

BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

What About the Internet?
**A Case Study of the Implications of the Non-Regulation of Virtual
Public Spaces**

Arnold Remenár

Bratislava 2019

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Remenár: What about the Internet?

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis is the work of my own and has not been published in part or in whole elsewhere. All used literature and other sources are attributed and cited in reference.

Bratislava, February 15, 2019

Arnold Remenár

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Remenár: What about the Internet?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of the non-regulation of virtual public spaces via social media. It examines the way in which citizens' attitudes are influenced through the absence of regulation in the virtual domain. The type of value systems and attitudes that are prioritized by individuals affects the quality of democracy in significant ways. Thus, it is argued here that the non-regulation of the Internet permits the fostering of such attitudes that are detrimental for the quality of democracy.

The empirical part of this study is grounded in two parts. First, it rests on the comparison between Estonia and Slovakia as national entities that regulate and don't regulate the virtual public spaces. Second, the study compares the effects of regulation and non-regulation by using two media outlets that have covered the same news story. One newspaper lacks any form of regulation with regards to their comment section while the other regulates its comment section. The attitudes of citizens are compared and conclusions are drawn regarding the effects of regulation or the lack of it. In short, the impact of the non-regulation of virtual public space on citizens' attitudes in terms of the quality of the democratic process are analyzed and contrasted.

Remenár: What about the Internet?

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Abstrakt

Cieľom tejto štúdie je skúmať účinky neregulácie virtuálnych verejných priestorov prostredníctvom sociálnych médií. Skúma spôsob, akým sú postoje občanov ovplyvnené v prípade absencie regulácie v rámci virtuálnej oblasti. Hodnoty občanov a ich postoje, ktoré sú súčasťou identity jednotlivcov, výrazne ovplyvňujú kvalitu demokracie, kde sa tieto hodnoty realizujú. V rozsahu tejto práce sa tvrdí, že v prípade absolútnej neregulácie internetu vzniká väčšia šanca, že takéto postoje občanov budú mať proti-demokratický charakter, a teda budú poškodzovať kvalitu demokracie.

Empirická časť tejto štúdie je založená na dvoch odsekoch. Po prvé, spočíva na porovnaní Estónska a Slovenska ako národných subjektov, ktoré regulujú a neregulujú ich virtuálne verejné priestory. Po druhé, štúdia porovnáva účinky regulácie a neregulácie pomocou dvoch médií, ktoré sa spracovali rovnakú informáciu avšak jeden z novín nemá žiadnu formu regulácie, v rámci svojej diskusnej sekcie, zatiaľ čo druhá moderuje svoj priestor diskusie. Postoje občanov sa následne porovnávajú a vyvodzujú sa závery týkajúce sa účinkov regulácie alebo jej nedostatku. Stručne povedané, analyzuje a kontrastuje sa vplyv neregulácie virtuálneho verejného priestoru na postoje občanov z hľadiska vplyvu na kvalitu demokratického procesu.

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Introduction

"Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." This statement from Winston Churchill very much describes the nature of the challenges that democracy has to face. On one hand it requires constant improvement, on the other hand, these improvements need to be careful in order not to bring more sin and woe. Finding and improving the best possible arrangement of society has always been one of the fundamental quests of humanity. In ancient Greece one of the first forms of democracy has been established. However, it was followed by centuries of monarchies as well as cases of authoritarianisms and dictatorships. Although in modern times these have been increasingly replaced with democratic rule, there are still goals left to achieve in these respective democracies. Thus, the quote by Winston Churchill still resonates; democracy is better than other forms of government that have been theorized and practiced however, the quality of democracy still needs to be improved with every decision that is being made in terms of law and legislation. The state of democracy largely depends on the society that it is connected to. In other words, based on the nature and value systems of a society, the quality of the democratic process is influenced and determined. In turn, the values of a society reflect the attitudes of individual citizens. Consequently, the quality of democracy relies on the types of attitudes that individual members, who comprise society, represent and prioritize. In other words, the quality of democracy can be traced to the views that individual members of the society hold. Thus, when the improvement of the quality of democracy is the goal, the attitudes of citizens are the units through which these changes can be realized. Given that individual attitudes can make or break a democracy, researchers have to find ways in which the attitudes of citizens can be bettered. When one seeks to improve democracy, one needs to take a look at the individual values that comprise the society and find ways in which these attitudes can be changed in a positive fashion. Before the advent of the Internet, most attitudes were formed through traditional media. Mostly printed news were the strongest medium through which the views of individuals were influenced. However, with the birth of the Internet and social media, this primary differentiation determinant has

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shifted. Based on the fact that the primary form of media that is being consumed by citizens nowadays is not traditional media, but social media it needs to receive more attention than it is getting now. The type of attention that is described here is political and legislative attention. Governments cannot just ignore and brush off social media as a hobby or pass time that does not affect society and consequently the quality of democracy. The issue of regulating or not regulating the sphere of social media has become crucial for the betterment of society through the improvement of the quality of democracy. This is the reason why policy makers should focus their attention on the ways in which a society can be shaped through statements in the virtual public sphere i.e. Internet and pass legislation accordingly. In short, the issue is far too important to ignore. Currently, there are countries where legislation has been passed in order to deal with this challenge. The case of Estonia provides an excellent example. There, statements made in the virtual public sphere are bearing the same consequences as though they were uttered in the actual physical public world. Countries that are lacking the laws that would pertain to online public communication have a lot to learn from countries such as Estonia. Whenever factors that determine the differentiation of citizens' attitudes are ignored, democracy has a very real chance of suffering. The reason for this research is to combat the lack of awareness that is usually associated with the importance of online public communication regarding real world impact. Here, the study attempts to gain an understanding of the differences that occur in individual citizens' attitudes based on the regulation of social media or the lack of it. Additionally, it argues that there is actually a real difference of attitudes of individual citizens between societies who are choosing to regulate and those who do not. Secondly, it is argued here that whenever governments and societies fail to regulate their respective virtual public spaces, they run a higher risk of producing such attitudes in their citizens that are essentially detrimental to democracy. The aim of this research is to answer the question why the regulation of virtual public spaces is not only possible but desirable as well. Desirable in so far as the goal of a society is to improve the quality of democracy in their country. This research question is tackled through the postulation of two hypotheses. First, there is a difference between citizens' attitudes based on whether the virtual public spaces in their respective countries are regulated or not. Second, whenever a society is faced with the fact of non-regulation, there is an increased risk for the fostering of such individual attitudes, that are by definition hostile to democracy and thus they decrease the quality of the democratic

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process. In other words, it is argued here that one of the primary determinants of the differentiation of attitudes in citizens has become the regulation of social media and the Internet. Conclusively, the argument is developed that whenever a society lacks regulation, it gives rise to such attitudes that are undermining the political system known as democracy.

Literature Review

When searching for the foundations of the democratic theory and the definitions regarding how to identify the quality of the democratic process the writings of Robert A. Dahl have proven to be extremely helpful. Dahl has argued that ideal democracy seen a theoretical utopia has not yet been achieved by any modern state. Although there have been no democracies in their ideal sense, there are still institutions that have created multiple epicenters of power. Countries with such political structures that decentralize the power are called "polyarchies" in Dahl's terminology. These are institutions that help to balance the power in the state and thus are contributing towards eliminating flaws in the democratic process and help to increase the quality of democracy. These institutions include elected officials, free elections, inclusive suffrage, the right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information, and the autonomy of associations (Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, 1989).

Furthermore, Dahl identifies five criteria that need to fulfill in order to increase the quality of democracy and get closer to the ideal. First, effective participation must be in place. Before any laws and policies are passed, there must be equal and effective opportunities for all members of the association to let their views be known. Second, there must be voting equality between the members of the association in the sense that every member has the same opportunity to vote and their vote must be considered equal. Thirdly, there must be enlightened understanding in the sense that members of the association must have the same opportunities for learning about specific issues and their possible alternative policies. Next, the control of the agenda must be open to discussion. In this sense, even the preceding three criteria must be open to discussion in between the members. In other words, the policies of the association are always subject to change by the members. Lastly, all adult permanent residents should possess the full citizenship rights as described by the first four criteria (Dahl, 1998). Thus when assessing the quality of democracy, definitions regarding defective and effective democracies must not be left out. Drawing on Robert Dahl's research, Merkel & Croissant have created a comprehensive categorization regarding embedded and defective democracies. In essence, a democracy is embedded when it is governed by freedom, equality and control. These three core principles are ensured by five factors that need to be present in an effective embedded democracy. These are:

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electoral regime, political participation, civil rights, horizontal accountability, and the power of the elected representatives to govern (Merkel & Croissant, 2004). These categories are vital for democracies. Electoral regime includes the universal passive right to vote, active right to suffrage, free and fair elections and the possibility to elect representatives (Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, 1989). Political participation can be defined through such liberties as the freedom of the press, assembly and expression (Merkel & Croissant, 2004). The third fact, civil rights is supporting the first two by protecting citizens against such actions that would violate their rights. These are negative rights that citizens have in terms of their relationship with the state (Merkel & Croissant, 2004). Horizontal accountability is the institution of checks and balances that exists between branches of the government. Although each branch must be given sufficient autonomy in order not to hinder their decision making ability, they must also be held accountable in order not to create imbalances in the power structures. Dahl argues that horizontal accountability can provide a solution when it comes to the void in the control of the basic democratic structures. In other words, horizontal accountability is the factor that can close the loopholes with regards to the control aspect of embedded democracies (Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, 1989). Lastly, the power of elected officials to govern must be protected. This is an aspect of democracy that is arguably needed in order that the society can make any decisions through their chosen representatives. In other words, this last factor needs to work in a democracy in order to efficiently control the agenda of the government (Merkel & Croissant, 2004). Having defined the factors of embedded democracies their defective counterparts are the next ones that need to be specified. Defective democracies are those types of democracies where one or more of these factors are missing. Thus, if there is for example incomplete horizontal accountability or missing civil rights, the regime is a defective democracy (Merkel & Croissant, 2004).

Having established the definitions of embedded and defective democracies it is clear that these categories for the assessment of the quality of democracy are tightly connected to the civic culture of the society in question. In turn, the political behavior of people is dependent on the set of values and practices that they live by. These factors influence the political behavior, therefore they form what Almond and Verba define as political culture (Almond & Verba, 1963). When citizens make decisions of moral character, they are influenced by political behavior. Similarly, the ideas and

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convictions citizens holds with regards to their conceptualization of what constitutes a good society is connected to their political behavior. The political culture in any given state is thus shaped by the attitudes of its people, as well as a nation's history and customs. In other words, events of previous centuries and regimes can have a heavy impact on the current state of political culture. Most importantly, by examining the state of political culture in a given country, one can draw parallels with the state of government in that country. Thus, while political culture is not an infallible indicator of the quality of democracy, it is still a very good place to start if one wishes to understand the flaws of a democracy, both on the governmental and the citizen's level. In their book, Almond & Verba have drawn political comparisons between countries such as the USA, Great Britain, France & Germany in order to understand the differences in their respective political cultures. In other words, by examining these countries, which all subscribe to some form of democracy, they have endeavored to find out what makes their citizens different in terms of civic and political culture. Thus, when looking at the case of the USA they found out that those whom are considered "good citizens" often share one or more of the following characteristics. They have an understanding of political issues, pay taxes, turn up to vote, help the community in times of need, demonstrate patriotism, recycle and respect the law on all levels of jurisdiction (Almond & Verba, 1963). The challenge of defining a good citizen in any given country lies in the fact that the concept of being good citizen changes rapidly based on the country we are observing. However, there can be one important conclusion to draw based on the scholarly analysis of civic culture by Almond & Verba. Good citizens stand for what a specific political culture deems essential for their community. In other words, they are not apathetic to the values of their society. Additionally, good citizens also agree with and represent the ideals of the country they are living in (Almond & Verba, 1963). In the case of the USA this would be an ideal such as the pursuit of happiness. The scholars also examine the potential of the change of political culture. They admit that political cultures do change over time however; it takes a great amount of effort and time to shift people's beliefs. Thus, they conclude that while it is true that change is always possible within a political culture, it comes about slowly and takes a long time to complete. For example, the USA's efforts of nation building in Iraq have been met with tremendous resistance. The USA has been trying to establish a liberal democracy in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq however; it ultimately failed because the political culture in the

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region was incompatible with the values of liberal democracy. Similarly to the case of Slovakia, Iraq has been influenced by authoritative elements in many aspects of life and for a great amount of time. In Slovakia, Communism has been around for almost half a century. It is no surprise than, that the current state of political & civic culture is influenced by the nation's history.

In the end, the shape of political culture is to a large extent determined by the process known as political socialization (Almond & Verba, 1963). It is defined as the process through which a citizen's societal values are formed. Almond & Verba argue that the main portion of this conditioning occurs in childhood where the children frequently adopt the values and opinions of their parents. However, this process continues into adulthood as well but with different sources. In schools, the values of a nation are sewn into the curriculum, developing the student's sense of proper citizenship through history and social studies. Additionally, sources such as religion, class and the media also play a crucial role in shaping the perception of an individual with regards to being a good citizen. By extension, these sources also influence the political and civic culture of the nation as a whole. For Almond and Verba, many of these factors are tied to the role of the government. The government has the power to oversee, coordinate and control the media, thus to a certain degree they are making the decisions about what we perceive and how we perceive it. Moreover, in the case of state schools, the government has total control about the curriculum, in this manner shaping young people's values. When there are many factions with different values that are trying to compete for the hearts and minds of individuals there has to be some way to measure it properly. Thus, the idea of social capital has been born. Social capital is a way through which one can measure the degree of cooperation a trust in a given society (Almond & Verba, 1963). In the case of democratic governments and societies, there must be a certain degree of cooperation and toleration. People have to trust those who they share a worldview with and they must be able to accept those with whom they are unable to find common ground. The reasoning behind this is simple. Democracy is a fundamentally tolerant and cooperative form of government. We never deprive political power from those whom we disagree with, just because they do not share our worldview. Similarly, the parties that win elections and form a government must in principle represent citizens of the country, not their voters who pledged allegiance to the party. Thus, without trust, cooperation and tolerance the

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fundamentals of democracy would be undermined. In other words, if a country's social capital is in decline, it is an indicator that the quality of democratic process is on the decreasing. On the other hand, authoritarian and tyrannical governments will make enormous efforts in order to block the development and free flow of social capital because it can potentially form the grounds for opposing the government. In other words, the fostering of social capital is attractive and desirable for democratic societies, but is a risk and danger in authoritarian societies.

Another important concept that Almond and Verba define is political participation. They argue that it is any endeavor that can potentially form and influence the political sphere (Almond & Verba, 1963). There are three distinct types of political participation – conventional, unconventional and illegal. First, the conventional participation is a form of participation that usually happens whenever there is an election. It includes activities such as making a donation to a political party or volunteering for them as well as voting. Conventional participation is usually seen as a reflective of good citizens – there are no potential negative consequences on one's reputation based on conventional participation. The second type of political participation is unconventional participation. These include activities such as staging and supporting boycotts or participating in protests. Elements of unconventional participation are still within the legal framework of democracy however; they can have negative consequences because they run the risk of appearing inappropriate. Last but not least, illegal participation usually occurs when both conventional and unconventional means have failed to bring about the desired change. These include various crime-ridden activities such as terrorism, murder and theft.

Having laid out the types of participation in a democratic society, there are various reasons why citizens choose to partake in political culture. They may participate based on idealism, responsibility, self-interest or enjoyment (Almond & Verba, 1963). Thus, some people participate because they have a strong allegiance towards a particular idea, others might do so out of the conviction that participation is a responsibility because of how they define "good citizens", still others partake because they want to support issues or political subjects that would allow them to receive personal advantages and lastly, there are those who participate because they take pleasure in public activities of the political kind. Regardless of the motivation for entering the voting aspect of political culture there is a prevailing argument that this

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type of participation –voting – is irrational. The reason for this is simple. The greater population a country possesses, the smaller the impact of an individual vote in the elections. Because one needs to devote resources such as time and effort in order to vote in an informed manner, the amount of actual impact that their ballot will make seems not enough with regards to the resources that they spend. In other words, the relative insignificance of the impact of a single vote cast still outweighs the time and effort that the voters have to devote in order to vote in an informed manner. On one hand there is the obvious truth that one vote does not make the world change. On the other hand, however, if everyone would succumb to the idea that his or her vote has little to no effect, democracy would be facing absolute voter apathy. In other words, the system of democracy as we understand it today would cease to be functional. This anomaly promptly describes the somewhat odd nature of the relationship between elections and the impact that individuals have over them (Almond & Verba, 1963). Although there are many reasons for political participation in a democracy, there are as many reasons for political nonparticipation. To begin, the absence of political attendance could signify a satisfaction with the current political atmosphere. If people were not satisfied with the state of the country and government, they would turn up to the election booths in greater numbers. Then, there is have the somewhat simplistic, yet paradoxical concept of freedom not to participate. Thirdly, democratic governments are faced with voter apathy, where citizens are either uncommitted towards politics, or they feel uninformed about politics as such. Lastly, we have the notion of alienation where citizens feel as though they and their views are ignored and excluded from the decision making of the government.

Despite all the apparent contradictions of voter behavior and political culture, the governments still need to pay attention to how they are perceived via public opinion. Public opinion can have a very real impact on the government in any democratic state. Through public opinion, governments can be ousted, can resign or can revel in the popularity of their constituents. The way of accurately measuring public opinion is by using polls that are based on representative samples. This can be done by adopting a sample that is representative of the population. Thus, if there is a 30% of a given minority in a country a poll may only be accurate if they have included 30% of the said minority in their sample. Even with the most accurate polls the public opinion is affected by a number of variables. These include the media,

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politicians, significant events and socioeconomic status. Lastly, there are the opinion leaders who are individuals from all aspects of society whom have the power to majorly influence the public perception of various issues in a community.

Moreover, with regards to the value systems of societies and the quality of democracy Ronald Inglehart argued that there is a certain link between a country's economic wellbeing and the value system of that society. A great deal of his academic career has been dedicated towards efforts to narrow down this relationship into something causal. He discovered that it is not as simple as wealth produces conditions for democracy or that democracy will inherently make countries wealthy. If this were the case, many oil rich monarchies would have transitioned to democracy long ago. As for the second part of the objection, even authoritarian societies have the ability to attain considerable growth at the early stages of their industrial development. Thus, instead of a deterministic conclusion, Inglehart uncovered a probabilistic relationship. First, societies that have low-income are far more likely to be concerned with survival (food, shelter, etc.) than self-expression. Second, the societies with a high-income will be more likely to identify with secular-rational value systems as opposed to traditional-sacral. To sum it up, post-materialist cultures are generally high-income societies where secular values are more dominant and given that the survival of individuals is more or less taken for granted, they are more inclined to prioritize self-expression over security. This means that any society that does not need to prioritize material survival is more conducive to democracy. In other words, the societal conditions that favor democracy versus more authoritarian regimes are fertilized by economic developments. However, there must be a very careful way of addressing the relationship between the progress of GDP per capita and democratization. Inglehart recognizes this complexity and thus argues that the changes in social and political dimensions due to financial development can come about only in so far as these developments change people's behavior. According to him, this change happens when economical progress creates a well-informed, intelligent and abundant middle class that can be autonomous in their thinking and values and thus be authors of their own motivations and value systems. (Inglehart, 1977).

Although the conditions and causalities described by Almond, Verba and Inglehart hold true to a great extent, there are new aspects of citizenship that need to be included in the analysis of the quality of democracy in the 21st century. As Yuval

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Noah Harrari writes, “Homo sapiens is a post-truth species, whose power depends on creating and believing fictions” (Harrari, 2018). He argues that the creation, sharing and questioning of these common fictions allowed the human race to cooperate because they have created a sense of unity. The power of humanity depended on creating and believing fiction. Thus, as a species humans have always relied upon establishing stories that could bring order and serve as an antidote to the chaos around them. However, birth of the Internet brought about the Information Revolution that has changed many aspects of human life in society including the aspect of storytelling and its significance for society. Now, it seems that we are living in an era where the spread of fakenews across social media and the Internet and it seems that there is an emergence of a new pillar of power in democracy. "Digital democracy can be defined as the pursuit and the practice of democracy in whatever view using digital media in online and offline political communication" (Hacker & Van Dijk, 2013). Social media have become an increasingly dominant factor in the formation of attitudes of citizens. When looking at the case of Slovakia, it is undoubtedly the case that young people in particular have almost no interest in politics however, they are rather interested by social media (Ščepán, 2017). To be concrete, in the age group from 18-24 years old, 26% of respondents claimed they do not follow the domestic politics of Slovakia. Moreover, 41% of the same age group have claimed that they read about politics, whether online or in newspapers, less than once a week. On the other hand, 65% of them have stated that they spend more than an hour browsing Facebook every single day. Additionally, 42% of the respondents of all age categories have claimed that they distrust traditional media while 45% of them declared that they like following alternative media outlets (Ščepán, 2017). Although such sociological measurements always benefit from further and more complex analysis, these data still paint a rather alarming picture about the citizens of Slovakia and their attitudes. These numbers illustrate how the birth of the Internet brought about a major change in the way people consume information. In turn, the source of the information that is being consumed has an influence on the attitudes and values of citizens. Consequently, these attitudes shape and influence the quality of democracy in a given state. In short, if one seeks to understand sociopolitical realities of a society in the 21st century, one needs to analyze the primary determinant of these values. In Slovakia it this determinant appears to be primarily social media. Thus, in a society whose attitude's main determinant is social media must question the way in which this challenge is dealt

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with. In other words, given the increasing influence of social media with regards to citizen's values and consequently the quality of democracy, how should governments deal with this new pillar of power? How should public spaces on the Internet be regulated in a way that increases the quality of democracy?

Another aspect of the complex nature of these regulations is the threat of deliberate disinformation that is widespread across social media. The danger of censorship in the 21st century comes not from establishing barriers for truthful information. Rather, censorship in this era operates on a dilution of truth ad infinitum. Put differently, the effectivity of censorship through the deliberate spreading of fake news comes not from the fact that the truth is being suppressed. Instead it draws power from the fact that the truth becomes indistinguishable from lies. The border between fact and fiction becomes unclear and thus, reality can be literally fabricated in terms of online information. Timothy Snyder argues along these lines by analyzing the way in which the media in Russia has become more about entertainment and less about factuality. Snyder's argument is that by deliberately flooding the news with various alternate versions of explanations of events, an atmosphere in society is established where almost nothing seems to be factual anymore (Snyder, 2018). For example, when the flight MH17 was shot down, each day the narrative of the Russian media seemed to make a U-turn, consequently creating an atmosphere where nothing seems provable anymore. Additionally, Snyder makes implications that this phenomenon of disinformation may have a dangerous impact on the quality of democracies. The spreading of fake news, Snyder argues, has the effect of undermining faith in the democratic process. When the feeling that nothing in the world seems provable takes over, it is unsurprising that citizens will start to increasingly doubt the fairness of the democratic process. Thus, the impact of fake news is clear. By diluting the truth, they promote an atmosphere where nothing is true and everything is permitted. As long as they succeed in the creation of such an atmosphere they effectively undermine citizens' faith in the democratic process, and by extension they are detrimental to the quality of democracy. Thus, in Slovakia where young people are not interested in politics however, they spend a significant amount of time on social media daily, they are the ones who are the most exposed to potential fake news stories.

Thesis statement

The quality of democracy in the 21st century has to be measured together with the new pillar of power – digital democracy. The Internet and social media, insofar as they are public spaces where citizens make statements, have become one of the main determinants of the differentiation of attitudes between citizens. Thus, with the emergence of this new powerful online influence, a question arises. Is regulation desirable? To what extent should the state and media regulate their online public spaces? What are the potential outcomes of both regulation and non-regulation? To answer these questions a twofold analysis will be conducted. One part looks at regulation on the national level, comparing the legislation and citizens' attitudes in Slovakia and Estonia. The second part will examine the differences of citizens' attitudes between news outlets where the comment section is regulated and where it is completely non-regulated. Conclusively, a hypothesis will be comprised of two distinct propositions that build on each other. First, the attitudes of citizens – and by extension the quality of democracy – differ based on whether their communication in the virtual public space are regulated or non-regulated. Secondly, a non-regulated virtual public space encourages attitudes that are detrimental to the quality of democracy more than a regulated one.

Approach and Methods

The empirical part of this thesis will consist of two major parts. Both parts shall examine the impact of the degree of regulation on the quality of democracy. First, there will be a thorough analysis of the differences of citizen's trust that they place in their respective national political institutions as well as traditional and non-traditional media institutions based on surveys conducted in their respective countries. Second, there will be typological analysis and comparison of the attitudes of commenters between news websites where comments are unregulated versus where comments are being evaluated and regulated by the editorial board of the news site. For the first part of the empirical analysis, the specific cases of Slovakia and Estonia will be compared in order to better understand the differences of a) citizen's trust in their government b) citizen's relationship towards various sources of news. Although the GDPR has largely united EU countries' policies in the virtual public space, the differences in citizens' trust between Slovakia and Estonia are still significant because of Estonia's implementation of policies that regulate discussions in the media. Specifically, Estonia has been known as one of the most advanced digitally interconnected democracies in the world. In addition to online voting, they have constructed a complex online infrastructure of business, public services and employment (E-Estonia). In other words, they have become the most digital country in the world. Moreover, when it comes to the regulation of virtual public spaces they offer the greatest contrast against nations without any form of regulatory policies and thus hold a high comparative value. Most importantly, according to the Freedom House's 2016 Freedom on the Net report: "In June 2015, the European Court of Human Rights upheld an Estonian Supreme Court decision from 2009, stating that content hosts may be held legally liable for third-party comments made on their websites. Since then, major online media publications have removed the functionality for anonymous comments on their websites and continued active moderation to limit hate speech" (Freedom House, 2016). Thus, by comparing countries with different degrees of citizen's trust as well as different amounts of online regulation a current disposition of attitudes of citizens in their respective countries is established. Next, there will be an examination of media trends between the two countries. Namely, by taking a look at what sources citizens of both countries tend to trust and distrust a clearer picture will be created about the relationship between trust in national political

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institutions and the types of trusted news sources by citizens. The nature of this relationship lies in the hypothesis that the impact of the Internet and social media on the attitudes of citizens – and by extension the quality of democracy – is very real and tangible. The attitudes of citizens will be measured by surveys of public opinion including, but not limited to: the failure of traditional institutions through the Democratic Index & the decreased trust of traditional news through the measurements of Reuters & Freedom House respectively. The first part of the empirical analysis will thus provide a national comparison between how the citizens' degree of trust towards their government relates to the source of news that they find trustworthy.

The second part of the empirical analysis will create a comparison between media outlets that have a non-regulated or regulated comment section. First, a widely covered and recent news story from the Slovak media will be chosen. Then, two news sources that have covered the same story but have a different approach towards the regulation of their respective comment sections will be chosen. For the purposes of this research, news site "Topky" will serve as the example of a news site without any regulation and "SME" will be the other target of examination, given that their editorial board actually evaluates statements posted in their comment sections and filters them periodically. Thus, we have "Topky" as a representation of unregulated news and "SME" as an avatar of regulated news. Next, the typology of citizens underneath each one of these comment sections shall be established. Finally with a database of attitudes of citizens a comparison will ensue. This comparison has the goal of establishing the differences that the impact of regulation or non-regulation has on citizen's attitudes and by extension the quality of democracy.

Trust in Decline? National Institutions in the EU

Based on the Economist's Intelligence Unit's 2018 Democratic Index report Eastern Europe's overall score has marginally improved as compared with the previous year. Specifically, while the overall score in 2017 hit its historical low at 5.40, the 2018 numbers indicate an improved score of 5.42. The report acknowledges that this increase happened because of few countries that improved their overall democratic index scores. The countries that are responsible for this marginal improvement include Armenia, Estonia and Macedonia (EIU, 2019). Although the EIU designates both Estonia and Slovakia as a "flawed democracy" there are significant differences between the two countries scores. In the year 2018 Slovakia's overall score dropped from 7.16 to 7.10 although it has kept its global current position at 44th place. On the other hand, Estonia has seen the greatest improvement among Eastern Europe's flawed democracies. It jumped from the 30th global rank to the 23rd with an overall score of 7.97 in 2018 from 7.79 in the previous year (EIU, 2019). Contrasting the reasons behind the two countries respective developments it becomes apparent that confidence in government was an essential factor in both cases. While the confidence in Slovakia's government decreased – mainly due to the still unsolved double murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his spouse Martina Kušnírová – the confidence in Estonia's government increased together with extent of citizen's participation in governance. Thus it seems that although both nation states are categorised as flawed democracies, Estonia has steadily improved as opposed to Slovakia, which in turn has deteriorated. The Eurobarometer's public opinion survey further illustrates the ongoing sharp contrasts between the two countries. Overall, one of the messages of 2017 with regards to the EU has been one of declining trust of citizens' toward their respective national political institutions. Comparatively speaking, only a small part of respondents tend to trust their national institutions, whereas the distrust of these institutions has increased. Interestingly enough the army has come out as the most trusted institution across members states overall. Moving into specifics regarding Estonia and Slovakia it appears to be a case of great difference. On the account of general trust, the Estonian respondents have proclaimed 57% of trust as well as 34% of distrust. The trust factor has increased by 7% as compared to the previous Eurobarometer public opinion survey. On the other

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hand, only 28% of Slovakian citizens have expressed trust towards their national political institutions. Moreover, 66% of Slovaks harbored a sentiment of distrust towards these institutions. Notably, even the generally most trusted institutions across the member states – the army – has received relatively low trust rating from the Slovakian respondents. Compared to Estonia's 81% trust index towards the army, Slovakia scored the second lowest next to Bulgaria with only 59%. Looking at the trust statistics of police there is a similar story unfolding. 80% of Estonians expressed trust and 15% distrust towards their national police while Slovakia has come in as the second lowest, once again, with a mere 43% of trust and a vast 52% of distrust. The erosion of trust in Slovakia is further evidenced by the citizens' sentiments about justice and the legal system. While 63% trust and 26% distrust Estonia's legal system, in Slovakia it is quite the opposite. Only 27% of Slovakian citizens have expressed trust in the legal system while 67% of them do not trust the framework of justice in Slovakia (TNS opinion & social, 2017).

Given the implications of the public opinion survey published in autumn of 2017 there are a few conclusions that can be made. On one hand, although both Estonia and Slovakia are classified as flawed democracies, Estonia has managed to significantly improve their score on the Democratic Index Report while Slovakia has in turn deteriorated. This development is largely a reflection of the trust of citizens' placed in their respective governments. On the other hand, while a decreasing trust in national political institutions seems to be a general trend across EU member states in 2017, Estonians still manage to harbor a solid trust towards their national political institutions unlike their Slovak counterparts. This is true when looking across the board and comparing a general sentiment of trust, as well as when looking at individual institutions such as the police, the army or the legal system. In short, Estonian citizens tend to trust their government significantly more than Slovak citizens.

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Where is the Trust? Traditional vs Non-Traditional Media

According to the surveys published by Eurobarometer in 2017 it seems that although the traditional media such as the television are still the most popular source of news for Europeans, the Internet is steadily gaining ground as the preferred source of national political news. However, what is the reason behind this phenomenon? How come that only 13% of Slovak citizens claim to read printed newspapers on a daily basis as opposed to the Estonian citizens' 34%? When looking at the trust in media organizations in the cases of Estonia and Slovakia one phenomenon becomes clear immediately. While Estonians tend to trust traditional media institutions such as television, radio and printed press more than their Slovak counterparts, the Slovak respondents have a greater trust in non-traditional media such as the Internet and online social networks. Additionally, based on the segment of the traditional media trust index 38% of Slovaks hold a low or no trust towards traditional media as opposed to 29% of Estonians (TNS opinion & social, 2017). When examining the trust of citizen's in traditional media institutions, it becomes clear that although there was an increase in the year 2017, the trust index in Slovakia is still below the average. The trust in news generally is 34%. Although, the trust in social media as the source of news is only 18%, the percentage of people who share perceived news on social media is 37%. In other words, it appears that although Slovakian citizens tend to share perceived news on social media, they often distrust the sources. In any case, they tend to share more news than the percentage of their trust in them. Facebook remains the most popular platform for the consumption of online news with 51% of respondents using the platform as a source of news. Interestingly only 11% pay to read online news, thus the majority of online news consumption is based around social media instead of paywalled online news outlets (Reuters Institute For The Study Of Journalism, 2018). Moreover, based on data published by the European Commission in 2018, 21% of Slovaks read blogs and comment on articles daily as compared to a mere 4% of Estonians on a daily. In response to the question whether Internet hosting services are effectively tackling illegal content 9% of Estonian's completely agreed that the issue is effectively tackled while 26% of them marked mostly agree. On the Slovak side of the questionnaire, when responding to the same question, 17% of respondents totally agreed while 32% mostly agreed that illegal content is being dealt with effectively. In other words, Slovakia's citizens tend to view to combating of illegal content online more effectively than the Estonians tend to perceive. However,

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delving deeper into the most common illegal content online shows significant differences between the two nation states. Particularly, with 42% of responses, Slovakia's most mentioned encounters with illegal content tended to be those falling into the category of hate speech. The situation is similar in neighbouring countries with the Czech Republic at 53% and Poland at 50% of hate speech. In contrast, only 15% of Estonian respondents have mentioned hate speech as an illegal content that they have encountered online. Instead of hate speech, the greatest concern for Estonians were online scams and frauds however, they were still sitting at the lowest end of the spectrum with 22%. Nevertheless, this gaping difference in the frequency of encountering hate speech online posits Estonia as one of the few countries where less than one in five citizens have come into contact with hate speech (TNS political & social, 2018).

So far, several conclusions can be drawn from the data. First, Estonian citizens tend to be more trusting of traditional media institutions such as printed newspapers while Slovakian citizens are increasingly leaning towards trusting non-traditional media such as sources found on the Internet. Secondly, although Slovaks do not particularly trust the articles they encounter online, they tend to share them regardless. Third, the perception that Internet hosting services are providing effective means for fighting illegal content online is more positive in Slovakia than in Estonia. Fourthly, although Slovaks have more favourable view of the hosting providers combating illegal content than Estonians, the Slovaks still encounter a much greater frequency of illegal content online than the Estonians do. Finally, the most frequent type of law-breaking content that the Slovaks encounter online is hate speech as opposed to the scams and frauds of that Estonians tend to encounter. In conclusion, there appears to be a dire overestimation of the online regulatory effectiveness by the Slovakian respondents. Although, the Estonians tend to have a more negative view of the effectiveness of regulatory measures in virtual public spaces, they do not encounter anywhere near the amount of hate speech online that the Slovaks do.

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To Regulate or not to Regulate? The Case of the Comment Section

The next part of the empirical chapter will be examining the differentiation of attitudes between a news outlet that has a regulated comment section –SME – versus another one, which completely lacks regulation of their virtual public spaces – Topky. The news story that was chosen is identical for both outlets. Specifically, the article covering Marián Kočner's November effort to be released from jail where he was awaiting a court hearing has been chosen because of its comparatively widespread impact in Slovak society. Kočner stands accused of several financial crimes including alleged tax fraud. One of the greatest accusations leveled against him has to do with TV Markíza, a private television station that he owns. In the case of TV Markíza, he is accused of fraudulent behavior regarding a bill of exchange that has been estimated to be worth 69 million euros (Petrovič, 2018). The news articles covering the development of the Kočner case have been receiving a great amount of attention from the public and thus seem suitable to analyze their respective comment sections for the purposes of this research. More specifically, regarding the overall number of unique interactions on both sites SME has 2,359,759 visitations while Topky has 1,477,502 visitations for the month of December 2018 (AIMmonitor - AIM - Mediaresearch & Gemius, 2018). First of all, the criteria of assessment will be based on the "discussant's codex" that has been developed by the SME editorial board. As such, the codex aims to regulate the discussions taking place in virtual public spaces, specifically in the comment sections of SME articles. If one seeks to comment under any SME article, one must accept the terms of the codex because otherwise they are unable to create an account on the website. This codex claims to improve the atmosphere of online discussion as well as provide a virtual public space free of abuse and harassment. Among other principles, it disallows comments that would encourage racism, fanaticism, any form of religious, civil, or national hate mongering as well as comments that contain obscenities, vulgarisms – both direct or indirect – and comments that present half-truths or lies. It also prohibits commercial advertisement, revealing other person's personal information as well as threats of physical or property damage (SME editorial board). Having defined the guidelines of SME's online discussion, the next part is to apply them to the particular cases in question. Concretely, using the codex on both the SME article about Kočner as well as the same story but covered by Topky the comments shall be examined and analyzed in terms of whether they would constitute a breach in the guidelines developed by SME. In other

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words, if Topky – that currently has zero regulation – were to use the codex developed by SME how many comments would be banned from their comment section under the Kočner article? Similarly we take a look at the corresponding SME article and evaluate the comments there.

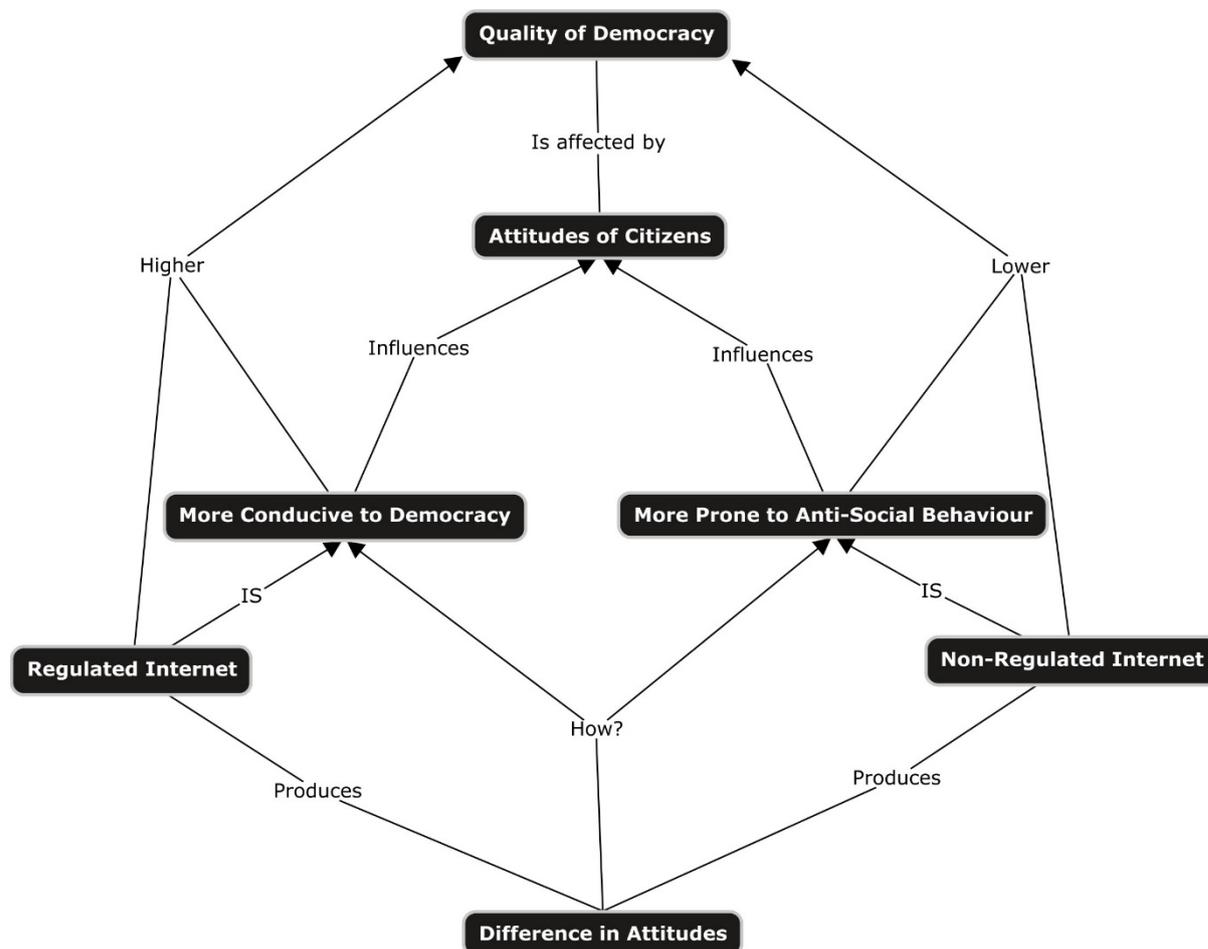
First, we examined the creators of the codex itself, SME. Their article contained a total of eighty-seven comments and only one has been found – by SME - to flagged because it breached the terms of the discussion's guidelines. However, given that the codex pertains both to direct and indirect threats as well as defamation one needs to take a deeper look and read through all of the comments one by one. After reading through the entire discussion on SME it was discovered that several potential breaches have occurred on top of the single one that has been flagged by the editorial board. All in all, seven counts of potential breaches have been recorded. They were generally indirect and cunning verbal gymnastics that essentially either threatened physical abuse or took pleasure in Kočner's potential suffering. Highlights worth mentioning include several commenters delighting in the fact that Kočner will be sexually abused once he is convicted and sent to prison as well as indirect threats of violence against his person (SME, 2018). It is important to keep in mind that at the time of the publishing this article all the accusations made against him were only alleged thus despite future developments that might or might not show his guilt, those commenters that have defamed him and wished him a horrible sexually abused long stay in the Slovak prison system were in fact engaging in behavior that breached the "discussants' codex" developed and used by the SME editorial board.

On the other end of the spectrum lies the completely unregulated news site Topky. They have not developed their own codex nor have they adapted guidelines from other colleagues. As of now they remain completely and utterly regulation free. However, what does this mean in terms of verbal abuse and harassment frequency in the comment section? To find out how their philosophy of non-regulation is holding up we have used the guidelines developed by SME and applied them to Topky's comment section to see how many potential breaches we could find. Comparatively, the amount of comments submitted here are over a double of SME's regulated comments. Specifically, the count is one hundred and seventy-two comments at the time of writing this paper (Topky, 2018). At first the amount might seem surprising to some however, given the fact that regulation is completely absent at Topky one

might at the very least expect a greater amount of comments than under the SME article. Here, diving into the comment section has proven that there are almost no boundaries of verbal abuse that commenters will not cross. The final count of verbal abuse and harassment turned out to be twenty-eight. Interestingly enough, one anti-Semitic comment has also been discovered among the avalanche of verbal violence and defamation. These uncivil behaviors have not only been targeting the subject of the article – Kočner – but they were also directed at fellow commenters. Perhaps the darkest thread of argumentation started with a disagreement about the particular case in question – alleged tax fraud – then evolved into a tense exchange about Trump's policies and finally it ended with one commenter calling his fellow discussant "an unavailing offspring of incest" (Topky, 2018). Given the disgusting content of this discussion, one can hardly expect to find civilized discourse in this unregulated comment section. Of course, the same principle applies here that at the time of publishing Kočner was still accused and not proven guilty. However, it was surprising to see that a greater quantity of abuse was hurled in between commenters instead of abusing Kočner.

In conclusion, there are two points that are important to make about this particular empirical case. First, the difference of attitudes of commenters between non-regulated virtual public space and regulated virtual public space is real and tangible. Second, when comparing a complete lack of regulation with a certain degree of regulation it seems to be the case that non-regulation permits a greater breeding ground for verbal abuse, defamation and toxic atmosphere. Specifically, SME had a total number of eighty-seven comments out of which 9.2% of them are considered to breach the "discussant's codex". On the other hand, Topky that possesses one hundred and seventy-two comments has over 22% of comments that are deemed to be toxic via the standards established in the discussion guidelines of SME. The trend here is clear-cut. Not only did the unregulated virtual public space have a generally greater quantity of comments, it also possessed over two times the amount of verbal abuse and hateful content as opposed to the regulated virtual public space.

Preliminary results and discussion



This bachelor thesis undergraduate research examines the impact of a new pillar of power on citizens attitudes, and consequently on the quality of democracy. In the beginning, key concepts were established to provide a theoretical backbone for the ensuing analysis. Using Robert Dahl's definitions the concepts of democracy – full and defective – were established. Furthermore, by drawing on literature from Almond, Verba and Inglehart, the crucial relationship between the quality of democracy and the civic culture was established (Almond & Verba, 1963) (Inglehart, 1977). From this point on, the importance of the attitudes of citizens in the 21st century democracies is examined. The reality of fake news, social media and their potential impact on the quality of democracy was established (Snyder, 2018). Moreover, the new pillar of

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power – digital democracy– is defined (Harari, 2018). Combining the impact of citizens' attitudes on the quality of democracy and the extent of the power of influence on the Internet and social media with regards to the attitudes of citizens yielded a causal relationship. The Internet and social media significantly impact the attitudes of citizens, thus it has become the new determinant for the differentiation of attitudes of citizens (Štěpán, 2017). Because of its significant influence, these virtual spaces cannot be left completely unregulated. This brings us to the empirical part of the research. First, by comparing the Internet and social media approach of Estonia with Slovakia, a distinct difference was drawn. Estonia, by taking steps to regulate its virtual public space and discussions in media, is potentially increasing the quality of its democracy by virtue of creating Internet and social media regulations that foster attitudes in citizens, which are more conducive to democracy. Slovakia on the other hand, is negatively affecting the quality of its democracy because they do not regulate the virtual public space and thus there is a greater chance for the breeding of attitudes that are detrimental to the quality of democracy. Secondly, by comparing two Slovak online media outlets – one with regulated comment section, the other with non-regulated – a typology of people underneath each was established. Similarly as on the national level, the media that has taken steps to regulate its comment section will have a typology of people who carry and are more prone to attitudes that are conducive to democracy. The non-regulated comment section on the other hand, carries within itself a greater quantity of citizens who subscribe to attitudes that are detrimental to democracy. Finally, the crux of the hypothesis is twofold. First, there are significantly different attitudes of citizens between regulated and non-regulated virtual public spaces. Secondly, the non-regulation of virtual public space encourages the spreading of attitudes that are more detrimental to the quality of democracy. By empirically analysing national policy and its impact on the trust of citizens on one hand, and the media's comment section policy on the other, the negative causal relationship between the non-regulation of the Internet and the quality of democracy was established. Whenever there is a non-regulated virtual public space, it is more prone to fostering attitudes of citizens' that are more detrimental to the quality of democracy than a regulated one.

Implications of the Research

Given the significant influence of the Internet and social media on the formation of attitudes of citizens and the impact of these attitudes on the quality of democracy this new pillar of democracy cannot be ignored. All who are concerned with increasing the quality of their respective democracy in the 21st century must not ignore the reality of digital democracy. In Estonia, there have been court rulings and regulatory measures that have made media and news site legally liable for third party comments on their sites. What followed the disabling of anonymous comments on a large quantity of Estonian sites. Moreover, the difference between Slovakia and Estonia is not only in their online regulatory policies. A sharp contrast can be seen in terms of trust towards the government, towards news and media as well as the frequency of encountering abusive behaviour online. Estonian citizens hold a greater trust towards their government, towards their news and media and compared to other EU countries encounter the least amount of hate speech online. Whenever there is a non-regulated virtual public space, it seems it is more prone to fostering attitudes of citizens' that are toxic and detrimental to the quality of democracy than a regulated one. This point is further evidenced in the comparison of SME's and Topky's comment sections. The unregulated discussion of Topky has had over twice the amount of verbal abuse and toxic behaviour than SME's regulated comment section. Thus, if citizens, leaders and policy makers seek to increase the trust of citizens in the government, in the news and media and improve the quality of the democratic process, they need to start reviewing the effects of virtual public space policies with the attitudes of the people in the back of their mind. Clearly, there needs to be a careful but skillful process through which the limits of virtual public spaces shall be drawn. However, without setting these boundaries and taking steps towards regulation, the quality of democracy in Slovakia is will hardly improve. As evidenced by both the comparisons of Estonia vs Slovakia and SME vs Topky, if the virtual public space is left unattended, it will most certainly be detrimental to the trust citizens place in their governments and news and thus consequently it will gradually erode the quality of democracy.

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Resumé

Táto bakalárska práca sa zaoberá témou neregulácie virtuálnej verejnej sféry a sociálnych médií a taktiež implikáciami neregulácie na postoj občanov a vplyvom týchto postojov na kvalitu demokracie. Skúma a porovnáva príklady Estónska a Slovenska ako dvoch štátnych subjektov ktoré majú a nemajú zavedenú reguláciu verejnej virtuálnej sféry v legislatíve. Estónsko je mimoriadne digitalizovaná krajina a disponuje súdnymi rozsudkami, ktoré podporujú ich legislatívne kroky k regulácii verejných virtuálnych priestorov. Pre jej unikátnu situáciu slúži ako dokonalý kontrast oproti Slovenskej neregulácii. V rámci tejto práce sa porovnáva dôvera občanov vo vlastnej vláde a taktiež dôvera v médiách. Preukazuje sa, že Estónsky občania, aj vďaka tomu, že ich vláda podnikla kroky k regulácii Internetu, majú vyššiu dôveru v médiách a taktiež vo vláde. Ďalej, z prieskumov sa ukázalo, že Slovenský respondenti majú omnoho častejšie stretnutia s nenávisným obsahom a komentármi online ako Estónsky respondenti, pričom platí, že Slováci precenili efektivitu vlády sa vysporiadať s nelegálnym obsahom vo virtuálnom verejnom priestore. Nakoniec, denníky SME a Topky boli porovnané na základe ich odlišnému prístupu k regulácii diskusie. SME disponuje kódexom pre diskutujúcich, ktorý určuje pravidlá diskusie pod všetkými článkami SME. Naopak Topky nemajú žiadnu reguláciu na webstránke. Výsledkom analyzovania stoviek komentárov bolo, že v neregulovanej diskusii sa vyskytol viac než dvojnásobný počet nenávisných príspevkov. Na záver boli prepojené všetky zistenia, ktoré boli objavené v rámci tejto bakalárskej práce a teda:

- a) Estónsko má prísnejšiu regulatívu verejného virtuálneho priestora ako Slovensko
- b) Slovenský respondenti majú nižšiu dôveru vo vláde ako Estónci
- c) Slováci častejšie stretávajú s nenávisnými prejavmi online
- d) Nenávisný obsah sa vyskytoval dva krát tak často v médiách s neregulovanou diskusiou ako v tých, kde bola diskusia regulovaná.

Tieto závery naznačujú, že do istej miery regulácia Internetu vplýva na postoje a hodnoty občanov, ktoré prejavujú keď sa vyjadrujú vo verejnej virtuálnej sfére. Vzhľadom na to, že tieto prejavy online reálne súvisia s hodnotami týchto občanov je potrebné upozorniť na fakt, že absencia regulácia vytvára jedovatejšiu občiansku atmosféru v rámci ktorej sa ľahšie a častejšie rodia proti demokratické a proti spoločenské hodnoty a postoje.

Appendix