
Burst the Bubble - Meet the world for debates
Project Proposal

Budapest Agora: Euth for Democracy

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Country Team Austria

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The Issue

Like all major technological advancements, digital connectivity has paved the way for both innovative opportunities and unprecedented challenges. The political, economic, and individual dependency on digital goods and services intensified even further in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. This development opened new ways of undermining, manipulating, and threatening social cohesion as well as democratic processes. Such vulnerabilities are progressively exploited by hostile state and non-state actors through unconventional means of aggression below the threshold of warfare. Against this background, the creation and dissemination of disinformation has become a widely used instrument to amplify distrust and polarisation. Hence, the intentional and systematic spread of verifiably false contents directly aims to destabilise and divide societies – also within Europe.

Despite past information operations on the European Union and its member states such as during the Brexit referendum, the Gilets Jaunes protests or the European Parliament elections, COVID-19 disinformation campaigns have reached an unprecedented intensity. The harmful contents are predominantly spread online, where filter bubbles and echo chambers exponentially multiply their outreach, strengthening their alleged legitimacy. By taking advantage of the algorithms that social media platforms are built on, human troll farms and digital bots have supercharged this process. We can define filter bubbles as a state of intellectual isolation caused by an algorithm selection based on personal online behaviour. To put it in simple terms, the internet tends to show us contents in line with our own opinion. Likewise, echo chambers are virtual communicative interactions where people seek out information that reinforces their existing views without encountering opposing ones. Information operations enhance this phenomenon and feed on it. Thus, the targeted digital manipulation and deception of the European society is cost-efficient, easily accessible, and widespread, whilst enhancing fragmentation. This dangerous trend is widely considered to be [the gravest threat to European democracy and solidarity](#).

Our project aims to tackle confirmation biases and create a space of communication that should not function as an alternative to Social Media but actually facilitate a digital social interaction that is based on a real dialogue.

Instead of a one-sided interaction through posts and shares, we want to support an audio-based, virtual conversation. Rather than winning anyone over by reinforcing already existing opinions,

the focus of engagement is a curious interaction of equal encounters. In a best-case scenario, these conversations become a regular method of communicating with people around the world to widen your own horizon. Therefore, our project is aiming to diffuse fears, prejudice, and biases to limit the spread and impact of disinformation.

Solution - “Burst the Bubble”

1.1 What & Why?

Ordinary social media networks, like Badoo, Clubhouse, Chatroulette or Mocospace, usually pursue economic interests. Different from them, our aspiration is to set a focus on democracy promotion. Despite being increasingly connected, we struggle to genuinely meet people whose views differ greatly from ours. When was the last time you talked about democracy and politics with a stranger? In order to ‘escape’ the filter bubble, we envision a global platform that brings people together from all over the world for one-on-one online video chats to discuss socio-political issues that matter to us all.

1.2 How?

I Participants answer a series of questions related to topics such as COVID-19, climate change or migration in order to give their opinion on key political issues democracies are facing currently.

II Participants will be matched based on their contrary answers.

III If both participants want to continue the discussion, they can exchange contact details and chat on their preferred platform.

1.3 Identified Issues and proposed solutions

As a team, we were clear from the beginning that we wanted to propose something that is feasible. There are plenty of good ideas. However, for many, a realistic implementation is not possible due to time, financial constraints or a lack of consensus. In order to focus on feasibility and implementation, we decided to have a ‘problems first’ approach. The exchanges we had with different country teams from the Budapest European Agora were hugely helpful for this - thank you all for your feedback!

1.3.1 Language barrier

The problem of language barrier is an essential factor that should not be omitted over the course of this project. The experience of a sensitive or emotional discussion is significantly influenced by whether and how the discussion is moderated. Also interrupting the flow of discussion, for

example through an external translation, contributes to the evaluation and perception of the conversation. Hence, we decided against the idea of a person moderating the discussion. Likewise, we want to take advantage of new technological developments to ensure the most open and non-restrictive conversational experience possible under the provision of inclusiveness.

As regarding this project, simultaneous translation software can decrease communicative language barriers. In addition, software developers from all over the world are offering the first generation of software-based digital translation tools. The quality of application translation is certainly not yet maxed out, which means that constant improvement is to be expected. Nevertheless, they can already make an enormous contribution to simplifying communication and connecting people. “Remote Interpreter” for example provides a cloud-based meeting software - so do also other companies like “kites” or “DROTR”, to mention just a few. The near future therefore holds a further consolidation of communication tools for us, so that the language barrier could recede into the background as the software solutions are developing further.

1.3.2 Internet access

Another obstacle is the lack of internet access. The social media management platform “Hootsuite” illustrates in its [annual Global Report](#) that a total of 4.54 billion people had used the internet in 2020. That corresponds to 59 percent of the world's population and the trend continues upwards. Furthermore, the asymmetric accessibility of urban regions compared to rural areas is another global question. To overcome this issue of digital infrastructure we can expect a soon solution. Nevertheless, we are confident that the digitization plans being pursued by numerous governments around the world (e.g., through projects such as WIFI4EU) will provide a sustainable contribution to improve this problem. For our project we would like to encourage the participation of communication initiatives, such as public Wi-Fi hotspots and community or cultural hubs that can provide the necessary infrastructure. We leave the method of communication open for alternatives - be it through an online platform, a good old landline or even a letter exchange. Further, another idea could be to cooperate with institutions and NGOs that would support our ambition of creating this space.

1.3.3 Information and Advertisement

The first question in this regard will be how to make the target group - the people - aware of this global exchange opportunity and, furthermore, why they should be interested in joining. Since the attractiveness for getting involved depends also on the awareness of the risks of social media communication, to promote a discourse with the help of trustworthy actors (as for example national media outlets) would create a solid space for the project's kick-off. Attaining people with different life realities seems to be the next obstacle. Therefore, the target group should be reached as low-threshold as possible and at the same time adjusted to the implementation feasibility. One way could be to include this project in the campaigns against hate speech, which are being deployed in many countries around the world. An important aspect is also the involvement of decision-makers beyond the EU, to make our project more tangible for non-EU citizens. Additional to the inclusion of transnational newspapers and broadcasting networks, prominent people can take on patronage to raise awareness.

1.3.4 Protection from abuse

Protection against cyber-grooming or assault must also be considered. As we cannot impose an age restriction, thus we would still propose using the platform starting from the age of sixteen for insightful discussions. Since the platform does not want to collect any data unnecessarily, the instrument of reporting a user is not sufficient or practical in this context. Leaving the video chat immediately seems to be the easiest way, but it does not protect against harm. Our aspiration must be to prevent any inappropriate behaviour or assault before it happens. Part of the solution can be the use of a facial recognition scan or a short eye-tracking scan before connecting participants. This way, obscene behaviour can be prevented in advance. Nevertheless, to guarantee compliance with EU data protection standards, the expertise of leading professionals will be consulted at an early stage of the implementation phase.

When participants sign up, their survey data as well as the answers to our questions, will be processed and stored by a small team behind "Burst the Bubble" in strict accordance with GDPR rules. Depending on the role of partner organisations, they too would need to act in accordance with the GDPR.

We would permanently delete the information from the participants from all databases after their conversations took (or did not take) place. We would potentially need to receive some

legal advice to develop a full privacy policy and check whether we could use some anonymous aggregate data to evaluate the project and show up some larger trends.

1.3.5 Financing

One item of expense would be the development of an algorithm that matches participants. The complexity and cost would be dependent on the range of questions and answer options. Borrowing the idea of questionnaires in social research with a numerical code could be a way to procure implementation. Also, these questions have to be frequently updated.

The second item of expense would be the development and servicing of an informational website. The third item would be communication.

We believe that this project makes a strong case for its democratic necessity and, thus, would be eligible for different grants as well as operational support from various EU institutions. However, partnerships with the private and non-profit sector will be indispensable.