

■ The Role of Citizens in Platform Governance: A Case Study of Public Consultations on European Online Content Regulation

Charis Papaevangelou – PhD Candidate
Université Toulouse 3 – Paul Sabatier

Workshop:

Radical Approaches to Platform Governance

Dublin, Ireland
1 November 2022



01.

INTRODUCTION

02.

THEORY & METHODS



03.

CASE STUDY: PUBLIC EU CONSULTATIONS



04.

CONCLUSIONS





INTRODUCTION



01.

INTRODUCTION

Research Questions

1. How can we start considering the role that users and citizens play, either directly or indirectly, in platform governance?
2. What do European citizens have to say about online platforms and the way that the Commission has attempted to approach online content regulation?

Goals

- Challenge the notion of participation in multistakeholder policy-making
- Apply an experimental methodological approach to a more 'traditional' topic
- Contribute to a re-theorisation of platform governance





LIT REVIEW & METHODS



02.





■ THEORY

PLATFORM GOVERNANCE

DELIBERATION

PLATFORM/MEDIA REGULATION

- Delineating the systems within which platforms operate (Gorwa, 2019; Owen, 2019; Hannah Bloch-Wehba, 2019; Flew & Martin, 2022)
- Identifying stakeholders in governance of, by, and through platforms (Gorwa, 2022; Nyabola et al., 2022; Papaevangelou, 2021)
- Understanding deliberative democracy processes and civil society's role (Deligiaouri & Suiter, 2021; Kohler-Koch, 2020; Habermas, 1996, 2022; Seeliger & Seignani, 2022)
- Offering a typology and critique of regulatory frameworks (Puppis & Van den Bulck, 2019; Matei et al., 2021; Suzor, 2018; Bradford, 2020)





■ METHODS

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Stakeholder analysis conceives of society as a set of organized and competing interests, and identifies the role of the state and policy-making institutions as one of reconciling these competing interests toward shared goals (Flew & Lim, 2019, p. 541)



CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

- Computationally assisted CDA using IRaMuTeQ (Ratinaud, 2009; Chaves, et al., 2017)





CASE STUDY: PUBLIC EU CONSULTATIONS

- Code of Practice on Disinformation
- Recommendation on Measures to Effectively Tackle Illegal Content Online
- DSA



03.



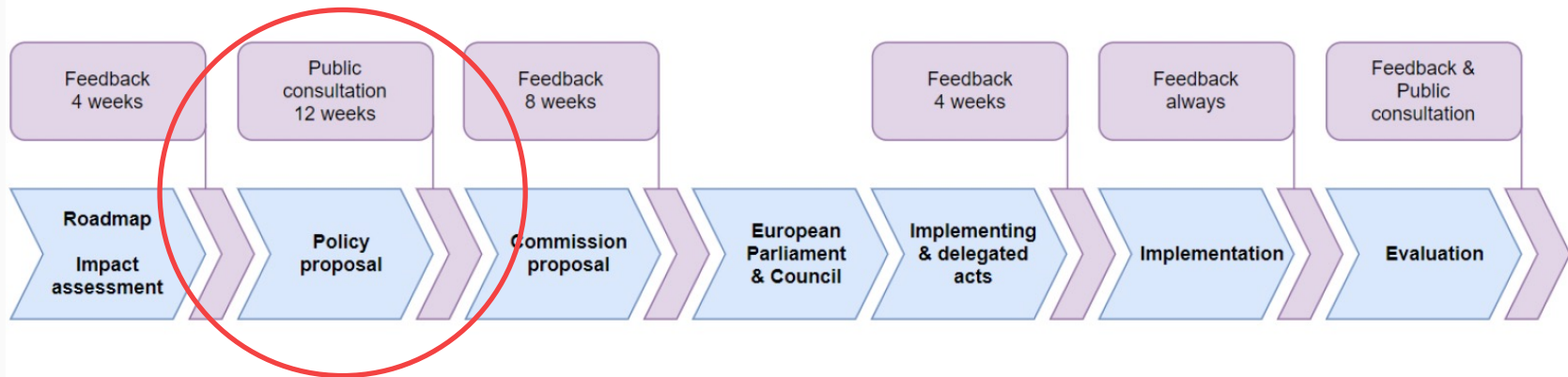


Figure 1 EU Policy/Legislation cycle and public consultation moments. Source: Better Regulation Agenda (European Commission, 2015)

Credits to Lukas de Haas

CORPUS

- The Public Consultation on fake news and online disinformation ran from 13/11/2017 to 23/02/2018 and received 2986 replies: 2784 from individuals and 202 from legal organisations and journalists; **in this analysis we only included citizens' replies.**
- The Public Consultation on measures to further improve the effectiveness of the fight against illegal content online ran from 30/04/2018 to 25/06/2018 and received a total of 8,961 replies, of which 8,749 were from individuals
- The Public Consultation on “Digital Services Act – deepening the internal market and clarifying responsibilities for digital services” ran from 02/06/2020 to 08/09/2020 and received 2863 replies: 2128 individuals, of which 1894 were EU citizens

REMARKS & LIMITATIONS

- Used IRaMuTeQ for the analysis (Ratinaud, 2009):
 - Descending Hierarchical Analysis (DHC) to understand citizens' discourse
 - Specific Words Analysis to contextualise certain words and see which were more popular
- Only looked at open-ended replies from European citizens and so I did not take into account contributions made by other stakeholders
- Many replies were not in English and the Commission did not provide an official translation for them, so I used the Commission's Official Translating Tool to translate them

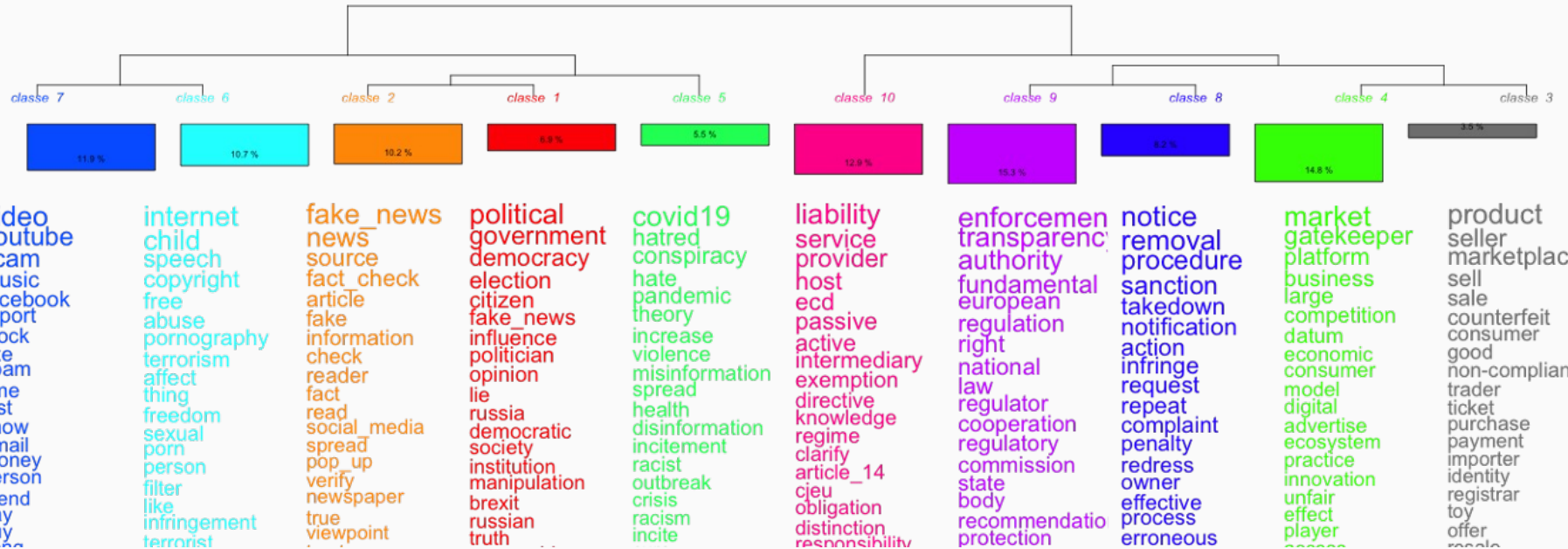


Top 10 countries by citizens' contributions to the Commission's consultations

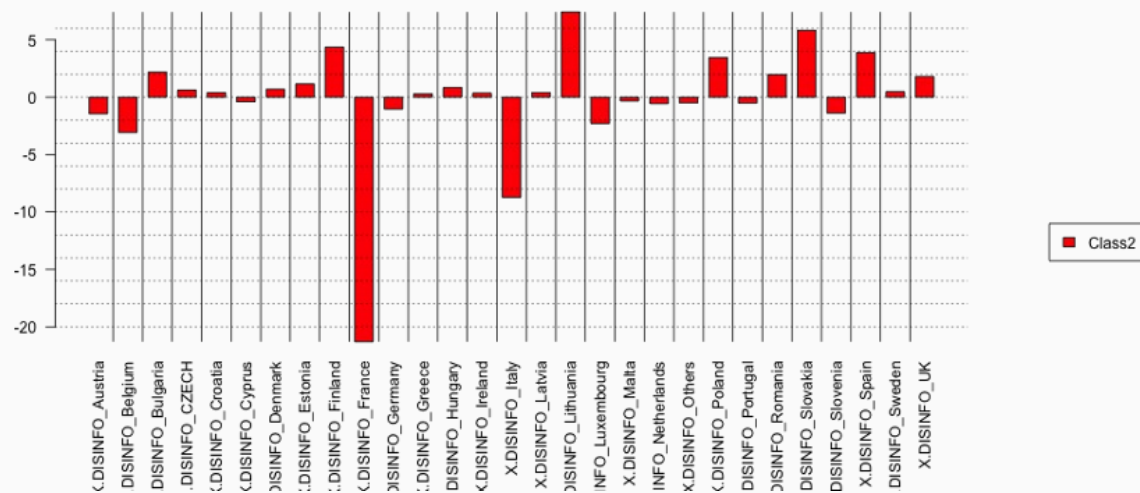
DSA	Germany	UK	France	Belgium	Italy	Netherlands	Austria	Ireland	Spain	Sweden
Code	Germany	UK	France	Belgium	Italy	Netherlands	Spain	Czech	Poland	Romania
Recommendation	Germany	UK	France	Belgium	Italy	Ireland	Poland	Sweden	Finland	Ireland



DHC analysis of all replies to the consultations



An example of Specific Words Analysis on the Disinformation Consultation





■ FINDINGS

DISINFORMATION

People complained about platforms' inaction regarding harmful/problematic content – esp. during Covid-19 pandemic

ILLEGAL CONTENT

There was a general consensus on outright banning explicitly illicit content (terrorist content, etc.)

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

People repeatedly expressed concerns regarding foreign manipulation of information (esp. Russia from citizens of the “Eastern Bloc”)

MEDIA LITERACY


Respondents emphasised the need for media literacy/education as the long-term remedy for harmful content

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

People expressed worries about stifling freedom of expression/information from platforms, governments and rightsholders

COMMISSION CRITICISM

People were quite critical of the way that the Commission shaped the surveys and asked certain questions framing SM as the main culprits





FINDINGS

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Respondents also touched upon the lack of a level playing field amongst content creators and rightsholders/platforms

CONSULTATIONS' BLINDSPOTS

Some respondents were wrongfully labelled as citizens or were not labelled at all, skewing the feedback received





FINDINGS

“Fake news comes from Russian channels and social media accounts on a daily, constant basis, the initiators of which try to influence the attitude of the EU's former and former Soviet states (especially national minorities) towards Russia, its military conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia, and foreign and business interests”.

Lithuanian citizen in the public consultation on the
Code of Practice on Disinformation





CONCLUSION

Discussion & Concluding Remarks



04.



■ CONCLUDING REMARKS

AGONISTIC POLICYMAKING

Far from an ideal harmonised EU landscape, citizens from different countries, esp. from “Eastern Bloc”, prioritised nationally-sensitive themes

LIMITED IMPLEMENTATION

The Commission primarily took into account the ‘quantitative’ data of the surveys excluding most open-ended replies

NEGOTIATING AGENCY

Citizens communicated concerns/complaints to the Commission beyond the scope of online content regulation



CO- REGULATION

Citizens are in favour of co-regulation primarily because they do not trust either platforms or governments to hold power over freedom of expression/information

EUROCENTRICISM

The openness, relevance and effectiveness of the Commission’s public consultations process are questioned



THANK YOU

Charis Papaevangelou

PhD Candidate @ Université Toulouse 3 – Paul
Sabatier

@CharisPapaev



charilaos.papaevangelou@univ-tlse3.fr



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 765140