

The Fourth Conference on National Dialogues, 11—12 June 2019

The House of the Estates, Helsinki

National dialogue in the age of digital media

Objective of the session

The objective of this session is to discuss and clarify the role of digital media in national dialogue processes as an increasingly important component in dialogue ecosystem. Moreover, the session aims at identifying recommendations on how to better utilize digital media in dialogue processes and, on the other hand, prevent risks linked to it. The session combines academic and practical insight to create a comprehensive picture of the topic.

Background

National dialogues do not take place in isolation. Societal discussion, as reflected in social media as well as traditional media, is affecting dialogue processes, whether we acknowledge this or not. Contemporary national dialogues are typically aimed at being inclusive and participatory processes accommodating many national stakeholders and bringing wide-ranging issues on the table. Incorporating many voices in the process contributes to a fuller understanding of the kinds of issues facing the society, but at the same time holds a risk of fragmenting the process and complicating effective decision making. This is all the more relevant when digital media is figured in the process, as it amplifies the flow of information, views and opinions. Perhaps at least partly for this reason, not all dialogue processes opt for maximum inclusion, and a process can very well entail exclusive elements of closed or semi-closed dialogue space. Nonetheless, even more confined dialogue processes are not immune to digital media because it is fast, highly accessible, and it can be used to monitor the public opinion, which surely makes it an attractive tool. The challenge, however, is that the content of digital media is diverse and the capacity of different negotiating parties to use digital media is uneven, which may lead to unbalanced process. Furthermore, digital media can be an effective channel for those whose interest is to disrupt or spoil the process altogether. Whatever the dialogue process, digital media as a form of societal discussion has an enormous impact within a wider dialogue ecosystem.

It should be noted, however, that digital media signify only one aspect of media landscape or societal discussion in general. A more comprehensive approach to the complexity of wider dialogue ecosystem is addressing it by the concept of *hybrid media*. By hybrid media we mean the coexistence and workings of traditional and new media, which creates complex fora for societal discussion to take place. The core argument in the concept is that different media platforms should be understood as parallel and merged in relation to each other, not as clean-cut and independent forms of societal communication. Social media is often highly emphasized in the mix, but media such as community radios, television and newspapers can in many instances play just as important a role in dialogue processes, and thus concentrating on just one media can lead to inadequate understanding. Nevertheless, social media has been an accelerating and complicating factor for societal discussion, and as such, it may have an impact

on how national dialogue processes should be executed and how they should be monitored. Rumours and disinformation spreads with great speed and extensive outreach on social media platforms. Disregarding this can lead to devastating consequences.

The session explores how digital media could be better utilized and managed in national dialogue processes. This question has two sides to it. On one hand, digital media can positively be harnessed to the service of dialogue processes. On the other hand, we should ask how we can avoid potential negative consequences of digital media as an independent force. Fragmented, socially mediated conversation in digital media may positively or negatively affect the dialogue process, while the issues and outcomes (agreements, compromises etc.) of the dialogue processes can be disseminated to the larger societal space via digital media. The increased interaction within a dialogue process can greatly improve digital inclusion. In addition to interaction, information and data analysis presented and made possible by digital media allows some novel potential for any dialogue process. Mapping and analysing digital media increase the accessible information and understanding about the societal space for the decision-making process.

Context specific cases exemplify how the use and analysis of digital media in both dialogue and larger societal space can prevent conflict and enable broader inclusion in national dialogue, thus enhancing the sustainability of dialogue outcomes. On the other hand, what happens via digital media can take an opposite turn if we do not take its challenge seriously. Societal discussion in digital media can work destructively, for example in the form of hate speech or spreading of fake news, and its analysis can be used to further goals that are not compatible with sustainable peace. Additionally, the significance of digital media must be placed in a larger context, be it the whole complex of hybrid media or the process of societal discussion. Building on these cautions, the session aims at developing understanding on how digital media should be approached in larger national dialogue strategies.

Key questions

- What is the relation between digital media and national dialogue?
- How digital media can be harnessed to the service of national dialogue process?
- How can we avoid negative consequences of digital media in national dialogue processes?
- What is the future of national dialogue processes in the age of digital media? What are the recommendations for the way forward?

Composition of the session

- Mr Ahmed Hadji, Team Leader and Co-Founder, Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum
- Mr Sanjana Hattotuwa, Researcher, University of Otago (video link)
- Ms Achol Jok Mach, Specialist, PeaceTech Lab Africa
- Mr Jukka Niva, Head of Yle News Lab, Finnish Broadcasting Company
- *Moderator: Mr Matthias Wevelsiep, Development Manager – Digital Transition, FCA*