

Report on the outcomes of a Short-Term Scientific Mission¹

Action number: CA21129

Grantee name: Christian Baden

Details of the STSM

Title: Functions of Opinion Expression

Start and end date: 20/01/2025 to 24/01/2025

Description of the work carried out during the STSM

This STSM had two primary objectives: To advance work on a joint paper focused on the functions of opinion expression, and to enter into discussions about the challenges associated with studying propaganda.

There were three primary foci of attention related to the joint paper. First, Gabriella Szabó and I discussed the conceptual framing of the democratic functions of opinion expression. In deliberate difference from the bulk of existing work, which discusses opinion expression in the context of the institutional functioning of democracies (notably, the capacity of political institutions to aggregate preferences and process political conflict), we focus in this paper on the contributions of opinion expression to the constitution of the political community of citizens. Drawing upon the motto of the French revolution as a conceptual umbrella – liberté, égalité, fraternité – we thus focus on the latter, translated gender-neutrally as “siblinghood”: the construction and maintenance of social bonds among the members of an imagined community by means of public discourse. We draw out the key dimensions of siblinghood by considering the different ways in which opinion expression helps a) constitute and delineate the political community, b) situate the individual therein as part thereof, c) contribute to the organization of collective advocacy toward the community, and d) enable the social-discursive processing of political conflict and diversity.

The second focus lay on devising a structure for the paper. On a continuum from a mostly inductive ordering – departing from existing scholarship on opinion expression to derive order and conceptual integration – to a mostly deductive structure determined by our conceptual differentiation set out above, we decided on a strategy close to the latter pole for the macro-structuring of the article, while permitting more freedom within each section. We furthermore determined to treat both opinion expression and the discretionary but context-bound choice to not express oneself as part of the same theoretical discussion,

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and to focus narrowly on contributions to siblinghood, acknowledging that for democracy, maximizing bonding is not necessarily functional, such that also practices that impose stress on social bonds can under certain circumstances be functional.

Third, we invested into drafting the introduction and conceptual framework, as well as some sample entries for the discussion of specific functions. We restricted this effort to offering order and sample narratives, so as to enable the remaining co-authors to join in and propose variations or additions to our jointly devised strategy.

Of the five days, one was primarily dedicated to the discussion of challenges in the study of propaganda, starting with my talk, followed by plenary discussions, and several bilateral interactions. In a nutshell, in my talk, I proposed not as presently commonly done as a violation of epistemic norms, but rather as a practice designed to undermine democratic pluralism. I proposed that the main mechanism is not rooted in formal coercive power, but in people's desire to view themselves and their in-groups as moral and reasonable, and propagandists' deliberate exploitation of cultural narratives, selective belief in news, and participatory public self-assurance, which generates considerable social pressure.

Description of the STSM main achievements and planned follow-up activities

Over the course of the STSM, we were able to meet all of the tangible aims of the visit (for the initiation of future collaborations, it is too early to tell what will emerge).

Through our joint work on the paper, we have come closer towards offering a framework for theorizing one key dimension of the work of OPINION's WG1 Theory, that is, the social implications and functions of opinion expression in a democratic society. We thereby complement existing theories, which view opinion expression primarily from a vantage point of aggregating public opinion toward informing collective policy (a process that is also the subject of a different theoretical paper project that I am part of). The proposed dimensions of societal functions of opinion expression will help situate key practices – such as incivility and hate speech, inauthentic opinion expression, but also engagement and memetic expression – in a wider theoretical perspective, illuminating implications beyond their immediately observable effects. Our functional framework furthermore helps us conceptualize opinion expression in a polyvalent perspective, wherein the same practices may contribute valuably to one objective while simultaneously causing other, dysfunctional side-effects. By conducting this project together with colleagues from quite different paradigmatic points of origin, we contribute to theoretical integration in the study of political expression.

For the study of propaganda, the discussions held at the HUN REN Center for Social Sciences primarily foreground the need to account for the variability of contexts and scales whereupon social pressure can be weaponized to suppress legitimate dissent. These discussions will directly feed into revisions of an associated paper, which is nearing submission.