

*Professor Danuta Hübner, PhD
Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament*

"Women in politics and digitalization"

European Parliament, Brussels, 7 March 2019

Digitalization is a multifaceted transformative process. It changes profoundly our life: economy, society, patterns of behavior, ways of communication. Digitalization generates a lot of value-added activities in economy and presents an enormous potential for growth, especially in advanced technologies such as the internet of things, big data, advanced manufacturing, robotics, 3D printing, blockchain technologies and artificial intelligence.

Digitalization will also be soon a game changer in how we would need to reshape our job market in terms of upgrading the skills of the new cohorts incoming into the market. We will also need to re-appreciate the skills of undervalued groups already in the market. I think here of us, women. The McKinsey Global Institute has estimated that advancing gender equality could add \$12 trillion per year to the world economy by 2025 (\$2.1 trillion to the EU economy). This economy will be progressing along the digital lines. Already, in China, for example, 55% of new Internet businesses are founded by women. In the EU it is only 15% - we have so much to do in this respect in Europe.

In economy, digitalization presents the upward opportunities for women. But, as an often unpredictable, non-linear process, digitalization has both positive and less positive facets. It brings benefits as well as costs. In politics, it increases the number of platforms that politicians can use for exposing their views and ideas to a broader public. We see it in the most extreme way when the President of the United States makes his policy, including a sensitive area of foreign policy, nearly exclusively via Twitter. Some years ago it would have not been possible to even think about something like that. Now, we are all used to it.

However, this one example points to the problem that can be a cost: namely, social media are very attractive for users and for recipients as well mostly because of their

immediacy. We can say or do what is on our mind live, so to speak and share our thoughts at the moment when a thought comes to our mind. But it does not lead to a rational political discourse. Half-baked thoughts, especially when they come from the mind of political leaders, on the spur of the moment, are not best recipe for a thoughtful and evidence-based policy.

There is also a problem of a segmentation of electorate –when politicians direct their messages exclusively to a certain type of voters based on their public opinion research. Politics instead of a search for the common good becomes a matter of targeting special interests for a short-term goal of winning the elections.

Thus, the growing volume of communication between the people and their representatives does not necessarily lead to a better quality of the public space.

Large-scale, previously unimaginable, “mediatization” of our lives transforms politics from the domain of deliberative conversation about the common good into the means of immediate satisfaction of our appetites for political revenge, social shaming or simple power-thirst. In this emotionally charged environment sophisticated digital tools (trolling, phishing, astroturfing) strengthen populist sentiments among the people.

We are thus functioning, as politicians, both women and men, in the same environment which pushes us often towards the populist solutions as the way for getting to office or keeping the office.

But, as women in politics, we face also different challenges from the digitalization of politics. More often than men we are subject to on-line harassment, trolling. According to Pew Research Center survey, overall, 11% of women have specifically been harassed because of their gender, compared with 5% of men. Women also report higher levels of emotional stress from these experiences. In addition, this is not just something that you would call a rude, but still individual behavior on part of some overexcited people. No, this has all the marks of considered efforts by certain groups: anti-feminists, male supremacists, to push women out of the public sphere. Survey conducted by the Inter Parliamentary Union of 55 women parliamentarians from 39 countries across five world regions found that 81.8% were subject to some form of psychological violence. According to the same study of female

parliamentarians, 45 % of them had received threats of rape, beatings, death or abduction. Of the women surveyed, 41.8% reported facing “extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of themselves spread through social media”. The disturbing content of online attacks includes degrading comments on their physical appearance, sexual orientation, marital status and parenting capabilities. Women running for office are often subject to sexual objectification, with harassers manipulating their photographs to appear as if they are in obscene scenes. In some of these instances, women were forced to drop out of political races due to fear for their lives and those of their families.

On-line harassment has become weaponized as means of silencing down women perceived as the agents of change. Look what is happening for example, again in the US, to Alexandra Occasio-Cortez, Nancy Pelosi and other women who arrived in Congress in the November election. Such a massive hate effort as they experience is not just a result of heated political disagreement, but of irrational fear of women who may really change things.

Thus, coming into politics in an era of social media and digitalization we have to understand the risks and be prepared for all types of reaction. Some years ago we would probably just say that we need to develop a ‘thick skin” and take it as it is.

But now, I think it’s not enough. We do not have to take it as “it is” any more. We have to work out, perhaps in different solidarity platforms, certain defense mechanisms that would make us less vulnerable if we decide to become politicians.

First, we have to build networks. I think that a role for lawyers, both women and men, who understand the challenges we are faced with, can be critical here. We need their support in deflecting the bad side of digitalization, so to speak. We need them to develop anti-harassment laws in tune with the demands of the new environment of social media, we also need their support in giving advice on how to navigate our rights in this complex, media-saturated world.

Second, in as much as we should use the digital tools in our work, we cannot fetishize them. We have to remember that no amount of digital contact with the people will replace the traditional eye-to-eye contact with real people, and not their digital avatars.

People, and in particular women, I would say, long for the real human encounters, not just a detached, digital contact. I say it from my own experience. I often meet women and their reaction is always intellectually attentive, but also emotionally affectionate, as they see that someone cares about what they say.

Women are also more engaged in getting knowledge about politics, about what is going on in the world. When I meet with the so-called Universities of the Third Age in Poland, invariably 90 % of the attendees of my lectures are women. Women are also more open to arguments, less concentrated on showing off in the discussion with the female politician. I think that between a female politician and woman voters there is a certain mutual circle of care and understanding that is often absent with the male voters. We show ourselves our support by listening to each other with dignity, even if we disagree on certain points.

Real retail politics, when you shake hands and talk face to face should thus not be discounted in the digital age. In my case, my campaigns have always been oriented toward meeting as many people as possible, in the streets, in various events, in schools, universities, public places etc.

The type of feedback is also different. Digitally, you exist as a sort of hologram that people can place their own ideas or prejudices on. You are never a real person to them, but always a some sort of stand-in for their hopes or fears. This is why it is so easy to be an object of discreditation and hate in social media.

But when they see you in person, they adjust their opinions and their expectation. They may see you strong, but they may also see you vulnerable.. They see you, simply, as a human, authentic being. That changed perception will also make a difference at the polls.

Thus, Facebook or Twitter for me can only be tools for getting out information on what I do, but they will never replace real encounters.