

Using Social Media to Engage the Public in Sustainable Development Initiatives

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Abstract. The issue of sustainable development arose in 1987 as a concern for the present and future of all countries worldwide, serving as a means to meet current needs and ensure those of future generations. The concept of sustainable development combines economic, social, and environmental spheres as a foundation—a triad for shaping life on Earth. There are many tools for forming sustainable development. One of them is the work of public initiatives (organizations), but they also require certain conditions for their existence. Given the significant importance of technologization and digitalization, the authors of the study analyze "social media" as a tool for engaging public initiatives in sustainable development. The article separately examines the functions and benefits of sustainable development, the types and functions of social media, and the risks and challenges for both areas. The study employs comparative-historical, hermeneutic, and deductive methods. At the end of the study, the authors conclude that social media is the voice of public organizations, offering an opportunity to spread their work, conduct public education, and find like-minded individuals. The authors also emphasize the importance of education and upbringing of citizens, as this influences critical thinking in consuming information, the desire to participate in social life, and the responsible use of sustainable development tools.

Keywords: media, technologization, digitalization, PR, promotion.

JEL Classification: L82, Q01, Q56.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its existence, humanity has continually grappled with the surrounding world and its circumstances. Civilization has had to respond to the challenges presented by the world. As Arnold Toynbee would say, if humanity responds adequately, it continues to live and develop. Today, the goal of humanity is to evolve by addressing the difficulties of the present. These include globalization and its consequences, epidemics, wars, economic crises,

and a combination of these and other problems. Humanity manages to navigate these situations, often not in the best way, but it does adapt and mitigate the consequences. All nations, cities, companies, and corporations are constantly in problem-solving mode, creating legislation, implementing new reforms, and so on. At a certain point, humanity started thinking about the future.

"Sustainable development" is a concept formed in the 20th century with the aim of

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uniting three elements for the successful development of society. The first element is economic. The second is social. The third concerns nature—ecological (Ruda & Mazurik, 2021; Ruggerio, 2021). The philosophy of this concept is based on stabilizing and meeting the needs of the present generation while ensuring a future for subsequent generations. Thus, it is a symbiosis of current and future well-being. "The concept of sustainable development is currently recognized by all countries that are members of the UN as one of the priorities of humanity, a transition that should occur at national and global levels. The term 'sustainable development' is increasingly used by the business community, appearing in corporate publications, and featuring in official political and economic documents of various levels. In recent decades, the most influential international organizations have prioritized the achievement of sustainable development" (Zaitseva, 2019).

In theory, or rather in philosophy, this concept has a noble goal, but in practice, it may encounter the following problems: economic interests intersect with ecological one

In 2015, 195 countries around the world adopted an environmental agreement for the sake of the future of the world (Urpelainen et al., 2017). It is very difficult to produce environmentally clean products or do so without waste. Climate change, depletion of natural resources, poor education, and other broad and interdisciplinary issues require comprehensive, broad-spectrum solutions (Johnson & Lee, 2019). This is how the "green" economy emerged (Wright-Arora et al., 2024). "In 2008, the term 'green' economy was actively used in the context of discussing anti-crisis policy: in the conditions of the financial crisis and the threat of global recession, the OECD advocated for 'green' stimulation—primarily those sectors where large-scale government investments could spur the formation of the foundations of a 'green' economy. This inspired a number of national governments to introduce 'green' stimulus packages within economic recovery measures" (Chmyr, n.d.).

One of the tools for overcoming problems and forming quality development lies in people and society. People who will follow norms and rules, create initiatives aimed at ethical constructs, and transmit them. Many countries,

such as Ukraine, have demonstrated what civil society is capable of (Kirkby et al., 2022). Engaging these people requires a comprehensive approach and draws from the present. We see a significant role and potential in the use of social media. Thus, the aim of our work is to study the use of social media and its impact on engaging citizens in sustainable development initiatives.

METHODS

To address the tasks set in the study of social methods for engaging public initiatives in sustainable development research, as just emphasized, we use the following methods: comparative-historical, comparative, hermeneutic, and deductive methods.

The first two methods (similar to each other) are the comparative-historical and comparative methods. They are used to enable us to explore the emergence of the concept of sustainable development, observe its original ideas, ideals, and functions, and then analyze its current state. This method will also be used to analyze and evolve various types of social media. For example, we compare the purposes for which they were invented, the format of content proposed, and how it has transformed over time. For instance, when some social networks transform and add new functions (from creating stories to introducing videos and increasing their length), and also the degree of freedom and taboos on certain topics or their absence.

The third method in our work is the hermeneutic method, an instrument responsible for the process of interpretation. A key method that has changed and transformed throughout history. From the classical "interpretation" of texts, Augustine's concept of "congeniality," psychological hermeneutics focusing on the significant role of the author, their world, and emotions, to philosophical hermeneutics and the question of "understanding" as a concept. We will use this method as a tool for interpreting and comprehensively examining scientific texts, understanding social media, and sustainable development.

The final method we use in our work is the deductive method. We will take general propositions, theses, opinions, and concepts and derive derivative propositions. We will follow the principle of moving from the general to the particular. The deductive method will be applied to all three elements of our work, namely: the

analysis of "social media" and its types, "sustainable development," and the concept of "public initiatives." The proposed method allows for the structural analysis of the stated concepts and their functions, the issues of the work, and the assessment of risks in each area.

We are confident that the proposed research methods (comparative, comparative-historical, hermeneutic, and deductive), which belong to the category of "theoretical," will serve for quality work and explore the stated topic. The symbiosis of these methods will allow us to assess the role of social media and their impact on public initiatives that influence and aid the development of the concept of "sustainable development."

If we engage in forecasting work, this research in the future could become a foundation for sociological studies, and the methods may be supplemented with statistical data, the theoretical method of observation, and observation of specific sustainable development initiatives. For example, in forming clear assessments of the impact of social media on public initiatives. Or using the forecasting method to try to assess the impact of public initiatives on sustainable development in the long-term perspective as well as immediately after implementation.

RESULTS

The concept of "sustainable development" has become a popular interdisciplinary concept in the modern world, aiming to find a balance between economic growth (well-being, poverty alleviation, improved living standards), social justice (norms, rights, and freedoms), and ecological integrity (preservation of nature and its purity). In 1987, "The concept of sustainable development has become a reference for scientific research on the environment" (Ruggerio, 2021). The UN report "Our Common Future," known as the Brundtland Report, provided the fundamental definition, essence, and functions of this concept: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.). This definition underscores the importance of equity and responsibility between generations. Although A. Peterson (2022) emphasizes that the

effectiveness of sustainable development in politics may be downplayed and unrecognized.

Based on the essence of sustainable development, we can define its main functions: from an ecological perspective, it involves working to protect, maintain, and restore flora and fauna, and the rational use of natural resources. Generally, this can be summarized as preserving our planet. From an economic perspective, the function of sustainable development lies in stimulating innovation, growth, and stability (Kovalchuk & Kovalchuk, 2021). The social function overlaps with the economic one and is related to improving quality of life, ensuring access to basic social services, and fighting poverty. This also includes issues of education, entertainment, and culture.

The main principles of sustainable development include integration, equity, participation, and transparency. The sustainable development process should involve as many people as possible to ensure the implementation of this concept. The next stage of our work will address the problems that may arise in the study of sustainable development. For example, one issue may be poor communication between sciences. It must be acknowledged that sustainable development is a subject of study for many disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is foundational, and lack of communication and narrow information can lead to problems. This includes the need for participation in forums and conferences that bring together scientists from different fields.

Another issue is the need for clear criteria and methods for assessing sustainability. Interdisciplinarity generates a plurality of methods, while globalization and rapid development highlight the weaknesses of existing methods. We cannot ignore the fact that sustainable development methods can become outdated, ineffective, and inaccurate. Therefore, the criteria and assessments of sustainable development must be clearly formulated and defined, but with a process of rethinking and adding.

Political institutions also pose a challenge. Many factors contribute to this issue. For instance, political institutions may act irresponsibly, unsystematically, or uninitiatively in fulfilling their duties, especially when power is centralized, leading local authorities to neglect

their responsibilities. In the subject/object relationship with the government, the people (social sector) stand. From this side, problems such as poor public awareness, political passivity, and indifference can lead to a lack of public support for sustainable development.

Communication and the use of all information sources also present issues. These last two problems are particularly relevant to our study. We believe that the social factor is very significant and impactful. The self-organization of people shows great effectiveness. A small example is Ukraine, where the civil movement plays a crucial role in the country's victory. Civil organizations will increasingly become objects of study as tools for sustainable development. Communication is also vital as a tool for transmitting information from the state to the public.

Civil initiatives are important not only for sustainable development but also for the development of the state as a whole. Civil initiatives as a good alternative to municipal initiatives (Bakker et al., 2012). Investment initiatives as a form of self-organization, in which citizens mobilize resources to collectively identify and implement projects aimed at providing public goods or services for their community (Igalla et al., 2019). They can be considered markers of society, indicators of norms, values, and ideals, sources of creativity in solving problems, and active support for the state. The existence of civil initiatives helps engage the public in decision-making processes at all levels, address social justice issues, and improve individual awareness and other matters. «citizens' initiatives are (partly) driven by individual or group interests. "We labelled the common ground between value views selfish collectivism." (Block et al., 2023).

Civil initiatives can be implemented in many directions. For example, information initiatives raise public awareness. Civil organizations or individual specialists can organize seminars, training sessions, master classes, and digital campaigns both online and offline. These help people acquire new skills, gain information on certain topics, and create their own projects/products. However, normative frameworks must be created to regulate such activities (Bortnyk & Yesimov, 2020; Liu et al., 2022).

In the ecological component of sustainable development, civil initiatives can involve organizing tree planting, beach and water clean-ups, waste sorting, energy conservation, and purchasing eco-friendly products. Environmental problems are vast. For example, many organizations address issues like plastic consumption and its decomposition (Walker, 2021), the use of renewable energy sources (Østergaard et al., 2022), (Østergaard et al., 2020), and the development of actions to preserve the planet by both individuals and governments.

"The results indicate that the advantages of handling informational asymmetry and enhancing social supervision are the two logical starting points of involving public participation in environmental governance." (Guo, 2019). Besides environmental preservation organizations, universities, schools, and other institutions often participate in such projects. Participating in these events has become fashionable. Civil organizations play a significant role in promoting social justice. For instance, organizations that assist women who have suffered from violence, feed the homeless, and help orphanages.

It is also worth noting that civil initiatives impact the economic sector. Charitable foundations often have two work units: fund employees and volunteers (at events or on a permanent basis), resulting in job creation. Additionally, they improve city conditions for work. Public opinion trends affect the positioning of individual companies. For example, if there is a trend towards eco-friendliness, companies must follow the trend to develop. "Growing consumer awareness of sustainability and desires to purchase sustainable products have caused fashion companies to make sustainability a priority and core management objective. To meet consumer demands for attention to social and environmental issues, brands now advertise their efforts to develop sustainable products and to show corporate social responsibility" (Kong et al., 2021; Özcan, A., & Tunca, 2021).

However, like any sphere, civil initiatives face funding problems (from the state, funds, patrons), leading to work limitations and a constant search for funding. There may also be issues in project implementation due to state

institutions, rules, and legislation. Furthermore, there are challenges in raising awareness and disseminating information.

Civil organizations, activists, and events can become powerful social tools, reaching international levels, drawing attention to problems, or assisting in solving them. Social states that respect their citizens and listen to their needs. Such organizations can share knowledge, experience, and resources for better development. Reaching an international level can attract the support and funding of large international organizations like the UN, UNESCO, and the Red Cross, providing financial, technical, and media assistance.

We live in an era of advanced technology, where the Internet and social networks, in particular, have filled the world, giving people a second existence—digital existence. Niklas Luhmann (2010) described it as our second reality. Besides creating human rhetorical constructs,

Realities are being constructed through vast processes of information dissemination. Nowadays, individuals think in snippets due to television, the Internet, and social networks. Consuming information via phone or television, seeing it on the streets, is as easy as breathing. "The digital transformation is an accumulation of various digital advancements, such as the transformation of the web phenomenon" (Sivarajah et al., 2019).

By "Social Media," we mean platforms that enable users to create, evaluate, and distribute information over the Internet, encompassing a wide range of online services, platforms (Khomyuk & Kolodny, n.d.), social networks, and applications that promote social interaction among people globally or within a nation. «Social media: there are now 4.20 billion social media users around the world. This figure has grown by 490 million over the past 12 months, delivering year-on-year growth of more than 13 percent. The number of social media users is now equivalent to more than 53 percent of the world's total population» (Digital 2021: the latest insights into the 'state of digital, 2021). The Internet has dissolved boundaries for communication, existence, education, and culture. «Social networks can contribute to an inclusive society, but they are also asymmetric

and polarized communication spaces.» (Barroso-Moreno et al., 2023).

The power and effectiveness of marketing, advertising, and social media are emphasized by studies focusing on target audiences that include children. Children, as both objects and consumers of content, are influenced by these factors. Such research illustrates how specific tools affect children's tastes and preferences, the mechanisms of their choices, and their trust. (De Jans et al., 2019), (De Veirman et al., 2019), (Coates et al., 2020), (De Jans et al., 2018).

Social media includes major social networks (sometimes different in purpose, operation mechanisms, existential sense, rules, and audience adherence). For example, Facebook and Instagram initially were created for personal representation, photo exchanges, and videos (Lyashuk, 2021), later evolving into profiles serving as internet stores, business pages, and public organization pages (Latiff et al., 2015), (Machova et al., 2021). They cater to all demographic demands, with platform rules governing content and language. Notably, TikTok emerged as a social video-sharing network, primarily for entertainment but also hosting shops, organizations, and companies.

Social media, especially Twitter, has become a strategic space for those users who try to extend their influence in the digital environment (Marcos-García et al., 2020). Another example is Twitter, a more liberal platform that doesn't control content, allowing posts not permitted elsewhere, focused on "tweets.". Twitter also significantly influences modern journalism (López-Rabadán & Mellado, 2019). For example, on a platform like Twitter, important social issues that serve as markers of society are often raised. For instance, topics such as nicotine, smoking, and the creation of authorities are discussed (Sun et al., 2022), (Ruan et al., 2023), (McGregor et al., 2018). LinkedIn, a platform for career growth, dominates the professional sphere of life, posting job vacancies, seeking candidates, and highlighting skills and work experience. "LinkedIn is considered the most effective social network website for job seekers and recruiters." (Fernandez et al., 2021). Content and photo characteristics change, taking on a businesslike appearance.

YouTube is a significant platform for various video formats and lengths, hosting

programs, blogs, films, and series. Zimmermann (2022) investigated how influencers on YouTube: a quantitative study of young people's usage and perception of videos on political and social topics. They concluded that young people watch YouTube more frequently than women, but the overall consumption among young people is quite high. The key lies in platforms constantly evolving and competing in functionality to attract and retain audiences. (Ladhari et al., 2020), (Rahmatika et al., 2021).

For instance, Instagram, initially photo-centric, introduced Reels to counter TikTok. From platforms for personal life, they expanded into global hubs for shops, informational services, and info-businesses, creating pages for political parties or presidents and launching targeted advertising campaigns (Chawla & Mehrotra, 2020). The study of comments on social networks was specifically addressed by Hue Trong Duong (Duong et al., 2020) and other researchers.

Overall, this pervasive media distribution has greatly influenced culture (exchanging cultural values, reproducing trends, creating concepts within the network, reflecting societal issues), communication (facilitating information exchange, supporting international connections), and marketing (social media as a marketing tool, creating ads, banners, entire ad campaigns, flash mobs, and engaging bloggers as influencers (Mallipeddi et al., 2021). Rapid, borderless information transfer has empowered people to express opinions, critique laws, and comment publicly swiftly and easily (Blok et al., 2023).

Of course, social media faces security challenges, such as consumer information privacy (issues of chat confidentiality, cyberattacks, content theft, etc.). People's second lives can be constructed, altering news and information in ways favorable to the message's creator. Public organizations conduct media literacy lectures aimed at preventing misinformation and fostering critical thinking. Another issue is the "simplification of humans," as it becomes challenging to absorb vast and complex information. Photos, short videos, and brief text posts have simplified how people consume information, swiping through each content unit. And certainly, the borderless second life created boundaries for real life.

People can sit at home with their phones and ignore the real world. Cheap dopamine — a problem of social media.

Indeed, social media itself is a powerful tool for creating and disseminating information, exerting significant influence on various aspects of societal life. We have already discussed that sustainable development has become one of the key concepts for the international community in the 21st century. Media have taken a special place in politics because they have transformed it. "Participatory and shareable digital media have shattered politicians' monopoly on the lead roles in performances of social and political dramas. Ever more people may audition for and get the part. Social media platforms (such as Twitter, Reddit and Facebook) have fundamentally changed the production and consumption of political communication, giving rise to new genres built out of (and in reaction to) pre-digital forms of communication. (Finlayson et al., 2020).

Non-governmental organizations play a significant role in creating and disseminating information, initiating actions, lectures, forums, etc. They represent a cross-section of society and embody an active societal stance. However, it is necessary to convey information to the population, disseminate information about events, register participants for events, and simply report on these events (Kim & Choi, 2019). Therefore, we can confidently state that social media plays an important role in engaging public initiatives aimed at sustainable development.

One of the main functions and simple aspects of social media in the context of "sustainable development" is informing the population and educational functions. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and others provide opportunities to spread information (videos, films, advertisements) about environmental pollution issues, global warming, disasters, social inequality, and other important aspects. It is through social media that various local and international environmental organizations and activists can reach a wide audience with data on the state of the planet, specific actions that can help the planet, and invite people to their events.

Social media can unite people into ideological groups and help solve problems.

Social networks can also create special challenges that increase outreach. The more outreach, the more engaged and informed people. This includes "viral" and "shocking" videos. In summary, social media give a voice to NGOs and individuals, and the tools within the networks, marketing tools, help tailor content to all target audiences (Willems et al., 2015).

Another function, though not obvious, is fundraising. Social media can help raise money for organizations, individuals, and companies, known as "donations". Social media provide outreach and make it easy to ask people to donate money. Unfortunately, NGOs may face issues of information credibility and public trust, which is an obvious risk, and the organization must create its "image", demonstrate transparency in actions, and build trust among the population.

DISCUSSION

The theme of sustainable development is vast and complex, encompassing many positions that can be considered both practically and theoretically. However, as global practice shows, ignoring social media as a tool for sustainable development is impossible. Perhaps this is the main tool now, because all people consume information through the Internet, and advertising, street banners are duplicated on the Internet without problems (Chen et al., 2024).

Social media has truly revolutionized the way NGOs participate in sustainable development initiatives. They use services, applications through which information about problems and solutions can quickly spread among a wide audience. But there is still an issue with information dissemination. The demanding consumer pays attention to the creative, cool presentation of information. And marketing and creativity can be a decisive factor in spreading information. Viral videos can get recommended better than any other content, although in essence, they may be worse. The same goes for funding. In any NGO, funding may be more than in any.

The more the image, the more trust. Further research may concern communities. You can specifically study the factors that unite people in one environment. Distribution and transfer of experience, help in solving complex situations, etc. For example, hashtags can help find like-

minded people or active PR and special contact search.

Another topic that can be highlighted and which is controversial is funding. We said that financial support comes from the state or through large organizations, patrons, grants. However, NGOs are forced to constantly look for grants and funding. It would be interesting to investigate the dependence of the quality of the organization's work on funding. How, how, where money goes and how to make their use more effective. Or what services, assistance, those same public institutions can provide to save money, in order to direct them to the necessary needs.

We are talking about NGOs within the framework of civic initiative, but we must not forget that there may be certain activists, symbols of a certain movement. Individual people who can unite people around themselves and become a voice. Therefore, this could be another topic for future research. Without forgetting that this image is also formed due to social media and a large part of marketing tools.

Separately, the problem of focusing public attention is important. People cannot always watch something for a long time. And social media tools can help constantly attract attention, remind society of existing problems. And the state with its resources can support this news agenda. It must be recognized that from time to time there are trendy topics that change each other. Mostly this may depend on what is "painful" in society, but there are many problems and tasks (We are social..., 2021). Therefore, in our opinion, the concept of sustainable development can effectively divide forces, focus attention on all necessary directions. Undoubtedly, this will be a discursive issue and it must be placed in chronological frameworks. But when defining clear problems, better decisions will be made.

During the main research, we did not emphasize the theme of education as a tool for raising, shaping values and worldview in children. Because schools, universities, and courses form critical thinking in people. And the quality of education, openness to children, very strongly affect the responsibility in shaping sustainable development. Without education, critical thinking for citizens will not be qualitatively good care of ecology, for reasonable

consumption of electricity, the desire to take part in public events, etc. Therefore, conscious people are the foundation for sustainable development, as well as for preventing disinformation, fakes, and information security of the state as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the challenges, risks, and problems, social media has been and remains a powerful tool for engagement, promotion, and raising awareness on any topic and anything, as well as serving as a common communication tool between people. Due to its complete integration with human existence, social media is a realm of existence for anything and also for engaging public initiatives. These can include creating and publishing educational videos, advertising events, conducting online events, creating challenges, or establishing and growing communities. The role of public media in considering sustainable development cannot be overstated. The public is a significant subject of sustainable development. It is the public that responds to certain actions (sorting waste, saving electricity, creating charity events, supporting orphanages, etc.). It is people who comply with regulations and laws. However, great attention

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must be paid to education and upbringing, because it is consciousness and love for the planet that make people caring.

The topic of sustainable development is vast and complex. But we hope that we have contributed to the understanding of this problem, and most importantly, to its development. Our topic can move from the theoretical realm to the practical one. For example, by using statistical data to see how many people are involved in initiatives, what topics concern people, what is being created, and predicting their results. Similarly, various public initiatives can be considered and analyzed. Or we can explore social media and test tools in practice to engage the audience.

Therefore, we believe that for the sake of the future, for the sake of future generations, and for a comfortable life on the planet, we must pay attention to the issue of sustainable development. The economy, society, and ecology are the three pillars on which it stands. Social media will be a leading tool and platform for communication, existence, and dissemination of information.

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