European Economic and Social Committee

TEN/571
Cyberactivism and civil
society organisations

Brussels, 16 September 2015

OPINION

of the
European Economic and Social Committee
on
Cyberactivism and civil society organisations
(own-initiative opinion)

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On 19 February 2015, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on

Cyberactivism and civil society organisations.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 31 August 2015.

At its 510th plenary session, held on 16 and 17 September 2015 (meeting of 16 September), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 205 votes to 2 with 8 abstentions.

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1. **Conclusions and recommendations**

1.1   In today's digital society, cyberactivism is a useful tool for empowering citizens insofar as it facilitates and promotes active social engagement and participation through new technologies, while contributing to reducing social and digital exclusion. A conceptual approach to cyberactivism defines it as a form of activism that encourages people to actively champion political, environmental, social, civic and cultural, etc. causes, without the prior need for defined ideologies, hierarchies or programmes, and which uses technological tools that promote viral dissemination and participation in order to do so. In this respect, it must be distinguished from initiatives that are not prompted by democratic and solidarity-based principles and values and do not have the public interest and common good at heart.

1.2   If cyberactivism is to develop as a tool, both the European Commission and the Member States need work agendas that incorporate initiatives and measures to promote structures that accommodate an appropriate expansion of the network society by facilitating free and universal access, ensuring transparency and confidentiality and protecting the right to privacy and data security, paying particular attention to the most disadvantaged groups.

1.3   The EESC believes it is essential to provide the public with the necessary knowledge and skills to handle cyberactivism intelligently and securely. It therefore urges the European institutions to encourage awareness-raising activities, training and education, with special emphasis on disseminating good practice and eradicating the malicious use of online activism. In this regard, the resources considered necessary for the evaluation and development of cyberactivism should be made available.

1.4   Moreover, and in relation to institutional governance, cyberactivism promotes co-decision areas and shared power through proactive and reactive multidirectional interactions between

multiple actors (governments, civil society organisations, social stakeholders, citizens and businesses).

1.5   As a result, support for cyberactivism requires a shared online configuration comprising both horizontal relations between citizens and vertical relations between governments and citizens. Horizontal interaction fosters online solidarity through active and committed cyber volunteering, and cooperation and collaborative activities and initiatives. Top-down vertical interaction is on the rise due to e-government, which contributes to transparency and facilitates public access and information regarding public affairs. Bottom-up vertical interaction strengthens citizen representation in institutions in an open e-democracy context, enabling effective participation through grassroots consultations or legislative initiatives.

1.6   Finally, the EESC sees a need to build and apply specific evaluation methodologies and indicators for measuring the economic and social impact of cyberactivism and to carry out studies and reports to achieve greater consistency in its activity with respect to factors such as effective representativeness and leadership, continuity and the emergence of new structures and social trends, etc.

2.   **Introduction**

2.1   The impact that new technologies are having on today's society is reflected in the virtual space known as the Digital Ecosystem, where new ways of living are being developed to replace traditional forms of expression and interaction in society.

2.2   In addition to the economic, cultural and innovation-related aspects of this technological revolution, particular consideration should be given to the challenges and opportunities in the field of information, communication and participation, against the backdrop of a new governance framework in which interconnected co-responsibility may, to a large extent, determine major changes in the way in which society is structured and organised in future.

2.3   The impact of online social networks – provided they are inclusive – and the internet have opened up new horizons for the role that citizens can play in building society, empowering them and giving them a leading role in designing their own shared development.

2.4   At global level, this collective trend has been reinforced over time, helping to strengthen the initiatives already taken and to further consolidate the ability to connect and interact, feeding back into decision-making and power over ever-wider areas, with a high degree of immediacy and scope. Consequently, the initiatives undertaken generate new ones in a process of positive reinforcement, with action being scaled up as a result.

2.5   In this respect, it is important not to regard digital grass-root movements simply as a body of internet users with typical "crowd" overtones, but rather as a "smart mob", i.e. a group which acts intelligently and efficiently due to the exponential growth of links in the network. This

network of links enables people to connect with one another to access information and interact with other people, thereby bringing about genuine social coordination which aims to construct a society that is aware, responsible and in which people get involved.

2.6   As a result, the main added value of the scenario outlined above is the active involvement of people who have no desire to give up control over the matters which affect them and who are prepared not only to shoulder this responsibility but also to act on it, as evidenced by some of the data (Tascón, Mario and Quintana, Yolanda: *Ciberactivismo: Las nuevas revoluciones de las multitudes conectadas* ("Cyberactivism: the new revolutions of the connected masses"), La Catarata, 2012) on day-to-day online activity: 1.6 million blog entries and 140 million tweets.

2.7   The same would apply when reviewing the documentation on cyberactivism, which highlights events and social movements of considerable reach and scope such as Occupy Wall Street, Gezi Park, the Arab Spring and the Spanish 15M; and campaigns to enlist support for philanthropic and solidarity-based causes promoted by recognised civil society organisations, including by raising funds through crowdfunding mechanisms or simply joining platforms that have transparent funding formulas.

3.   **Digital or net activism**

3.1   Drawing on the various definitions put forward to describe cyberactivism, it is possible to sum up this concept as a strategy or activity which seeks to influence the public agenda through electronic media and using new technologies as a communication channel, and with the goal of transmitting information in the area of civic participation.

3.2   Furthermore, the media used for cyberactivism is regarded as all information and communication technologies which use social media and networks allowing for rapid and effective electronic communication among people. This is linked to a common commitment to actively address needs, problems or issues of interest to them because of ideological motivations or values, underpinned by ethics and solidarity.

3.3   Normal and non-destructive use of the internet for a cause or objective is clearly different from other types of activities (Denning, 2001) such as "hacktivism" or electronic civil disobedience, both in terms of methods and goals, when they are of a criminal nature. In the case of digital activism, or cyberactivism to use the correct term, actions must be geared towards the common general good or in particular to resilience and efforts to overcome difficulties or adverse circumstances which certain population groups may endure on a recurrent or unexpected basis.

3.4   The most common forms of cyberactivism are searching for information on the web; constructing internet sites which provide information and documentation; electronic publications; setting up virtual communities; bulk e-mailing of letters; creating spaces and

forums for debate on the net; planning, announcing and coordinating activities; establishing strategic alliances and cooperation; promoting associations; offers of support and/or calls to sign up to collective initiatives already under way.

3.5   Cyberactivism could also include international political appeals via the internet or "web squared" measures, which are collective actions in which individuals who are physically dispersed (at global or local level) come together using mobile communication tools, converging in a specific physical location.

3.6   In conclusion, online activism or cyberactivism is a highly effective and powerful tool, enabling information and knowledge to be transferred on important issues which may not be known to the public, who are therefore unable to respond in a timely fashion by rallying support. However, its validity still lacks legitimacy as an alternative to the traditional channels used to champion causes.

4.   **Cyberactivism in the context of EU policies**

4.1   The EU approach to cyberactivism is based, on the one hand, on policies to promote a digital society and, on the other, policies to promote participation and social policies, with an emphasis on applying the principles of good governance in public administration.

4.2   Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union stipulates that everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right includes the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. The freedom and pluralism of the media must be respected.

4.3   In addition, Article 12 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights provides for freedom of assembly and association, stipulating that everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association at all levels, in particular in political, trade union and civic matters.

4.4   Consideration should also be given to Article 8 of the charter, which refers to the right that everyone has to the protection of personal data concerning him or her, with an obligation to process this data fairly for specified purposes and on the basis of the consent of the person concerned or some other legitimate basis laid down by law. Equally, everyone has the right of access to data which has been collected concerning him or her, and the right to have it rectified. An equally important consideration is the principle of equal opportunities as a fundamental right to address digital exclusion, especially with regard to vulnerable groups.

4.5   Furthermore, the Digital Agenda for Europe addresses the following aspects, among others, which Member States are required to protect:

- freedom of access to digital services and content. This is a key factor for exercising citizenship in both electronic and real-life democratic contexts;
- citizen involvement; Europe will only reap the benefits of the digital revolution if all EU citizens are mobilised and empowered to participate fully in the new digital society;
- ensuring universal and high-speed access, which is both essential and all that is needed for effective and powerful cyberactivism;
- transparency in any form of management of digital resources, tools and structures that prevents open participation, or undermines the objectives and processes of cyberactivism and its development;
- the promotion of digital skills for an inclusive digital society. Europe's potential lies in the skills of its citizens, its workforce and its organisations. Without omnipresent infrastructure, only limited use can be made of ICT and without skills, only limited economic and social value can result from that use. It is also crucial to narrow the digital divide, which causes imbalances and inequalities;
- effective protection of digital rights; Unless people feel sufficiently confident, they will not actively participate, interact or express their opinions freely;
- development of what is known as the "fifth freedom": the free movement of content and knowledge.

4.6   Active citizenship includes involving individual citizens, citizens' groups and civil society organisations, particularly the social partners, in drawing up policy (vertical dialogue between civil society and public administrations) and ensuring networking and cooperation between them (horizontal dialogue).

5.   **Volunteering as a component of cyberactivism**

5.1   In a digital society such as today's, the opportunities for social change provided by the Internet and social networks are clearly immense. With no limits imposed by time or space and in a simple and accessible way, people can contribute to achieving significant change in their surroundings, and also outside their everyday sphere, helping thousands of people without seeking any personal gain from it.

5.2   Far from encouraging so-called "slacktivism" or half-hearted activism, the new information and communication technologies enable citizens to address their concerns, participate in managing their affairs and defending their rights and interests, and to collaborate actively and with commitment in initiatives that help express their ideas, principles and values. This fosters a sense of personal achievement and prevents social alienation. It also becomes a factor for community cohesion and integration.

5.3   Virtual or online volunteering means volunteering through the medium of the new technologies in activities that do not require a physical presence, through support for campaigns, the dissemination and production of information, providing assistance and any other tasks that can be carried out online in an altruistic way, committed to a specific goal or cause.

5.4   When this digital volunteering is confined to supporting, disseminating and communicating campaigns, it falls within the scope of cyberactivism, here taking the form of participation in protest activities and electronic reporting (collection of signatures, personal contributions, exponential information dissemination activities, etc.).

5.5   In the quest for progress and to scale up action, different platforms and websites are empowering millions of people, raising their awareness and encouraging them to react to urgent and important issues, irrespective of where they are taking place and regardless of their nature (economic, social, environmental, political, etc.).

5.6   This model of mobilisation through the internet makes it possible to unite thousands of people's individual efforts and aspirations. While they might be anonymous or not directly concerned, this unity becomes significant in that it can quickly become a powerful collective force that is able to influence the appropriate spheres of power and decision-making.

Ultimately, this type of remote volunteering boosts the capacity of organisations and provides a space for involving as many people as possible, thereby making it more inclusive.

6.   **Proposals for action**

6.1   Despite the proven potential and benefits of cyberactivism, however, the strategies used in the social media sometimes bring people together but do not create stable virtual communities, which to some extent undermines the sustainability of the social changes being pursued. An objective assessment linked to qualitative criteria and principles, as well as the social returns provided by the initiative, should therefore help establish a methodology in this area.

6.2   We believe it would be appropriate to support the proactive development of cyberactivism and digital volunteering, since the environment provided by social networks and internet portals offers greater accessibility, immediacy and critical mass for social participation and public co-responsibility, with considerable cost savings for the management, coordination and implementation of activities. Furthermore, they promote the conditions that foster inclusion: accessibility, responsibility and affordability.

6.3   The European Economic and Social Committee therefore calls on the European Commission and the Member States to take the necessary steps within their respective remits to effectively promote the implementation and development of mechanisms for cyberactivism and online participation, so as to encourage and strengthen social engagement and boost volunteering.

6.4   Support should also be provided for setting the relevant standards and evaluation criteria for endorsing and legitimising these mechanisms, and help bring transparency and added value to awareness-raising and mobilisation processes. An additional reason is to be able to determine the social returns that have been generated.

6.5   It is also important to ensure the effective protection and exercise of the rights conferred in this area on European citizens, as stated above, particularly as regards facilitating access and freedom of information and ensuring the flow of exchanges and their integrity, confidentiality and continuity through networks, without in any way diminishing the speed of transmitting their communications. These guarantees should be applied proportionately and as necessary in the case of vulnerable groups.

6.6   Furthermore, due to their importance in the context of cyberactivism, it is worth mentioning active e-justice and the values of trust and reputation, with a view to exploring the improvement of cyberspace safeguards.

6.7   The institutions concerned should ensure that they make infrastructure and technological tools available to the public to enable people to carry out their digital activities on an ongoing and regular basis. They should also adapt social structures to the new technologies and promote the educational and training activities needed to empower people to use these tools and narrow the current digital divide in the interests of greater territorial, social and economic cohesion.

6.8   Lastly, programmes should be designed and adopted to raise people's awareness of social participation and volunteering through these new technologies, assisting bodies and initiatives in these fields through cooperation, against a backdrop of sound institutional governance.

Brussels, 16 September 2015.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Henri Malosse

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