effect of the social, political, and economic and technological context "affords the autonomy, control, and expressive capabilities of that enable dissent, it effectively reconciles the personal with the political in a way that enables connection with like-minded individuals." Although this approach reflects moderate optimism, the author elsewhere (2002: 9-10) expresses obvious doubts about the 'revolutionizing' effects of technologies on the political sphere suggesting they will rather be adapted to the current status quo. In addition, she points out that Internet-based technologies frequently fragmentize political discourse. Christian Fuchs (2014: 89) also finds that today's

digital media landscape is "shaped by three antagonism: a) the economic antagonism between a) users' data and social media corporations' profit interests, b) the political antagonism between users' privacy and the surveillance-industrial complex as well as citizens' desire for accountability of the powerful and the secrecy of power, c) the civil society antagonism between the creation of public spheres and the corporate and state colonisation of these spheres."

When discussing the afterlife of the Habermasian argument, it is important to mention José van Dijck's (2012) research, also reflecting a nuanced approach, insofar as it suggests "social media platforms neither warrant a recalibration of Habermas' public sphere, nor a conscious blending of spheres." She also advocates a different understanding which understands social media platforms as a "contested space where private, public and corporate interests compete to produce new norms of sociality and connectivity." With regard to such a contested space in question, I hereby anticipate that certain fora on social networking sites (SNSs) in their own way practically allow activism and mobilisation for a given cause. These mentioned nuanced approaches, which objectively criticize the public sphere, without falling into the utopian trap, highlight the conceptual framework of digital realism in my view.

Some of the following statements of an editorial article of the New York Times highlighting the geopolitical aspects of digital media use constitute an approach which can arguably called digital realist in essence: "Because social media businesses have become such a fixture in modern life, many people might think of them as the digital equivalent of the public square where opinions can be freely shared. But […] as much as free speech advocates would like Facebook and other Internet companies to uphold liberal values, these companies are unlikely to do so if that means sacrificing lucrative business opportunities." Here, panoptic features meet ICT-interests, uniting some of the above-listed categories, and the corporate complaisance dimension becomes evident once again. But again, the prevalence of such factors does not mean, that grassroots online engagement would be completely made impossible. Experience of such online engagement, in fact, does presuppose a form of a limited public sphere, or in other words, public sphericules (cf. Cunningham 2001)

Validity of an alternative public sphere

W. Russel Neuman et al. (2011: 27-30) while following a "moderate" digital optimistic approach, that is a lot more cautious than the "mainstream" of above-quoted tendencies, provides a useful set of criteria, that can be regarded as some kind of a touchstone for understanding digital media as a successful online public sphere:

1) *the inclusion of a broad array of citizens in rational deliberation;*
2) *the capacity to influence the agenda of public discussion;*
3) *whether, once the attention is evident, the online environment facilitates rational critical discussion and the capacity for collective will formation;*
4) *discursive equality and reciprocal respect – the capacity in collective deliberation to evaluate arguments by their sincerity and persuasive strength rather than the status of the speaker;*
5) *the absence of a coercive external constraint on open discussion;*
6) *the absence of systematic distraction from political deliberation.*

Although I doubt the revolutionary ethos that Neuman et al. generally attribute to the internet, I accept the relevance and constructivity of such standards as a basis for evaluating the online

environment. In this spirit, I will consistently use it when discussing experiences of digital media use hereinafter.

In this spirit, recent evidence reflecting traits of a mobilization and arguably, even emancipatory potential of digital media will be demonstrated below with an intention to objectively and realistically evaluate cases in the light of Neuman et al. (2011)'s set of criteria.

Another standard that seems to be useful is Danah Boyd (2008)'s analysis which centers on how social network sites can be understood as *networked publics. Accordingly, the latter* is simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. Consequently, networked publics support many of the same practices as unmediated publics, but their structural differences often inflect practices in unique ways. Four properties—*persistence, searchability, replicability*, and *scalability*—and three dynamics—*invisible audiences collapsed contexts,* and *the blurring of public and private need to be taken into consideration accordingly.* Experiences of "public sphericules" where communities' identity is formed through a sense of belonging via self-popularized media (cf. Cunningham, 2001) and social polarization tendencies of internet users to separate into groups with other people who share the same beliefs, i.e., "echo chambers" or audience fragmentation (Sunstein, 2009; Lynch, 2015) are well-known social psychological and public life phenomena enough to argue that digital media and online social networking sites (SNSs) in particular, where people also interact with others and express same beliefs, and content, might show similar characteristics.

However, Sunstein's (2009) rather digital pessimistic vision of cyberbalkanization which is predominantly based on his findings on partisan Weblogs that have become significant political forces has seemed to me logical, yet, disputable as groups not necessarily define *against* but also *for* something.

People indeed define their identity by what they are not. Distinctiveness theory holds that people define themselves by what makes them different from others in a particular context: "one perceives oneself in terms of characteristics that distinguish oneself from other humans, especially from people in one's usual social milieu" (McGuire, 1988).

Social identity theory posits that a portion of one's self-concept is dependent on the importance and relevance placed on the group membership(s) to which an individual belongs (Turner and Oakes, 1986). The theory suggests that individuals' drive for positive identity and esteem influences the social comparisons they make (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In particular, group/category comparisons that accentuate group distinctiveness in favor of one's in-group over a relevant outgroup are privileged. As a result, when a particular group becomes salient, the features associated with that group guide one's attitudes and behaviors (McKinley et al., 2014).

My research described below intends to indicate that given some particular cases in the context of self-categorization via digital media, the optimistic notion of the public sphere or public sphericules might be closer to reality than the pessimistic vision of echo chambers.
In support of this hypothesis, a content analysis of relevant posts and page feedback, relevant statistics on the induced reaction were carried out as well as the findings of an anonymous survey of 11 questions were also evaluated.

"Success stories" of online engagement

Bilingual South Slovakia [Kétnyelvű Dél-Szlovákia] and online features of ethnicity

Founded in 2011, Bilingual Slovakia [*Kétnyelvű Dél-Szlovákia – hereinafter: KDSz*]*'s* mission is to urge for action to promote bilingual public names. This paper focuses on the online dimension of KDSz and to evaluate relevant experiences.

In accordance with a development which was also covered by mainstream media, railway station names in Dunaszerdahely [Dunajská Streda] and Révkomárom [Komárno], both located in ethnic Hungarian majority inhabited southern Slovakia, will not only be able to be read in the Slovak language but also in the minority Hungarian language. "Transport and Construction Minister Árpád Érsek and deputy speaker of parliament Béla Bugár (both members of the Most-Híd Party) officially unveiled the bilingual signs in the towns on April 21. Thus the station in Dunajská Streda bears also the name Dunaszerdahely and the station in Komárno also Komárom" (Spectator, 2017).

The bilingual boards will be set up only at railway stations in towns where at least 20 percent of the population belongs to a national minority.

In line with a government regulation, as many as 55 bilingual boards - 54 in Hungarian and one in the Rusyn language - will be placed at stations located in Slovak towns and cities with considerable non-Slovak populations. All the signs will be installed by the end of September.

These developments above are exactly of the KDSz movement, which is also has been present on the social networking site Facebook.

In an interview, a KDSz-activist expressed his conviction that this issue could not have been at the center of the Hungarian interest representation in Slovakia had the civil sphere – not just the KDSZ – not raised it and if the concerned parties would not feel that it needs to be addressed as a synergy (Maszol, 2017).

In this spirit, KDSz introduces the movement, its goals, its principles and tools, objectives, and relations to politics at its Facebook-page as follows respectively:
Information about the initiative: "We are civil activists who are concerned that the Hungarian language is becoming more and more distraught in southern Slovakia, although we have the right to written and oral use of our mother tongue."

Their objective is to promote the "visibility" of Hungarian language and minority living in Slovakia and raising awareness *tout court*. Explicitly, as described "Above all, we want the elimination of the visual discrimination of the Hungarian language, and thus, a more confident Hungarian community in Slovakia […] aim is not to exacerbate the pointless ethnic conflicts, but our intention is to make our community aware of its rights

Their principles are respect for human dignity and nonviolence and tools are civil advocacy by raising the issue of bilingualism.

They also claim to be free of politics as "the issue of preserving the Hungarian language is independent of any [political] party." Their call for support includes some specific examples "Our goal cannot be achieved without widespread civic engagement. […] You already help a lot if next time when you go shopping you express disapproval of the lack of Hungarian signs or demand the book of complaints. […] You may also want to follow our Facebook page where you can contribute to the cause of bilingualism by sharing our content. If you engage in dispute, feel free to use the bilingual guide."

Referred to as "Milestones," the Facebook page lists a number of achievements, predominantly "offline" precedents: 12 February 2012 "The Párkány project II": On board of the AVALA international express train passing through the town of Érsekújvár [Nové

Zámky] and Párkány [Štúrovo] civilians informed passengers apart from Slovakian language, also in Hungarian, for the first time in history.

- On 14 January 2012, in the framework of The Nameless Villages Project: KDSz-activists registered 77 missing signs in the minority language in 34 settlements.

- On 16 October 2011, in the context of The Dunaszerdahely Project, activists place the first bilingual traffic sign ever.

- On 4 September 2011, as implementing "The Párkány [Štúrovo] project I," civilians greeted passengers at the railway station for the first time in a number of decades in Hungarian and English languages.

- On 1 August 2011, KDSz-activists placed bilingual stickers in a number of settlements.

- On 30 May, the Facebook group counted 14,941 followers.

In this case, although the listed developments rather reflect self-conscious references for digital representation than direct mobilizing functions *per se*, combined with other traits of digital activism described below, they indicate a lively interaction between the "offline" and "online" spheres. This hypothetically fulfills Neuman et al. (2011)'s following criteria: 1) the inclusion of a broad array of citizens in rational deliberation; 2) the capacity to influence the agenda of public discussion; 3) whether, once the attention is evident, the online environment facilitates rational critical discussion and the capacity for collective will formation; 4) discursive equality and reciprocal respect – the capacity in collective deliberation to evaluate arguments by their sincerity and persuasive strength rather than the status of the speaker; 5) the absence of a coercive external constraint on open discussion; 6) the absence of systematic distraction from political deliberation.

My research found that recently, in correspondence with successful public law developments, the content shared attracted 208 reactions and 4 supportive comments on average per post, which were re-shared by follower approximately 12 times.

Biggest feedback attracted was a post of 27 April in which 465 followers reacted to a photo of a bilingual sign at the railway station of Rimaszombat [Rimavská Sobota], with the caption: "Historical moment: first time ever since 1945, the railway station bears a Hungarian name!"

Content regularly attracts significant attention of members, who insert positive "emoticons," comment supportively, set out further goals and discuss them generally sharing a feeling of solidarity (cf. Neuman et al.'s criteria 1 and 3-4) and without coercive external constraints on open discussion (cf. Neuman et al.'s criterion 5)

The repetitive slogan used by the group and its FB-page has been: "It's time to do more [than before]."

Occasionally popular culture and Internet meme-based communication has appeared on the page, such as: "If there is no money for Hungarian signs, then why Hungarians have to pay taxes?" or "Making fun of my accent?" "I'm bilingual," answers a laughing Di Caprio figure. Word games regularly caricature chauvinistic stance: Slovensko Slovákom Komárno Komárom.

The page shares call for certain petitions in line with the profile of the page. Posts cover relevant issues of Hungarian language use from other parts of the Carpathian Basin, for example, comparing the status of Hungarian labels in stores of the Transylvania region of present-day Romania with that in Southern Slovakia. In addition, the page regularly

advertises institutions and events connected to Hungarian ethnic identities, such as the PMSZK Hungarian College in Bratislava and its calls for application for admission. The page also interacts with Hungarian language news organs, such as Parameter.sk, which latter categorizes itself as "the most visited Hungarian news portal in Slovakia" (cf. Neuman et al.'s criterion 2).

Content reflected consistent bilingualism in the context of describing the group's profile and the majority of shared posts. The latter has been characterized by both a supranational and a regional outlook as "best practices" of other EU-Member States (Swedish-speaking population in Finland, Alto Adige, etc.) are often regarded as standards for evaluating developments, and Transylvania is also regularly considered a reference point for the movement

However, such manifestations of ethnocentrism do not necessarily mean that the group is exclusive or aims to confront on the grounds of ethnic identity. Accordingly, the FM-page of KDSz emphasizes in a bilingual statement that there is no problem with the use of the Slovak language, nor do they intend to undermine the rights of those who use the Slovak language in any way. Rather, what they want to achieve is the full bilingualism. Even the name itself "Kétnyelvű Dél-Szlovákia – Dvojjazyčné Južné Slovensko" and other page profile descriptions are consequently bilingual (cf. Neuman et al.'s criterion 6).

Thus, the page has managed to convey an ethos and a sense of mission that contributes to the maintenance of social identity of followers and to the preservation of the commitment of group members, and also to increase the number of followers. According to the findings of an anonymous survey based on 11 questions[2] among internet users, from whom 90.6% are ethnic Hungarians from Southern Slovakia. Most followers of the page visit

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[2] Questions and results of the survey in detail: 1. How regularly do you follow the FB-page of Bilingual South Slovakia and its shared contents? a) on a daily basis (13,2%); b) not on a daily basis, but rather often (49.9%) c) occasionally, when notified (31,5%); d) other (5.4%) 2. How important is that Hungarian language in used publicly in Southern Slovakia? a) it has a special significance (83,8%); b) is rather important (16,2%); 3. Does the Hungarian identity matter to you personally? a) it has a special significance (83,8%); b) is rather important (16,2%); c) non-impiortant (0%). 4. Which tools can be the most viable in favour of promoting bilingualism in Southern Slovakia? a) Previous tools used by KDSz, such as placing stickers, giving information in Hungarian on public transport, etc. (48,6%); (b) combining peaceful online and offline forms of protest (40,5%); c) civil disobedience (2,6%); (d) other (8,3%), including: political steps (4,1%), more radical steps (such as the destruction of Slovak labels, open confrontation with persons or institutions who violate the law) (0 %); using Hungarian language even on Facebook (4,1%) 5. What tools of those being at the disposable of the KDSz can contribute the most to ensuring bilingualism? a) organising demonstrations, flashmobs (57,1%); b) compilation of online petitions (2,7%); c) raising awareness with legitimate online guerrilla methods (e.g. placing links on other sites) (37,1%); d) other (3,1%); 6. Do you plan to be present at events related to the site's goals in the future? a) Of course, since it is a key issue for me (5,1%); b) Yes, if I have the opportunity (35,9%); c) No, online support for this site is sufficient (35,9%); d) No (23,1%) 7. Do you speak the Slovak language? a) Yes (84,4%); b) I can get myself understood and read (6,2%); c) I speak, but I do not use it on principle (0%); d) No (9,4%). 8. Does the attitude of the Slovak state toward the use of Hungarian language disturb you? a) yes, absolutely (34,4%); b) I have been experiencing improvement lately, but it still irritates me (43,8%); c) Does not bother that much, as one can understand also their position in this regard (15,6%); d) does not bother (6,2%). 9. What is your relationship with Slovakia, the Slovak people and culture? a) hostile, after all they are "dumb tót" and "I am older than Slovakia to begin with" (5,1%); b) I do not like them because of historical trauma and a hostile state behavior (10,1%); c) I have no problem with them as "they are also human beings", however, some state policies indeed disturb me (78,1%); d) I like them because of their similar historic trajectory and mentality and understand their state's attitude (6,7%). 10. Do you get informed about the status of ethnic Hungarian people and language in Southern Slovakia? a) only through news and also conveyed by KDSz (6,3%); b) apart from KDSz, also from other Hungarian language news sites (25%); c) both from Hungarian and Slovakian news sources (53,1%); d) I don't get informed (15,6%). 11. Where do you come from? a) From the Hungarian parts of Upper Hungary, in current-day Southern Slovakia (90,6%); b) from Hungary proper (9,4%); c) Other (0%).

the KDSz-page rather often; consider the public use of Hungarian language to be of crucial importance; attribute to Hungarian identity special significance; consider previous tools used by KDSz (such as placing stickers, giving information in Hungarian on public transport, etc.) and combining peaceful online and offline forms of protest viable in favor of promoting bilingualism in Southern Slovakia. The majority believes that organizing demonstrations, flash mobs, and compiling online petitions can contribute to achieving the goal of bilingualism; plan to be present at "offline" events if have the opportunity and/or consider online tools in this regard enough; have no problem with Slovakia, Slovakian people and language as "they are also human beings," however, find some state policies indeed disturbing. Apart from KDSz, they also tend to get informed about the status of ethnic Hungarian people and language in Southern Slovakia by other Hungarian and Slovakian language news sites.

Apparently, ethnic identity, with a sense of belonging that is inscribed in the institutional and political, as well as everyday life beyond the online sphere, is a determining factor for the KDSz-group. The experience of KDSz suggests that even if "homogeneous" content circulates within an online group (cf. Sunstein's vision of the echo chambers), this does not necessarily imply isolation or hostile attitude toward others. Neither does it mean that the group tolerates or *ad absurdum* encourages such behavior among its members. The concept of cyber-balkanization, or at least the term *per se,* suggests separatism and/or prejudice against or hostility toward outsiders or rival groups as the term coins the combination of cyberspace with Balkans, a political region in southeastern Europe with a history of partitioned cultures, languages, and religion, and even more importantly, ethnically-based conflicts and wars in the early '90s. This does not seem to be the case here.

Consequently, online activities of KDSz can well be understood as political participation based on a pure sense of belonging (i.e., self-categorization within a group; cf: Turner et al. 1987) rather than being an echo chamber (Sunstein, 2009) or merely a movement promoted in line with self-congratulatory poses of ICT-imperialism (Aouragh, 2012). In addition, findings confirm *de facto* political engagement untied to political factors used for oppression (Morozov 2011), and lastly, online activities have constantly been compatible with Neuman et al. (2011)'s criteria (*findings are shown in Table 1*).

In fact it seems evident that in particular Neuman et al.'s following criteria were met: 1) the inclusion of a broad array of citizens in rational deliberation; and 2) the capacity to influence the agenda of public discussion; were met without any 5) coercive external constraints on open discussion or 6) systematic distraction from political deliberation.

All this suggests that a public sphericule has been formed where the common identity has been reproduced in the online sphere, by a digital media social networking site without necessarily turning into an echo chamber (cf. Sunstein, 2009).

The Igazi Csíki Sör case – Szekler identity and transnational politico-economic interests

Although links to a form of political economy cannot be excluded, especially that the topic has recently reached state-level and political agendas, one can also draw important lessons from social engagement patterns of another "regional" case, namely digital media activities surrounding a beer producer rivalry in Transylvania (current-day Romania). This paper predominantly focuses on the social mobilization dimension of the series of events and results related to (self-)categorization (McKinley et al., 2014; Turner et al., 1987) driven digital media use in light of documented online activity.

In the course of its business-related rivalry and conflict, and the accompanying legal action initiated on the grounds of alleged infringement of intellectual property, unfair

competition and trade violations, Dutch multinational corporation Heineken has publicly questioned the geographic and cultural existence of Székely Land (or Szeklerland, a historic and ethnographic area in Romania, inhabited by an ethnic Hungarian majority).

On 20 January 2015, a Facebook group entitled 'Let's boycott Heineken products' [*Bojkottáljuk a Heineken termékeket*] was launched.

By the end of July 2015, the number of people joining the group reached more than 11 thousand. They called for boycotting Heineken's products as "[Heineken] not only desires to have the factory "Igazi Csíki Sör" closed down, but what's more, recently the Hungarophobe Heineken also questions the existence of Székely Land. This comes close to extremely chauvinist Noua Dreapta's communication who refer to it as "Asa-zis Tinutul Secuiesc."

Although the group's page has not been available since 2015, it offers some lessons both for digital media experts and scholars, especially together with another page with overlapping supposed motivations and patterns of digital media use as will be seen below.   Not necessarily spontaneous or grassroots, as an online collective action aimed to explicitly demonstrate solidarity with a beer manufacturer in its rivalry vis-a-vis Heineken portraying in this regard as an "underdog" or "David against the multinational Goliath," another Facebook-page, entitled "Forbidden Beer from Csík" [Tiltott Csíki Sör], was launched somewhat earlier before (11 December 2014) than the online call for a boycott. At the time of finishing this paper [on 29 September], it counts 76,412 followers.

Again, partly similarly to the case of the KDSz-page, content analysis of relevant posts and page feedback was carried out, accompanied by an evaluation of relevant statistics on the induced reaction. My research found that in the early days (more precisely: between 11 December 2014 until 26 December 2014), its posts provoked limited feedback and collected an average of 63 likes, 2 comments and less than 19 shares per content.

Later on (i.e., between 15 May and 28 May 2017) feedback figures numbered an average of 721 reactions, 15 comments and 77 re-shares per content.

The following shared post is an epitome of the conveyed narrative: "The struggle of a beer manufacturer from Csíkszentsimon [Sânsimion] with MNC Heineken: shall the multi-billionaire capital be victorious?"

The second ("Forbidden beer from Csík") page uses a motto attributed to Frank Zappa on several occasions: "you can't be a real country unless you have a beer and an airline. It helps if you have some kind of a football team or some nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer."

Regardless of evident political and arguably politico-economic aspects and corresponding marketing-related activities, the group managed to raise constant awareness including that of mainstream (traditional) media outlets (cf. Neuman et al.'s criterion 2). Regionally widespread news outlets such as Maszol.ro (Transylvania/Romania) and Mandiner.hu (Hungary) also covered the issue and mentioned the online activism in some articles with catchy titles such as "The Székelys have declared war on Heineken" and "Here's an everyday beer, what a pity it's not available at home [Hungary]" on 21 January 2017 and 12 May 2015, respectively.

While playing on social identification driven (cf. McKinley, 2014; Turner et al., 1987) psychological stimuli, namely the Szekler identity and self-esteem, the group posted nearly on a daily basis stereotypical content related to internet memes, "Székely jokes" and initiates international campaigns of representing the disadvantaged brand Tiltott Csíki Sör.

Shared content although biased to a certain extent and provocative, has remained open for discussion (cf. Neuman 2011 et al.'s criteria 1, 3-4). Arguably, the online engagement was utilized by and/or met a business interest in the overlapping objective of promoting a Székely Land-based brand identity and at the same time to negatively affect Heineken beer giant's business as an answer. Consequently, while business interests were served in terms of

ventilating a brand identity, group affiliation of members has also been strengthened. Although from a different perspective based on a different case, these patterns again indicate similarly to KDSz that although in a way group polarization can be manifested in online social networking platforms, this neither necessarily induces echo chambers or hate speech (cf. Sunstein, 2009).

Summarized and evaluated on the basis of Neuman et al. (2011) criteria, the Let's Boycott Heineken page thus allowed the 1) inclusion of a broad array of citizens in rational deliberation, although somewhat biased vis-a-vis Heineken, and to a lesser extent, also gave room to 2) capacities to influence the agenda of public discussion. In this case, the online environment arguably, although not necessarily 3) facilitated rational critical discussion and the capacity for collective will formation, where at least in theory, 4) discursive equality and reciprocal respect was also provided although echo-chamber effects (cf. Sunstein, 2002) might have made content one-sided. 5) The absence of a coercive external constraint on open discussion and 6) the absence of systematic distraction from political deliberation undoubtedly characterized the mechanisms (*findings are shown in Table 1 on page34*).
Eventually on 27 March 2017, HEINEKEN announced officially that Romania and Lixid Project SRL intend to settle their ongoing dispute

As published on its official website, HEINEKEN Romania, and S.C. Lixid Project SRL are pleased to announce that following ongoing and constructive conversations they both intend to settle their dispute about the Csiki Sor brand-name.

As part of the settlement, HEINEKEN Romania gives consent to Lixid Project SRL for the coexistence of the Ciuc and Csiki brand names and agrees that Lixid Project SRL market the Csiki Sör beer. As a result of this agreement, both parties will abandon all legal activities related to the commercial dispute.

The settlement involves compromises on both sides, and it allows both companies to continue building their relationship with their consumers, employees, business partners and the local community. Both companies now look forward to leaving their past differences behind them and focusing on what they do best and enjoy most: brewing beer (Heineken, 2017).

Table 1: Assessment of experiences

Criteria for a successful online public sphere (*based on Habermas 1962 / Neuman et al. 2011*)	"Let's boycott Heineken products" [*Bojkottáljuk a Heineken termékeket*] / "Forbidden Beer from Csík" [Tiltott Csíki Sör]	Bilingual South Slovakia [KDSz]
1) *the inclusion of a broad array of citizens in rational deliberation;*	yes	yes
2) *the capacity to influence the agenda of public discussion;*	yes	yes
3) *the online environment facilitates rational critical discussion and the capacity for collective will formation;*	not necessarily	not necessarily
4) *discursive equality and reciprocal respect – the capacity in collective deliberation to evaluate arguments by their sincerity and persuasive strength rather than the status of the speaker;*	not necessarily	not necessarily
5) *the absence of a coercive external constraint on open discussion;*	yes	yes
6) *the absence of systematic distraction from political deliberation.*	yes	yes

Synopsis

Taken into consideration that hegemonic optimistic and pessimistic models have arguably always led to the reductive interpretation of the complex reality of digital media's social functions, I sought to identify the objective foundations or ultimate grounds of the social mobilizing potential within digital media thus advocating a balanced view in line with earlier research (e.g., Habermas, 2006; Boyd, 2008; Papacharissi, 2010; Neuman, 2011; van Dijck, 2012; Fuchs, 2014).

Such a dialectic approach which I venture to name digital realism does not deny that politico-economics, (geo)politics-based and social criticism and the corresponding pessimistic arguments are relevant when discussing digital media, rather it collides them with optimistic digital premises in order to realize this claimed nuanced approach at hand. Thus, my hypothesis has been that under certain conditions, digital media does indeed form sociopolitical frameworks where the Neuman et al. (2011) criteria of understanding an alternative public sphere could also be arguably met, while realities of large-scale politico-economic and international power-related structures and agendas are also present, that limit this alternative public sphere in its scope.

Such anchored postulates determine a balanced view that led me to distinguish between different environments.

I have found the idea of focusing on online activities of small local or regional, ethnic identity-based online movements which either involve political action aimed at citizenship (KDSz) or express solidarity (Let's Boycott Heineken) when evaluating digital optimism and pessimism profoundly appealing as my intention has been to avoid falling into the trap of approaching these means exclusively in an either optimistic or pessimistic manner.

This idea seemed logical toed in terms of supporting claims of mobilization potential within digital media while also acknowledging of course that in some sense politico-economic (Aouragh, 2012) and/or social criticism is indeed needed when discussing their social functions.

Moreover, it has seemed to provide a way of making sense of the essentially valid points of digital optimism's premises of a public sphere while taking the context of social variables with regard to dynamic politics/economy-related and other aspects seriously, which altogether allowed to consistently remain on digital realist grounds.

In other words, the question that arises is not whether digital media can serve as a tool for political participation, but rather, 1) whether such existing qualities of these services and applications can counterbalance those already identified (cf. i.e., Morozov, 2011; Aouragh, 2012; Nashif, 2017) and 2) whether such online activism constitutes or paves the way for audience fragmentation and isolation (Sunstein, 2009).

Experiences of KDSz and "Let's boycott Heineken's products!"/ "Forbidden Beer from Csík" give an insight into the fine nuances of the use of digital media. These events and facts could not only serve the public sphere debate where arguably Neuman et al. (2011) standards can be a useful benchmark from which to evaluate them, but also show interesting aspects of self-categorization-related ethnic identity of communities and the corresponding emergence of public sphericules which are in this case online rather than popular media-based (cf. Cunningham, 2001) and not necessarily to be considered echo chambers (cf. Sunstein, 2009) Thus, as for the questions above, this paper refutes the premise of the second one; however, the first remains still open for the future to tell.

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