

THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2021

Rebuilding mutual trust – a trans- communication platform

Karl Michael Braun is one of the top three contributors to this year's Global Essay Competition Award. He studied at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg and attended the 50th St. Gallen Symposium as a Leader of Tomorrow.

Introduction

Just two days after the riots in the Capitol in Washington, D.C., on January 6th, Twitter permanently suspended the US president's private account from its platform – Facebook/Instagram had already done the same by then (Conger, 2021). During his four years in office, Donald Trump has systematically undermined people's trust in the media, public institutions, and eventually in the electoral process and its result, – and therefore even in democracy itself (Landwehr, 2020). But populists do not pop up from nowhere; the political 'substance' on which they act are people who are ready to follow them. Today, ideological division within many societies is tremendous. Concerning, for example, the USA, empirical studies confirm that affective polarisation (measuring to what extent people of one-party dislike members of

the opposing party) has aggravated significantly over the past six decades; in other words, many Americans hate each other more than ever (Mims, 2020). But this is not just an American issue. The emergence of populism is ubiquitous (Koopmans & Zürn, 2019). Populist political entrepreneurs capitalise and thrive on societies' polarisations worldwide.

The angry crowd that invaded the Capitol may have been incited in the 'real' sphere – yet, the structural reasons and processes that smoothed the way to this shameful event can be found in the online sphere. Despite digital founders' and shapers' noble aspirations, technology might rather hinder than contribute to an ideal that is generally referred to as "deliberative democracy" (e.g. Fishkin, 2018).

The problem: how platforms work

A significant number of people nowadays draw their news and information from social media. But what is shown in the newsfeed is determined by artificial, not human intelligence. Emotional and polarising news are favoured. The recipient is thus connected to a 'reality' that reconfirms already held attitudes. Often "unaware of how much their political views are influenced by selective exposure to information" (Bail, 2018), within their cognitive cages, people often feel certain to know 'the truth'; everything else is considered 'fake'. The algorithms may well contribute to the effect of 'birds from the same feather flocking together' also regarding active communication: people engage less in uncomfortable exchanges, i.e. rather with like-minded people. A study which examined online behaviour during the 2012 US presidential election campaign shows that in social media, 85 percent of retweets were made by citizens who shared each other's' political orientation (Barberá, 2015). It is conceivable that this results in difficulties with understanding compromise, and in hardened communication when confronted with people who hold opposing views.

As a reaction to his permanent Twitter ban Donald Trump announced that he considered introducing his own platform (Courty, 2021; Wilhelm, 2021). Yet, it is evident that such platforms would gather only more people of similar opinions, and therefore contribute to further affirmation – a vicious cycle. Even though this has not happened so far, in the future, new communication platforms might come up that are politically more biased than the currently dominant ones and which attract more people with specific stances. This certainly cannot be a solution. It would only solidify the gaps within societies.

As interwoven as economics and politics may be, as meaningless the different categories would become if we did not dare drawing clear

lines along some vital and societally relevant issues. Should we really leave controversial discussions in the long run increasingly to social media and a few tech companies? Should we leave freedom of expression and judgement to private players? Should we rely – as Thierry Breton, *European Commissioner for Internal Market* put it – "on the goodwill of platforms" and "their creative interpretation of the law" (dpa, 2021)? I think we should not. I argue that if we leave our political online discourse to platforms of companies that can indeed have a political tendency, and therefore technologically suppress controversial statements and voices, this could sow even more mistrust in the political system and might eventually undermine citizens' faith in it altogether.

It is time for a paradigm shift. We have to reorganise our digital space: away from a privately framed system and towards a democratically legitimised and independently controlled and organised communication framework. What we need is an independent entity, subject to public law, that promotes a specific kind of communication.

The idea: a trans-communication platform

We need to get people out of their bubbles and echo chambers, expose them to opposing views and facilitate a process-oriented discourse particularly among those who disagree with each other. What we need is not more communication but more communicational processes between people who hold opposing views – which I coin 'trans-communication'.

In the following section, I will outline an online platform which provides a pre-structured public space for discussion and is decisively based on listening to and understanding each other. There have been various approaches to implementing such platforms in the past, but have either long been dormant or have been closed entirely. The crucial part in attracting

the broad mass of ordinary people to a trans-communication platform would be its design: to make it a success, it must not consist of a random communication process but would have to be carefully conceived (Esau et al., 2017); its communication process would have to be channelled.

Many studies (e.g. Coe et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2014; Sunstein, 2002; Wilhelm, 2000) show that online communication is often characterized by incivility instead of reasoning and respect, or homophily and polarisation rather than rational consensus. To break this, and to encourage a trans-communicational discourse that is based on reason and respect, the platform needs a deliberate 'architecture'. In order to enhance civility and quality, I propose the concept of deliberation to be structurally implemented in this trans-communicational exchange. Deliberation is the opposite of an emotionalised discourse and of 'knowing' the truth *a priori*: it is regarded as a reciprocal communication process that includes both listening and responding (Barber, 1984). It relies on balancing different arguments and viewpoints. Political philosophers like Joshua Cohen (1989) and Jürgen Habermas (1984) have discussed in detail why a respectful exchange of reasoning among equals has a "truth-tracking potential" (Habermas, 2006).

In order to channel the communication, trans-communication would have to be conducted in a defined process, which would be based on a fixed protocol. This is why I devote a substantial part of this essay to describing the design of the platform.

Structure

A *conversational figuration* consists of three participatory roles: *initiator* (participant A), *listener* (B), and *third party* (C). One *round* consists of three *sessions* during each participant passes through all three *participatory roles* A, B and C. This is important for variation and empathy. Thus, within one *conversational figuration*, the

participatory roles exist threefold, ergo there are nine overall participants. While the *initiator* and the *listener* form a *conversational unit*, the Cs have a *third party*-meta role evaluating their contributions and giving feedback.

Algorithms

Two algorithms specifically ensure trans-communication. One makes sure that a *conversational unit* is constituted by participants who hold (more or less) opposing views on a given topic. (These positions are determined in advance: before the first *session* starts, each user classifies him-/herself on a scale of 1 to 10 regarding the specific issue.) Another algorithm makes sure that each respective participatory role shares – scale-based – the same view as the other ones. It does not matter how opposing the 'opinion relation' between the *third party* (Cs) and the As/Bs is, only that it is the same within all three participatory roles.

Procedure

Within one *round*, the discussion topic, i.e. the proposed question, remains the same. Questions could be posed in the style of "What is your position on a specific cap for the intake of refugees?" or "What is your position on driving bans in inner cities?".

Just like one *round* encompasses three *sessions*, one *session* consists of three steps.

1. The *statement*: the *initiator* answers to the proposed question by explaining his/her position on the matter.
2. The *referring comment*: the *listener* responds to the initiator's *statement*. The main point of the *referring comment* is to comprehend the other's position
3. The *evaluation process*: for the evaluation, we need a *third party*: the Cs. The whole *evaluation process* consists of three steps:
 - a. The Cs scrutinise the initiators' statements by the As on the basis of the four

criteria of deliberation broadly shared among deliberative theorists: comprehension, reasoning, structure, expression (e.g. Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Each of the Cs gives feedback to all three As.

- b. The Cs examine their referring comments by the Bs on the basis of the four criteria mentioned above. The Cs give feedback to the Bs.
- c. The Cs themselves also need to be evaluated and feedbacked. Only if they are

also evaluated, we can ensure that they do their best to evaluate their fellow participants within the conversational figuration. Therefore, the Cs evaluate each other. The criterion is the validity of the feedbacks (to the As and Bs) given by their fellows.

A session ends with the Cs' mutual evaluation. A round ends after three sessions – i.e. once each participant has been initiator (A), listener (B) and third party (C).

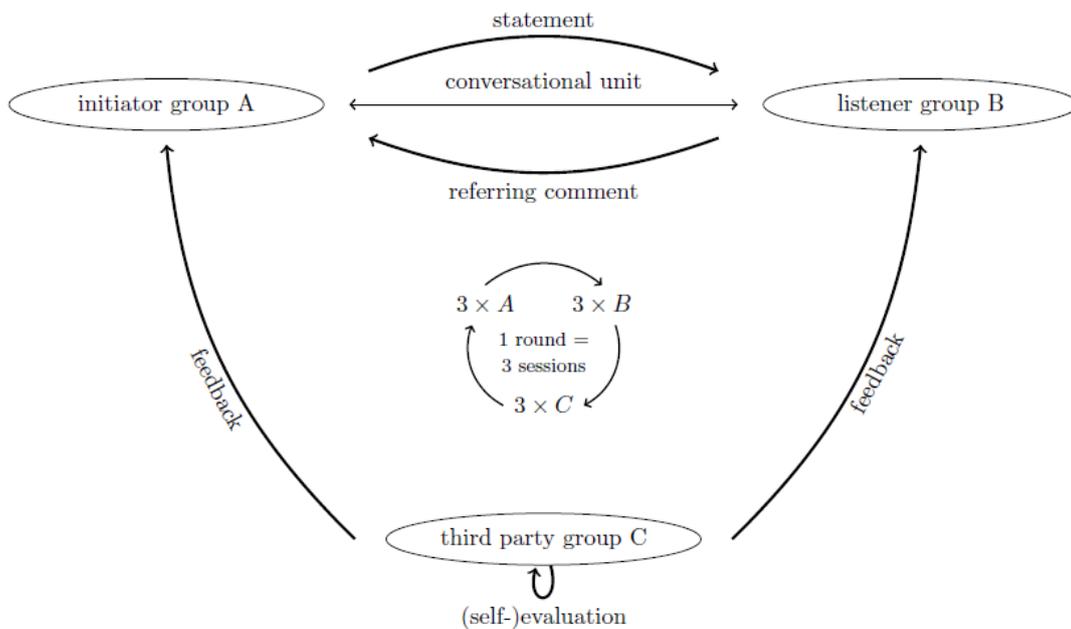


Figure 1: Schematic of the trans-communication protocol. A conversational figuration is executed by 3 sets of 3 homophilic participants. These rotate to occupy the roles A, B and C for one respective session within one round. The outer circle outlines one session.

It is worth considering to implement tokens in the evaluation process that could be accredited to the participants' accounts and work as incentives, or playful elements that might increase the fun factor.

Implementation: initiated but not run by the government

How could such a platform succeed in rebuilding mutual trust? Trans-communication would have to become some kind of popular 'sport' which

everybody feels excited to participate in. It would have to become a trend – not just a seasonal fashion but a long-term, stable practice. Such a delicate and difficult task – implementation, promotion and successful dissemination of a platform that provides and facilitates trans-communicational exchange – to my mind can only be initiated by the political executive.

In the United States, for example, a starting point to successfully advertise and popularise

a trans-communication platform could consist of a symbolic act: prominent leaders both from the Democrats and the Republicans could send out invitations to two ordinary citizens who would then invite two other citizens, and so on. Exclusive access and artificial shortage in the early stages would serve the 'fear of missing out' effect and increase curiosity at the beginning, but eventually users' numbers could grow exponentially due to network effects (von Mutius, 2018), which would help the spectrum of participants go beyond any social 'bubbles' that might exist in the start. In the long term, it could become an institutionalised part of education and might even be implemented in school curricula.

The crux of the matter would lie in that once institutionalised, the platform would have to become an independent entity by the respective government, comparable to (ideally independent) foundations. In an open and liberal society an institution such as the *People's Public Opinion Office* in China would in any case not be appropriate for governing such a forum. Confirming and maintaining its independence could be a challenge indeed. But its potential is worth trying. Now is the right time, since its urgency is evident so as to reshape controversial online communication by trying a fundamental shift with trans-

communication. Much is being said about a *Platform Revolution* (Parker et al., 2016) with regard to changes over the last years. But now, societies need a more profound trans-communicative turn.

Conclusion

One of the most important values of a liberal democracy is its capacity to endure and often harmonise discordant voices. In democracies, the other's attitude, culture, way of life need to be tolerated. In democracies, trans-communication could become a regular training tool for their political culture and its controversial discussions that are necessary for them to thrive. It could then become an element of active citizenship.

Where people hate each other, they certainly do not trust each other. By encouraging more active listening, this can be the basis for getting to know each others' positions and understanding different positions. And then people might be less inclined to see the other side as their opponents – and more open to compromise. With trans-communication, we could close gaps within societies. It could form a substantial component of an agenda to rebuild mutual trust and to heal divided societies. The platform outlined above and its implementation is a constructive approach towards meeting these goals.

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