



## Where is social media headed? The biggest trends to watch out for 9 November 2017

**Speaker:** Christophe Ginisty, CEO of AGOREP, Belgium

**Moderator:** Aurélie Valtat, Head of Digital, Multimedia and Internal Communication, EUROPEAid

The social media landscape moves quickly. The mobile transformation is almost complete. Along with mobile, video is the present and future king, with a sharp rise in live video content that makes users feel they are a genuine part of the experience. Virtual reality and augmented reality are making their presence felt. The shift towards more interactive, inspirational and emotionally engaging content is evident. Meanwhile, social media, once a playground for the young, has been colonised by an older demographic. Paid amplification is becoming standard, platforms are introducing integrated bots, and users are having doubts about their privacy and security. Anticipating future trends is vital for the proper allocation of resources and the development of an integrated communications approach. So where is social media headed?

Before the beginning of the keynote lecture, moderator **Aurélie Valtat** invited the audience to participate in a poll on Sli.do and, using only one word, to answer the question "When thinking about social media in 2018, what is your biggest challenge?"

**Christophe Ginisty** then took the floor and started the lecture, outlining briefly his area of expertise. Moving closer to the main topic of the lecture, Mr Ginisty argued that the question of trends in social media could be addressed in various ways. His approach was to examine it from a societal point of view, trying to find out how social media shaped the information society.

To give the audience a better understanding of the scene, five figures involved in a so-called social media revolution were described:

- **Idea starters** – those creating or posting ideas (i.e. bloggers, writers etc.);
- **Amplifiers** – those making information available to a wider audience (i.e. journalists, followers etc.);
- **Curators** – those putting idea into a context, a perspective;
- **Commentators** – those adding something new to the initial idea, whether it is fake or not;
- **Viewers**

Mr Ginisty then highlighted the key role of amplifiers, who appear to be even more important for the social media scene than idea starters, as amplifiers give ideas scale and outreach or the *amplification* necessary for a social media revolution. In that regard, Mr Ginisty provided the example of the fake leak of documents which occurred during the election of French president Macron, and the multiplication of reactions which followed. He then argued that it is impossible for communicators to have any control on how the information will spread.

He went further by pointing out the current stereotypes around social media, and how overcoming them is a prerequisite for seeing and understanding future trends. Mr Ginisty emphasised that, in particular, the following four points should be taken into account:

- Social media is not virtual – they are in reality led by real people sharing real things;
- Social media is not about technology, but society and behaviours. Social media allows a duplication of society;
- Social media is part of traditional media - separating the two; we "miss the picture".



Further analysing the latter assertion, Mr Ginisty drew attention to the fact that, nowadays, communication in social media (for instance, the Twitter feed of the POTUS) serves as a source and has become a constituent part of the traditional media landscape. Moreover, the mainstream role of traditional media was questioned: what if we say that the mainstream of today is what is happening online? Social media is not only about information, but also about emotions and how they are transmitted. Therefore social media are powered by emotional flows. The above framework described above thus shaped the discussion over the biggest trends in social media to watch out for in coming years.

The first trend highlighted was that "fake" would continue to set the agenda. "Fake" in this context was used as a broad term that includes "fake news", but not exclusively. In particular, "fake" also referred to "fake accounts", serving as amplifiers and, therefore, spreading information with unprecedented speed, scale and outreach, whether or not the information is real. In this regard, Mr Ginisty also referred to the word "post-truth" coined by American media, which was chosen as word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary. He recalled nevertheless that fake news is not a recent concept, unlike its mass dissemination.

The second trend was that machines would play a more and more prominent role in social media, as already in 2016 global traffic generated from bots accounted for 51.8%, surpassing human-generated traffic. In addition, the use of chatbots in customer service is expected to increase. Algorithms will also continue setting agendas, directing our choice based on our previous decisions, purchases, likes etc.

Against this backdrop, we will also witness – as a third trend – content in social media becoming more and more "snackable", meaning small as well as easy to create and consume. Apart from the characteristics mentioned previously, "snackable" content is also non-lasting and does not create any knowledge. Mr Ginisty took several examples of this new type of content, such as stories in Instagram, statuses in WhatsApp, Snapchat etc. He further emphasised that Twitter, despite a move towards 280 characters (and so less "snackability"), will remain the main press-room, located at the crossroads of various types of media.

The fourth big trend is that influencers will continue shaping reality. Here, the "people like me" effect will play its role, giving rise to more bloggers. Along with that, celebrities will remain leaders of opinion, triggering certain social (re)actions (i.e. Alyssa Milano and the #metoo campaign), and politicians will continue using social media to deliver their message without facing the filters of traditional media. Last but not least, the power of individuals to create one-off impacts and mobilise people through social media will remain evident (i.e. the "Je suis Charlie" slogan).

As the fifth trend we will observe community re-organisation. Namely, segmentation of social media (according to age, interests etc.) will continue, proving that there is no universal platform for all. The "life in bubbles" phenomenon will become more and more visible, meaning that people will stay connected to those sharing their views, while becoming more and more distant from the "others".

To conclude, Mr Ginisty stated that currently society and each individual are "lost in information", which affects their ability to think critically. He compared perception of information flows with watching of a fast-passing train – we see headlines and seem to be aware of news, but we do not possess deeper, proper (or even any) knowledge on the matter. This affects our ability to assess and analyse information as well as reflect on it, accumulate and acquire knowledge, which in the long-run will undermine intellectual capacity of both current and coming generations. Therefore, in order to avoid these losses in media literacy and critical thinking, the social media revolution needs to be balanced with education and development of in-depth knowledge.



Following this presentation, **Ms Valtat** announced the results of the poll, in which 76 people took part. The words "engagement" and "fake" appeared to be among the most common responses. Mr Ginisty stated that the answers were not surprising, given that they were closely related to the previously outlined trends in social media, and represented matters to be dealt with in the coming years (i.e. engagement and "bubbles"; reaction to/assessment of "fake" etc.). The entire word cloud can be seen below.



Afterwards, Ms Valtat opened the floor to questions. In particular, the audience was interested in how social media trends would affect businesses. **Mr Ginisty** answered that companies would face the same challenges as society (especially considering the strong impact of "fake" on business operations and stock prices). He added that businesses would need to develop more flexible and responsive communication models to be able to react faster.

The issue of growing demand for emotional and easy, "snackable" content led to a question about possible ways to confront decreasing critical thinking capacity in a society. Mr Ginisty suggested revising the educational system and approaches to teaching, because so far they have not taken into consideration human need for emotional content. He emphasised that it was necessary to understand that the content that triggered strong emotional reactions (even if the information was "fake"), could not be confronted with rational facts or even "stories", but only with emotions. So the task is to find a way for providing trusted information and facts, but without cutting them off from emotions.

Responding to the concerns over privacy and manipulation, Mr Ginisty suggested practising "digital detox" from time to time, and expected that we would see training courses on how to navigate the Internet in the very near future, as internet would become too complex, while privacy issues would not be resolved.