Abstract

Is social media a repository of magical media power? Does it have an inherent structure that allows it to be dispensed or triggered at a user’s whim at the first sign of trouble? These questions motivated this study. The concern of this research is to describe the relationship established by Romanian users with social media, in a time in which the European continent was seeing protests in its major cities. The impulse feeding this scientific research has been the use of social media to gather public support for political causes. Social media has been presented as underpinning recent political events, both in Romania and in Europe. The importance of social media content tends to be perceived in a less skeptical spirit than it is in this article. Based on the findings, we can state that social media is not a stable tool for civic action as it can also rapidly shift from informative to entertaining. Qualitative research revealed the context in which individuals viewed the events in the University Square. The results of this research proved to be less optimistic than the general enthusiastic perception of social media as an all-powerful tool able to call the masses to democratic activism.

Keywords: social media, political engagement, democratic activism

1. The theoretical background and the problematic present

Social scientists have been in the past decades chiefly concerned with individual political involvement. There are many reasons that can support the action of civic engagement into important issues, some more, others less emotional, but we wish to mention in passing at least two. First, theoretical analysis of citizen engagement into the political life of a country has uncovered the social outcome component (Levine, 2008) and the correction of legislation that proves to be unfair or inefficient in addressing the citizens’ needs (Dahlgren, 2007). There is a growing need to assess the importance of political communication or whether it has increased at the EU level and in Romania. As a result, research into political engagement from young people is necessary. In this context, political problems have started to find their ways more and more in people’s lives and have started to be investigated. Social scientists are anxious in discovering factors that play a role in motivating and socializing people into becoming active citizens. Underlying this scientific interest is a common assumption: the faith in the persuasive efficacy of media. Social scientists interested in the factors that transform an individual into an active citizen (Hoffman, 2009) work under the assumption that the media do indeed have

* Beneficiary of the „Doctoral Scholarships for a Sustainable Society” project, co-financed by the European Union through the European Social Fund, Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources and Development, 2007-2013; National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, College of Communication and Public Relations, Bucharest; i_dragos_lucian@yahoo.com.
a considerable influence upon its audience. The priority task of a citizen is to engage into political and civic action. It could appear self-evident, thus, that a priority task should be the analysis of the new instruments of media that take the shape of social media. The study of social media’s effects on people’s outlook on the world and on the political events taking place should be a priority, so as to determine its limits and its strengths, its areas of independent action and its areas of completing other media or communication tools. The need for specific research on the Romanian media is relevant as it has developed around its own specificities. These specificities are related to, but do not overlap with the European model.

“Romanian media has developed its specificities related to the coverage of European topics, if compared with other European national media. European topics are less visible than expected during periods of important European events and media practices are centered on conflict and powerlessness frames, which in fact translate a range of attitudes specific to emergent democracies in the EU” (Corbu, Boțan, Bărgăoanu & Negrea, 2011, p. 25). The reality that Romania is in fact an emergent democracy in the EU finds supporting facts in the way in which its people chose to manifest civic engagement. Their attitude and their civic participation in a time of crisis best describe the democratic Romanian model.

Civic engagement is in fact participation, as part of a larger group, usually collaborating with others so as to change or improve societal conditions. We also agree with the statement that “The media have long been pinpointed as instrumental in negotiating and reflecting the meanings and ideological allegiances of individuals and communities” (Ciocea, 2010, p. 1). As a result, our research viewed and analyzed social media from this stem point. The purpose of this research was to help establish whether social media alone could determine civil and political engagement through personal involvement so as to change or improve societal conditions. The research had a mainly qualitative approach so as to determine whether or not social media would lead to activities devoted to public interest in issues of great importance for the Romanian society. We understand that people are mobilized into active citizenship by other agents such as media, parents, peers, colleagues, non governmental institutions and even schools (Adler, 2005), but we wish to determine whether or not social media could replace any other means of mobilizing support for civil and political participation. We acknowledge the magnitude of the media in influencing and shaping civic engagement (O’Neil, 2009), but we wish to challenge the view that social media can act alone as a trigger for civic engagement. We believe that social media can have conflicting results (Nissen, 2010) once young people rely on it entirely. It may result not only into public interest translated into civic and political engagement, but also in self-interest translated into promoting one’s own image. The promotion of one’s own image practically manifests itself in the medium of social media through consuming and redistributing information. The process of using public information for self promotion among personal groups can lead to distorted information regarding important political issues, for the sake of what participants in the research called “popularity”.

Similar research on a specific instrument part of the overall media system has been performed before by Putnam, who focused his scientific interest on the power of television. He constructed a methodological approach in determining the effects of television on youth political engagement. Putnam (2000) underlines the conflicting results of media usage in the case of the television. The researcher points out the danger in which society is placed, the moment in which the individual stops being part of a community. Normally, it is in this community that the individual discusses political issues and decides civic and political engagements as part of the community, part of its greater group that also provides information links and feed-
back. Danger appears the moment the individual starts focusing only on the information that he receives alone at home, while watching TV without interacting with the greater community, without trying to have multiple sources of information. Putnam (2000) underlines that civic participation knows a severe decrease that is in direct link with the number of hours spent watching television. The fewer hours he spends on interacting with the community or with sources of information, the less he feels the need to manifest himself through civic participation. Isolation from the community or unilateral focus on just one media instrument, for example the television, leads to a decrease in civic engagement, corroborated with an increase in social distrust (Putnam, 2000; Hoffman, 2009). As we previously mentioned, the presence of distrust, both in community and in the operating social system prevents the forming of a community dedicated to either challenging or to supporting policies or norms. Civic participation, as discussed above and as it will be discussed in the rest of the article, underlines the importance of the community in manifesting civic or political engagement. Why is the quest for evidence of social media effects on civic and political engagement in young people so contentious? Particularly effects of it are sometimes castigated for resting on, we believe, naive theories that present social media as being able to channel, on its own, civic and political engagement. Such a research is increasingly important as young people are increasingly relying exclusively on social media to inform, represent and shape their outlook on important issues (Dahlgren, 2007; Hooghe, 2002; O’Neil, 2009).

The solution would lie in a more nuanced theorizing and research of this issue and the adoption of improved methodologies. People have tended to deploy social media like a searchlight for the truth, hopefully illuminating an ever-increasing number of issues. Another important fact that should encourage more researchers on focusing upon social media is the apparent gap and break between the users of traditional media and modern media instruments. While young people start to reject traditional media instruments (Dahlgren, 2007), the other users have to face a social media that is hard to penetrate if not part of a particular generation. Reality is starting to be depicted as a pair between those self-excluded from traditional media and those excluded from social media. We acknowledge that the media plays a positive role in civic and political engagement through providing information, raising interest, raising consciousness (Hooghe, 2002). On the other hand, we note that it can also have a negative role through the isolation of the individual, raising distrust within the community, or for the institutional system, having as a result a possible lowering of civic and political engagement (Morozov, 2011). It is important to be aware of both sides of interpretation.

Previous research showed that the type of role that media played in civic engagement was relatively easy to master. Researchers have proven that the content of media played an important part in determining participation of citizens in the political life (Sloam, 2007; O’Neil, 2009). There was a clear barrier between “media consumption” that was focused upon entertainment and media that triggered involvement. The media that triggered involvement was believed to do so through news, political transmissions, debates, talk-shows, all of them addressing particularly the civic and political interest of the individual (Spratt, 2004). In the case of the social media we do not have such a clear demarcation. Information is no longer so clearly defined or marked. Thus, the involvement of the user can change from entertainment/consuming to cognitive/active engagement rather quickly. As we mentioned before, the first type of information may lead to and encourage a civic engagement attitude. In this case the individual focuses on issues with a bigger scope than himself. The second type of content can determine a self-centered attitude, in which the fundamental concern is not so much
with the bigger political issue, but rather with using that issue that attracts attention to promote one-self or a personal agenda.

The rise of social media communication in modern times has been apparently more disruptive, largely because the majority of other media producers have presented it as the ultimate tool in determining citizen participation (Jenkins, 2009). Social media has been more readily accepted and presented as a paramount leader for its priestly media predecessors (Shane, 2011). Social media has been mainly interpreted as a relatively active way of seeking to fundamentally alter the power-structure and decision process of our society (Olsson, 2008). We believe that an increasing disjunction has occurred, however, between the actual power of social media and its representation in our times. This may lead to a misinterpretation of the usage of other media tools to inform, present or describe actions and events with potentially disruptive consequences on social cohesion and social interaction.

We believe that in time, the progressive detachment of social media from the complete media system has been confounded by the mutual rivalry for audience. We are in danger of noticing a break between the two due to their traditional claim of legitimacy: they both claim and are presented as representing the public, both claim and are presented as serving the public, both claim and are presented as having the power to change the outcome of an event or the degree of involvement of an individual. Recently, more and more supporters gathered around a new outlook on the power of media (Grossman, 2009). It seems that the continuous presence of social media in the center of media and public attention has presented it as the sole tool able to represent, serve, inform, shift and mobilize the public (Coleman, 2008). This inevitably leads to a tension and to failure in representing, serving, informing and mobilizing citizen activity in today’s society. This tension is reflected in media portrayals of contemporary events and issues. During the course of our decade, the character of the media began to change. An increasing number of newspapers in Romania became more dependent of their on-line presence, some of them completely renouncing their hardcover format. The press also became on-line progressively, with some national papers more than halving or significantly reducing their hardcover content and national spread. In 2010 the national newspaper Cotidianul chose to work only on-line, stopping its hardcover format, together with Ziua and Gardianul. The on-line medium is characterized by certain demographic indicators which forced the media to adapt its content so as to survive. Changes in topics, coverage and language were introduced so as to better fit the demographic features of the on-line medium. These changes have altered the relationship of media to their audience. Increasingly, the media public, as a whole, consumed entertainment rather than public affairs content in the on-line press.

The most obvious route into this problem starts with an outlook upon political participation. We believe that such a definition should not start with the abstract, but with the concrete, the structure of the forms of political participation themselves. Political participation must be viewed not only as a product of evanescent consciousness, but as an active component of our world. We believe that political participation has a determinate reality. Its existence is entirely and wholly objective and can be measured. Being part of the material world also, of reality, it can be distributed through specifiable social relationships. Our investigation seeks to determine whether the medium of social media and contemporary social communication can constitute alone a distinctive place within which political participation is actually organized and carried out. Clearly, this is a different approach to the study of social media impact upon political participation of the user. The consequence of this is to call into question the ability of social media users to act as political participants without the need for other sources of
manifestation or information. Yet, another consequence of this is to call into question the magical power with which social media has been empowered lately, being seen as capable of changing the turnout of a political event solely, without any other form of media tool or communication method.

A valid, yet brief definition of political participation would underline the wish of a citizen to support or to attack policies proposed or enforced by Government, state institutions or politics. This way of conceptualizing political participation is broad. Be this as it may, we understand this broadness from two perspectives that we believe are necessary for this research. In maintaining this, this definition is understood not only as the target of the political action, but also from the point of view of the types of instruments and actions that can be included as possible. Indeed, from the second perspective the definition is broad, but since we refer in this study only to the fact that the actions were targeted at the government’s policy and political behavior, it becomes narrow as well. We have identified that political participation refers to political activities that are targeted at changing, questioning or supporting existing rules, laws, and practices. Although today’s research has determined that political participation is not only directed towards a Government, but also can be directed to other private or state institutions, for the benefit of our own research we shall accept that the target of political participation is the Government, represented through its own rules, norms, laws and even the political figures that represent it. We believe that the experience in Romania has proven we can include among targets for political participation not only norms, rules, laws, but also public political figures that represent the Government in the eyes of the citizen. From the second point of view, the instruments and tools that are at the disposal of citizens when it comes to political participation, we noticed that traditional ways of manifesting political participation are no longer fit in our modern society. That is, attending political rallies, political meetings, proselytizing, affiliating oneself with a political party, working in political campaigns are no longer presented as powerful impact instruments for winning in a political debate or for political participation. Some of these instruments are not even familiar to the young generation or for those that are involved most of the time in the usage of social media. Robert Putnam (2000) is among the few, outside this consensus, who states that the erosion of traditional instruments of political participation creates a dangerous situation of overestimating new modern ways of political participation.

Political involvement has been marked by the general conception that young people have been detaching themselves from traditional ways of manifesting their participation and involvement in political events. For instance, certain instruments that have been seen as paramount in political involvement such as party membership, voting, protests seem to attract less attention among young people than social media, seen and recently described as the most powerful representing tool in any political movement. This potential has perhaps been widely recognized by media elites, but we believe it would be difficult to argue that we can manage without nationalized media systems, without dissemination through media and through official channels of news and information, only in the presence of social media. We believe that the view according to which social media could help break down or support any political event or movement has, therefore, been found to be unhelpful in a number of ways. We shall demonstrate that the evidence in favor of social media not only as a political tool, but also as a part of a consumerism society is conclusive. Evaluation of social media as either a tool of citizen involvement or as an instrument of consumerism is an especially complex task. We had to deal with the fact that not enough is known about social media and about the political
events that have been presented as social media successes. These successes have been systematically exploited for the purpose of presenting social media as a sort of magical tool ready to be used at a user’s whim.

Before the support for social media, there was a period in which media theoreticians have noticed the disengagement of the young generation with traditional methods of political representation or change. Indeed, this assumption is embodied in the theoretical approaches that analyze modern political involvement. According to Stoker (2006), for instance, traditional political involvement that was built around traditional media and traditional instruments of manifestation by which one could disseminate support or distrust was no longer a concern for the young generation. This shift away from traditional media from the part of young people was justified by Putnam (2000) through the presence of modern technology. Modern technology not only made possible the transmission of communication to a wider public, but also gave each individual the chance to construct a personal network of communication. Once a personal network of communication was constructed, it could be separated from the rest and also allowed for permanent and strict control over the degree of interaction. While being alienated away from traditional media (Sloam, 2007), there was another movement of attraction towards new modern ways of communication, that also proposed novel and apparently more efficient ways of representation. Young people were more attracted by social media also because they had the flexibility of choosing topics from a wider range of subjects. Traditional media was identified as being the repository of problems that no longer were major concerns for the new generation of young people (Russell, 2005).

2. Defining the objectives and assessing the context

The primary concern of this study was to explore the role of social media in triggering and maintaining youth civic and political engagement in the winter-spring University Square Protest in Bucharest, Romania. Although at the protest there were protesters from all age groups, our focus was on youth engagement, or the way young people between 18 and 25 years were involved and affected.

What happened? On the 12th of January 2012, people started gathering in the University Square to protest against the attitude of the president towards Raed Arafat, Under-Secretary of State for Health, and the medical system in Romania. This was the starting point for all the other grievances that remained silent until that moment.

The central research question underpinning our scientific curiosity is:

RQ1: How does social-media find a place behind the political participation of young people? More specifically we ask:
RQ2: To what degree can social media determine the political participation of the young generation in Romania?
RQ3: Can it act alone in determining political participation that can have a definite impact in a political movement, or is it just another tool that has little power on its own?
RQ4: Under what format do young people find it easier to form interpersonal relationships and community cohesion?
We expect the following:

a. Young people who directly participate at a politic or civic action maintain a higher degree of focus and interest in that event than those who use only indirect ways of participating, such as social media instruments.

b. Young people that use both traditional and modern media means of communication and information display a higher degree of civic and political engagement than those who rely only on social media for information, communication and representation.

c. Young people who rely only on social media to represent, inform and present themselves, use it also for “personal glory” and for their personal image.

The study revolves around the University Square Protest that took place in Romania in 2012. The protest was triggered by the resignation of Raed Arafat and the personal intervention of the Romanian president to support this resignation. The public perceived this negatively, as an intrusion, and saw it as a public humiliation against a well-known and respected medical professional. The overall context could be characterized by overwhelming economic burdens, salary cuts, let backs and political and economic uncertainty.

The context was also constructed around the European crisis that manifested itself in Romania as well. “The crisis revealed long-standing problems related to governance and the general design of the supra-national structure: common market without common governance, monetary policy without fiscal policy, common currency with no fiscal authority and no finance commissioner” (Bârgăoanu, Negrea & Dascălu, 2010, p. 36), all of these issues influencing to some degree the situation of Romania. Research and public opinion polls showed dissatisfaction with the way in which the inner public affairs were managed. Information from IMAS and Mediafax has been analyzed and we have noticed an increase in the case of the Romanian Parliament from 17% to 20% in 2008, only to have in 2010 to 14%, an increase in the case of Political Parties from 11% to 18% in 2008, only to have it in 2010 to 12%, an increase in the case of the Romanian Government from 21% to 25% in 2008, to have it in 2010 at a value of 13%. The context it characterized by a continuous level of trust in the other institutions such as Army, Police, Church and the European Union.

The political context was also characterized by a severe mistrust in the elected public officials over the topic of the Schengen agreement, a topic that was of interest for many Romanians. This in turn led to dissatisfaction with the way in which Romania and Romanians’ interests are defended in external affairs. “Much criticism was expressed for the underperformance of the Romanian external affairs over the latest years, summed up in the idea that steps to reach such an important objective should have been prepared in advance, through negotiation, high level visits in the partner states and of their representatives in Romania, open discussions and, in general, through a more active involvement of the representatives of the Romanian state on the European stage” (Dobrescu & Bârgăoanu, 2012, p. 33).

Table 1. Typology of the participants at the University Square Protest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A typology of involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watchers: passers-by or not involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protesters: involved actively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rioters: involved in violent disturbance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-involved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants were involved in different ways in the process of tackling the political situation, forming different rapports with it. Although the media presented the event as an extremely dangerous one, most of the time the surrounding area and the University Square presented no danger to both those involved and to passers-by. We shall try to capture the roles played by young people as part of this diverse group physically present at the University Square. The data analyzed allowed us to create a list of behavioral patterns and of persons active in the University Square during the protest. Although each category is usually associated with a certain type of behavior and expectations, during the University Square Protest, the majority of protesters moved from one category to another very easily.

3. Forming relationships between methodological concerns

The research was qualitative in design and the data was gathered in three stages, each focused on a particular instrument of data collection: focus-groups, in-depth interviews and surveys. The design of the overall research shall be presented at the end of this part of the article in a graphical form.

Each new stage was performed after the preliminary analysis of the previous findings. We also asked the participants to add us on Facebook and Twitter, obtaining their blog addresses when they had an active blog. This was done after explaining that they can add us only if they feel comfortable doing so and after presenting our future desire of looking over their communication and posts related to the University Square Protest. We used Facebook and Twitter accounts which were specially created for this research, with certain configurations that help in setting up and managing the entire research experience. The participants were not able to see the posts of others or to see the list of those participating in the research. Therefore, we used online ethnography to better manage the research.

Although we believe the findings are interesting, unique and add to the already researched field of social media and communication studies, we believe that it is necessary to caution against too broad generalizations. This is also meant to encourage future research on this topic. We have to note down that the research is culturally and geographically specific, being an investigation of a phenomenon that presented unknown origins, nature and dimensions. We admit that we began the research with an open mind, being ourselves caught in the civic and political engagement that was captured by the media in this period. We took into consideration the danger of being biased in such an emotional and personal environment and tried to block out this possible danger through a carefully chosen methodology.

Finally, we wish to argue that much of the responses given by the participants put into a clear picture yet another paradox of the University Square Protest, that of an experience that was in fact voluntary, but still pressurized. All of the participants supposedly chose to participate at this protest, either under physical form in the University Square, or through the help of social media, but the pressure was due to an overall feeling that they could not stand by without being part of this event in any form. They were under the pressure of not being able to say “no” to the challenge of engaging in this event. In its pervasiveness, the development of the protest was accompanied by contamination, a quality inscribed in such a powerful social event. The participants viewed it through their own lenses of reality, chose their own instruments to engage it, but all of them found themselves in the impossibility of entirely looking away and not becoming active in a way that they understood as political and civic participation.
The research did reveal particular “lenses” for analyzing and understanding reality, which pertain to the youth groups and indeed presented different problems experienced by young people. In our analysis of the event we tried to concentrate their experiences, trying to eliminate the stereotypical headings used in the media of the time. Our sketch captures a reality that cannot be described in absolute terms, because for many of the participants political and civic engagement lay in an ambiguous area, very hard to define. This protest has played on the young generation’s fear of isolation. The protest was perceived as a chance for young people’s entry into the spotlight by giving voice to their concerns through political weight. It was a means by which young people could overcome their puniness and isolation, by merging their will with that of a mass political movement.

The first stage of the research consisted in organizing focus groups. It is important to note that the enlarged spectrum of a focus group can be regarded as the perfect method through which one researcher can achieve understanding of the experience, perspectives and behavior manifested during the University Square Protest. The use of focus groups enables the presence of possibly different perspectives on the same event, allowing for reflection and consideration of all the factors involved. This means that the participants are less likely to encounter a consistent pattern of loyalty towards a particular point of view. The focus group is able to help the participants to transmit effectively factors that both facilitate and that act as barriers in a person’s behavior. We used mixed groups of males and females, anticipating that using only male or only female groups might lead to slightly different results, but not by much (Allen, 2004).

The research design had at the basis the analysis of two groups of participants. Our desire was to determine whether social media played a vital part in the political action represented by the University Square Protest in Romania. Now knowing from the beginning whether or not the active social media involvement overlaps in terms of participants with those young people that manifest their political desires in the University Square, we thought of considering them two different groups and gradually determining whether or not they have in common the use of social media. This perspective led us to using focus groups so as to determine the way in which young people in Romania perceive politics, political participation and their own motivation regarding the University Square Protest. We opted to use focus groups because of their explorative power.

We organized two parallel focus groups: 4 focus groups were formed of young people that we found participating physically at the University Square Protest (they were selected on location) and 4 other focus groups were formed of selected participants that fit the status of social media user (they were selected randomly). We believe that the best way was to choose young people that spent at least 2 to 4 hours a day at the protest and young people that spent at least 2-4 hours logged in on social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Forums, News Groups, Instant Messaging, Blogs, Video and Photo sharing). Each focus group was formed of 6-10 young people, both males and females of Romanian nationality, from Bucharest, from families with different income levels, all of them being either high-school students or university students, from all fields of activity, selected according to the age interval 18-25 years. The participants were selected according to age because we are interested in the impact of social media on political participation of young people and it also presented the advantage that they could better relate to the group leader, the researcher, due to the similar age. We realize that age presents a decisive advantage when debating complex and sensitive
issues. A group manager of a similar or close age presents the advantage of sharing an approximate experience of life and a similar context. The focus groups lasted between 1 and 2 hours.

The focus groups were conducted in Romanian. The participants were not members of any political party at the beginning of the research, nor did they manifest any willingness to pursue such a trajectory. Focus groups are excellent tools in eliciting credible data on complex research, in this case youth participation in political events, linked or not with social media activity. All of the participants were familiar with social media tools of participation, representation and communication, recognizing active participation on such media instruments for the previous month. We planned two meetings. The discussions took place within vacant rooms in the University of Bucharest and in the Polytechnic University on the first occasion, while the second meeting took place in a more informal environment, a place of their choosing or a room provided by non-governmental organizations. Thus, we organized our discussions in university classrooms, in large quiet cafés or in non-governmental organizations’ heard-quarters that provided the necessary space and intimacy. We used the data from focus-groups to analyze the role played by social media in determining political involvement of young men and in trying to explain its presence in the choice of either participating or non-participating in political action.

The second stage of research consisted in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted as a result of the focus groups. Our choice for these stages provided a powerful method of triangulation. Below, in Image 2, we have captured the design of the research in all of its stages.

Table 2. Research design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Area Scoping</th>
<th>Desk scoping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Social media listening, assessment of conviction data and profiling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affected Area: On-line social media space – Area 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affected Area: The University Square Bucharest – Area 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection from the participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face – Area 2</td>
<td>On-line ethnography – Area 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage I – Focus group</td>
<td>Stage II – In depth interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage III – Survey</td>
<td>Data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final output</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After analyzing the results from the focus groups we determined a number of 12 participants with which we chose to continue the research at the level of in-depth interviews. The methodology was inspired from McClelland and Fine (2008) and we used “intensity sampling” focusing on particular cases after exploring the issue from a broader sense. The average length of an interview has been established between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews took place in classrooms, public locations or rooms provided by partner NGOs. In-depth interviews provided the chance of talking about a sensitive issue such as civic and political engagement without the participants having their peers around. This provided a more personal and deep insight into the subjects discussed during the focus groups.
For the purpose of this research, student participants were selected from eight universities and from eight high-schools in the administrative region of Bucharest, Romania. The surveys were completed on-line and they were handed-in in two stages, as the protest unfolded. All of the participants were actively taking part in the social media campaign that was taking place during the University Square Protest 2012 and were constantly reading or catching up on news about this event. They were part of families that were characterized by a broad range of income levels, education, members of the family, but were relatively ethnically and culturally homogenous. The participants were constantly into contact with the researcher for the duration of the study and data has been constantly gathered from their part while things progressed. Once the protest ended, they were in continuous contact with the researcher for yet another period. The participants in this study were 230 boys and 210 girls and their age ranged from 18 to 25 years. The majority of the participants were of Romanian nationality (97%), but the research sample also included Moldavians (2%) and French young people (1%). Questionnaires were used during the research. These questionnaires were administered by the researcher. The questionnaires were completed on-line. Each questionnaire took between 30 and 40 minutes to be completed. The participants completed the questionnaires without anyone’s presence. They had the opportunity to ask the researcher any question regarding the questionnaire.

4. Uniting methodological approach with procedure

Data collection took place in 2012. Prospective participants were informed about the dates and times of communication with the researcher. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential. The researcher also informed the parents through a formal hardcover letter and through e-mail. Consent has been obtained from both parents and participants. As part of the procedure passive consent was also employed. Parents were presented the opportunity to contact the researcher so as to stop the research at any time. Participants were not paid for their participation, but all of them were enrolled in a drawing with prizes consisting in training sessions or personal development opportunities or opportunity for future cooperation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Depth Participants</th>
<th>Group Participants</th>
<th>Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-21 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-25 years</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Activity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/Employed</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The primary ethical concerns were that of disclosure and consent. The majority of participants were in a way concerned about making their political beliefs public. They were worried about their future and about potentially being discriminated for their political beliefs. At the same time, they were worried for their personal image in the eyes of those around them and were reluctant at first in engaging in separate activities. Using social media from their own homes offered a sort of protective environment, while being part of the University Square Protest offered a similar feeling of protection, being among those alike. Leaving the apparent safety of these environments proved difficult and we understood the situation.

5. The problematic nature of this research: challenges

A. Defining the situation. The research was conducted as soon as it developed and immediately after the event stopped. It was a challenge following the event as it unfolded. There was the danger of leaving out important information and data which on the moment of collection and gathering seemed not that important, but as time passed it could have proved instrumental in understanding the situation. Also, personal involvement was another danger for analyzing the situation.

B. Access to participants for the qualitative study. It proved difficult to access participants at the event because they were involved in the event itself. It was particularly difficult to build a relationship of trust with some of the participants. They were mistrusting of new persons and of anyone outside their own group. Some reluctant protesters refused to take part in the research for fear that they could be later identified and discriminated upon, based on their political engagement and civic actions.

C. The fact that the issue was a sensitive one made things difficult. All the people involved in one form or another were to discuss sensitive issues. There was the danger of hiding information so as to present a particular point of view in a more favorable light.

6. Reflections on variations that were made visible by the research

Since the beginning of the political event, the presence of social media in the lives of the participants was overwhelming, while the type of traditional broadcasting was not inextricably bound with it. During this time, the participants exposed to social media (the group that started only through social media engagement without physical presence in the University Square) manifested a low degree of social participation. In general, the participants considered that the political event and political changes that were taking place were important, but did not consider it necessary to involve themselves further by being present in the University Square.

“Do you really think that being in the University Square means something? It is just a chance for being hit in the head with a rock, no more, no less. Real change is brought about through social pressure, without shouting, throwing rocks or being beaten up by the police”.

Although these events did attract community participation in the form of on-line support, the participants did not extend their participation to the realm of actively participating outside their own home. Their participation was only of sporadic nature, they seldom concen-
trated only at the political issues at hand, and most of the time their participation was of a passive nature at best. During the on-line ethnographic observation, the participants often changed the subject and only 15% out of those that acted only on social media posted or commented exclusively about the University Square Protest and its political subject. Around 45% admitted that they saw this as an opportunity to improve their personal image on-line. On the other hand, 87% of the respondents that actually participated physically at the University Square Protest posted and acted on social media only in direct link with the protest and civic engagement.

Those that were protesting physically in the University Square invested little time in using social media. 34% stopped using social media altogether during the protest, while 20% mentioned a reduction in the time spent using social media. They admitted that they prefer to rely on traditional means of communication and information, social media being just another instrument. They manifested little interest in using social media while engaged in the protest, only 15% of our respondents posted and commented while being present in the University Square. Although before the protest they were constant users of social media, during the protest their activity on-line dropped and they only posted pure information about what was going on at the protest. They did little to encourage others to participate at the protest, they admitted that they mainly expressed disappointment with those that on-line checked the “attending button” to the protest and failed to arrive.

While involved in social media groups and forums discussing the political issues that were present in their lives, the participants displayed a high degree of solidarity with those that were taking active participation in the University Square, but little solidarity with those that manifested themselves on-line in support of those political movements.

“We who are here know each other and support each other. It is an opportunity to know people that wish for a Romania that can be called European.”

“Supporters? What supporters? If they are not right here, at our side, they are not supporters, they are just glory hounds.”

Analysis revealed that 20 of the respondents that took part at the University Square Protest made acquaintance with at least 4 people, who they now call “friends”. On the other hand, only 6 of the respondents who acted only on-line through social media ever displayed or added somebody on-line only because they supported the political movement. Out of these, only 1 ever met that person or talked and none called them “friends”. We noticed a high degree of mistrust between the participants that were engaging in on-line political participation, in activities of collective action such as organizing meetings, forums, groups, comments, presenting the issues in discussion, sources of information, unless these issues were not also linked with some sort of personal social interest such as on-line image, attracting attention from groups of friends or attempts at improving their own on-line profile or image.

On the other hand, those that were protesting physically in the University Square formed powerful inter-personal relationships. Those that regularly protested and were engaged in civic action formed groups that discussed even after the protest and continued to socialize using social media and communication means. Socializing and exchanging information became a way of manifesting solidarity and created a high degree of trust in those that were present at the protest. On the other hand, they developed a high degree of mistrust towards those that used social media to promote the event. They were disappointed by their absence from the University Square Protest and saw little help in their on-line support.
Varying outlooks on the event took place while the research was conducted. Their outlook on the event changed from one position to another, in accordance with the support received from other social media users, rather than with the information received. The moment one point of view presented to their personal audience became unpopular among fellow social media users, the participant immediately started to distance oneself from it. The participant attempted new forms of political participation through a change in opinion or through a re-evaluation of the moment, in search for gathering support not for the political event, but rather for his own point of view. Personal on-line success was considered the most important aspect, political participation being just an excuse, most of the time. On the other hand, the participants that started out as protesters in the University Square during this period were seldom interested in other topics. The survey conducted on participants at the University Square Protest showed that they ignored international news in a very high percentage (87%) and national news not concerning the protest to a degree of 54%. Even those who in the beginning admitted that they were passionate readers of news acknowledged that during the protest they lost their appetite for reading the news. Protesters who were preoccupied with sports news continued to read sports-related news in an overwhelming percentage of 80%. A total lack of support was manifested towards daily news and towards other subjects. People and channels of communication that tried to present other types of news were seen as manipulators, trying to divert attention from the important issues such as political change and civic engagement.

“I saw in the morning that a lot of newspapers presented on their first page international news or news related to celebrities. I find that disgusting. The country is going to hell and they are just trying to divert attention. It is so Romanian from their part”.

The participants displayed a sort of resignation from the public scene. Although in contact with it through social media, all of them manifested a retreat from the public scene. The participants were not members of, nor did they admit any wish in participating in political parties or unions. Using social media was most of the time linked with some other reason than civic or political engagement, supporting change or the movement taking place in the University Square.

Knowing the definition for civic engagement, we understand that any change in norms and laws needs an active involvement over perhaps extended periods of time. Also, the issue needs constant attention, not only shifting perspective and shifting involvement. Changes in the over-all focus of the cognition power of the individual, shifts from the political issue to the personal area of interest, underlines its importance in changes in attitude. This change was manifested in those that start participating on-line at the University Square Protest. Although they were active in the beginning, using all the instruments provided by social media to promote the event, to publicly defend it on-line or to encourage others to participate, they personally never engaged in the protest, even though on-line they mentioned that they will attend. On the other hand, the participants who took part personally at the University Square Protest also manifested an interest in using social media, but mainly through publicizing videos, photos from the event, presenting information and changes in the situation. They acted mainly as reporters of the events, rarely engaging in conversation or in the organization of on-line groups or forums. Their attitude was one of mistrust towards those who adopted an activist attitude on-line and realized that many of those will not come in the University Square. Those that participated at the protest physically found out about the protest from traditional media.
or through direct experience, either by passing through the University Square or by hearing from friends, family, colleagues. They manifested feelings of dissatisfaction when talking about those that use only social media, promising also that they will attend the protest, but without ever appearing in the square.

We also noticed that the participants who used social media from the start, without being present in the University Square, manifested a broadening of focus away from the near-exclusive concentration on political change of the Government presented by those that attend in person the University Square Protest, to other political issues and even to personal issues that were linked somehow, not necessarily in a logic manner, to the event. The event was seen as an excuse to jump from one topic to another, taking advantage of the wide audience and of the attention given to the topic. The messages started to shift away from general political concerns to personal concerns which had little or even no direct link with civic and political engagement. In the case of the participants who took part at the University Square Protest in person we notice a constant focus on the issue at hand. Social media and traditional media were used to gather information and to present information exclusively related to the civic and political engagement. This was their main preoccupation. Seldom did we notice involvement of distant personal issues into these greater political expectations, nor did we notice a personalization of the protest. Most of the time, the participants perceived themselves as representing a group with the same problem, considering that a solution would be beneficial not only for them as individuals, but also for a greater group. Although the general political concerns were supported by personal stories, the general issue, that of political change, was their main concern.

We do not wish to stop short, however, at presenting our findings and continue by pointing out that both groups of young people agreed that there are only some appropriate mechanisms for civic and political engagement. They maintained that when people are exposed only to these proper mechanisms, they are more likely to be confirmed as participants in the civic or political engagement action. They also sought to explain that they felt the need for equilibrium between empowering young people to take action and pressuring them into becoming involved. The distinction between the two groups appeared at the level of perception. The group of young people who took part physically at the University Square protest felt that they were also under pressure from others using social media to participate or take a particular course of action while in the square. On the other side, the group of young people that were manifesting civic engagement only through social media felt an indirect pressure from those who actively participated at the University Square Protest and felt as if they were also expected to join them. It was recognized that both groups of young people felt some sort of pressure from the other, but felt that the proper mechanisms for civic engagement were different, enabling them to rehearse even counter-arguments against opposing views. Each of the groups had a different political anchorage into the protest, through the difference in the mechanisms that they believed to work and to best fit a democracy. They were firm enough in this belief that they conformed to this model of civic engagement, going so far as to deny the importance of the other form of civic and political engagement. Those using social media sometimes viewed the protest as surpassing the barrier of democracy, including scenes of unnecessary violence, while the others viewed social media protest as lacking efficiency at best, and as a sort of game. A key linchpin of this edifice of interpretation has at the base the fact that the two groups of young people were not ready to engage in different civic and political engage-
ment schemes and initiatives, that did not fit their own perspective on political anchorage. Consequently, we notice also a difference in the response to the expected changes.

7. An evaluation in short upon our intervention. Future prospects?

The assumption that social media can act alone in determining civic and political engagement has been challenged by our findings in the case of the University Square Protest in Romania. Social media, presented and widely accepted as the main catalyst for this movement and for other such movements was in this case used also for a range of other reasons. We registered a shift from focusing on political attitudes and opinions to a focus on seeking attention from the other members of the youth culture, present through social media. This change of focus raises, however, an important issue, namely the fact that although there is indeed the presence of a community, the youth community using social media, this community is not necessarily fixed on the political engagement, but rather it shifts interest rather quickly.

The majority of those using social media have manifested a shift away from a preoccupation with the political issue at hand towards other more day to day issues. They have metamorphosed rather quickly and rapidly from originators of political and civic engagement messages that might or might not influence others into actively participating in the University Square Protest, to an interest in the less purposive but potentially more personally beneficial contributions to their public image that started to stem from the political news and reports fashioned mechanically from the headings presented in the media.

It is important to note that those present at the University Square Protest were expecting immediate political change, while those using social media to present their message expected that their impact would be felt rather on the longer term, expecting that the protest will bring change, but later on. These two forms of civic and political engagement promised to these two different groups of young people different expectations related to time and a different range of measurable successes. The image of the protest as an opportunity for the participants to effectively persuade and influence policy and government seemed to have created different expectations. Those participating at the University Square Protest were focused on obtaining the changes requested; they were able to note them down in a list, to create a list of demands and changes, while those that were using social media to manifest civic and political engagement were rather preoccupied with speaking and presenting individual problems. In terms of gains, those participating at the protest in the University Square believed that the protest was a powerful method of obtaining change of laws and norms: “each day we change Romania”, while those using social media viewed the protest as a perfect way of expressing one-self freely: “it is the perfect opportunity for expression. Freedom of speech”. We have a balance between more specific aims and the general need for expression through liberty of speech and argumentation.

Much more attention needs to be given to the processes by which individuals interpret, translate and transform their social media experience to relate to the political reality they live in. Perhaps the most useful working conclusion that can be drawn from this brief enquiry is that there is a great need for emphasis on the level at which the individual engages social media.
Rezumat: Sunt social media un receptacol pentru puterea magică a media? Au ele o structură inerentă care să permită utilizatorului să recurgă la ele după bunul său plac, la primul semn de necesitate? Aceste întrebări au motivat existența acestui studiu. Scopul acestei cercetări este de a descrie relația stabilită de utilizatorii români cu social media, într-o perioadă în care orașe importante ale Europei cunoscute valuri de proteste. Impulsul realizării acestei cercetări a fost dat de utilizarea social media pentru sprijinirea unor cauze politice. Social media au fost descrise ca aflându-se la baza evenimentelor de natură politică din România și Europa. Importanța lor tinde să fie percepută mai puțin sceptic decât în acest articol. Pe baza rezultatelor cercetării putem afirma că social media nu sunt un instrument stabil de manifestare civică din moment ce ele pot trece cu ușurință de la informație la divertisment. Cercetarea empirică de natură calitativă a dezvăluit contextul în care participanții au perceput protestul din piața Universității. Rezultatele acestei cercetări s-au dovedit a fi mai puțin optimiste în privința puterii social media de a declanșa activismul democratic.

Cuvinte-cheie: social media, participare politică, activism democratic

Note

1. According to the Romanian Bureau of Circulation Audit, România Liberă, edited by Media Gamma Publishers, had an average sell of 33560 papers for January, 31278 for February, 31301 for March 2012, in comparison with a number of 40947 for January 2011, 41734 for February, 41355 for March 2011; second placed in the national circulation top is the newspaper Adevărul, published by Adevărul Holding with a circulation of 23087 for January 2012, 21776 for February 2012, 23884 for March 2012 in comparison with the figures from 2011 which were 42640 for January 2011, 48584 for February 2011 and 43441 for March 2011.

References


