

Virality & Influencers in Digital Communication

Workshop report



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Author

Sophia Ignatidou, Academy Stavros Niarchos Foundation Fellow, Chatham House

STOA administrators responsible

Eszter Fày

Silvia Polidori

Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA)

Directorate for Impact Assessment and European Added Value

Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services

European Parliament

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Régnier Pot

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INTRODUCTION

By Sophia Ignatidou, Academy and Stavros Niarchos, Chatham House

Posing the broader question of how the European message can be conveyed more effectively, the European Parliament's Science-Media Hub hosted a workshop on the issue of virality and influencers on 3 April 2019. Chair of the European Parliament's Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA), Greek Member of Parliament, Eva Kaili, opened the debate on how virality manifests itself, what it means and how influencers impact online communication, with moderator and online communications expert Philippe Félix moderating the lively discussion. The first part of the workshop focused on the more theoretical aspects of virality, while the second moved on to practicalities.

Eva Kaili explained the role the recently launched European Science and Media Hub (ESMH) has taken, as the main platform through which the European Parliament (EP) aims to enhance dialogue between scientists, politicians and the media, and simultaneously provide citizens with science-based knowledge. Kaili explained that, in light of the upcoming European elections, the workshop would look at how online activism and messaging can motivate people, by exploring the issue of echo chambers, the psychological aspects of online communications, as well as the potential of social-media-listening methodologies and new technologies more broadly. She argued that, despite the fear or nostalgia's potential to become major mobilising forces, we do have to explore actively how effectively to convey a positive message to society.

— **George Markopoulos**, Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistics, School of Philosophy, of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, began by looking at prevalent social-media trends through the lens of discourse analysis and exploring the sociolinguistics of virality.

He highlighted the emotive punctuation of internet discourse and delved into what he called a 'linguistic anarchy' – a liberation from written conventions and strict spelling or grammar rules. He also mentioned the effect of repeating the same words, without differentiating their slightly different meanings. As a consequence, vocabulary is also reduced.

As Markopoulos explained, research has indicated that there is a relationship between virality and the content of messages. Affective emotions are crucial factors behind any viral diffusion, while originality is not as necessary as usually perceived. An interesting point raised was that 'in social-media communication, content which is more likely to spread is the one which activates social relationships'. Investigating the probability of retweeting, researchers found that, in peer interaction, negative sentiments are detrimental to sharing, while negative news content disseminates better.

Markopoulos reminded the audience that social media impose a sense of intimacy upon their users that does not actually exist, and concluded on a dystopian note: 'If cyberspace was once a spectre of the real world, today the real world, I am afraid, is a spectre of the digital'.

— Presenting the potential and pitfalls of virality for politics, **Michael Bossetta**, Political and Data Scientist at the University of Copenhagen, looked at social media, 'at 3D', and how it changes vertical power relations between citizens and politicians, citizens and media, citizens and elites. He looked at how citizens communicate with each other, how they mobilise to create social movements, and how plug-ins, such as canvassing apps, accommodate that mobilisation. Bossetta pointed out that there is no single model of virality, as the latter can be the outcome of influencer sharing, citizen sharing, or even a mix of the two. He also added that the issue of how these platforms are coded is often overlooked, making the case that code is a really important variable for virality, because it determines not only how a platform operates, but also what plugs into it. For instance, some plug-ins can turn citizens into micro-influencers. Before wrapping up his presentation, he asked whether virality is actually a meaningful engagement.

— **Kristof Varga**, Consultant on policy development and social media, and former Director of the Public Division at Bakamo.Social, opened his presentation by clarifying that people make viral content, not social media. He explored what motivates people to share online, drawing on the work of Eric Berne, the founding father of the transactional therapeutic analysis that focused on the practice of observation. After explaining the methodology followed at Bakamo (keyword grid, scraping software etc.), Varga presented the results of the company's study on the impact of disinformation on the 2017 French presidential election, which had looked specifically at sharing behaviour. Categories of tracked behaviour included the isolated repeat of a post and the mission-type approach, when people added value to a post by explaining what they were trying to convey, while, finally, a tendency to provoke was also recorded. Varga reminded the audience that, in general, people feel a great need to belong, and social media are really good at providing a sense of community at a very low price. Other strong drivers for sharing were signalling individuals' identity or increasing their self-worth by becoming the reference points that peers draw upon. An

interesting insight was the researcher's conclusions from his research on social media users endorsing Russian authoritarianism in former USSR countries. It appears that people feeling anxious and fearful prefer to relate to 'the devil they know' above an uncertain or more distant concept. To inform the debate on the message that the European Union should be communicating, he pointed out that one cannot communicate effectively without taking motivational and emotional factors into account.

— Turning to the more practical aspects of the workshop, **Diarmaid Mac Mathúna**, director at Indiepics, reminded the audience that, despite any feelings of being overwhelmed by issues such as disinformation, we can still use social media for good. Mac Mathúna explained that to connect with their audience in a meaningful way, Indiepics follows a MEDIA (monitor, evaluate, downgrade, inform and attack) framework, which it deploys to monitor disinformation. He highlighted that it is however important to evaluate the scale of disinformation or a specific trend. For instance, how many followers a troll has will define if the company will engage, but even if that is the case, the ultimate goal would be to downgrade the reach of a problematic post, rather than enhance its visibility. The 'attack' component relates to how and when the company engages with problematic content. Mac Mathúna also warned that, at times, reposting could backfire, by propagating the myth someone is trying to suppress. He concluded with what he called Indiepics' ZEUS principles, which stand for zeitgeist (joining conversations already happening), emotion, useful (provide useful content), and stories (create compelling stories).

— **Emmanuel Rivière**, chairman at Centre Kantar sur le Futur de l'Europe, highlighted the example of the 'yellow jackets' ('gilets jaunes') movement, illustrating the high degree of disenfranchisement in the country. For instance, in summer 2017, and following the election of Emmanuel Macron, Kantar found that 74 % of the French people stated they would rather be represented by a citizen than a professional politician and 81 % that the elites had failed. A widespread lack of confidence in the media, mistrust in the

elite, and a poor relationship with political parties was, according to Rivière, provided the ideal landscape for the 'yellow jackets' movement – in essence, a movement set in motion by individuals, but accelerated and scaled up by social networks – to succeed. Rivière pointed to 'triangulation' between social networks, polls and legacy media, with the 24-hour-news cycle providing extensive coverage of the movement. Polls were impactful as, by indicating that the majority of the population supported the movement, they forced the government to change its perspective and begin making concessions. Additionally, the structure of the social networks themselves facilitated the needs of the movement, the lack of hierarchy they promote was well-suited to a movement where no one claimed to be a leader, and this horizontality and decentralisation allowed people to mobilise in various locations, complicating the authorities' response. The movement was also boosted by an apparent change in Facebook's algorithm that began to prioritise groups rather than pages, effectively enhancing 'yellow jackets' groups' visibility. Ultimately, the 'yellow jackets' promoted a form of engagement that perfectly reflected the social networks' codes.

Facebook Public-policy Manager, **Meg Chang**, gave the final presentation of the workshop. Before covering best practices in storytelling, she reaffirmed the company's willingness to engage with the research community and social scientists. She added that, when it comes to civic engagement, Facebook's philosophy is giving people a voice in government at every level, every day. Chang explained how the Facebook newsfeed works, drawing on thousands of signals relating to users' interactions, and predictions feeding off a 'relevance score'. Facebook's recently released feature 'Why am I seeing this post?' will also hopefully serve to inform its users as to what data are collected and processed. Virality, interactivity, authenticity, timeliness and consistency were presented as the key variables. European Council President Donald Tusk was congratulated on projecting authenticity via his Instagram account, while Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, was presented as a prominent case study of successful use of timeliness in audience interaction.

Chang's presentation concluded with an overview of Facebook's response to disinformation.

Austrian Member of the EP and STOA Vice-Chair, **Paul Rübzig**, concluded the event, praising STOA's efforts in actively working to inform citizens. He added that, apart from politicians' responsibility to shape public opinion, traditional media also have a crucial role to play, for which they need to know how to promote public participation in the European policy-making process. Rübzig stated that evidence-based decision-making is very important for the Parliament, as illustrated by the fact it draws on the expertise of around 300 inter-disciplinary scientists to advance the work of the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). In conclusion, Rübzig underlined the need to overcome 'knowledge silos' and put systems in place to enable more efficient communication. He ended with a passionate call for everyone to take part in democracy, by voting in the EP elections in May.





There isn't as much interactivity between the politicians and the public. I think there could be more crowdsourcing of ideas. Projects like live streams, questions and answers, ideas that give a more down to earth glimpse of what's going on, are positive steps.



MICHAEL BOSSETTA

Political & Data Scientist



Michael Bossetta is a political and data scientist at the University of Copenhagen. His research examines how politicians and citizens use social media during elections. In particular, he is interested in how the technical design of platforms influences campaigning. Michael has also conducted studies on Euroscepticism, populism, and Russian disinformation.





Michael BOSSETTA

University of Copenhagen

[@MichaelBossetta](#)

1 Can you tell us more about your academic background, and how it relates to social media?

I initially started my PhD in populism, but then moved on to research euroscepticism in online forums. We were looking at the differences between Denmark and Sweden as to how people were talking about Europe. While there was some forum activity in Sweden, we realised there was none in Denmark. This was around 2013–2014 and we soon realised most of the Danish activity was actually on social media. What is interesting is that looking at social media data, the most active citizens are those that tend to support ‘populist parties’.



2 Do you see a connection between that statistic and the social media infrastructure and business models? Someone might argue the kind of interactivity they promote is a quite reductive or simplistic version of reality?

I would not go as far as to say platforms are driving that simplification. If you look at some countries right now, the front-runners are people with no concrete policy positions. Social media are just another broadcast medium that circumvents legacy media and, if you are really lucky, everything you do gets amplified by the latter. For example, if Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wants to make a push, she can use social media to launch something and the legacy media will pick up on it. The same applies for Donald Trump or Beto O’Rourke. Social media really works out for a few politicians, but I do not think platforms as a whole have supported the simplification of the political discourse, I think that is just a general trend. Sure, social media give people a way to

interact and vent their political opinions, but I do not think you can trace a causal link between the design of the platforms and the simplification of discourse.



3 Do you have any examples of when politicians, political parties or movements have used social media in a productive way in terms of the impact it had on broader society, or the same platforms being used in less productive or negative ways?

I see the idea of authenticity, where people get to see and know the person they are electing, as a positive example. Ocasio-Cortez and Trump are such examples, and I think that is what Europe lacks – with a few exceptions, like Guy Verhofstadt for instance. There are also more ways for people to get involved in political campaigns, such as through the use of organising apps. However, there isn’t as much interactivity between the politicians and the public. I think there could be more crowdsourcing of ideas. Projects like live streams, questions and answers, ideas that give a more down to earth glimpse of what’s going on, are positive steps.

In terms of negative examples, there has been coordinated activity by bots and false amplification, but it quickly gets to the question of whether or not social media give a voice to some of these more extremist ideas. I believe it is too easy to blame all this on the rise of technology, when there are many other trends, such as the commercialisation of legacy media, tending towards sensationalism. Those are the more fundamental issues, and I think platforms just magnify some of the structural cleavages that already exist.

4 So regarding using the platforms productively, you embrace the idea of opening up the data for citizens to see what politicians are discussing – their actual deliberations?

Yes, I am talking about the idea of a virtual town hall, with one person, or debates between two people. I do think the media market is moving more towards expert panels that you subscribe to, but politicians could do that without the subscription.

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5 In terms of familiarity and the way some politicians are trying to project it through Instagram or Twitter: Is that what politicians are about? Is it not distracting from the actual issues?

Even though I see authenticity as positive, we should bear in mind people can manipulate that too. Authenticity can be constructed and then you are leading people to think you are someone that you are not. That is the danger.

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6 You have also been producing a podcast?

Yes, the Social Media and Politics Podcast features interviews with academics, practitioners, people who research social media or work in the advocacy and campaigning space. It is about accessing different perspectives, locating the cutting edge and what trends we can expect going forward.

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7 Have you thought of the issue of regulation? Would you recommend any specific changes to accommodate a more productive political dialogue?

I think there should be some research into what are the best technological structures to facilitate meaningful dialogue. One concrete measure would be to regulate the opening up of data, so researchers can study them and look at issues such as under what conditions inflaming happens, how people become radicalised over time, or how it can be reversed.

How can people be nudged in directions that support constructive dialogue? Is this even possible?

For example, we have studied about 38 million Facebook posts from the comment feeds of Brexit campaigns and media outlets, trying to see what the democratic potential of these pages is. We were coding for arguments, so we were really trying to find them.

We took an argument to mean a comment on some aspect of Brexit that was supported by a fact or an example. The initial random sample produced an 8 % ratio, while when we applied stricter criteria for what constitutes democratic deliberation, we got a 3 %. A lot of the comments were people just expressing themselves and the question then is, what effect does that have?

The reason you have so much junk on these media pages is the fact they are public. For the most part people do not act the same way in their private networks.

If you look at Twitter, a lot of research shows that your connections there are kind of a loose tie, you are not friends with most of

your Twitter network, so you tend to act differently than you would do on a network like WhatsApp where you have your close friends.

The question is how these structures can be engineered in a way that supports political discussion, but that is not really in the platforms' interests.

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8 Why do you think that is so?

Facebook was not built to be a political campaigning tool, but people took advantage of its features. Facebook was never a civic platform. Whatever features there are, people are going to take advantage of them. Facebook was just a place to hang out with friends, but now it has morphed into this huge big tech giant.

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9 Is scale the main issue then? Does the sheer amount of information create confusion? Do we need to filter things out?

That scale is precisely why there will not be successful regulation. It is effectively an arms race between the users and the

platforms and there are always going to be more users. It is too easy to create accounts and to manipulate the platforms. But these are private companies, so they can do whatever they want, they can delete whatever opinions they wish.

There is also the idea that, if you start removing content, especially extremist content, extremists then go and act, so there's potentially a backfire effect.

And there are also the competitors, like Gab, more crypto-oriented social networks, where people pay each other in cryptocurrencies to boost each other's posts instead of having a main algorithm. So you have fringe voices that organise in other places outside Facebook and then they are attempting to manipulate the platforms.

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10 How do you see micro-targeting in political processes in general?

I am a bit laissez-faire. To an extent, targeting is necessary because the platforms have made it so.

If you have one million followers and you post something just organically, it is going to reach less than 5 % of them, or something similar. Platforms are incentivising people to pay, it is part of their business model. The question is, is it only in politics that



people should not be micro-targeted? Is it OK for companies to do that? This problem is even more crucial in the USA.

There, micro-targeting is applied to a very small number of people, individuals living in key voting districts. I do not think that is necessarily a positive thing, because you are not getting your message out to everybody. Precisely because of the way the US system is structured, makes micro-targeting arguably more powerful, because voters publicly signal in most states for which parties they register to vote in the primary.

Essentially, because of the primary system, when people register to vote, it gives campaigns better data to inform their targeting strategies. I think in the United Kingdom there is some aspect of this, but in most EU countries there is not.

You are not allowed to use these data and parties are not allowed to store it over elections to trace people's activity. Campaigns can target

more effectively in the USA because you give them better data.

11 So would you say unregulated exchange of data between data brokers, parties and political actors has dangerous implications?

That is a difficult question, because for example, if you are doing a Google search for an issue that aligns with a candidate's policy position and then the same candidate, identifying you as part of their strategic voters, targets you, that creates awareness. Obviously, there is a problem if this candidate promotes two different policies to two different people. There is a tension growing in academia, as to whether or not these technologies are good or bad. On the one hand, they increase participation, which is through the roof in most Western democracies. The question is, what kind? Deliberation – consensus making – is down, but participation is up.





People like people they recognise. That is a very fundamental psychological analysis.



DIARMAID MAC MATHUNA

Communication Expert



Diarmaid has over 15 years of experience in marketing and communications in Ireland and across the EU. Named a Top 30 Business Tweeter by the Sunday Independent, he is passionate about combatting disinformation online. Through audience-focused content strategy and creative messaging he has successfully implemented communications and marketing campaigns that engage diverse target audiences with factual information.





Diarmaid MAC MATHUNA

Director at Indiepics

[@diarmaidmacm](https://twitter.com/diarmaidmacm)

1 What can you tell us about Indiepics and your role there?

I am the Director of Indiepics, which is a communications agency that works with a lot of European clients and the Irish private sector. We work with clients such as the Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union (FISMA) and the Directorate-General for Energy of the European Commission, especially around visual content for social media. We also work with the EU's decentralised agencies, such as the European Food Safety Authority in Italy or the European Commission's Representation in Ireland.

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2 Do you have any comments in terms of the workshop?

What I found very interesting was that in many ways we were echoing the same advice for people who want their content to 'go viral'. We all talked about how people are building a sense of community online, finding their own identity, trying to differentiate themselves, to look good to their peers ...

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3 However, it could be said that your presentation was the most optimistic one ...

I was trying to hit a hopeful tone, because I genuinely believe we can use social media for good. We rather lost our way in recent years. It is natural to feel a bit overwhelmed by the negative things that are happening on these platforms and the disinformation, but I think we do have to remember that a lot of people are using these platforms for good. We also have to understand what the bad things are too. That is

why we came up with this 'MEDIA' framework that relates to monitoring, evaluating, downgrading, informing, and occasionally attacking.

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4 What exactly do you mean by attacking? It sounds controversial ...

I mean, sometimes you have to attack an issue head-on. A good example is Brian Cox, an English physicist presenting television programmes in the UK. He gets very angry with people who believe the earth is flat (I get angry too). But Cox engages with those people online – the problem is that means all his Twitter followers get to see the original flat earth comment. Because Twitter's algorithm saw that Cox commented on a post it concluded it is important, so it will prioritise that. This way you end up bringing the myth or the false fact to a wider audience by accident. You have to be very careful when you attack things head-on.

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5 So is it sometimes wiser to employ strategic silence?

Yes, they say 'don't feed the trolls' on Twitter. I think there is truth to that.

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6 Do you have regular conversations with social media representatives?

We do link up with them when we are looking at specific campaigns, in terms of optimising those campaigns, and getting their advice on what might work best for particular campaigns. It is a conversation we are having more frequently nowadays, and what we see is that the platforms are open to conversations. For instance, Facebook will be running training

sessions involving their new transparency tools, so they are inviting more people in to talk about what they are doing.

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7 Facebook and Google representatives have been training politicians and officials in the USA and other countries. Do you support this? Should platforms advise politicians?

I think they should be educating and informing people about how the platforms can be used for good. Bad actors are doing things at scale and very quickly. To counterbalance that we need to be agile ourselves.

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8 What percentage of your work is with the private and the public sectors?

It is a mix, I would say half and half. What is great about that is that you can combine the latest thinking and experiences from both. One of the interesting things we are seeing now for example is that disinformation has started to affect brands. The whole issue of vaccine hesitancy has been having an impact on pharmaceutical companies, which are becoming worried, as it literally hits their sales. So, they have started to invest in research to combat disinformation, or at least understand it.

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9 And social media platforms like Pinterest have blocked anti-vaccination content altogether.

Yes, the other worrying aspect about disinformation is that people make money from it. That is the crazy thing. If we want to change, then the financial incentive must also be removed. Some people are bad actors because they are trying to disrupt, but they are not necessarily motivated by bad – they are probably motivated by greed, which is perfectly

understandable, or they could be motivated by religious beliefs, which is also entirely valid and understandable. I think it is through understanding and evaluating where these questions are coming from that we can make a change.

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10 What is your take on micro-targeting, specifically when it comes to political campaigning?

I think as long as it is transparent it is fine. It just has to be transparent. You have to know who is targeting you.

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11 Yes, but most of the time we do not get enough information on the data points factored in targeting ...

That is a very interesting point. During the Facebook presentation, we heard that they use thousands of signals to decide how relevant an ad or a piece of content is for you. Usually when we click on that button we only get information on one signal. So I think more transparency there would be very welcome. Some transparency is definitely better than none – we are heading in the right direction. Another interesting aspect of the problem is the question of that happening with inferred data. So yes, they can track my location, but they probably can figure out from my location history what my religious beliefs are. I think companies should give you the raw data and then also inform you of what they are inferring using machine learning techniques. We are not there yet, however.

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12 To what extent is there awareness about the possibilities of machine learning?

At a base level, I think people are starting to realise that algorithms are influencing what we see.

13 How do you think algorithms impact viral content?

I think they are fundamental to how the information is shared. What is interesting, though, is the interplay between what humans like and what algorithms like. Humans like very short pieces of content that gives them answers immediately, but, if you publish a blog post that is very short, Google will think it is poor quality. Humans think it is good, the algorithm thinks it is bad. The result is that, if you want your blog post to appear in search engines, you have to write a very long blog post. As a reader, I need to take a long time to get to the answer, because what you are trying to do is make me spend a lot of time on the page and scroll all the way down, with Google tracking those signals. What happens then is the algorithm shows it to more humans. We are at this very weird place today, where you have to solve problems for both humans and algorithms. If you want humans to see it you have to convince the algorithms that humans will like it.

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14 Can you game an algorithm to make content viral?

You can trigger certain signals. The same will apply for YouTube videos for example. You know, if I am Googling how to do something, I usually want to get the answer quickly, but, if Google wants to show me the right video, it wants to show me a video that other people are watching for a long time. So, if you want a video to be very high in Google search, you have to tease the audience, forcing them to take a long time to get to the actual point.

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15 Are we having the right conversation? What does virality mean anyway? Does it actually illustrate people care?

I think that is a very good question. A researcher I mentioned, Jonah Berger, also dislike the term viral. He prefers this concept of 'contagious' content. One

of the issues raised in the workshop was the quality of the conversations that we spark each time. This is key. It does not matter whether we agree or disagree, it is about having respectful conversations, creating content that sets out our positions but also – and this is where the idea of sharing content comes in – we have to make sure people see it. If you do not trigger zeitgeist or emotion, or useful stories, your content may never be seen, because it may never get shared. If we want people to actually hear our message, whether they agree or disagree, we do have to bear in mind why content is shared. We should not be focusing on making a video that goes viral – that is not valuable – but I think, if we have communication campaigns with certain messages we want to reach a wider audience, we have to bear those issues in mind.

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16 The UK's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Committee on disinformation produced a report with a recommendation to reintroduce friction in online interactions, so people would have more time to consider whether they should share or post content. What do you think about that?

It is an interesting suggestion, but I think one of the things we lost with social media is this idea of serendipity. We do not stumble across things in a newspaper anymore.

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17 We are just fed with information?

Yes, we are fed with things algorithms think we would be interested in.



18 In terms of influencers, how do you see this trend changing the way people do politics? Can you think of any good examples of politicians successfully using their influencing personas to advance their political careers?

I find the whole area of personal branding very interesting. It is no longer the domain of celebrities, an example that comes to mind is Donald Tusk. He has been using his personal Twitter feed in an interesting way. He might make a comment in his speech that makes you think it is by accident, but then he will tweet it immediately and then you know that he really meant it – particularly in the context of Brexit. He has built a brand around himself and people are intrigued by what he might say next.

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19 Was he not already a brand?

Yes, but he has used social platforms to amplify his position and reach new audiences. He is joining that Brexit conversation, bursting the bubble with colourful and provocative language that catches people's attention. That is the first thing you have to do on social media – get people's attention.

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20 Are we close to the point of electing someone just because they have become a big influencer online?

The underlying issue is that people like people they recognise. That is a very fundamental psychological analysis. Even in Ireland, in our presidential elections, I think two of the candidates were previously in the same reality TV show. They are both quite serious business people, but, when you are looking at a panel of five and two of them have been on the same television show, you start wondering whether there is something broken in the system.

21 Are social media enabling the hyper-mediatisation of politics now that candidates and politicians have access to the tools themselves?

Politicians are taking control of their own personal brands and use the amplification that social media give them to communicate directly to their audience. Journalists are also so time poor that they all rely on tweets for their story. Sometimes bots can amplify tweets, giving the impression they are popular and convincing journalists they should cover the story, even though real people are not talking about the subject, but bots. The use of Twitter by journalists is an interesting area to consider.

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22 How can we manufacture virality?

You can buy bots. One of the more popular searches starting with the word 'buy' in Ireland is 'buy Instagram followers'. You can actually buy the perception of popularity and then you can turn that into money by going to a brand and saying I am an influencer now, with thousands of followers. You can actually manipulate the system for personal gain. You can also use bot farms to amplify a particular message.

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23 Are you aware of an international organisation, political party or movement getting digital marketing right?

Yes, the World Economic Forum is doing some good social media content, including online videos with very nice visuals. They always focus on themes that people are already talking about. Sometimes it actually feels like you are interacting with content created by a channel like the Guardian. Their content also comes across as relatively non-biased.





If you have appealing visuals, you create emotions. The dopamine levels rise when you see a video.



GEORGE MARKOPOULOS

Professor of Linguistics



George Markopoulos is Associate Professor of Computational Linguistics at the Department of Linguistics and Director of the Phonetics and Computational Linguistics Laboratory at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, where he teaches and conducts research since 1993. He specializes in the computational processing of linguistic data, corpus design and annotation, and text mining and information retrieval.





1 Can you tell us something about your background?

I finished German literature and language at the University of Athens. Because of my passion for linguistics, I continued my studies in Austria and Germany.

My current research area is computational linguistics, looking at how computers process and understand language. I work in natural language processing (NLP), sentiment detection, data mining and text specification.



2 Can you explain what you mean by sentiment detection?

It refers to the emotions we can trace in a text. If you read a text, you can detect emotions such as anger or surprise in positive or negative comments. We can now detect those emotions by training machine learning algorithms. Using this technology, you can follow hate speech, for example.

The whole endeavour of text mining attempts to give some knowledge of written language to computers.



3 In terms of sentiment analysis, what kind of areas do you research?

There is a classic binary distinction, positive and negative comments, but there are also many nuances. We tend to look into those, as well as what we would classify as one of the basic six emotions (anger, surprise, disgust, fear,

happiness and sadness).

Sentiment analysis is really an umbrella term. We are trying to detect every possible positive or negative emotion in the text. This is a text classification technique. It comes under the rubric of text specification, which is a very fast-growing area in artificial intelligence.



4 Do you tend to investigate public online data such as social media posts?

We trawl through social media because that is where the most heated debates are happening right now.

There we can explore a subject, or a user, and we can actually deduct personalities from social media. From all the training data available, an algorithm can scan unlabelled text and detect hidden emotions.



5 Apart from emotion detection, can you use the same technology to produce psychographs of different users?

In that case, you would need the assistance of psychologists. Building a personality profile is something different, because you have to combine the personality traits with the emotions and that is not always a linear relation, so although doable, it is more complicated. You cannot accomplish it as a linguist, the work is interdisciplinary.

There are currently efforts underway

to combine personalities with a specific writing style. Apart from the gender distinction, a problem that has been solved, researchers are trying to combine all the classical personality traits (extrovert, introvert, emotional etc.) through their writing style and find possible combinations.

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6 What is the purpose of this research?

To build machine intelligence, a smart dialogue system that can respond to emotions. All dialogue is based on emotions; but what we are talking about is a challenge for researchers.

If, for example, you want to track someone, you want to spot paedophile activity patterns and their grooming processes, or hate speech, you can enrich your algorithm with specific labels of emotional behaviour to have a better chance of tracking these people. Positive or negative labelling alone is not enough. That is merely the first level.

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7 So machine learning can let you factor in the context in which a conversation is taking place?

Yes, it can better classify and filter the content. It is a very delicate process.

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8 Are there basic threads in viral content in terms of its linguistic analysis?

I have seen is that emotion is affective. Not just positive, but also negative emotions. Visual stimulus is also strong.

9 When you are saying that you are observing emotion, how do you detect emotion when it's not that obvious?

In our field, we have a 'sentiment lexicon', which includes not just words but also the various contexts of these words. It is a very complicated statistical thinking tool for algorithms to detect not only the word but also the context. As we say in linguistics, you know a word by the company it keeps.

So if I have not only the words, but also the context, then I have a much richer environment to play with.

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10 Is emotion more important than appealing visuals for virality?

If you have appealing visuals, you create emotions. The dopamine levels rise when you see a video. In our research we mainly consider the text, not the visuals.

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11 Have you worked with other EU institutions?

Yes, I am currently building a start-up with a colleague who is an expert in computational stylometry. We are trying to build 'authorship fingerprinting' that can identify unique writing styles.

We are also working on text analytics, to train Greek algorithms to track emotion in Greek language text.

The ultimate goal is to link the personality to the writing style, but this, as I said, is a complicated process.

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12 Are you working with the Greek government or other departments?

We have started discussions with Vouliwatch, because they want to build a hate speech tracker and follow all the far-right politicians' comments in the Greek parliament and people's response.

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13 What about the European Commission? Have you cooperated with them?

Under the Horizon 2020 European research programme, we cooperate with a lot of institutions on the participation of young children in digital media and how kids react to online content. We also look at how we can use digital technology in education.

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14 In terms of content moderation how easy is it to determine what content gets banned using artificial intelligence?

I think we are making a mistake by seeing everything in binaries. Binary solutions are troubling because there are always grey areas. The inclusion/exclusion debate on social media also relies on binaries.

Sometimes I feel like a split personality, because I like social media and I like freedom of expression. If you want to control the content by extension you will control freedom of expression, and the internet was built on the latter.

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15 In terms of NLP and natural language generation, OpenAI recently produced a text-generating system, but decided not to release it. Any comment on this decision?

I have followed this strand of artificial intelligence from the very beginning and I have to admit the technology has reached an astounding level of sophistication.

OpenAI's model is unsupervised, and they did release part of the code to the

public. You can download the source code of a small part of the model and play with it – it is incredible. That is how things are going to progress from now on.

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16 Are you saying that even if OpenAI do not release a really good NLG model someone else will?

I do not think you can do anything to prevent that, because it is a research challenge for us. I agree with writer Yuval Noah Harari, who said there is no bad or good AI. It is up to us how we use this technology.

17 What is the situation with artificial intelligence research in Greece?

We communicate with colleagues at the Institute for Speech and Language Processing, colleagues at 'Demokritos' [National Centre of Scientific Research] and some other researchers at the Department of Informatics at the Athens University of Economics and Business.

It is not a very large community, but many researchers are working on projects that are the state-of-the-art. Greece is a small market and because of the [euro] crisis, universities lack funding for research. This kind of research particularly needs serious funding.





The content we access through social networks is increasingly fed by images and videos, and the prevailing horizontality means real content is shared with no hierarchy... There is no need for “fake news”. Just one single authentic fact can become so viral that it becomes how people understand the whole story.



EMMANUEL RIVIÈRE

Political Scientist



A graduate of Sciences-Po Paris, Emmanuel began his career at CSA in 1992. After a stint at Louis Harris, he became head of the Research and Surveys Department of the Government Information Service in 1999 and then joined TNS Sofres in 2005 as Director of the Political Department. Since 2016, he has been CEO of Kantar Public France and President of the Kantar Centre on the Future of Europe.





Emmanuel RIVIÈRE

Kantar CEO, Public Division

[@emmanuelriviere](https://twitter.com/emmanuelriviere)

1 How did you find the event?

I think it was positive to see that, although people come from different organisations, backgrounds and perspectives, we all agree on the fact that something new, unstable and powerful is now changing the way we access information, the way we interpret news and the way we are exposed to public policy and public debate.



2 Can you tell us something about yourself? What is your current position at Kantar and what were you doing previously?

In the past, I worked for the French Prime Minister's service, where I led the research and opinion bureau.

I ended up working for two prime ministers, Lionel Jospin and Jean-Pierre Raffarin. Before joining the Prime Minister's communication service specialising in opinion monitoring and behavioural insights, my very first steps in my career were in market research, and that is where I returned after six years, when I joined Kantar.

When I have to describe my job, I tend to say that I am working on making public policies more efficient by better analysing people's behaviour, understanding and opinions.



3 Your presentation was on the 'yellow jackets' movement, but I was wondering whether you have seen anything comparable in the past.

The very first manifestation of digital influence on a political event was about 14

years ago, with France's 2005 referendum on the constitutional treaty. The answer the voters gave was ultimately 'no', but one significant and influential actor was a university professor, Étienne Chouard, who posted his views about the referendum on the internet.

People started sharing a link to the website via their emails and eventually this became the first strong internet influence on a political debate in France.

Back then, it was pretty much established that the internet campaign for 'no' was much more powerful than that of the 'yes' camp.

All the major parties, apart from the Front National and the French Communist Party, campaigned for 'yes', as well as almost all newspapers and TV channels.

The outcome in a way expressed the mainstream media and politicians' opposition to something that was rather underground, but still existed and spread on the internet.

I think it is quite interesting to remember that; because ultimately with the 'yellow jackets' it is the same story.

Again, we see the internet as a substitute for what are considered the dominant communication tools.



4 In terms of new tools, I think Jean-Luc Mélenchon also launched an app during the last presidential election, did he not?

Yes, that is a really good example. Mélenchon launched 'happ' with hundreds of thousands of views of long videos that do not fit at all with the standard recommended by digital communication agencies – we are talking about 20-minute videos – but they were still

seen by people. His campaign started slowly, but the point when he definitely won the competition with those on the left side of the political spectrum were the TV debates. He was very successful and surprised everyone who recognised that Mélenchon came off as wiser, cleverer and much more moderate than previously. Until 2017, television remained the medium for impactful campaign events. Social media had a role to play, but was not the full story. For example, no matter which KPI [key performance indicator] or metrics you want to consider, on Facebook or Twitter, the strongest and most dynamic campaigns were those for François Fillon and Marine Le Pen, not Macron. The far right has strong engagement on the internet, so it has probably become a really effective tool for non-mainstream parties.



5 You mentioned a TV debate featuring Mélenchon. Did you track increased social media engagement after the debate?

Well, we have to remember social media engagement has become partly artificial. When you mobilise dozens of party supporters to post or retweet, that is a measurable activity, however it is not normal people expressing themselves, but supporters asked to do so.

6 Avaaz published a report recently on disinformation in relation to the 'yellow jackets'. Did you see it?

I have not seen that report but I have seen research by some academics in Toulouse, who concluded the amount of disinformation on social media was not that important for that movement.

7 Did that research conclude that pollution of the online space was not a determinant in the outcome or the organisation of the movement in that case?

That is correct, but we have to remember the problem is not just disinformation. Reports based on real facts can also be influential in certain ways.

You see there was a kind of competition on social media between those who wanted to prove the violence came from the 'yellow jackets' and those who wanted to demonstrate the violence came from the police and the state forces.

What was amazing was how influential people from both sides, people who were supposed to provide an analysis of the situation, at some point started only sharing videos that showed the violence from their respective sides.

The content we access through social networks is increasingly fed by images and videos, and the prevailing horizontality means real content is shared with no hierarchy. It used to be journalists' role to create that hierarchy.

If you have, for instance, 10 cases where the police may misuse force, and on the other side thousands of cases where 'yellow jackets' turn violent, the amount of views for the police brutality content can counteract the more limited views of the 'yellow jacket' videos.



8 Do you mean that through social media two cases can be presented as equivalent, even when there is imbalance in terms of the force the two sides are using?

Yes, the same unique video of shocking violence by a policeman, shared 10 000 times, can have a bigger impact than 10 videos displaying violence by 'yellow jackets'.

shown 1 000 times each.

With social media as a source of information, you lose the role played by journalists, the balancing and setting up of a hierarchy among facts.



9 Apart from removing such hierarchy, with social media do we run the risk of being subjected to a hierarchy that can be manipulated or hidden?

Yes, exactly. To go back to your point, there is no need for 'fake news'. Just one single authentic fact can become so viral that it becomes how people understand the whole story.

And it is enough to have one policeman do something shocking to demonstrate that the police are abusing their power.



10 Do you think then that is exactly why it is important to discuss the whole notion of virality? Because viral content tends to define a story and its frame?

I am totally convinced of that. Social networks are reshaping the way we are

accessing information in a way that could mislead us.

I think we are obsessed with 'fake news', when the real issue is bigger than that. It is the way we transform relative facts into a generality.

In any case, 'fake news' did not wait for social media to exist.

At least, as some analysis has indicated, people are aware they can be exposed to 'fake news'.

Some 75 % of the French population said they thought they were receiving 'fake news' on a regular basis and their reaction was to turn back to the classical and professional sources of information, traditional media, so the situation is not that bad.



11 The situation is not static, people are becoming aware ...

Which leads me to the conclusion that you probably cannot fight 'fake news' by trying to control the content. You have to build trust around professional distributors of information. It is not about controlling the content, but about enhancing transparency and the quality of the content in the media.



12 In terms of stories that go viral and attack or misrepresent what politicians or institutions are doing, what would you recommend as the right way to respond?

What can you do about stories that are not factually inaccurate, but misrepresent an issue?

Firstly, it depends on the degree of virality. If it is limited and reaches users who are already strongly opposing you, I would say it is useless to engage. However, if what is being said on social media is exaggerated, transformed, biased, but not totally false, then you are under an obligation to control the leak.

I think we are in a situation right now where there cannot be hidden activities or a hidden agenda. When you have defamatory content circulating, the first question should

be 'are we clean? Or not totally?' And if not, then we have to manage the situation, which was not at all the case 10 years ago.

Today transparency is the real winner against disinformation, because sooner or later, what you want to keep hidden will come to light and then you will be confronted by an alliance of those who are against you anyway and those who were not against you in the beginning but came to understand the lie.





Making radical comments or promoting radical ideas and disinformation was just the surface of the issue. These are just acts that people engage in to express their dissatisfaction and anger towards their own elite.



KRISTOF VARGA

Social Media
Research Expert



Kristof Varga is a social media research expert and the former head of Bakamo Public, a social media insight research company dedicated to serve the not for profit and public sectors. Kristof has two decades of experience in research, international development, philanthropy and government in elected and appointed positions.





Kristof VARGA

Consultant on policy development & social media

[@kristofvarga7](https://twitter.com/kristofvarga7)

1 Can you tell us a couple of things about your background and your current position?

I used to be Research Director for Demos Hungary, a progressive think tank, and following that position I have worked in international development, philanthropy at the Open Society Foundations.

I also set up and managed the Public Division of Bakamo.Social, a market research company working for commercial companies, where we served exclusively mission-based initiatives, governments, the EU, NGOs, foundations and not-for-profit organisations.



2 Do you consult with those clients on specific campaigns?

The methodology of social-media listening was originally developed for the commercial sector; it grew out of the market research industry.

The purpose of Bakamo's Public Division was to apply that methodology to serve the objectives of not-for-profits, multinational organisations and governments.



3 What work have you done, if any, for the European Commission or the Parliament?

We have not worked directly with them, but we did research for a think tank that collaborates with the Member States' security apparatus, studying whether there was a connection between online disinformation and radicalisation.

4 I appreciate the report is not public, but can you share any insights about the results?

I can say there are so many issues online that it is not necessarily the content behind things going viral. We found that making radical comments or promoting radical ideas and disinformation was just the surface of the issue.

These are just acts that people engage in to express their dissatisfaction and anger towards their own elite. It is a means to externalise frustration about the perceived gap between the self-serving elite and themselves, the people.



5 Can social media exacerbate already existing divisions within society? All those underlying grievances?

Yes, mostly there is already something present within society and social media becomes the 'playground' where this is acted out by the people. As time goes by, other issues will tend to surface. The issues debated are interchangeable, people may be annoyed because of migrants one day, or because of banks and globalisation the next. What remains is the emotion or the societal problem of the elite being disengaged from the rest of society.



6 So you see it as an externalisation rather than a causation, not that social media are causing radicalism?

It is just a playground, yes, that amplifies content easily with very little investment on the people's part.

7 At present, both the USA and the EU are discussing regulation.

Do you think regulation may have an impact in containing the problem in societies that are really fragmented or challenged? Will regulating Facebook, for instance, solve the problem?

Well the fact of high inequality will not disappear. What I think regulation can do is to limit the ability of bad actors who are attempting to take advantage, to do so. The amplifying effect can also be dampened with regulation, which I personally think is a good thing.

Because this effect really distorts the perception of social media users and it is not their fault, as they do not know the algorithms behind what they see.



8 Do you mean that amplification gives the false impression of acceptance by the wider community?

Yes. The algorithms are essentially there to serve a business interest, which is fine, social media are a business after all and that is what shareholders expect.



9 Some of these platforms promote themselves as supporters of democracy, by assisting either politicians or citizens. Given the fact they are private companies, can they accommodate a more civic role?

No. I do not think they can. Nor do I think they should. Because that would be messing with the transparency of their own set of objectives.

They are a business, out there to make money in a competitive field – it is not competitive at the moment, but in theory it is. This is capitalism and, if they try to mess with it by bringing in other incentives,

it is not going to work and we are actually seeing this.

I do not think social media can assume the role of a promoter of the public good because they are for private gain. It is OK for the state to step in, because that's why we have states.



10 One of the elements you mentioned regarding virality, was individuals' need to signal their identity to their peers.

What other motivations and drivers are there?

Lessening anxiety and stress in general, which is what acting out anger serves, for example.



11 Given the fact you are working at the crossroads of policy-making and digital communication research, do you often find yourself in situations where policy-makers do not understand the issues we are talking about?

Yes, a lot.

Everybody understands that what we are discussing is important.

Many people know about the dangers that come with social media, so if you are working in policy and politics you have definitely heard about disinformation and you do look at social media as a tool for mobilisation, but in general there isn't a deep understanding of how platforms work and how their research works.

Most policy-makers and officials think social media research is confined to monitoring analytics.





12 As a researcher, what are you lacking most of the time? Access to data or access to where decisions are made?

From my research angle, the algorithms were not that important, because we were doing research on the end result; what is visible publicly, online; the public discourse. In terms of missing data, over the last year, Facebook has changed its policies several times regarding what is available and what is not. That gives researchers a bit of a headache. More consistency would be welcome.



13 Are there any new studies you would like to mention?

Bakamo just published a study on migration narratives in all 28 EU Member States carried out with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. I think it is a very important piece of research in terms of policy-making, politics, and getting a handle on this migration issue that seems to permeate politics in every EU Member State.

14 So is it about what people are discussing regarding migration online?

It is a comparative study of the narratives people are using to understand this complex phenomenon in different Member States.



15 Moving to the issue of analysing consumers, do you have any concerns about the ability of private companies to know what makes people 'tick'?

Not really, market research has been around for a long time and this is just a new methodology that is being applied, where the concern is at the user level. People should slowly begin to realise what it means to post something on social media. Very simple things like the knowledge that if you post a picture it is going to stay there, it does not matter that you may want to delete it, it may come back to haunt you, or that your future employer will probably look at your social media profile. Many people still do not comprehend very basic issues like these.

16 Which social media platforms do you think accommodate more productive dialogue?

Each platform has its own flavour. Twitter tends to be the place where the most informed and fact-based discussion takes place. Facebook less so, although we have not seen much Facebook data for some time.



17 Do you think the speed of online interaction is an issue too?

Platforms try to make everything fast, but life is not as fast as social media want it to be. I think it is plain silly to make important policy or political decisions in 10 minutes.



18 It would work as an obstacle to stories going viral, but do you think we need more friction online?

It is not a bad idea. Currently, social media is artificially intense, with so much focus on the here and now that it does not conform to reality. If there were friction or tweaks that make it more necessary for people to pause to think, that would probably be positive. I do not know how this can be done, if the trend can be reversed or if people are too used to it, but generally speaking, this would be a good thing.

19 Have you seen many debates on the EU in your research?

A piece of research is underway at the moment on how the EU is perceived in four countries in the Balkans and central Europe, so we will have to wait for the conclusions.



20 Any last comments?

I would like to remind everyone virality is not something that you can generate at the moment. We know much about it, but there is no recipe to make something go viral, so it will probably remain a challenge. We may never figure it out. It could even come down to simple luck.



