

“I Can Share Politics But I Don’t Discuss It”: Everyday Practices of Political Talk on Facebook

Social Media + Society
October–December 2017: 1–11
© The Author(s) 2017
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2056305117747849
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


Giovanna Mascheroni  and Maria Francesca Murru

Abstract

The article explores how a group of young people in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom experience and manage informal political talk on Facebook. Based on 60 interviews with 14- to 25-year-olds with diverse interest and participation in politics, it understands political talk as a social achievement dependent on the situational definition, shaped by the perceived imagined audiences, shared expectations, and technological affordances. Results show that young people construct different interactional contexts on Facebook depending on their political experiences, but also on their understanding of the affordances of networked publics as shaped by the social norms of their peer groups. Many youth define Facebook as an unsafe social setting for informal political discussions, thus adhering to a form of “publicness” aimed at neutralizing conflicts. Others, instead, develop different forms of “publicness” based on emergent communicative skills that help them manage the uncertainty of social media as interactional contexts.

Keywords

imagined audiences, impression management, political talk, social media, young people

Introduction

Contemporary views about citizenship and participation emphasize the importance of everyday, mundane practices such as informal political talk for young people’s socialization to democratic values, the formation of political opinions, and the development of political identities (Dahlgren, 2013; Ekström & Östman, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2008).

Informal political talk has been defined as non-purposive, spontaneous conversations around political issues that are free from any formal procedural rule and predetermined agenda (Habermas, 1984), and are immersed in sociable and often coincidental interactions undertaken just for conversation’s sake. Habermas (1984, p. 327) refers to “chatting, conversing, and arguing” as the practical form of communicative action whose informality and lack of strategic purposes allow to achieve mutual understanding and the establishment of an interpretive community. Others (e.g., Barber, 1984) argue that through informal, non-purposive and unruled everyday civic talk citizens create bridges between their private self-interest and the sense of reciprocity and belonging that makes civility and collective political action possible. Therefore, the political value of such conversations emerges as the unplanned outcome of social interactions that are rarely born as political. This is increasingly common as the

youngsters are putting into practice new modes of “actualizing citizenship” (Bennett, 2008) where the traditional civic practices of voting and party membership are being replaced by, or combined with, playful and hybrid activities which are not primarily framed as political. Within this mode of “discursive civic agency” (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015), communication arises as an end in itself, and it is actualized through forms of hybrid practices that mix together occasional conversations about contemporary social issues with playing games, signing petitions on social media, and so on.

The democratic potential of informal political talk for young people has been primarily investigated in relation to everyday settings such as family and peer group contexts (Ekström & Östman, 2013). More recently, though, given the pervasive use of social media by young people, research has explored the practice of online political talk, and its consequences.

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Italy

Corresponding Author:

Giovanna Mascheroni, Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Largo A. Gemelli, 1-20123 Milano, Italy.
Email: giovanna.mascheroni@unicatt.it



The growing interest in social media as a venue for political discussion and participation is grounded in their socio-technical affordances—namely, “context collapse” (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2014) and the overlapping of private and public, non-political and political in the same interactional context (Ekström & Shehata, 2016). As a consequence of the blurred boundaries, it is argued, the opportunities for citizens to encounter political content and engage in political conversation have expanded, with beneficial outcomes for participation. There is evidence that accidental steps into the political that occur on social media have the potential to level the online participation gap between citizens with high and low interests in politics (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2015). However, the relationship between exposure to political content, online political interaction and political participation is not straightforward. While social interaction increases the likelihood that young social media users engage in online political activities irrespective of their preexisting interests in political matters (Ekström & Shehata, 2016; Kahne, Lee, & Fezell, 2013), lower thresholds into the political do not automatically turn adolescents and young people into a politically active generation (Ekström & Shehata, 2016).

Different interactional contexts vary in their capacity to promote or hinder informal conversations on political issues. Indeed, political talk can be conceived of as a social achievement, shaped by the specific norms governing interaction in a given social context, and related to issues of self-presentation and impression management (Ekström, 2016). The ethnographic work by Eliasoph (1998) already demonstrated that informal and spontaneous conversations on political issues are extremely sensitive to the social setting, to the unwritten rules of the interactional order which establish what behaviors are appropriate and what, instead, are negatively sanctioned and stigmatized. In many contexts, political issues are considered risky, delicate, and unsafe topics.

In this article, we examine how young people in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom experiment with and engage in practices of online political interaction. We focus mainly on Facebook, as it is still the most used social media platform among our interviewees. Assuming political discussion as a situated and contingent social achievement, we aim to identify the factors that shape Facebook as a space of political talk. Results show how young people negotiate the conventions, opportunities, and constraints of Facebook, based on the perceived imagined audiences, shared expectations regarding communication on the platform (what is appropriate or not), and its technological affordances.

Political Talk on Social Media

Research on online political interactions has come to divergent conclusions, suggesting that Facebook and social media are either risky (Ekström, 2016; Thorson, 2014) or safer (Vromen et al., 2015) settings for political talk and the

expression of political identities. Much work in the field draws on Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to social life, according to which people interact on the basis of the “definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1959, pp. 1–4), which includes information about the participants in the social interaction, reciprocal expectations, and normative prescriptions that guide behavior and enable participants to control other people’s impression. In this light, whether social media are seen as problematic or encouraging contexts largely depends on young people’s understanding of social media as an interactional context—including the reciprocal expectations regarding which topics are appropriate for communication on different social media platforms (or not), and what information should be shared with whom. In other words, as in offline contexts, young people would engage with others on social media based on shared situational definitions, their communicative practices being primarily motivated by the wish to control other people’s impressions and save the “face” (Goffman, 1959).

Due to the porous boundaries between private and public spaces, the definition of the situation on social media can become problematic, as individuals lack the cues that help them behave according to shared schemata of action. This interactional ambiguity is tied to the structural affordances of “networked publics” that result in “invisible audiences” and “context collapse” (boyd, 2010). Facebook posts can be shared, commented on, and liked. Shareability (Papacharissi & Easton, 2013) contributes to expanding the audience well beyond the “target imagined audience” (Litt & Hargittai, 2016), thus making the reception of communication uncertain. According to Thorson (2014), the flattening of distinct social spheres as well as unpredictable audiences contribute to increase the “social groundlessness” of political interaction (Warren, 1996). While the uncertainty of the social context may encourage the exploration of novel norms and modes of political talk, as a minority of “social politics curators” show, perceptions of publicness and social pressures to preserve Facebook as a relational-only space induce the majority of young people to adopt “political neutrality” as their self-presentation strategy, and to abstain from political discussions (Thorson, 2014). Similarly, Ekström (2016) notes how young people use social media to explore their political identities in a safe manner—following discussions without taking part and having a public voice—for fear of risking their face.

However, the collapse of different social and communicative contexts in social media interactions cannot be assumed as having straightforward consequences on political talk, nor on individual impression management. In this sense, Davis and Jurgenson (2014) distinguish between “context collusion” and “collision,” whereby the former refers to “the process whereby social actors intentionally collapse, blur, and flatten contexts” in order to bring together a diverse audience and publicize political opinions (p. 480). In context collision, instead, “different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other” (Davis &

Jurgenson, 2014, p. 480). Baym and boyd (2012) also point to how “socially mediated publicness” requires new competences in order to manage what it means to be public, to navigate the shifting boundaries across diverse audiences, to engage with networked publics. Accordingly, recent research has explored the way users engage with the “personal publics” that emerge on social media as “communicative spaces” characterized by a conversational mode and structured by the interplay of (1) technological affordances, (2) the social and textual networks supported by the platform, and (3) the normative practices and expectations that govern use (Schmidt, 2014). For example, Schwartz (2017) explores how citizens variously engage and experiment with political communication on Facebook. Key factors that help explain different patterns of engagement are the individual’s political agenda and the type of audience(s). An individual political agenda refers to the (narrow or broad) sets of issues and political opinions that one considers central to their identity project. This clearly shapes the topics around which, and the social circles with whom, an individual is willing to discuss politics. People with narrow political agendas may wish to limit their online political discussions to a specific group of like-minded individuals. However, setting the boundaries between different social circles can be challenging on social media, as different social spheres converge in the communicative space of “personal publics.” Potential discrepancies between “primary” (Schwartz, 2017) or “targeted” (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) imagined audiences, and the active audience (Schwartz, 2017) that actually likes, shares, or comments on a user’s post also explain why individuals may refrain from political communication on Facebook, especially because criticism of an opinion results in issues of impression management (Schwartz, 2017). As a consequence, some people adopt a common denominator approach (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Schwartz, 2017) and decide to share only what would be appropriate for all members of their personal publics. These studies show that ultimately, whether and how young people engage in political talk on social media depends both on their political agenda and their personal publics—whether political talk is a socially legitimate and desirable activity within the network or not.

What makes discussing politics on social media more or less desirable is also related to the forms of talk (Ekström, 2016). Political talk on Facebook can develop in an unpredictable fashion: conversations that are perceived as safe and innocent can take an unexpected turn into heated arguments. As a consequence, only young people who are self-confident in their political opinions and affiliations face the risks of online public discussions (Ekström, 2016). For other youth, instead, self-censorship and political neutrality are protective strategies that help them to deal with the patterns of discourse promoted by political provocateurs—seemingly the most visible form of political discussion on Facebook (Thorson, 2014). Indeed, a recent report from Pew (Duggan & Smith, 2016) has shown that a substantial share of social

media users express frustration and discomfort over the tone of political discussions on Facebook and Twitter, perceived as particularly angry (49%) and disrespectful (53%) compared to face-to-face conversations. Beyond avoiding political discussions on social media, other defensive strategies against political provocateurs include blocking or “unfriending” friends (Miller, Bobkowski, Maliniak, & Rapoport, 2015). According to the same Pew report (Duggan & Smith, 2016), 39% of social media users have either blocked or unfriended a contact for political reasons, or changed the settings so as to limit political content in their feed.

In conclusion, the research review—through the concepts of context collapse, socially mediated publicness, personal publics, political agenda, the form of political talk—point to the notion of political talk as a contingent and socially situated achievement.

Methods

This contribution is based on the qualitative data collected as part of a wider research project, which investigated the relationship between politics and social media in Europe from the viewpoint of both citizens and political actors. Interviews were conducted in 2015 in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom in order to complement the three waves of survey data and provide a closer analysis of the practices and meanings of social media for young people, and their role in youth political engagement.

Sixty 14- to 25-year-olds participated in the study, recruited through a theoretical sampling among (1) activists in political parties, trade or student unions, and youth parliaments; (2) activists in social movements, students’ cooperatives, squats, and Italian “social centres”; (3) young volunteers in youth organizations and civil society associations (anti-bullying campaigns, charities, associations against corruption and mafia, etc.); (4) young digital entrepreneurs, as summarized in Table 1 (in Appendix). The aim was to provide a diverse picture of young people, including youth with diverse relations to politics: “dutifully” oriented youth (Bennett, 2008; Vromen et al., 2015) affiliated to political parties and other formal opportunities for youth engagement; young people active in self-actualizing forms of political agency (Bennett, 2008; Vromen et al., 2015); and young people active in groups or modes who are not overtly political, including also self-defined “disaffected” youth.

The qualitative, non-structured interviews lasted from 45 min to one and a half hour and were conducted in German, Italian and English using the same interview protocol by a team of three researchers. The topics covered in the interview included the following: interviewee’s political socialization; offline participation (citizenship practices, knowledge, values and competences); digital literacies and imaginaries around the Internet; and participatory practices online. The transcriptions were analyzed through NVivo using a combination of inductive and theoretical thematic

analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Initial thematic coding was for anything related to discussing politics on social media. A secondary coding was theoretically informed by the concepts discussed in the literature review and helped us to identify three main themes: (1) the strategies self-representation in relation to political talk on Facebook; (2) publicness as a risk; and (3) publicness as an opportunity. The analysis presented here does not assume cross-cultural comparisons as its primary goal. Instead, we aimed at identifying consistent practices and attitudes toward online political talk across countries.

Analysis

In order to answer to our research question, the analysis examines (1) how engagement in political communication on Facebook is related to the individual's political agenda and to the practice of "presencing" (Couldry, 2012) and (2) how diverse ways of managing context collapse (as either a risk or an opportunity) lead to different forms of publicness.

Presencing and Presenting One's (Political) Identity

When reflecting over discussing politics or social issues on Facebook, participants in our study implicitly or explicitly connect this practice to issues of self-presentation and the construction of a political identity. "Presencing"—which refers to the practice of constructing and maintaining one's presence on social media (Couldry, 2012)—involves "sustaining a public presence" (Couldry, 2012, p. 50) by selecting and displaying selected aspects of one's identity, namely, those that the individual wants to be public. Choosing to maintain a political identity on Facebook is closely related to the individual's political agenda, and its position within the overall project of the self.

For political activists, political identity is a great part of their overall identities and, consequently, of their self-representation on Facebook. It is a central part of their self-narratives and how they want to be viewed by others. To ensure coherent biographical narratives, they reflexively match their online "presencing" with the political agenda in which they have already invested emotionally and cognitively. Aisha is a young activist in a students' organic food cooperative in a UK university, and member of a German-based online citizen journalism platform. She pursues her strong political interests through a sophisticated repertoire of online non-mainstream sources that she has developed through time and through online networking, in line with self-actualizing citizenship practices. However, in spite of, or precisely because of, her critical media literacy and her engagement in DIY news production, she avoids participating in discussions on topics she is not knowledgeable enough for risk of face-threatening:

Interviewer: so do you also take part in discussions?

Aisha (20, United Kingdom): some times. Yeah, it depends on how much I know on the debate. For example, I know another boy, who writes about vegetarianism and veganism and impact on the environment, and, like, resources that are used up or wasted, and I comment that usually because I'm active in that. And also feminism and atheism, because they're ideologies I support, this is my cause.

The mirroring of the political agenda in the practice of online self-representation can be observed also in interviewees who are actually in the process of developing their political agenda. For Emily, a 15-year-old girl from the United Kingdom, active in a youth organization for the prevention of cyberbullying, Facebook represents a further semi-public venue where she can engage in identity practices that are embedded in the social contexts she inhabits offline and online. In so doing, she does not conform to the platform-specific modes of expression—for example, including political affiliation in her profile's information or liking civic or political pages. Rather, the process of expressing her civic and/or political identity is contingent, actualized according to the interaction frames, topics, and participants:

Emily (15, United Kingdom): if I'm interested in a subject and I have an opinion on it, then I'm going to perform my opinion. Obviously not to be rude but . . . just to perform what I mean.

Andrew also contextualizes online political discussion in the process of developing one's identity. He recounts when, as a student of Philosophy, Politics and Economics, talking politics on Facebook helped him to enter a new social context and new social circles. Once he achieved this goal, the practice of political talk has become less relevant in maintaining his online presence:

Andrew (23, United Kingdom): I did when I was at the university, especially in my first year, but I find a lot of it, it's a bit boring and a bit aggressive and I've kind of got to the stage where I know who I like to talk to about certain things, what they'll say or who'll be really interesting to talk to about issues.

As Andrew's words suggest, we can identify two patterns through which an individual's political agenda is mobilized within her or his online self-representation. Like Emily and Andrew, many young people achieve this goal only by engaging in political discussions mostly initiated by others. In so doing, they negotiate their political self-representation within a conversational space where publicness is already built and managed by others. This preference for interactional situations that are clearly defined, coexists with the avoidance of those ambiguous spaces of publicness where the subject is more vulnerable to the unwanted consequences of context collapse.

Conversely, other interviewees, especially activists, conform to the “social politics curator” type identified by Thorson (2014)—that is, they broadcast political information to their online circles as part of their strategies of “presencing.” As we will see, they have developed a set of competences that help them navigate and even taking advantage of collapsing contexts. Thanks to these skills, online political curators agentically construct their publicness by shaping an online personal identity that coincides with their political agenda.

Publicness as a Risk

As anticipated, young people, whose mode of “presencing” is limited to taking part in discussions initiated and controlled by others, are more likely to experience critiques to their arguments as personal critiques. For example, as a young member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Sibel is in the process of developing her political identity and agenda. As such, her limited political knowledge and little self-confidence in her political opinions constitute a major reason for avoiding to take a political position in front of others by engaging in online political discussions:

Sibel (20, Germany): I'd like to express my views, but I still prefer to hold back. When I will be more experienced I'll take a position. Because if you are criticised but you are not knowledgeable enough, it is stupid. If you want to take part in a discussion then you should be able to firmly defend your opinion.

Bringing up political issues in peer talk on Facebook is framed as a public performance: fear of not being a credible enough actor and losing their face prevents youth from discussing politics. Lea, a Greenpeace activist, reports avoiding political talk for fear of being personally attacked, showing how difficult it is for her to manage the boundaries between different roles and audiences, and to “save the face”:

Lea (19, Germany): I decided to remove all political stuff from my Facebook. So I do not share anything on or from political parties, even though I might like it. Sometimes I share something about the environment or food, something new. But I never get involved in commenting anything political because I realised I do not want to offer any opportunity to attack me. You make yourself an easy target if you comment beneath something, or when you phrase it in a wrong way.

One important element that informs the diverse attitudes toward political talk on Facebook among the interviewees is represented by potential discrepancies between their political agenda and their primary imagined audience. Even young people who are politically active would avoid engaging in political talk when they expect their closest friends to negatively sanction this behavior. This is the case with Annika, a member of the local Young Free Democratic Party (FDP),

who describes avoiding to expose her passion for politics on Facebook as this might set her apart from their friends. Therefore, she contrasts her practices of political discussion on the page of the FDP youth branch, with the management of her personal profile. Marta, activist within an anti-corruption movement in Italy, likes sharing news on her profile but rarely engages in discussion, as her friends are not so much interested in politics and negatively sanction her behavior:

Annika (19, Germany): as Young FDP Braunschweig we use to comment our own posts. If discussions arise, we try to stimulate them, we reply and try to keep them alive. Because it increases our visibility and people understand that there are real people behind the page who communicate with them. I do it less privately, unless it is a topic I really care about. I must recognise that since I have started my activity within the FDP, my friends, those who are less political, are actually quite annoyed: “I have stopped following your updates because you only post political shit.” And so . . . I seldom do it.

Marta (22, IT): I shared it on my profile, and this friend of mine commented “that town is smaller so it is easier to mobilise citizens” and I replied that it is a question of methods of engagement, not a matter of how many people eventually get involved. So he wrote back “You’re becoming a real drag, as usual!” Because I am usually labelled as the boring type.

Central here is the definition of the interactional situation, which shapes whether Facebook is legitimized as a space for political discussion or not. Indeed, the affordances of networked publics (boyd, 2010) do not translate into univocal situational definitions. By contrast, these affordances are variously perceived and experienced according to the shared norms governing group interactions on Facebook, and to expectations regarding the imagined audience. Annika and Marta describe how their online behavior is conform to the so-called “lowest common denominator” approach (Hogan, 2010), whereby users share only what they expect all the members of their networks—and especially the members of their primary imagined audiences—to approve. Similarly, Bethany describes how among her circle of friends Facebook is defined as a private space, and a communicative space from which political talk is expunged as inappropriate. By contrast, she reports being in touch with a more diverse network of people on Twitter, and describes how this diversity stimulates the exchange of opinions. In other words, her perceptions of the imagined audience on each platform shape the quite diverse experiences of publicness:

Bethany (14, United Kingdom): Yeah, I'm less active on Facebook, 'cause I find Facebook is personal and I am like personal with only friends what I know. Twitter is more of like a world thing, so you talk about opinions, you talk to different people. It's more open compared to Facebook.

Both Annika and Bethany, then, create safer, less “personal” and more public zones for political expression (the

Facebook page of a political group, Twitter), in which the expected “primary audience” and the “active audience” coincide, and comprises people who are equally interested in discussing political issues. These safe zones are characterized not only by a clearly defined interactional situation but also by lower personal investment and identification, so that criticism to one’s opinion is not perceived as criticism to oneself.

Other interviewees, instead, emphasize the lack of social cues that characterizes online discussion in contrast to face-to-face conversation, and makes the reception of messages unpredictable. Contrasting political talk in face-to-face settings with discussions on Facebook, Rebecca argues that not being able to see other people’s gestures and hear the tone of their voices facilitates misunderstandings and increases the uncertainty over how a message can be interpreted. This is why she prefers to follow discussions and read political content without expressing her own views. Franziska, who is active in the regional board of her Church, adds the dimension of anonymity and explains how people online are less likely to assume responsibility for their going public. As a result, both prefer to discuss political issues with their friends in co-present interactions:

Rebecca (21, United Kingdom): more reading. I don’t really like having debates online. I think it’s weird because you can’t like . . . I don’t know, it’s too impersonal and you don’t have any idea of the tone or voice or anything to sort of, there’s no context, it’s just words on a screen . . . I don’t really like that . . . it sort of freaks me out, really, it’s too impersonal and detached.

Franziska (22, Germany): I hold back, because I always think that . . . I mean, I like to take a position but I do not like to discuss it on Facebook. It is worthless, talking in private with people is more meaningful.[. . .]it is just a babble. How should I say? Online it is more anonymous, you are not asked to defend your opinions in public. While I would rather say “here I am, this is my opinion.” So I’d rather take a position in real life.

Ultimately, what concerns Rebecca and Franziska is the de-contextualization of conversation on Facebook. The uncertainty over who will read the message and potential conflict between competing definitional situations result in the perceived anonymity and even anomie of social interactions.

Whereas for some, the friction between imagined and active audiences provides a stimulus for reflexively engage with one’s political agenda, and shift from personal thinking to public thinking and public expression (Schwartz, 2017), others choose to silence their political opinions since they do not feel adequate to manage the face-threatening risks of context collision (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Alexander motivates his withdrawal from online political conversations in terms of the difficulties of targeting the message only to the intended audiences—close friends. As a consequence, he avoids going public on Facebook:

Alexander (21, Germany): I never disclose my views on political issues or topics such as the [German Wings] incident in public on Facebook, I never do that. I’d make my own reflections and discuss it with friends face to face. But not on Facebook. It is my opinion, I don’t need it to be accessible to the xy person . . . someone that I met three years ago on holiday, because among online contacts there are also people you barely know. So I think it is better not to share my views on Facebook. If I feel like sharing, I’d rather do it face to face.

Similarly, Olivia’s words suggest how she does not move beyond personal thinking: she wants her opinions to remain personal:

Olivia (22, United Kingdom): I get shy about saying what I think all the time, so I don’t really necessarily like to engage on Facebook because it’s so open, I don’t really like the idea anybody can see my views on bla, you know.

The reluctance over political self-disclosure on social media must not be equated with political disaffection. Rather what Alexander and Olivia adopt is a strategy of safe self-representation that Thorson (2014) called “political neutrality.” This defensive self-censorship can also be adopted by activists with a strong political agenda. For example, Lena, a young member of the Green party, explains how that the uncertainty over the reception of messages is unmanageable because of the unpredictable evolution of the discussion itself that can easily become heated. Similarly, Thomas, a member of the UK Youth Parliament, describes how he sometimes avoids getting involved in political discussions on Facebook because the mode of the conversation is too aggressive:

Lena (21, Germany): Something I do not do, and I find terrible is getting involved in discussion in big forums on Facebook, where everyone, including those who usually do not go public, shout from the rooftops their opinion. And the “shit storm” that usually develops beneath certain comments. I don’t do that.

Thomas (16, United Kingdom): A: some of them I do but often you finally get in arguments with people, because there’s lots of fiercely opinionated people in my year who sort of get quite shouty if your opinion is not the same as theirs, so I sometimes avoid it for my own good.

As the above excerpts suggest, frustration over the form and tone of political discussions on social media represents a further motivation for avoiding political talk on Facebook. As Thorson (2014) already outlined, political provocateurs and heated arguments represent the most visible form of political conversations on the platform, with people getting into a shouting match beneath news stories. Facebook is experienced as an ambiguous social setting, which encourages offensive behavior and egocentrism and favors the juxtaposition of autonomous unconditional statements that serve as identity markers (Ekström, 2016).

However, the accounts of those interviewees who have experienced forms of abuse and hate speech on Facebook, and have been the target of discriminatory attacks based on gender, political affiliation, and/or religion, show once more how young people are variously exposed to the consequences of invisible audiences. Not all interviewees develop the skills that help them compensate for the lack of social cues and situate conversation within appropriate frameworks. Jessica describes feeling upset for receiving rude comments on Facebook because of her political ideas. The reason why she feels powerless, we argue, is because she frames the attack as “personal.” By contrast, Micol dismisses the attacks she received as being a woman and a representative of a religious minority, as a political attack to the ideals (freedom of speech, antiracism, and social inclusion) that she embodies due to her institutional role within the community. In this way, she reduced the potential harmful effect of the attack for her own personal well-being:

Jessica (20, United Kingdom): I’ve got a few, like, mean, messages online, some guy, I don’t know why, on everything that I posted, he would comment “you lefty little . . . you’re a psycho” I did not respond at all, I was like “who are you? Go away!”, it was really abusive, I felt quite bad about myself.

Micol (23, Italy): social media can be very important but also quite dangerous. It is the easiest way to broadcast information, but it is also very dangerous. As much as well-informed individual, so also the most fanatic idiot can write whatever he wants and nobody can prevent it. [. . .] this fake profile posted the newspaper article with the new Council of the Young Jews and made very rude and targeted comments beneath, especially attacking me.

The presence of hate speech, then, hinders the construction of Facebook as a communicative context suitable for political discussion. Many youth react to invisible audiences and context collision by choosing to withdraw from political conversations. Others, like Micol, resist to aggressive modes of discourse and continue to share political content though they no longer engage in political talk. This is also the experience of Amy, a self-actualizing young citizen with an equally politically active group of friends, who points to the evolution of political discussions on Facebook as her primary motivation for not getting involved:

Amy (21, United Kingdom): when someone posts on a page, your profile or whatever, a news article or a status or something and you make the step to comment, it’s like a bad move every time. Because there are hundreds of people looking at that comment and going “you’re wrong, you’re right, you are an idiot, bla bla.” I never get involved in that but I see it happen every time. [. . .] I just don’t think Facebook is a good place for debate because it starts arguments between strangers and without faces. So you can’t see that someone is beginning to pull a sad face and you change your wording more tactfully, what you see is you winning and you’re creating your profile to make it look

like you know your stuff. So I don’t discuss politics, I can share politics, I can share interesting articles, but I don’t discuss them.

Publicness as an Opportunity

As anticipated, some interviewees have developed sophisticated communicative competences to deal with the face-threatening risks of online political talk in a more strategic and effective manner, and even turn context collapse into an opportunity. For some, the removal of political talk from Facebook means simply shifting to other online platforms and modes of expression that stimulate political discussion more. Dave is an anarchist and animalist, who has been active in the students’ movement while he was at the University, and, more recently, in the No Borders movement. He has a blog where he shares political issues, and engages in political talk in face-to-face interactions. But he avoids to do so on Facebook, as he feels uncomfortable with the patterns of political discussion on that site:

Dave (25, United Kingdom): I think, the political discussion side I tend to keep out from Facebook. Cause I prefer to have those conversations face to face. I do see some people, they get into lengthy political debates on Facebook, but . . . yeah, I’m not sure why . . . I don’t want to get involved in them, but . . . I think I’d just, my preferred method is face to face and getting out there and talking to people.

Other interviewees reported limiting political conversations to close circle of intimate friends, and filtering out the rest of their online contacts. This is a competent way of boundary enforcement in a communicative space characterized precisely by the collapse of such boundaries. Duncan, who has been involved in the occupation of his university organized by a group of fellow students, is an active member of the local Debate Society, thus appreciating rational modes of political conversation. Nonetheless, he describes how he prefers to discuss politics only with “real life” friends, not because he wants to avoid being confronted with different opinions, but, rather, because he wants to avoid the heated arguments that characterize most political conversations on Facebook:

Duncan (21, United Kingdom): yeah, when I get involved in discussion it would only be on Facebook with people I know. I am not having discussions online with people, random people because it’s not really a conversation or a discussion, it’s more just shouting into a void, and you don’t convince anyone of anything, everyone gets very aggressive and argumentative, so I don’t really discuss politics, unless is people I talk to in real life as well.

Sandra, instead, describes having developed different communicative skills, tailored to the interactional context of Facebook. As a consequence of having experienced discrepancies between target imagined audience and the active audience who commented her posts, Sandra learned how to fine-tune

her argumentation in front of diverse audiences. This helped her to shift from public thinking to public communication (Schwartz, 2017). She is now able to manage controversies in political conversations on the platform so as to avoid direct confrontation and promote constructive dialogue:

Sandra (20, Germany): I used to engage in long discussions. But then I realised that this is not successful on Facebook because it is not easy to communicate your ideas. So I have changed the way I communicate, I used to make firm statements but I have learned how to question other people's positions and guide them to the point they realise their position is not right. And it also depends on who is writing. Now when I see a very critical comment from a friend, I would say "let's go for a coffee and discuss it."

Finally, some interviewees purposively seek what Davis and Jurgenson call "context collusion" and enjoy engaging in online political discussions with people of diverse political orientations. Gemma, an Italian student in the United Kingdom, who has done her internship at 38 Degrees, and Jonas, an LGBT activist and media entrepreneur, well describe how they take advantage of the blurring boundaries on Facebook. In this latter case, exposure to diverse political views is perceived as beneficial to a political identity and agenda that are under construction:

Gemma (22, United Kingdom): I like to use it to keep in touch with my [dispersed] friend, but also to express my opinions. To share an article, make a joke, and even write "I do not agree" is always useful.

Jonas (25, Germany): yes, often people comment under the news I share, and heated discussions are initiated. Also because I am in touch with people from different political orientations, this is important for me, in order to avoid positioning myself exclusively in the left-wing area. I consider myself as a liberal left, but I am in touch with CDU or FDP affiliates. This is very important for me, and this causes heated discussions in which I take part. Some people say I am too pleased in carrying out these very long discussions on Facebook.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on 60 interviews with young people whose interest in politics is diverse, the study has explored how they experience and manage informal political talk on Facebook.

Consistent with prior research, the findings show that how a social situation is defined shapes whether and what kind of political talk emerges within it. What makes Facebook a particularly problematic interactional context is the affordances of networked publics, namely, invisible audiences and context collapse (boyd, 2010). Indeed, when describing what hinders political talk on the platform, young people either refer to the uncertain reception of political messages, the collision between imagined and active audiences, or the prevailing heated form of political discussion on Facebook.

While invisible audiences and context collapse are the result of Facebook affordances, our findings confirm that affordances are always embedded in social settings and interact with shared rules governing communicative practices, as well as social and textual relations (Schmidt, 2014). Many youth frame Facebook as an unsafe social setting for informal political discussions because they experience Facebook as lacking social clues, rather than as a communicative context where traditional social cues are remediated. As a consequence, they are reluctant to take part in conversations that develop beneath political posts shared by someone in their circles, and adhere to a form of "publicness" aimed at neutralizing conflicts.

On other occasions, engagement in political talk on Facebook seems to ultimately rely on the shared norms of the peer group one belongs to—whether political talk on social media is framed as a socially legitimate or, at the opposite, a negatively sanctioned practice. Facebook is often collectively constructed as a "personal" space from which the political is expunged. A possible answer to this consists in the appropriation of Facebook through the creation of safer zones for political discussion such as political groups.

However, young people vary in their ability to master impression management in the context of social media, and in the communicative skills that help them manage the potential discrepancies between "imagined" and "active" audiences. Some interviewees, especially more politically active youth conform to the so-called "social politics curators" (Thorson, 2014), and broadcast political content to their online contacts. Other interviewees develop emergent communicative skills that help them shift from "personal thinking" to "public communication" (Schwartz, 2017). This suggests that, along with individual trajectories of political socialization and specific experiences of informal political talk, digital literacy could counter the now prevailing reluctance toward getting involved in political conversations on social media.

The countries where the study has been conducted are clearly diverse in terms of electoral and political systems, the specific patterns of "digital politics" (Vaccari, 2013) and, especially, youth active engagement in conventional and non-conventional modes of participation (Sloam, 2014). However, across these countries young people "have become more defined by (increasingly) diverse lifestyles, identities, and values" that give shape to distinctive civic and political participation repertoires (Sloam, 2014, p. 680). Within the same participatory repertoire (Mascheroni, 2017), similarities across countries are more consistent than differences. This explains why what distinguishes the participants in our study is more their political experiences as active members of social movements or political parties, through which they gain the ability to shift from personal to public modes of expression. Thanks to this background, young activists manage to develop communicative competences that help them face the challenges of a groundless and uncertain

interactional context. Conversely, young people with no prior political experience react to context collapse on Facebook only by withdrawing from informal political talk.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Italian Ministry of Education's Future in Research 2012 initiative (Project Code RBFR12BKZH) for the project titled "Building Inclusive Societies and a Global Europe Online: Political Information and Participation on Social Media in Comparative Perspective" (<http://www.webpoleu.net>).

ORCID iD

Giovanna Mascheroni  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6939-2650>

References

- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Baym, N. K., & boyd, d. (2012). Socially mediated publicness: An introduction. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*, 320–329.
- Bennett, W. L. (2008). Changing citizenship in the digital age. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.
- boyd, d. (2010). Social network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics, and implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites* (pp. 39–58). London, England: Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, society, world*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Dahlgren, P. (2013). *The political web: Media, participation and alternative democracy*. Houndsmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Davis, J. L., & Jurgenson, N. (2014). Context collapse: Theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*, 476–485.
- Duggan, M., & Smith, A. (2016). *The political environment on social media*. Washington: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/10/25/the-political-environment-on-social-media>
- Ekström, M. (2016). Young people's everyday political talk: A social achievement of democratic engagement. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *19*, 1–19.
- Ekström, M., & Östman, J. (2013). Family talk, peer talk and young people's civic orientation. *European Journal of Communication*, *28*, 294–308.
- Ekström, M., & Shehata, A. (2016). Social media, porous boundaries, and the development of online political engagement among young citizens. *New Media & Society*. doi:10.1177/1461444816670325
- Eliasoph, N. (1998). *Avoiding politics: How Americans produce apathy in everyday life*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *5*, 80–92.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action (Vol. 1: Reason and the rationalization of society)*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Hogan, B. (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, *30*, 377–386.
- Kahne, J., Lee, N.-J., & Feezell, J. T. (2013). The civic and political significance of online participatory cultures among youth transitioning to adulthood. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *10*(1), 1–20.
- Kim, J., & Kim, E. J. (2008). Theorizing dialogical deliberation: Everyday political talk as communicative action and dialogue. *Communication Theory*, *18*, 51–70.
- Litt, E., & Hargittai, E. (2016). The imagined audience on social network sites. *Social Media + Society*, *2*, 1–12.
- Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2014). Networked privacy: How teenagers negotiate context in social media. *New Media & Society*, *16*, 1051–1067.
- Mascheroni, G. (2017). A practice-based approach to online participation: Young people's participatory habitus as a source of their diverse online engagement. *International Journal of Communication*, *11*, 4630–4651.
- Miller, P. R., Bobkowski, P. S., Maliniak, D., & Rapoport, R. B. (2015). Talking politics on facebook: Network centrality and political discussion practices in social media. *Political Research Quarterly*, *68*(2), 377–391.
- Papacharissi, Z., & Easton, E. (2013). The habitus of the new: Structure, agency, and the social media habitus. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds.), *A companion to new media dynamics* (pp. 167–184). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Schmidt, J. (2014). Twitter and the rise of personal publics. In K. Weller, A. Bruns, J. Burgess, M. Mahrt, & C. Puschmann (Eds.), *Twitter and society* (pp. 3–14). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Schwartz, S. A. (2017). Public and proud: How and why some citizens use their Facebook network as a personal public. *First Monday*, *22*, 1–12.
- Sloam, J. (2014). New voice, less equal: The civic and political engagement of young people in the United States and Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, *47*, 663–688.
- Thorson, K. (2014). Facing an uncertain reception: Young citizens and political interaction on Facebook. *Information, Communication & Society*, *17*, 203–216.
- Vaccari, C. (2013). *Digital politics in Western democracies: A comparative study*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Valeriani, A., & Vaccari, C. (2015). Accidental exposure to politics on social media as online participation equalizer in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. *New Media & Society*, *18*, 1857–1874.
- Vromen, A., Xenos, M. A., & Loader, B. (2015). Young people, social media and connective action: From organisational maintenance to everyday political talk. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *18*, 80–100.

Warren, M. E. (1996). What should we expect from more democracy? Radically democratic responses to politics. *Political Theory*, 24, 241–270.

Author Biographies

Giovanna Mascheroni (PhD, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano) is a senior lecturer of Sociology of Communication and Culture at the Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica di Milano. Her research interests include the social shaping and social consequences of

the internet and mobile media among young children, children and young people. She is a member of the EU Kids Online management team and co-chair of WG4 of COST Action DigiLitEY (IS1410).

Maria Francesca Murru (PhD, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano) is a lecturer of Sociology of Media and Communication at Università Cattolica di Milano, Department of Media and Performing Arts. Her research interests are focused on online public spheres and mediated civic participation and she is currently engaged in research projects dealing with mediated civic literacy and emergent publics.

Appendix

Table 1. Participants.

Name ^a	Age (years)	Country	Category
Jan	24	DE	1—Die Linke Party
Philipp	21	DE	1—Representative of CDU in the city council
Anna	18	DE	1—Youth Parliament
Tobias	22	DE	2—Foodsharing
Tim	18	DE	1—Die Grünen
Laura	16	DE	1—Student council
Lena	17	DE	1—Die Grünen
Sandra	20	DE	1—Trade Union (VER.DI)
Aylin	22	DE	3—Civil service
Lea	19	DE	3—Greenpeace
Lisa	15	DE	3—Ethical purchasing group
Annika	19	DE	1—FDP
Sibel	20	DE	1—SPD
Christian	26	DE	1—Trade Union (IG Metall)
Alexander	21	DE	3/4—President of the Youth Board of the Protestant Church
Vanessa	21	DE	3—Slow Food Youth
Franziska	22	DE	3—Synod of the Evangelical Church
Jonas	25	DE	2/4—LGBT activist and young entrepreneur
Daniel	19	DE	3/4—NGO and young entrepreneur
Ali	19	DE	3/4—NGO and young entrepreneur
Sofia	20-25	IT	1—Democratic Party (PD)
Tommaso	20-25	IT	3/4—Young entrepreneur and volunteer against food poverty
Aurora	20-25	IT	2—Media activist and “social centre”
Sara	14-19	IT	1—Youth Local Council
Marta	20-25	IT	3—Association against mafia and corruption
Monica	20-25	IT	3—Association for youth participation in deprived urban areas
Francesca	20-25	IT	1—Candidate in local elections, independentist movement
Simone	20-25	IT	1—Independentist movement
Marco	20-25	IT	1—Former member of UDC (Unione di Centro, Christian party), member of the European Democrat Students network (Edsnet)
Luca	20-25	IT	3—Volunteer, Catholic association against poverty
Matteo	14-19	IT	1—Local Forza Italia
Alberto	20-25	IT	1—Local Counsellor SEL (Sinistra e libertà, left-wing party)
Zoe	14-19	IT	2—“social centre” and students’ movement
Micol	20-25	IT	3—Association for Young Jews
Giorgia	20-25	IT	4—Young entrepreneur
Paulo	14-19	IT	1—Project on European citizenship in a vocational school
Giulia	14-19	IT	1—Project on European citizenship in a vocational school
Susanna	14-19	IT	1—Project on European citizenship in a vocational school
Carlo	14-19	IT	1—Project on European citizenship in a vocational school
Elena	20-25	IT	2—No Borders activist

continued

Table 1. (Continued)

Name ^a	Age (years)	Country	Category
Sarah	20-25	UK	1—General Secretary SU
Matthew	20-25	UK	2—Students' cooperative
Bethany	14-19	UK	3—Anti-bullying ambassador
Rebecca	20-25	UK	2—Students' cooperative
Amy	20-25	UK	2—Students' cooperative
Aisha	20-25	UK	2—Media activist and students' coop
Gabrielle	20-25	UK	1—LGBT Officer
Emily	14-19	UK	3—Anti-bullying ambassador
Myra	14-19	UK	4—Young entrepreneur
Deepa	20-25	UK	3—Volunteering counselor for mental health and anti-bullying
Andrew	20-25	UK	1—Labour Party, SU
Olivia	20-25	UK	3—Amnesty International
Alicia	20-25	UK	2—Squatter
Lyla	14-19	UK	3—Amnesty International
Dave	20-25	UK	2—Activist, anti-cuts movement, Animal Liberation, No Borders
Thomas	14-19	UK	1—UK Youth Parliament
Gemma	20-25	UK	3—38 Degrees
Jessica	20-25	UK	2—Students' movement
Nicholas	20-25	UK	2—Students movement
Duncan	20-25	UK	2—Students movement

CDU: Christian Democratic Union; FDP: Free Democratic Party; NGO: non-governmental organization; SPD: Social Democratic Party.

^aAll the names of participants have been changed to guarantee their anonymity. Names were chosen based on lists of popular names in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom for specific years, and lists of popular names for ethnic minorities.