# LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

## SELF-PRESENTATION, NETWORKING, PLAYING, AND PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS

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# Social Media and Diffused Participation

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**ABSTRACT**
The chapter deals with diffused participation and the role of social media in mundane civic and political practices. Drawing on previous research and employing a structuration model of media for its theoretical framework, the chapter aims to illustrate that the uses of social media are structured by affordances of the media as well as by the immediate and broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which political and civic practices are embedded. Three distinct perspectives have emerged in the course of ongoing research – the first emphasizes the role of collective membership and the pressure to conform; the second focuses on being a member of a performative audience; and the third takes political contexts into account.

**Keywords**
social media, diffused participation, diffused audience, political practices, structuration model of media

## INTRODUCTION

Social media – as a new arena for practically all human activity – have recently become one of the most central, "sexiest" research topics, including in research on political participation. This chapter aims to challenge this centrality by putting the relationship of social media and political participation into a broader context. The chapter revolves around two simple questions: why and how do people use social media in their political practices? The inevitable partial answer has been shaped as theoretical (though research-based)[33] notes on three crucial perspectives: when thinking about the role of social media in political practices, it seems appropriate to take into consideration that the social actors we address are (1) members of media audiences; (2) members of particular organic, virtual, and imagined communities, as well as members of networks of social relations; and (3) citizens forming their agency within the

33 Some of the empirical research that we conducted in the past three years under the auspices of the VITOVIN project has been published in Macek 2013a; Macek, 2013b; Macková & Macek, 2014; Macek et al., 2015; Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015; Macková & Macek, 2015.

context of a particular political and public sphere.[34] These three perspectives do not contradict one another; on the contrary, they are inevitably complementary. And, they enable me to propose a working concept of diffused participation, a concept that was briefly introduced in an empirical study and that refers to normal participatory practices on social and mobile media (Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015).

However, I open this chapter with a short discussion of the general theoretical framework that was employed in our research – the structuration model of media.[35] The model provides an underlying net that keeps together the threads that I explore here and, importantly, it also highlights the emphasis on the materiality and textuality of communication technologies within the immediate and broader contexts of participation and use of social media. In this regard, this chapter further illustrates Monika Metykova's argument (see previous chapter) about the implausibility of the "technological fix" logic by showing that the political implications of social media can hardly be presented as the direct result of the technological affordances of new media. How these affordances are actualized depends on contextual factors, an issue that I will return to later.

## STRUCTURATION MODEL OF MEDIA

The structuration model of media approaches media in three mutually constitutive dimensions – as (1) a techno-textual artefact which is (2) used in a certain way by certain users in (3) specific contexts of immediate everyday-based environments and the wider socio-cultural, economic, and political milieu.

The model draws on Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, which reconciles the structuralist, functionalist, and interactionist approaches to the social world, and "linguistically" emphasizes a recursive relation between social agency and structures. The agency is structured by material and symbolic structures, and these structures are restructured through the agency (cf. Giddens, 1976, 1984).

34 In the chapter I distinguish between the adjectives "political", "civic", and "public". By "political" I refer to issues related to the sphere of institutionalized politics. "Civic" covers issues in which people relate themselves to the state, municipalities, etc., and their institutions. And the term "public" refers to general issues "located beyond the private sphere – issues related to events and relations in the public space" (Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015), including cultural or sport events, charity, associations, etc.

35 The model is explored in more detail in Macek, 2013a: 95–106, where it was first published.

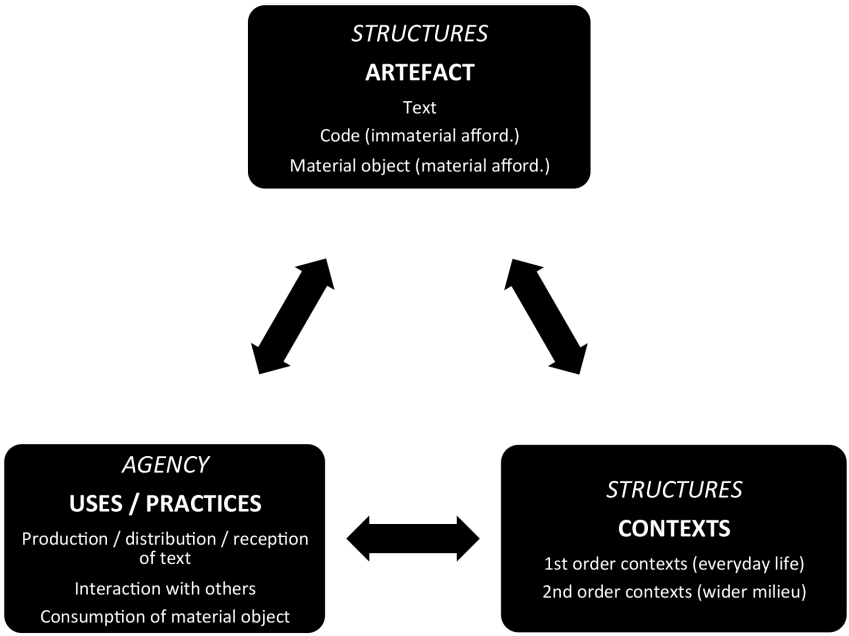


**Figure 1:** Scheme of the structuration model of media (Macek, 2013a).

In the structuration model, the underlying relationship between agency and structure helps to explain how the techno-textual artefact (structure), contexts (structures), and practices (agency) are related. The agency – understood here as political and civic uses of social media – is conditioned by a social actor's socially formed intentions, knowledge, and needs. At the same time the agency is structured by the textual, material, and immaterial technological affordances of the particular medium. And, last, the agency is structured by contextual structures which fall into two categories: Firstly by the immediate contexts of the first order that constitute the actual everyday-life environment that surrounds the social actor (the private home, the public workplace or school, and other semi-public and public spaces like streets, cafes, malls, etc., and social relations saturating these places and spaces); and, secondly, often in a less explicit way, second-order contexts – by the political sphere, the nation-state, the economy, cultural system, etc.

Yet, as the above figure and the theory of structuration imply, the connections

among the three dimensions are mutual. In other words, the structuration model explicitly takes into account that the technological and textual affordances of media are, for example, regulated by legislation or shaped by economic pressures or interests. Or, that the immediate and broader contexts can be eventually and retrospectively structured through the use of technologies. In what way does the model contribute to our inquiry into the political and civic uses of social media? Without going into further details of the model or Giddens' theory (Giddens, 1976, 1984), the model helps to establish a holistic picture of social media and their users as it makes it possible to include the techno-textual affordances of social media and the formative role of the contexts while the model still centers on social actors and their agency (in this case, the people using social media for various kinds of involvement in the public and political spheres). Moreover, the model helps to keep in mind another simple and, yet, important fact: social media are not isolated phenomena and they can hardly be analyzed as such. Firstly, they are part of the immediate and broader social and cultural order. Secondly, they are part of a growing number of communication channels and their place in our lived experience is inevitably shaped by their relationship to other media-related practices.[36]

**WHAT PRACTICES?**

The notion of diffused participation itself deserves some thought before I focus on the particular contexts that link it to media audiences, collective identities, and the political sphere. Firstly, the use of the word "participation" in the phrase "diffused participation" is a synecdoche – it is not terminologically precise in relation to the conceptual apparatus we use in our research. Originally inspired by Nico Carpentier's arguments (Carpentier, 2011), our analyses of politically and publicly oriented agency distinguishes between practices of reception, interaction, engagement, and participation. People using (old, new, social) media receive public and political content and information; they interact – speak – with others about political topics; they actively engage in public or political events, organizations, or communities; and, finally, they may aim to participate in deciding about these events etc. These four types of practices are intertwined – engagement precedes and conditions participation and the conative practices

36 On the role of new and old media in everyday life, see Macek, 2013a (particularly pp. 136–143) where I discuss how people organize their media-related practices, media texts, and technological objects into the media ensembles – more or less reflexively constructed classificatory systems structured by particular needs; by cultural, social, and economic capital; and impacted by the spatiotemporal organization of their everyday lives.

of engagement and participation cannot occur without the communicative practices of reception and interaction. Diffused participation, therefore, actually covers the whole range of these practices, not merely participation as such.

Secondly, the practices constituting diffused participation are political and civic practices that are typically experienced as formative parts of the individual's everyday life and that, at the same time, utilize communication media to blur recently physically evident boundaries between distinct situations and between private and public spaces. In other words, due to the use of social media and mobile technologies, diffused participation is experienced as permanent and as diffused in everyday routines, not as a distinct event. This is the first moment in which the notion of diffused participation refers to Abercrombie and Longhurst's theory of a diffused audience (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998); it will be discussed in more detail below.

Thirdly, the notion of diffused participation addresses forms of mundane political and civic practices that are experienced as a more or less a spectacular performance for other people. This is another aspect that connects to the original notion as developed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (ibid.) to address the increasing importance of social media – for Czechs mainly the social networking site Facebook[37] – as a performative social arena, and it underlines the fact that social media saturate the older cultural needs of self-performance.

And, fourthly, the notion of diffused participation refers to political and civic practices embedded in the everyday lives of common social actors. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that it operates with the phenomena referred to by Ulrich Beck (1996) as "subpolitics" and by Maria Bakardjieva (2009) as "sub-activism". However, since more detailed attention has been paid to this topic elsewhere (cf. Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015), I would just note here that practices framed as diffused participation vary from explicitly public activism to the sub-activist forms of public engagement performed against private ties and mundane routine practices.

## BEING "US": CONNECT AND CONFORM

The first dimension of diffused participation is the collective one. Political and civic practices are inevitably connected to collective belongings and identities:

37 According to a survey conducted in December 2014 (N=1998), 33.5% of Czechs actively used Facebook on a daily or weekly basis. In comparison, 6.3% used Google+; 2.5% the local service Lide.cz; and 1.3% Twitter (Macek et al., 2015).

with the construction, experience, and maintenance of "us". Diverse types of collectivities – from the large-scale imagined communities of nation, class, race, gender, and generation through subcultures, political movements, and organized groups such as NGOs and political parties to local communities, local beekeepers' associations, and simple networks of social ties – are sources of group interests and stages of political and public agency. And, at the same time, they are also built on and sustained through (though not exclusively) the communication practices of reception and interaction.

Media affordances play a crucial role in this regard. The affordances of the mass media of press, radio, and television with their ability to provide a means of mass communication met the needs of imagined communities relatively well, as classic texts repeatedly argued (cf. Anderson, 1991; Williams, 2003; Curran, 1998; etc.). Also, mass media co-structured modern forms of engagement and participation that were dominantly tied to institutionalized, party-based politics. Although mass media obviously failed to provide us with a Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1992), since the 19th century it has played its role in establishing the common symbolic – cultural and political – space of modern society. On the one hand, as a consequence of setting agendas on a mass scale, mass media served as a platform for cultural and ideological consent (cf. Herman & Chomsky, 1988), of articulating social distinctions, and of affirming the positions of certain collective identities within the society. On the other hand, they created a public space in the privacy of the home and, while bridging spatial distances, they opened the nation-state to horizontal mobility (Williams, 2003). Basically, mass media is crucial for those collective identities that emerged with imagined communities and, therefore, it could be seen as a source of traditional political engagement and participation.

And what about social media? Its affordances obviously differ from those of mass media: most importantly they enable their users to set up, maintain, and manage interpersonal connections; to distribute and recirculate both user-generated and mass media content; and to interact with this content with others. Even collective identities tied to imagined communities – such as the nation – are expressed and reproduced in online social arenas as a not insignificant proportion of content spread over social media as mass media content. Nevertheless, through their affordances, social media tend to support identification with social peers in terms of social and cultural capital, and with community.

In this regard, I have noted elsewhere that users' production and recirculation of textuality in social media could be seen as an exposure of taste, and that it is partly motivated by a will to conformity (i.e., by a need to ensure myself and my online audience that I do not differ in taste and opinions from "us", from "our" people, "my" social peers, Macek, 2013b). This remark was based on an ethnographic inquiry into the everyday uses of new media that was focused on textuality in general and included, not only politically and publicly oriented textual practices, but also, importantly, practices related to popular content. As research conducted with my colleagues indicates, this conclusion is also plausible in relation to online political activism and subpolitical engagement (Macková & Macek, 2014; Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015). The motivation of online activists from the local "Žít Brno" group to engage and participate does not suggest that Facebook and other online tools were effective in their repertoire of collective action (Tilly, 1984); rather it was the fact that their online-exposed political practices were appreciated, or even expected, by their online-gathered peers. In other words, first-order contexts – represented by social relations and shared normative expectations – matched the affordances of social media. We can arrive at a similar conclusion in the case of the active citizens my colleagues and I on the Vitovin team encountered in another study – this time the motivation linked to their sense of belonging to a local community (Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015).

Besides the unsurprising finding – that the specific context of social relations and shared values can be a source of peer-pressure to conform, and that such conformity can motivate for specific agency (such as taking part in political or civic activities) – we arrive at another hypothesis: qualitative data suggest that such uses of social networking sites serves as a source of social pressure towards a particular "expected" agency in contexts with weak or absent physical communities (ibid.). In such local contexts (hypothetically more typical of cities) social ties are maintained in a physical space that lacks a particular physical focal point and where the local, physically concentrated community cannot serve as the main source of "us-identity". In these contexts, social media are used as a substitution. Due to their affordances they serve as tools that bridge the fragmented social space and as tools recreating the permanent visibility and reachability of others typical of physical, organic communities.

This argument is demonstrated in the illustrative fact that respondents participating in local communities express a different attitude to the use of

social networking sites: they simply do not need to use Facebook to be in touch with their communities and can thus avoid its pressure towards conformity (Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015). Their communities, as platforms of local "us-identity" and as sources of collective motivation for political and civic practices, are clearly and physically set. In their case, social media are conceived as a means of connecting with the outer social space or with specific members of the community (namely the youth) rather than as acceptable or routine tools for the reproduction of local community.

Last, when talking about "us" and political and civic practices we cannot leave aside imagined communities – first and foremost the nation. Interestingly, it appears that motivations to use (or not to use) social media in activities (reception, interaction, engagement, and participation) related to imagined communities are subject to peer pressure amplified in the environment of social media. Imagined communities intersect with social media through the recirculation of mass media content that represents the public agenda, and through interaction over such content. And both, the content sharing and interactions, happen in front of a permanent audience that consists of the above-described social peers – in semi-public contexts shaped by the expectations of others' similarity and conformity. However, imagined communities and social media use has not been satisfyingly researched yet and, currently – especially in light of growing nationalist and xenophobic sentiments among Czechs that have been sparked by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the threats of Islamism – we understand it as one of the crucial axes for future research. Hence, in this chapter I can only offer highly speculative thoughts in this respect.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIENCE: PERMANENT AND PERFORMATIVE

Those using social media as part of their political and civic practices should be treated not only as media users but also as media audiences because they use social media for the reception, production, and recirculation of content; they express their opinions and values; and they expose themselves as political and public persona. It is important to stress the performative character of social media that markedly differs from mass media – specifically, social networking sites are constructed as ego-centric platforms to enable individuals to conceive their reception, production, and recirculation as managed self-performance targeted at other users, other members of the audience. In contrast with the previous, collectively oriented perspective, this standpoint accents the

individual self: being a politically and civically active member of the social media audience equals being a self-performing member of the audience.

Alena Macková's chapter in this section is illustrative of this phenomenon – the self-exposure of Czech politicians on Facebook shows that social media should be seen as platforms for setting specific conditions for the construction and performance of the self in the media-saturated and media-based environments. I have described this source of motivation for online practices as the will to self-performance (for more detail, see Macek, 2013b), a distinct source of motivations complementary to the will to conformity. Social media practices are driven not only by the need to be in consent with others, but also by the need to perform in a unique and appreciated way: conformity itself is not enough; it has to be visible and it has to be reflexively and carefully performed in a proper and satisfying way. The exposure of one's tastes and opinions has to euphemistically enrich and uplift the "expected" conformity with an "unexpected" performance.

To be clear, in the logic of the structuration model of media, the will to self-performance is linked to first-order contexts as a stage of performance and to second-order contexts, specifically to the wider milieu, as the sources of the cultural motivations for performance. Here, I clearly and explicitly draw on Abercrombie and Longhurst's concept of the diffused audience (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998) which served as the inspiration for the phrase "diffused participation". Abercrombie and Longhurst insightfully identify two important modern cultural sources, specifically structuring relations between the modern subject, society, and media – cultural narcissism (drawing on the work of Christopher Lasch, 1991) and the construction of the social world as a spectacle (following Guy Debord, 1983). These two contextual cultural forces do not only mutually reinforce each other; they emphasize the role of media in both everyday and broader contexts, and underline the importance of "being an audience" for the social actors.

In media-saturated environments – where media technologies and textualities have literally become ubiquitous – "being an audience" has become, as Abercrombie and Longhurst note, a performative, permanent, and constitutive experience. "Being an audience" is linked to a construction of everyday life as a spectacle and as a constant performance – "we are audience and performer at the same time", the authors conclude (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998: 73). The everyday, media-related practices lost the strict rituality of distinct, exceptional

situations and melted into other everyday routines. "Being an audience" is thus one of the axes of everyday life on the individual "self-level" as it is one of the axes of the socio-cultural identity on the collective "us-level" of the story.

Although Abercrombie and Longhurst wrote about the state of affairs prior to the spread of new media and understood the performance in a Goffmanian sense as implicit and hidden (cg. Goffman, 1990), their understanding of the diffused audience has found an obvious application in new – social and mobile – media. Social media users perform in technologically mediated spaces, and they are increasingly "always on", as Sherry Turkle states (Turkle, 2011).[38] And their social surroundings, shared through feeds and timelines, have become more spectacular than ever. While mass media keeps its position as the common symbolic reservoir for the performance,[39] uses of social media bring the experience of "being an audience" to a new qualitative level, and made the originally "invisible" performance explicit and expected. The intersection of the contextual principles of narcissism and spectacle, with affordances for social media, puts the subject, the social actor, into the center of her or his own perimeter – a mediatized perimeter – more clearly than ever before. Social actors have become the media. Although, this is in a slightly different way than Dan Gillmore promised in relation to social media and grassroots journalism a decade ago (cf. Gillmore, 2004).

Online political and civic practices are not exceptional in this regard; apparently they are not distinct from other online practices. On the contrary, they can and should be treated as clear examples of the narcissism- and spectacle-driven agencies as practiced by the diffused audience. The politicians studied by Alena Macková manage the online performance of their political and personal lives with the same explicit reflexivity as the online political activists from the "Žít Brno" group (Macková & Macek, 2014) or our respondents who considered themselves interested in public and political issues (Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015): the game of statuses, likes, comments, photos, created and joint events, and petitions is subjected to the rule of impression management (Goffman, 1990).

38 In December 2014, 41.3% of the Czech population owned smartphones enabling being permanently online and 19.8% of the population admits being permanently online (cf. Macek et al., 2015).

39 In December 2014, 89.9% of the Czech population received news via TV broadcasting and 47.2% of the population watched it just on TV (cf. Macek et al., 2015).

## POLITICS: DUTY AND DISCONNECTION

Finally, this chapter pays attention to the contexts of national and local politics – social actors practicing diffused participation are not only members of a diffused audience, communities, and networks of social ties, they are also citizens. While the already discussed two contexts could help us understand the ways in which online political and civic practices are not actually different from other online practices, exploring diffused participation within the political context helps understand it as part of the political sphere.

The broader political contexts consist of authoritative resources (power), regulatory rules of legislation (from constitution to election laws, etc.), habitual norms regulating the political agency in a narrow sense, and constitutive rules (including political ideologies and cultural values) constituting opinions and collective interests. At the same time, these contexts include the systems of social, political, and economic relations – from the formal system of political parties to the networks of personal and economic relations. Together, these contexts constitute the political sphere that plays a role as a frame of reference for the mundane political and public actors: people practicing diffused participation are entering the political sphere "from the outside", remaining in their ambitions and particular goals outside institutionalized national politics.

When talking about diffused participation in Czech politics, it is obvious that active citizens define themselves in opposition to the national political sphere. In our most recent study suggested that their attitudes to political agency – including online practices – and their willingness to participate in the public sphere are substantially structured by the way they perceive institutionalized politics and politicians, and by the way they experience themselves as citizens (Macek, Macková, & Kotišová, 2015). In relation to institutionalized national politics, respondents showed clear signs of discontent, they viewed national politics as alienated and detached from citizens, democratic institutions as hardly functioning, mass media as failing its mission, and other citizens as apathetic. In contrast, respondents considered their own public activities to be a civic duty – and the perceived apathy of other citizens they disregarded as a residual of the past communist regime. Their actual practices, therefore, could be interpreted as a reflexive adaptation to the tension between the sense of duty and the sense of disconnection. As a result, they redirected their will to civic duty from national politics to local politics and the local public sphere. Importantly, the use – or refusal – of social media as tools for these practices

appeared secondary, as one of the instrumental decisions, not as a motivation for being active.

The contextual structures of local politics necessarily differ from those of national politics; they presumably structure the diffused participation more directly as they co-create the immediate space of local public and political life. Still, the local contexts can – as we have illustrated in the case of the activist group "Žít Brno" – produce similar patterns of motivations as those identified in the contexts of national politics (Macková & Macek, 2014). Although the group practicing online activism became popular for their successful use of social media for protest politics and for their humorous challenges of municipal politicians in Brno (the second largest Czech city), our conclusion was that that new media played "an important albeit fractional role as sources of particular tactics" (Macková & Macek, 2014). The key to the explanation of the activists' political success lay in "the group's ability to address municipal politics in line with the expectations of the local public" (ibid.) – in their understanding of local politics and the local public sphere. The activists' agency was, in other words, structured by the local political and public contexts. Importantly, the group addressed local political elites – the mayor, above all – with similar arguments as the citizens mentioned in the previous paragraph.

## CONCLUSION

Although my answers to the opening questions (why and how people use social media in their political practices) was not intended to be exhaustive and, although I focused on a specific aspect of the problem, a closer look at some selected phenomena that structure the uses of social media in mundane political and public practices revealed several insights that contradict any unfounded enthusiasm about the potential of the newest of new media. The notion of diffused participation and the application of the structuration model of media suggest that we need to steer away from a completely media-centric approach. The research that I carried out with colleagues, as well as related theoretical work, support the argument that it is necessary to approach social media – at least when studying them in relation to mundane political and public practices – as just one particular facet of a bigger picture.

Firstly, I argue that diffused participation and related uses of social media are structured by collective belongings and social relationships, and that peer pressure to conform is amplified in the affordances of social media. Secondly, I suggest that in media-saturated environments – where media technologies and textualities and

related practices are literally ubiquitous – "being participatory" is inevitably linked to "being an audience". These two experiences are connected through the practices of reception and interaction and "being an audience" in terms of Abercrombie and Longhurst's concept of the diffused audience (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998) which emphasizes that mundane political and public practices are performative, permanent, and constitutive in relation to everyday life. And, thirdly, the political practices of mundane actors (and the related uses of social media) are structured by the contexts of local and national politics. The recent research that my colleagues and I conducted illustrates the relevance of Peter Dahlgren's conclusion that new forms of civic and political practices should normally be seen as an attempt to bypass the unsatisfactory and alienated institutionalized politics, and that our understanding of the political agency related to new media is conditioned by an understanding of the political in general (cf. Dahlgren, 2011).

These conclusions are hardly revolutionary. They show that – although social media are at the center of our interest because they are relatively new phenomena – they are not central to the social world we investigate. Social media inevitably involve alterations in mundane political practices – social media structure and enable them in new ways as they set up new interaction arenas and reception channels. Social media therefore broaden the scope of possible agency, which had previously been limited to physical encounters and mass media. But, at the same time, social media obviously serve the existing needs and amplify existing cultural trends, as I have illustrated with the example of the diffused audience.

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