

# The role of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as sources of information about Europe

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## ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we provide insights into the platformisation of media content by examining how news professionals communicate about European issues on major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) across ten European countries and how the public engages in discussions about these issues on these platforms. The results provide essential information about the digital public sphere with respect to the most relevant European issues (health, the climate, and the economy, according to the Eurobarometer), published by both professional news producers and non-professional actors over three months (September–November 2021). However, the results only reveal a few references to the dimensions of Europeanisation in social media posts, as institutions, law, and governance are the most frequently mentioned dimensions in the analysis, demonstrating that Europe is primarily associated with the establishment. By contrast, no trends of Europeanisation from below were found. We discuss these findings with respect to the potential impact of platforms on public sphere failures.

**KEYWORDS:** content analysis, digital public sphere, Europeanisation, European identity, social media platforms

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Thomass, B., Micóni, A., & Moreno, J. (2026). The role of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as sources of information about Europe. In A. Balčytienė, P. Bajomi-Lázár, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *Digital media shadowing democracy: Technology, communication, and power* (pp. 149–170). Nordicom, University of Gothenburg. <https://doi.org/10.48335/9789189864290-8>

## **Introduction: Europe and social media platforms**

Historically, Europeanisation was seen by the political actors who created the EU and its forerunners as the integration of many states into one more or less homogeneous entity. In media and communication studies, this approach gave birth to the idea of the Europeanisation of the public sphere, which, however, developed into a very contested notion.

In this chapter, we take a perspective that looks at the content of social media platforms with a focus on the Europeanisation of the public sphere and its changing status. We ask if we can find this notion in the communications that populate the social media platforms.

As part of the EU-funded research project “EuMePlat – European Media Platforms: assessing positive and negative externalities for European Culture”, we analyse how the key preoccupations of European citizens are played out by the news media and ordinary citizens on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). These key preoccupations refer to the economy, health, the environment, the climate, and Europe. We assume that the content that users find on these platforms has an implication for the project of European democracy and European integration and that it may be an indicator of the state of the Europeanisation of the public sphere.

Our research is based on a cross-country comparative analysis of ten countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey). We conducted a content analysis of the most important social media publications to assess their impact on the societal level. In this part of the overarching project, which was methodologically grounded in a quantitative content analysis of several social media platforms, the coding of Europeanisation relied on five dimensions – political, economic, scientific, legal, and cultural – inspired by the European cultures and values approaches and by the European (capitalist) industries, political institutions, and law approach. Thereby, we aim to contribute to the part of this volume that assesses the impact of social media platforms upon the creation of European news, news consumption, and the overall state of the public sphere.

## **Europeanisation and the European public sphere**

Since our research relies on the concepts of Europeanisation and the European public sphere, a few considerations on how we understand these will be outlined here. The literature on these notions is extremely rich and broad, and an important step in the theoretical foundation of our project was to capture this diversity of meanings in an understanding as comprehensively as possible.

Following Carpentier and colleagues (2022), we depart from a complex understanding of Europeanisation that includes various dimensions. As the

main categories to grasp the complexity of Europeanisation, Carpentier and colleagues (2022) distinguished between the material and the discursive aspects of the concept. While the material aspect focuses on structures and institutions, as well as practices, the discursive aspect is related to the meanings allocated to Europe. Both components are entangled and hence should not be considered a dichotomy, given “the capacity of the discursive to produce meanings about the material, and for the material to invite for particular meanings and to dislocate others through its own materiality” (Carpentier et al., 2022: 106).

Discourses about Europe can either claim a fixed, essential meaning or stress shifting, unstable meanings, while the material side focuses on Europe as a social space or as a political space shaped by institutions and practices. Europeanisation has many dimensions and meanings, and all of them can be “more” European in the sense of being more important, more acknowledged, more present, and more practiced.

The European public sphere is at the heart of the material-discursive dimension, understood in this chapter as public communication, which takes place in defined spaces with general access and with reference to common subjects mainly imparted by the media. With the foundation of the EU, the project of European integration has migrated from the status of a primarily economic project to a comprehensive political and social one. With the enlargement of the political aims and the increasing dislocation of national competencies to the European level, the connection of the European population to the policies of the EU via a public sphere has become a vital question, relevant from both a theoretical and a practical perspective (Thomass, 2011: 119). This is where the question of the state of European public spheres has long been intensely debated.

## **Social media platforms as sources for information on Europe**

The state of the European public sphere has been of concern to political actors and researchers ever since it became clear that the project of European integration is not solely driven by economic integration, but that the population of Europe must also be able to exchange ideas in a communication space – and actually do so. The European public sphere, and more comprehensively the European identity, are key to this integration process, in which media play an important role. Based on a normatively highly charged and homogeneous concept of the public sphere, and in the light of numerous study results, research has come to the conclusion that the Europeanisation of the public sphere is not an exceptional situation but rather an ongoing process of transnational communication of the same topics and patterns of interpretation in the media of the European countries (Benert & Pfetsch, 2022: 364).

For a long time, media theorists were predominantly optimistic about the potential social impacts of computer networks. They assumed that the digital public sphere would provide everyone with better access to political information, facilitate public debate, and improve political participation (Kovarik, 2015). The expansion of the spectrum of actors would increase the degree of deliberation (Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). These hopes have been countered by sceptical considerations suggesting that this expansion would result in the fragmentation of the public sphere, which was assumed to be homogeneous in the age of mass media.

However, the current media systems in the industrialised Western societies are more likely to produce what could be described as cacophony, borrowing a term from music theory. Pfetsch and colleagues (2018: 479) noted that communication in digitalised public spheres has led to diversity but also to a state in which “the synchronicity of voices and messages that are not necessarily related to each other can be described as a characteristic of public spheres [translated]”. They coined the term “dissonant public spheres [translated]” to describe this phenomenon. Dissonances in public spheres are understood as situations,

in which diverse actors synchronously and asynchronously articulate topics, information and opinions between which tensions, contradictions or ruptures exist. Dissonance encompasses both an unrelated juxtaposition of different public contributions as well as explicit counter-speech to the (supposedly) hegemonic perspective [translated]. (Pfetsch et al., 2018: 479)

The assumption of fragmentation is supported by the characteristics of the platform economy. According to Srnicek (2017), the platform economy is based on a business model that is driven by monopolistic companies and is based on the utilisation of data. Platforms are large companies that collect, utilise, and control data en masse to achieve dominance in the economy. The dramatic consequences in the areas of information, communication, and entertainment can be summarised by the term “disruption”. Platform providers are creating new media formats that are changing user expectations and behaviour. The resulting reality of digital media services is a world of multiple realities that exist side by side. Misinformation has increased, half-truths and quarter-truths are circulating, one emotional uproar is replaced by the next seemingly even more scandalous one, conspiracy theories are spreading virally at great speed, prejudices and hasty judgements are replacing reliable knowledge. The networks falsely labelled as social are fuelling this smouldering fire that is eating into solid information with ever new offerings and functionalities that are constantly being reinvented by powerful intermediaries with large research and development budgets (Thomaß, 2020: 208).

As the platform economy has given rise to the oligopoly of gigantic network companies, highly monopolised structures have emerged whose

business models are ultimately based on Big Data: “Facebook is not run so that we can all share our ideas. It’s so that advertisers can obtain more data about us. That’s the primary function. Everything else is a by-product [translated]”, stated Srnicek (2018). The algorithms that control the respective services place users in separate digital realities if they do not become active themselves and search for commonalities. There is a growing risk of alienation between individual social groups and between elites and broad sections of the population. Under these conditions, the public arena becomes a battleground over divergent truth claims – the common ground is missing. Moreover, conflicts, separations, and arising inequalities are contributing to social fragmentation and the lack of cohesion.

The economic power of platforms is therefore relevant to democracy because it jeopardises the prerequisites of a democratic public sphere without any social control capable of containing this power. While the debate on the social control of public media has taken on a sharp form in many European countries, the control of Big Tech platforms has so far been a topic only for media research and regulatory experts in the EU.

The issue of the power of Big Tech platforms is relevant for the idea of Europeanisation as well. Benert and Pfetsch (2022) have argued that the Europeanisation of the political public sphere is a process that is dependent on political and media infrastructures. Two key developments have led to a gradual increase in the Europeanisation of national public spheres over time: First, political and economic crises promote politicisation and, as a result, an increased visibility of European issues in the national media. Second, the Internet and particularly the social media platforms are creating new communication infrastructures and the possibility of transnational networking. Despite increasing politicisation and digital networking opportunities, the European public sphere does not function as a democratic arena, but rather as a communication space for mutual observation and reference between actors from different national contexts (Benert & Pfetsch, 2022). This is backed by the observation that a national framing of EU-related issues has been primarily detected by comparative studies of European media (Bee & Chrona, 2020; 871–872; de Vreese, 2003: 99–116; de Vreese et al., 2001: 116–118; Koopmans & Erbe, 2003: 115–118; Machill et al., 2007: 188–189; Peters et al., 2005: 148).

But to what extent is this happening? One relevant aspect of political communication on digital communication platforms is the question of which actors are active on which topics. Do the same media outlets and politicians dominate here as they did in broadcasting, or do ordinary citizens have a share in the public discourse, as the hope for more participation would suggest? What do the actors talk about? What relative impact do their posts have? Do they have conversations across borders or across the entire continent? And what does empirical evidence tell us about the state of platformisation and

Europeanisation and, therefore, about the state of the democratic, European, digital public sphere?

Recent studies point to the potential impact of digital platforms upon political polarisation and public sphere failures (Allcott et al., 2020; Bail et al., 2018; Schuessler et al., 2026; Yarchi et al. 2021).

While traditional mass media constitute gatekeepers controlling who can speak publicly and what is spoken about, social media allow everyone with Internet access to address a potentially global audience. How much of that potential is realised depends to a large degree on the algorithms controlling the news feed (in case of Facebook and Twitter/X) and the recommendations (in case of YouTube). Hence, the publications of the actual mix of agents – media, politicians, public intellectuals, and ordinary citizens – on social media and what they talk about will have an impact on public discourse, which needs to be assessed. Do we see a rational discourse about the best outcome for the biggest possible number in solidarity and fairness, or a cesspool of hatred, populism, self-righteousness, me-first, disinformation, propaganda, and porn? What does the state of the digital social public sphere tell us about the state of democracy in Europe?

We wanted to address these questions through the study of publications on social media platforms. The next section explains how we proceeded with the analysis.

## **Methodology: An analysis of social media publications**

As already mentioned, the data for this chapter come from the EuMePlat project, which aimed to empirically research the interplay of two major concepts: platformisation and Europeanisation. The research questions addressed publications about Europe and European citizens' concerns on social media and explored the intersection between top-level professional content and bottom-level non-professional content on social media platforms (Cardoso et al., 2023). The units of analysis were the media objects published on social media platforms.

To address those issues, a research framework was devised to implement the research in the ten countries involved in the project and to assure the comparability of the results (Cardoso et al., 2021). Following the guidelines of the EuMePlat project, all of the social media publications collected for analysis were about Europe and about the three main concerns of Europeans in relation to Europe (according to the Eurobarometer 93 study): Health, Economy, and Climate (European Union, 2020). With regard to social media platforms, our choice was to collect social media publications on Facebook, Twitter (now X) and YouTube, following the overall data presenting those platforms as some of the most used in the ten participating countries (Kemp, 2021; Newman et al., 2021).

To collect social media content referring to Europe and to one of the other three dimensions – Health, Economy, and Climate – we constructed a query that was translated and adapted to each of the ten countries (and eleven languages) of the project. The goal was to collect all the social media publications – Facebook posts, Twitter tweets, and YouTube videos – referring to those issues during a period of three months: September–November 2021.

We also wanted to compare the presence of news media on social media platforms to that of the general users of the platforms. To that end, we developed lists of mainstream news media with significant presence on social media platforms for each of the ten countries and eleven languages (Cardoso et al., 2021).

With these criteria for including social media publications, we were able to compare media and non-news media content on different social media platforms in different countries, referring to four dimensions: Europe, Health, Economy, and Climate.

This research used a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013), combining quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data. From all the social media publications collected in all datasets for all countries and all dimensions, the most relevant were selected for categorisation and analysis, according to their metrics. The criteria for that selection were based on the metrics that better express the attention that each publication had garnered from its audience on each platform: “total interactions” on Facebook, “reach” on Twitter, and “relevance” on YouTube. Facebook “Total interactions” express the sum of all interactions that users had with a Facebook post: shares, comments, and all reactions (like, love, care, haha, wow, sad, and angry); Twitter “reach” expresses the total number of people estimated to have seen the tweet; and YouTube “relevance” orders the videos according to the most relevant responses of the search algorithm to a given search query, in this case, the precise search queries mentioned above (Cardoso et al., 2021).

In the end, our global sample included 6,233 social media posts, tweets, and videos. These media objects were then categorised and coded by the research teams in each country (trained for the purpose) according to a codebook similar for all countries and subject to an intercoder reliability check whereby two independent coders coded 20 per cent of the first-month sample data (Krippendorff, 2011; Lombard et al., 2002). The codebook included the following six key categories: on- or off-topic; the inclusion/exclusion criteria; the format of the publication (text, image, video, link); the agent who posted, either individual or organisational; the subject, person, or organisation mentioned or addressed in the publication; and the dimensions of Europeanisation, resulting from the semantic map developed for this purpose (Carpentier et al., 2022).

## Findings: Europeanisation on social media platforms

When looking at the data, we first noticed a significant amount of off-topic content, that is, social media publications that used some of the keywords referring to Europe (or Europe and Health, Economy, and Climate) but did not meet the inclusion criteria to be part of our sample. In particular, a lot of off-topic content was relative to performances in European sports competitions, and thus not relevant for the analysis of Europeanisation, but presenting a significant use of European keywords in the content shared and discussed on social media platforms.

From the 6,233 social media publications included in our sample (1,577 about Europe; 1,558 about Europe & Economy; 1,552 about Europe & Climate; and 1,546 about Europe & Health), 3,091 were posts from Facebook pages, 2,197 were tweets from Twitter accounts, and 945 were videos from YouTube.

The main level of analysis is relative to the agents who published the total 6,233 publications included in our sample: 52 per cent (3,315) of those total publications are from media organisations, but that derives from the fact that some datasets are exclusively populated by media organisations (those related to professional content). When we analyse the part of the sample that is open to all users of social media platforms ( $n = 3,081$ ), we see that 1,252 of the social media publications (41%) are published by media organisations, whereas 963 (31%) are authored by political agents – either politicians or political parties and groups. But there are variations across the platforms. On Twitter and YouTube, media organisations are dominant (41% and 63%, respectively), but on Facebook, political agents (mostly politicians) are the most significant source of publications (48%). To some extent, although there are differences from country to country, these data present Facebook as the most significant platform for political agents on social media when considering the overall sample. That correlates with the fact that this is also the most popular social media platform in most countries. On the other hand, political agents are mostly politicians (both on Facebook and on Twitter) rather than political parties or groups, which suggests the personalisation of the connection with audiences as a key driver of interactions and reach on social media platforms. This is visible in the data: Considering all platforms, politicians account for 80 per cent of all publications by agents in our social media sample, whereas political parties represent only 15 per cent.

Furthermore, the data also indicate that the most relevant political actors in our social media sample are different on Facebook and Twitter. Considering all countries, on Facebook far-right populist politicians (e.g., Tomio Okomura from Czechia, Theo Franken from Belgium, and Alice Weidel from Germany) stand out as those who amass more interactions – and attention – with their social media posts. Inversely, on Twitter the publications that register the most reach – and, again, attention – are those of institutional actors such as

presidents, prime ministers, and ministers (e.g., the official account of the Greek prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Alena Schillerová from Czechia, or Alexander de Croo from Belgium).

When we categorised the political agents in our sample according to their EU groups allegiance – which was part of the coding process – we got the results shown in Table 8.1, which support the analysis above. Far-right populist politicians are dominant in the overall sample of most relevant social media posts, but that dominance is particularly notorious on Facebook, where 186 (33%) of the publications with the most interactions are made by political agents pertaining to that political allegiance. On Twitter, in contrast, the reach of far-right populist politicians’ publications (9%) does not stand out and is second to more centrist and moderate political allegiances such as Christian democrats (21%) or liberals (19%).

**Table 8.1** Distribution of publications on social media platforms according to political agents’ allegiance (per cent)

Political allegiance	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube	Total
Christian democrats & Conservatives	10	21	19	14
Socialists & Democrats	7	11	13	9
Liberals & Centrists (Renew Europe)	9	19	4	12
Eurosceptic conservatives	9	10	6	9
Greens & Regionalists	6	8	4	7
Communists & Left	13	7	26	11
Far-right nationalists (Identity & Democracy)	33	9	15	24
Independents (not integrating any EU group)	5	5	6	5
Non-aligned (in the case of Turkey)	1	0	0	0
Not coded	8	12	6	9

Comments: “Political allegiance” is attributed according to the political groups in the European Parliament.

When we look at the data correlating the agent of the most relevant publications with the dimensions of Europe and Europe plus Health, Economy, and Climate (see Table 8.2), we see that media agents drive the conversation in most of the dimensions and platforms, but political agents are significantly more prominent on Facebook than on Twitter. On the one hand, these data present news media as still a pivotal player within the relevant publications about Europe and about Europe and Health, Economy, and Climate on social media, either as agents of those publications or as sources of raw material for the publications of other agents, especially political agents. On the other hand, the same data also show that a significant part of those political agents focus mostly on economic and European issues, in most cases using those issues to leverage internal political struggles.

**Table 8.2** Distribution of all users' publications on social media, according to the dimension and the platform (per cent)

Dimension	Platform	Agent			
		Political agent	Media agent	Any other organisation	Non organisation
Health (+ Europe)	Facebook	33	38	11	18
	Twitter	16	51	9	24
	YouTube	4	69	18	9
Climate (+ Europe)	Facebook	46	24	13	17
	Twitter	19	51	13	17
	YouTube	2	45	28	25
Economy (+ Europe)	Facebook	61	21	1	18
	Twitter	30	41	6	23
	YouTube	11	43	19	27
Europe	Facebook	54	23	5	18
	Twitter	51	19	5	25
	YouTube	11	51	23	15

Comments: "Political agent" refers to political parties, politicians, and EU political groups; "Media agent" refers to any news media outlet; "Any other organisation" refers to organisations that are not political agents or media agents but have a presence outside social media (e.g., a website); "Non-organisation" refers to individuals or groups that have no media existence outside social media, such as an influencer or a page or account that has no existence or website outside social media.

When comparing the presence of news media on social media platforms to that of all users, we notice that the news media included in our sample ( $n = 2,076$ ) display a large number of followers but a relatively low number of interactions, resulting in a comparatively low interaction rate (see Table 8.3). Considering all publications collected in our sample of Facebook pages operated by news media outlets ( $n = 1,054$ ), the interaction rate (percentage of total followers of the pages that interacted with the publications) is 0.18 per cent, whereas the same metric, when considering all users' pages, is 1.43 per cent. The same phenomenon can be seen on Twitter, where, considering the total reach and total interaction, news media Twitter accounts ( $n = 1,022$ ) register an interaction rate (percentage of people reached that interacted with the content) of 0.09 per cent. Again, when considering all accounts, that percentage is 0.15 per cent. Facebook groups – similarly to all users' pages – also register an engagement rate that is higher than that of news media pages – 1.46 per cent – and YouTube videos (published by all users) gather an engagement rate of 2.7 per cent on its views.

**Table 8.3** Comparison of the engagement rate of media and all users' publications on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube

	Followers (n)	Interactions (n)	Engagement rate (%)
Facebook media pages	1,247,237,805	2,290,305	0.18
Facebook pages, all users	663,057,919	9,469,567	1.43
Facebook public groups	48,182,735	702,262	1.46

  

	Reach (n)	Engagements (n)	Engagement rate (%)
Twitter media accounts	120,025,189	103,460	0.09
Twitter accounts, all users	274,286,367	400,960	0.15

  

	Views (n)	Engagements (n)	Engagement rate (%)
YouTube channels, all users	57,900,970	1,563,053	2.70

Comments: Facebook interactions include reactions, comments, and shares; Twitter engagements include likes and shares; YouTube engagements include comments, likes, and dislikes.

This is an indication that other users of social media platforms, notably political agents and particularly far-right populist politicians, are better at taking advantage of the affordances of the social media platforms – and particularly its distribution algorithms – to reach larger audiences and get more interactions. Two observed publishing behaviours may explain that: On the one hand, far-right populist politicians tend to publish more frequently, putting them in a better position to control the narrative on social media; on the other hand, far-right populist politicians tend to use a more emotional and charged discourse, also reinforcing their position to control the narrative vis-à-vis the algorithms of social media platforms that favour that type of content. The counterpart to that is that news media are confronted with the challenge of having to fight for the attention of users on social media platforms with a plethora of other, less constrained, agents.

A further level of analysis to approach this data is about the subject (who or what those publications were about, directed at, or discussed within them) of the publications.

When looking at the subject of the 3,081 publications considered (subjects addressed in those publications being  $n = 6,095$ ), we find that 33.6 per cent (2,043) talk about organisations other than political agents or news media, and 22.4 per cent (1,364) are directed at politicians or political parties and groups. Organisations other than political agents or news media as the main subject addressed in the publications include public institutions such as governments and governmental bodies, as well as private organisations. News media, by contrast, are seldomly the subject of the conversations:

559 publications, or 9.2 per cent of the total 6,095 subjects identified. Non-organisations such as influencers or common people are addressed in 1,142 (17.7%) of the publications by all users.

Also of note, non-organisational agents – mostly common citizens – are more frequently a subject on Facebook than on Twitter or YouTube. Likewise, politicians are not only more of an agent on Facebook than on Twitter or YouTube – they are also more of a subject. These data suggest that Facebook is the preferred terrain for popular content and far-right populist politicians, whereas Twitter seems to be more of a micro-cosmos for news and mainstream politics.

Regarding the territorial scope of the social media publications collected and analysed, the European scope is dominant (51%), as would be expected, but the national scope (31%) is a prominent second, relative to global (12%), regional (4%), or local (3%). This feeds into the observation above that European content is used mostly to leverage national content and political struggles.

The last level of analysis for the data collected is related to the dimensions of Europeanisation that can be inferred from the social media publications included in our sample. Those dimensions of Europeanisation, as mentioned before, were derived from the semantic map developed by Carpentier and colleagues (2022).

The first observation to make is that, although all social media publications categorised were on-topic about Europe, only a small part refer to those dimensions of Europeanisation. This seems to indicate that Europeanisation is not an issue on social media, even when Europe is the topic (or part of it). Also, considering that those dimensions of Europeanisation are often addressed by political or media agents and not by common users, we cannot find traces of Europeanisation from below in our data.

The dimension of Europeanisation we called European institutions (for publications that contained any reference to one of the several European institutions, like the Commission, the Parliament, or the Central Bank) was the dimension that was included the most times in the publications ( $n = 1,774$ , or 16%). The Political dimension of Europe comes next (12%), followed by the Economic dimension (12%) and European Law & Governance (11%). Conversely, European interactions & dialogues, European culture(s), European (media) content, and European new social movements are the dimensions of Europeanisation that are less present in the publications in our sample (see Table 8.4).

**Table 8.4** Distribution of references to the dimensions of Europeanisation across all samples (multiple choice)

Europeanisation dimensions	All publications	
	n	%
European institutions	1,774	16
Political	1,328	12
Economic	1,298	12
European law & governance	1,239	11
Scientific	766	7
European (media) industries & capitalist economies	764	7
European territory	738	7
European people (“Europeans”)	544	5
European public sphere	477	4
European democratic model(s)	455	4
European values	437	4
European interactions & dialogues	399	4
European culture(s)	379	3
European (media) content	255	2
European new social movements	155	1

This suggests a strong focus on the normative side of Europe, not only considering references to the institutions and laws of Europe but also to its political and economic dimensions. The economic side of Europe, for instance, is most frequently associated with European funds and relief efforts for (or from) European countries. And the political dimension is most often used as leverage for internal political struggles. Seldomly, issues about Europe seem to be debated on social media platforms as European in their own right, and when they are, that debate is almost always associated with some related national issue.

On the other end of the spectrum: The low attention provided by Europeans to new social movements and European media content or European culture(s), for instance, suggests less interest in the social side of Europe and Europeanisation.

## Theoretical discussion of the findings: A modest interest in European issues

When discussing our findings, we observe that – in principle, at least – the problem of the agency has always been with us Europeans, and the same holds for its connections to the media field. As the *Tindemans Report* (Tindemans, 1976: 12) read, back in the mid-1970s,

no one wants to see a technocratic Europe. European Union must be experienced by the citizen in his daily life. It must make itself felt in education and culture, news and communications, it must be manifest in the youth of our countries.

As we have seen, this goal has not been accomplished, if not partially and locally, due to several criticalities: the modest interest in EU-related issues in national media cultures; the scarcity of references to Europe in online public debate; the predominance of professional content in the social media discussion on European issues; and in sum, the weakness of Europeanisation from below.

As to what people actively produce online, we noticed that the reference to European affairs is rare in social media discussion across Europe. This is the most relevant, apart from the limitations of our study, considering that we focused on the most impactful posts. In this sense, it is not simply that there was not much discussion about Europe and European issues, but even more, that “references to Europe were not about European issues themselves but rather as a leveraging of European issues for use on internal national political and social struggles” (quotation from the WP2 note provided by the ISCTE team).

In this respect, our findings confirm the evidence delineated by means of the literature review. First, a national framing of EU-related issues has been largely detected by comparative studies of European media, usually with no remarkable differences between the considered countries or outlets (Bee & Chrona, 2020: 871–872; de Vreese, 2003: 99–116; de Vreese et al., 2001: 116–118; Koopmans & Erbe, 2003: 115–118; Machill et al., 2007: 188–189; Peters et al., 2005: 148). In a few cases, some exceptions stand out, with a few media outlets providing a properly European narrative: such would be the occasional circumstance of newspapers in Denmark (Sifft et al., 2007: 139) or in the Netherlands (de Vreese, 2008: 136–140). It has also been empirically observed that the attention devoted to European issues increases, in terms of media coverage, when those issues directly intersect national interests or political themes (Barisione & Ceron, 2017: 95; Trenz, 2004: 293). No all-embracing generalisations should be allowed, but in this respect, we may doubt that the platformisation process per se is working in favour of Europeanisation.

A second insight to be highlighted is the marginal role ordinary users play in the discourse about Europe. This is particularly clear in our dataset, as the most impactful posts usually come from some kind of institutional actors – mostly political agents on Facebook, and in prevalence media agents on Twitter and YouTube. If anything, this speaks against the alleged democratic properties of Web 2.0 – an illusion perpetrated by some divulgators and market stakeholders, despite the early evidence of the power-law organisation of the Web, and attention clustering around a few selected nodes – based on

the statistical concentration measured by a number of authors in the so-called physics of complex networks (Barabási, 2011; Barabási & Albert, 1999), and eventually impacting also the distribution of attention in the online debate (Miconi, 2013).

A strong interpretation of the nexus between agency and social media in Europe has been put forward by Conti and Memoli (2016) in their elaboration on people's trust, which is the closest to the one that we realised for the EuMePlat project. The major difference is that, resulting from factor analysis, we obtained two macro-variables: the use of legacy media, taking together press, radio, and television; and the use of online media, including both the open web and social media platforms (Cannizzaro et al., forthcoming). Conti and Memoli (2016: 37–41), on their part, worked on three clusters as they separated Internet users and social media users, probably owing to the different datasets analysed: the 2011–2015 editions of Eurobarometer, compared to the 2019 report in our case. The common finding in both works is that strong users of legacy media are more easily engaged in European discussions and are keener to trust and generally be in favour of the EU, in comparison to strong Internet users. The Eurobarometer data, in this case, would confirm the indications of the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*, which also shows an elective affinity between the use of traditional news outlets and trust in national and EU institutions (Newman et al., 2017). As an additional distinction, justified by the above-cited statistical difference, Conti and Memoli (2016: 93) found that social media users, on average, trust the EU even less than the “general Internet users”. This would allow the authors to state an inverse relationship between Europeaness and people's agency, or “mobilisation”: In the end, the more active the users are – the more they share on social media – the less they trust the EU. An additional research path to be explored, in the years to come, hinges on whether this trend is due to a deeper fracture in European societies, with media repertoires possibly being an indicator, if not a predictor, of the increasing polarisation between affluent citizens and mass audiences (Miconi, 2024: 135–136).

We already discussed the implication of this tendency for European identity, as it shows the weakness of what Della Porta has defined as “Europeanization from below” (Della Porta et al., 2006; Della Porta & Caiani, 2007) – or at least, it shows that social media are not serving this process (Miconi, 2024). Here, we address two explanations of people's limited participation in a properly pan-European debate, which relies on different aspects: the way such debate is organised on social media platforms and the possible changes in the set of values shared by Europeans.

As to social media debate, we already knew that all resources in the web ecosystem are distributed in a very uneven way and that – either measured in terms of links, followers, or traffic – such resources cluster around very few hubs, owing to the power-law organisation of complex networks (Barabási &

Albert, 1999; Barabási et al., 1999). When the academic community started mapping online mobilisation, though, there was space for native successes: The accounts destined to become hubs, in other words, used to be parts of the bottom-up stream of communication, as the well-known cases of the Arab Spring, Occupy America, or the Spanish 15M demonstrate (Lotan et al., 2011; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2011). Recent analyses rather isolated the role of the news media pages on Facebook, whose contents are easily reposted by common users and which can be defined as a new generation of gatekeepers (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018: 4743). Legacy media also played a decisive role in filtering and shaping the information related to the Covid-19 outbreak, as proved by a study on 200 million Twitter interactions during the early days of the pandemic (Sacco et al., 2021: 6–7). In the Italian case, the same findings can be inferred from a study on the 2018 electoral campaign (Bracciale et al., 2018: 373–374); from a cross-platform investigation on the overall polarisation of public debate (Pilati, 2021); and the Twitter discussion around the introduction of the Green Pass, or Covid-19 vaccine certificate (Pilati & Miconi, 2023). Even though these results do not allow for any generalisation, they are consistent enough to make necessary a reflection on what happened to define the “colonisation” of social media debate by influential figures – whether journalists, politicians, or legacy media (Pilati & Miconi, 2023). Such evidence is still in need of a theoretical explanation: If anything, though, it shows that the online debate is no longer animated only by bottom-up phenomena and that the mass diffusion stage has come with an increased level of centralisation.

A second explanation would rely, in a different vein, on a very social reason: people’s possible withdrawal from the public discussion on European issues. That European affairs would not win the hearts of Europeans is not new, *per se*. As noted earlier, there is clear evidence in the literature of EU-related topics being mainly discussed within the member states when they directly impact national interests, particularly in the cases of public debt and bailout debates – and economic crises in general. An additional (yet complementary) hypothesis is that people’s sense of belonging to the EU has been weakened by the recent crises, and in particular by the financial downturn, which have impacted both the societal structure and the moral economy of the area (Castells et al., 2012, 2018).

The interplay between the material and the ideological dimensions is more relevant when one recalls Inglehart’s work on the values of Europeans. Already back in 1971, by means of a comparative survey in six European countries, Inglehart (1971) identified the shift of priorities, according to the new generations, from the material needs to what he first defined as post-bourgeois and later post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1977). It makes sense to highlight that the adoption of post-materialist values in Inglehart’s work is a driver of the identification with Europe as a supranational community and form of government. Yet these same value choices also evince a relationship

with other political preferences that have no obvious similarity in terms of face content. For example, they are good predictors of attitudes toward supranational European integration (Inglehart, 1971: 996). A research path to be considered for future research, therefore, is whether the very material needs imposed by the recent traumas – unemployment, eviction, and poverty caused by the economic crisis, or healthcare and human liberties issues in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic – are reverting the set of priorities as perceived by the people, therefore impacting their willingness to embrace the typical post-materialist idea of supranational unification.

For our current purposes, it makes sense to discuss an additional point that has been raised by our colleague Vaia Doudaki during an EuMePlat meeting hosted by Bilkent University in September 2023. Yes, let us say that Europeans do not talk about Europe on social media platforms – but does this mean that they do not talk about Europe at all? Let us radicalise Doudaki’s argument. As relevant as they might be for our research interests, the media – either legacy or social – are only a small piece of a bigger picture, and the idea that *any* or *most* human activity would take place online is, indeed, questionable. It is probably due to some accepted concepts that we take for granted the hegemonic role of mediated relations: for instance, the “new operating system” notion, which relies on a plain overlapping between online and offline social networks (Rainie & Wellman, 2012: 126), or Couldry’s (2008: 377) mediatisation, defined as the “transformation of many disparate social and cultural processes into forms or formats suitable for media representation”. *Many* processes, though, are not the same as *all* processes, and what we found may simply mean that there is no elective affinity between social media platforms and the European narrative – simple as that.

Hence, the follow-up question arises of why citizens use social media platforms for discussing any possible topics such as national politics, local chronicles, global crises, economy, sport, and more, and at the same time, *do not* choose them in the case of European affairs. In terms of the evidence, there is no elective affinity between Europe and social media – but whether this depends on the material configurations of the platforms or people’s values is a pending research question.

## **Concluding remarks: Strengthening media pluralism**

In our analysis of the publications on social media platforms and the attention each publication gets from its audience, we focused on the topics that, according to the Eurobarometer surveys, are among the main concerns of Europeans: Health, Economy, and Climate. We compared the publications of the traditional media with those of other users and differentiated the user groups. The analysis took place against the backdrop of the hopes once placed in the Internet; more precisely, we wanted to combine the concepts of

Europeanisation and platformisation to find out to what extent the relevance of platforms in digital communication promotes a Europeanisation in which civil society actors play a relevant role. The result is sobering: Social media platforms are not the place where Europeanisation takes place. This is the main finding of our empirical study. European issues are not high on the agenda, nor do those users who post refer to European institutional actors. Furthermore, European conflicts, of which there are many, are not negotiated on social media platforms.

There is no sign of a strong civil society component that was once associated with the rise of the Internet and the opportunity for everyone to have their voice heard. Instead, the publications are dominated by the familiar political players and legacy media. What is more, contrary to these initial hopes, is the realisation that, among the political actors, it is primarily those from the right-wing spectrum who make particular use of the algorithms and functionalities of social media platforms.

In the theoretical discussion, we analysed these findings from various perspectives. What these perspectives have in common is that we place the communication-related interpretations in a broader context and ask whether and to what extent the material experiences that people have – crises and associated fears, as well as the values that people follow – must be used to interpret the results mentioned. How this can be done must be the subject of further research.

The EuMePlat project, whose partial results have been presented here, aimed at analysing the role of media platforms and focused on the “platformisation” process and its positive and negative externalities. Based on the overall results, strategies for media policy were developed accordingly (Miconi et al., 2024), of which only excerpts of relevant considerations can be given here. As we consider concentration in the digital media sector as crucial for the state of the platforms, recommendations point to the establishment of a strong, permanent, informative instrument for monitoring concentration of media ownership and opinion power, possibly by taking together, or promoting synergy between, the Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) of the Center for Media Pluralism and Freedom (CMPF) and the Euromedia Ownership Monitor (EurOMo) launched by the EuroMedia Research Group.

In addition, we recommend strengthening the powers of the independent European Board for Media Services to take binding decisions on issues of media pluralism with a European dimension. We also encourage the development and deployment of tools throughout the news environment, both on legacy media and social media platforms, that make relevant ownership and risk metrics available to citizens (similar to the information panel on YouTube, where channels owned by a government or publicly funded news publisher provide context and a link to the Wikipedia page of that publisher). A further recommendation asks for the support of decentralised alternatives to global commercial platforms (Miconi et al., 2024: 21).

Ultimately, however, the undesirable developments of digital communication technologies can only be corrected or even contained by a whole bundle of media policy measures, which are also discussed in the other contributions to this volume, and which should be considered in their interaction.

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