Redefining civic engagement in the digital age

An online ethnographic study of the #rezist protests in Romania
Abstract

Media is belittling millennials for the current overall decrease in civic engagement. They are criticized for their apparent lack of responsibility, political knowledge and reluctance to get involved in current affairs, and social media and the Internet have been regarded as contributing to this civic decline. Millennials choose more liquid forms of organizing, as they have uprooted from pre-established and stable collective identities. There is a change in generations and their activities, and millennials’ use of social media for both political and civic engagement is a growing research field now. Hence this thesis aims to determine how civic engagement has been redefined by new media and generational shifts. The Internet has been proven to entice citizens to thoroughly engage in politics, providing a framework for broad social participation, which is inherently democratic, becoming a potent tool for civic and political participation, a crucial motivation for the core constituency of movements. According to the theoretical and empirical material, with the emergence of new media, new concepts, such as online activism, have been materialized or old ones, such as simple protests, have simply shifted and adapted to current times. There is not a discontinuity but rather a redefinition of civic engagement. The findings of the current study are significant in this sense, as they support the theoretical concept of the reinvigoration of civic life through generational shifts and the rise of new media.

Keywords: millennials, social media, online activism, generational shifts, civic engagement.
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1. Introduction

Civic engagement is important for democracy, it is maybe one of the essential elements keeping the democracy running. But in recent times, there is a decline in civic engagement, coming especially from the youth: Hillary Clinton’s loss, for example, can be blamed on the young, who were not politically involved enough to go vote, although they were avidly supporting her online. Unlike the Baby Boomers, a generation which was, at its peak, highly engaged both politically and civically, “Millennials seem to lag, behind older generations, in their interest in government and politics.”¹ Their most salient trait is, nevertheless, their online presence, as they are after all, the social media generation, being natives of the digital culture. “A majority of millennials post on social media about issues they care about. This is a generation where a majority agrees their life is richer because they are connected through social media.”²

The declining levels of civic participation are concerning: people are not actively participating in their communities as much as they should, or as much as their parents did. Instead they are sharing status updates, tweeting opinions, and uploading creative content on Instagram. Some of that content channelling the inner thoughts of millennials does describe their civic participation to their communities, government and world. Media, however, reflect social anxiety towards the changes millennials might bring to traditional political and civic orientation. However, people nowadays, the social media users in particular, can be regarded as monitorial citizens: acting only when they feel it is really imperative. (Ekman; Amnå, 2012) Moreover as stated by the Pew Research Center in the US, “Younger adults are just as likely as older adults to be engaged in many political activities, and are much more likely to be politically active on social networking sites.”³

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³ Aaron Smith(2013): “Civic engagement in the Digital Age”, Pew Research Center
1.1 Aim

The current study explores the ways in which civic engagement might have been redefined with generational shifts and development of social media networks, by examining online activism behaviours and whether “slacktivism” represents a new form of societal involvement. The present research thus aims to explore possible ways in which civic engagement has been redefined, trying to identify whether new concepts have materialized in this digital age. Literature on political and civic participation, although abundant, needs theoretical development and adaptation. Thus the current study will try to understand the new forms of engagement employed by Romanian millennials and what the role of new media is in this regard. In doing so I have chosen a very particular sample, consisting of the Romanian Protests in February 2017, which benefited from online mobilization efforts. The collected data will identify the Romanian millennials approach the concepts of online activism and civic engagement as opposed to older generations. The sample, as mentioned before, has been significantly reduced to the Romanian young people protesting on the streets of Bucharest, as it is difficult to survey a representative sample from the entire country. A pilot study has been undertaken previously on this subject, and its results have shown that there is clearly a gap as to what social causes mean to young people nowadays. As Peter Dahlgren puts it, in his book *Media and Political Engagement*, democracy’s future lies in “finding new ways to embody and express democratic values and principles, rather than trying to reconstruct circumstances that have become historically eclipsed.” (Dahlgren, 2009:14) As far as the expected outcomes are concerned, the most important one consists in whether there is any change in the interpretation of the concept of civic engagement and whether there are any new patterns of less conventional political and civic participation among Romanian millennials. Moreover, the current research also aims to pinpoint the concepts of soft leadership and choreography of assembly to the overall organisation of a social movement, to show that spontaneity and “insurgence” are not inherent to collective action, allowing the researcher to thus observe the dynamics between the online and offline milieus. The research subsequently aims to build on the concept of online social capital in order to show that young people are drawn to react by political solidarity and sociality. The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: How did Romanian Millennials devise and apply The Facebook page Corruption Kills (Corupția ucide) during the protests in February 2017?

RQ2: How does the Romanian youth define and reflect on the diverse nature of their “contemporary” civic and political engagement?
1.2 Background

At the time of writing, Romanian citizens were protesting the current Government’s recent decisions to decriminalize official corruption. On the 31st of January, at night, the government tried to put an end to the fight against corruption which was going on quite successfully in Romania. The social-democrats passed an emergency ordinance decriminalizing abuse of power up to 200,000 RON, or 45,000 EUR, reducing prison sentences significantly and weakening the provisions around conflicts of interest. This had been a hot topic even before the 31st of January, as the citizens were aware that corrupt politicians were the direct beneficiaries of these infamous changes. Social media was already the protester’s own public sphere, but the passing of the ordinance struck a nerve on the Romanians’ already weakened trust in politics, which led to a spike in online activity concerning the upcoming protests. Over the first week of February Romanians have organized the largest peaceful manifestation since 1989, when the Communist regime fell in Romania, and became an inspiration for people everywhere, regardless of their level or civic participation. “The current confrontation in Romania exemplifies the ‘new politics’ in the era of global populism, where pushback against democratic norms by incumbent politicians is met with popular resistance.” The call to actions, the updates, basically the entire organization of the protest has been rendered online, through the use of Facebook groups, events, hashtags, as well as the involvement of influencers. Many Facebook groups fighting this new ordinance arose, but a Facebook group called ‘Corupția ucide’ created by an online activist, Florin Badita, stood out. At the moment it has approximately 50000 followers, but counting on weak ties, information shared on the group reaches more than those followers. The page had been originally set up after a deadly fire took place in a nightclub in Bucharest, killing more than 60 people. In the following days, Romanian people took to the streets and the current government at that time resigned, being accused of corruption. Romania had a technocrat interim government for 1 year, until the elections in December 2016, when the same social democratic government came to the power, after having collected the majority of votes. Many young people did not vote, assuming their votes did not count either way. However, when the current government started applying their agenda, many people, including the very popular president among the youth, Klaus Iohannis, showed their concerns regarding the decisions the government was taking. Popular hashtags were #neamtrezit (we woke up/awoken people) #tineriada(youth revolution; a reference to protests in 1990 known as mineriada),

#rezist, encouraging and supporting a solidarity, going beyond any online/offline boundary. The main slogan used for the protests was “Noaptea ca hotii” (During the night, like thieves) implying that the politicians had acted at night, like thieves, when they passed the decree. “The signs of many protesters accuse the government of acting “thievishly” at night, of cowardice and fear to engage in a democratic deliberation about the proposed changes in legislation. Such moral outrage motivates a form of political participation that is symbolic and ritualistic.”

The protests have been an inspiration for other countries’ youth to act and voice their concerns regarding corruption in their own states. The media coverage for the protests was extensive, as international media such as Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN and many others talked about them. However, even if the people had been prepared to take to the streets individually, the fact that there was a group, aimed on solidarity and sharing the same ideals against corruption, helped build a spirit of community and solidarity. On the 5th of February 2017, there were 600000 in the streets in Romania, with 300000 only in Bucharest. “By last Sunday, the demonstrations swelled to 500,000 nationwide as young, urban

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demonstrators mixed with a disparate crowd of families, anarchists and even Orthodox priests bearing crosses.” The people had a choreography organized beforehand, to have their phone flashlights pointed at the sky at 21:00 so as to create a sea of light. The picture of that moment became extremely popular in the media in the following days. It was a moral revolution altogether, with people defending concepts such as justice or honour. “Dragostea de țară nu se ură, nu se declamă, nu se strigă pe stadioane la manifestări electorale, nu se pune pe afiș. Este un punct mic de întâlnire cu sine, pe o hartă cu milioane de lumini.” (Author’s translation: You do not yell out, claim, cheer on a stadium or at an electoral meeting, you don’t put your love of country on a banner. It is a small meeting point with yourself, on a map with millions of lights.)

After 5 days, the decree was repealed, which made the protesters even angrier, as they were sensing mischief aimed at them, and continued to demonstrate peacefully in Victoria Square, even though in lower numbers, despite the heavy snowstorms and the cold weather. “The nightly gatherings have adopted the kind of flat organisational structure favoured by protests like the Occupy Movement. There are no formal structures or leaders. And no speeches. Laurentiu Ion, a tech entrepreneur, beamed graphic slogans on to the surrounding offices with a high-powered projector, prompting frantic searches of neighbouring flats by policemen in search of the culprits.” The main internal organization platform that organizers are using is a chat group on Slack, a tool known for team management.

1.3 Terms and definitions employed

Millennials, civic engagement, online behaviours, “slacktivism”, choreography of assembly.

The Millennials represent the generation born between the 1980 and 2000. They are the generation that grew up with technological advances, in a society very different than the generations before them experienced. The concept of the “Generation Y” was first coined in an Ad age article in 1993. This generation comes after the X Generation, or the Baby Boomers. The Y Generation is often described as being formed of egocentric individuals, who are prone to exposing all their life details in the online world. This label has however become somewhat generic, as there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach

6 Andrew Byrne, Neil Buckley, “The week revolution returned to Romania” available at https://www.ft.com/content/e9b6066e-ef7e-11e6-ba01-119a44939bb6 accessed on 28.03.2017.
8 Andrew Byrne, Neil Buckley, “The week revolution returned to Romania” available at https://www.ft.com/content/e9b6066e-ef7e-11e6-ba01-119a44939bb6 accessed on 28.03.2017.
when coming to Millennials. There are many differences between them as individuals, but the media keeps casting the group as deviant, framing them as scapegoats for the current political context.

The members of the Y Generation are characterized by a mosaic of features which might sometimes look incompatible: “confident, self-assured, high self-esteem, and an optimistic outlook on life”⁹, even though they grow up in a tumultuous time, when terrorists were a recurring theme on newscasts. “Millennials reveal the promise and changes of the group as they come of age during a time of critical, social, mediated and cultural changes.” (Novak, 2016:6) Due to the impact of globalization, westernization, social media and the speed of change, millennials worldwide have grown to be more sceptical, and developed a cognitive mechanism to get their information. “Now that millennials are reaching their prime adult years, staying informed about current events has become more important. A generation where a majority agrees their life feels richer because they are connected through social media.”¹⁰ The members of the Y Generation are a more diverse and segmented audience, often regarded as conceited and obtrusive to social and political issues. They are less divided on social issues, religion, politics, but are still very aware of the socio-political context although they reject any kind of political participation and consider themselves socially liberals. “They do not like the competitive and confrontational atmosphere created by the parties and many do not seem to want their beliefs and identity limited by party affiliation.”¹¹ News media can no longer act as gatekeepers, as millennials are prone to fact-check everything in their attempt to achieve a higher transparency. Their collective and civic actions are distinct and not acknowledged as genuine comparing to other generations.

“To older generations it may appear as if Millennials are choosing not to engage in traditional institutions of family, community, politics and workplace. Younger generations might say they are disillusioned or rightfully cynical about traditional or institutionalized forms of engagement and are seeking alternative forms”(Sinha, 2016:13)

The information age provided the young with a community in terms of a “digital place of common interest as well as a shared physical space”¹². It is their own public sphere. Gone are the days of the

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¹¹ Kiesa Abby et al. (2007): „Millennials talk politics: a study of college student political engagement”, CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement”.
blind following the blind. The current generation is the most informed generation of voters to date. “Their relatively high level of participation in the civic realm holds hope for the future”\(^{13}\). The nature of their participation to society and social causes in particular is, to some extent, peculiar, even latent. “Political engagement in the Millennial Generation needs to be looked at contextually not just statistically.” (Novak, 2016:102) Social Media technologies play a key role in the organization of social movement, having had a significant impact on civic engagement in recent years. “The information revolution has further empowered individuals by handing them the technology to compete against huge organizations: hackers vs. corporations, bloggers versus newspapers, etc.” (Stein, Sanburn, 2013). Nevertheless, these forms of latent participation are crucial to the understanding of the shaping of new forms of political behaviour and participation.

According to Gilman and Stokes, millennials, in particular, are “gravitating away from institutional forms of participation, as they are finding other, more accessible avenues to participate in their communities and engage in the world. Millennials are spearheading civic uses of social media.”(Gilman, Stokes, 2014) Thus social media, their playground, has been rendered a prominent part of the organization structure of social activism in the information age. Digital collective actions tend to scale up more quickly, driving offline activism attitudes and redefining civic engagement. However, according to various scholars and media sources, their participation seems to stop at online petitions and events created on Facebook. They are recurring “slacktivists”. It is very common and fashionable nowadays to share your political opinions on your Facebook wall, or to like and share blog posts, tweets, Instagram pictures relating to a certain cause. Activist and advocacy groups have noticed that lately there has been a spike in the use of social media to build support on social causes. “Such forms of advocacy, particularly those related to social media, are often derisively referred to as “slacktivism” or armchair activism. “Slacktivism” requires little to no involvement and can be usually done from the comfort of a phone screen. These activities pose a minimal cost to participants; one click on Facebook or retweet on Twitter and the slacktivist can feel that he or she has helped to support the cause.”\(^{14}\) Raising awareness for a cause is indeed important. But there is not very much traction following when it comes to “slacktivism”. There has been a decrease in civic engagement overall in terms of people acting up. “Beyond voting, other traditional forms of civic engagement—

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\(^{13}\) Ibidem, p.2.

including group and union membership, contacting public officials, attending public meetings, and working with neighbours—have also decreased.\textsuperscript{15} The young generation is “consistently berated for its lack of civic responsibility, inadequate levels of political knowledge and unwillingness to get involved in current affairs.”(Dahlgren, 2009:13) “Millennials are still treated humorously. Although the group is actively being identified and discussed in the media, the mentions of the group are largely negative and problematic, in that they fail to recognize political engagement and instead use the group as part of the less-serious side.” (Novak, 2016:73) As Jeff Fromm states, although they are a generation constantly striving to make the world better, they don’t consider themselves activists. These online activities have always been regarded with scepticism by many scholars. For example, Robert Putnam, a political scientist, most known for his work in the area of social capital, repeatedly expressed his disapproval of the Internet and everything related to it: “The Internet will have a detrimental impact on engagement, because it is primarily used for entertainment. As a result, citizens may have less time to devote to civic or social activities, such as joining civic groups, visiting family and friends, etc.” (Putnam quoted by Boulianne;2009)

However, as it has turned out lately, the Internet is in fact, capable of mobilizing politically inactive populations, because it provides peer approval and solidarity, and thus it might entice citizens to engage in politics to a greater extent: “New online opportunities for expression may help with the identification and organization of like-minded citizens expanding engagement across diverse populations. The convenience or novelty of online engagement may draw in those disillusioned with traditional methods of political participation.” (Boulianne;2009) The 21\textsuperscript{st} century and its population do not react to the same incentives, and are not motivated by the same type of political and civic causes. Their approach to civic engagement has adapted to the digital age. “Slacktivism” could now be regarded as the new kind of civic engagement, allowing users to always be on point, reinvigorating civic life to some extent. What is also peculiar to civic engagement nowadays is the emergence of \textit{soft leaders} in the online environment. “The post-industrial age is characterised by a social complexity which largely escapes the capture of traditional bureaucratic organisation, like parties and trade unions.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:29) Millennials nowadays choose more liquid forms of organizing, as they are disembedded from \textit{pre-established and stable collective identities}. However, the social movements emerging online do require a sense of direction as well as prior mobilization actions. Creating a collective identity is important for social movements, as the conveyed messages grow stronger if there is a sense of unity

\textsuperscript{15} Holie Gilman, Elizabeth Stokes(2014): “The civic and political participation of Millennials” in New America
and unanimity. However, although posing as horizontal and leaderless movements, collective actions do showcase a somewhat concealed leadership, which throughout the current thesis will be addressed as soft leadership. “Social media adoption among activists is accompanied by the rise of forms of soft and emotional leadership, which are by and large indirect as well as invisible but nonetheless effective in giving collective action a certain degree of coherence and a sense of direction.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:157) Activists manage to shape the actions of social movements through mobilization techniques known as choreography of assembly. These actions are paramount to social movements as they facilitate their coming together in public space, and social media are crucial in this context. It is essential to create an emotional impetus, which is the main resource for protest participation. Assembling is “underscored by complex communicative and organisational practices, allowing for groups which are spatially dispersed but united by the same interests or convictions to act together.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:40)

And although the media is constantly stigmatizing people for their primarily online behaviours, research has actually shown that “political social networking site users are frequently active in other aspects of civic life”16. Online activism has opened many gates for the young, such as volunteering abroad, helping out in emerging countries, volunteering in local hospitals and hospices, etc., but which are not necessarily a political form of engagement, and thus are not regarded as appropriate forms of civic engagement. The Internet has become “a focus for expressions of hope and anxiety and a site for making moral judgement about the kind of world we ought to live in” (Hine, 2015:18)

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2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Civic Engagement

As defined by the Oxford Dictionary, the word *civic* relates to ‘the duties or activities of people in relation to their town, city or local area’. *Engagement*, is simply defined by the same dictionary as the action of being engaged. However, together, the two words defined above, mean much more than just an action, they imply active participation. “Civic engagement is often defined precisely as forms of voluntary activity aimed toward solving problems in the community and helping others” (Dahlgren, 2009:45) Civic engagement is a concept that is nowadays of very high interest to the media in particular, as there are apparently declining levels of participation, as well as low electoral turnout and public weariness. However, “the debate on citizenship is replete of discourses that exhort young people to adapt the dutiful practices of participation that correspond to the regulatory norms established by earlier generations.” (Loader, Vromen, Xenox, 2014)

The media have noticed, however, a disengagement from the traditional channels of political and civic participation. Many years ago, when people were unhappy with their governments, or were simply upset with the political situation in their own countries, they used to be part of parties, sign petitions, take to the streets, march or do sit-ins to express their disapproval. People would organize these manifestations using landlines, word of mouth, or through the news. The efforts were impressive. Maybe one of the best examples for such manifestations is the Civil Rights Movement in the US in the 1960’s. This movement consisted of major campaigns of civil resistance seeking social change. Various non-violent activities were organized, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Greensboro sit-in, or the Selma to Montgomery March, transforming American democracy. As Peter Dahlgren states, “democracy emerges, at best, unevenly across the world, through political struggles: it rarely comes as a gift to people from the powerful circles.” (Dahlgren, 2009:3) The manifestations served as an example for other group movements regarding feminism and inequality, the LGBTQ community, etc. Nevertheless, nowadays the dynamics of speaking out have changed drastically thanks to as well as due to technological advances. If the Civil Rights Movement is a defining demonstration for the 20th century, the 21st century is so far best known for movements such as the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street. What is special about the former two is their origin and support, as they have prompted “a flurry of online support from ideological sympathizers to keep the movement going.”17

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17 Tim Mak, “Occupy Wall Street copies Arab Spring” in Politico, available at
movements were organized mainly online having “a horizontal, autonomous, leaderless, modified-consensus-based system with roots in anarchist thought.” However, even if there is so much media coverage on these topics of *Twitter revolutions*, and it has been enquired whether the internet has the potential to build social capital, it is difficult to establish any causality relation between the online and the offline milieus: “There is still no consensus about the impact of online communication on citizen's civic and political engagement.” (Vissers;Stole, 2014) Nevertheless, civic engagement is by definition a collective action, drawing on communities acting up together for a greater cause. As Ekman and Amnà see it, “such engagement comes in the form of collaboration or joint action to improve conditions in the civil sphere.” (Ekman, Amnà, 2012) Therefore it is only fair to discuss the concept of social capital next.

2.2. Social Capital

Alexis De Tocqueville was one of the first people to discuss the idea of social capital, when observing the American communities, describing it at that time as *habits of the heart*. Social capital is based on 4 main concepts: trust, reciprocity, collective action and networking. Essentially, “social capital can be seen as the social fabric of a community” (J.R. Cook, 2016) This concept is of great importance when researching civic engagement behaviours, as it employs to some extent the same sense of community and collective action as civic engagement does, leading to an actual increase in the former. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, whose main focus was the transfer of power, was the first scholar to formally describe social capital as an “aggregate of the actual potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (LeShaunne Johnson, 2016). Moreover, Nieminen states that social capital depends on social networks and it should clearly be perceived as a collective property, because it usually arises in communities and neighborhoods. The social networks mentioned here are the “core building blocks of the aforementioned communities and the development of social capital.” (J.R. Cook, 2016) To sum up, by exchanging resources and working on common goals to solve problems, a community is able to bridge social capital. Putnam, another influential scholar researching the topic of social capital also mentions the importance of social networks as well as social trust when speaking about this concept. What is salient about Putnam and his approach to social capital and civic engagement, is the “nostalgia for the golden age of traditional associations” (Wu Song, 2009:16). However, one of his main findings


18 Ibidem.
in his well-known book *Bowling Alone* is the fact that there is a decline in civic engagement in the American Democracy, mainly due to *infotainment*: “Informal ties of all sorts were unraveling, and Americans were becoming an ever more isolated, cynical and anomic lot -- detached from civic life, deprived of the social networks that develop when communities are more closely knit.” However, when talking about civic engagement and social capital, Putnam refers to an older and dominant control culture, who, at some point has also been criticized for its choice of participation forms: civil rights, rock&roll, etc. The only acclaimed generation that scholars look up to when referring to civic engagement behaviours is the *Great Generation*, an altruistic generation, who chose to go to war and fight for their countries, almost a century ago. Nevertheless, times change, and so do the generations, challenging thus “the traditional definitions and categorizations of political and civic participation” (Novak, 2016:143). As seen now, young people seem to be more individualistic as far as their participation is concerned. However, they “become more nomadic and mobile, make more individual choices and have more technological capacities at their disposal to avoid being the traditional sitting ducks of mass media communication.” (Dahlgren, 2009: 45) What is at stake here is the fact that the concept of social capital is also subject to change and many scholars argue whether “the early examples of social capital still hold true with and for Millennials.” (Jill W. Sinha, 2016)

“We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that our construction of social capital so far is utopian in the positive achievements a group of like-minded individuals can accomplish.”(Greenberg et al, 2016:5)

### 2.3. The Internet as a participatory space

“Social capital is about networks and the net is the network to end all networks” (Putnam quoted by Wu Song, 2009:16)

As argued earlier, when discussing civic engagement behaviours and social capital, there is a change in generations and their activities that cannot be denied and millennials’ use of social media for both political and civic engagement is a growing research field at the very moment. One of the first scholars to acknowledge the tendency toward online behaviours was Putnam, who considered Internet to “have a detrimental impact on engagement, because it was primarily used for entertainment. As a result, in Putnam’s opinion, citizens may have less time to devote to civic or social activities.”

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19 Margaret Talbot, “Who wants to be a legionnaire” available at [http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/25/reviews/000625.25talbott.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/06/25/reviews/000625.25talbott.html), accessed on 03.03.2017.
(Boulianne, 2009) However, it has turned out that Putnam’s affirmations were debatable, as it has actually turned out that “new media technologies can actually promote civic empowerment” (Dahlgren, 2009:55). As a matter of fact, the internet seems to resemble Habermas’ idea of a weak public sphere as it is an informal setting that allows “not only for the circulation of ideas and the development of political will and public opinion, but also for the emergence of collective identities,” (Dahlgren, 2009:73) as it is overall a weak tie instrument.

The Web 2.0 represents a new participatory space, influential in “characterizing a changing set of expectations about the relationship between ordinary users and the Internet” (Hine, 2015:18) as well as a familiar setting where people start making moral judgements regarding the world nowadays. Overall, as stated before, the Web 2.0 is the own public sphere of the young, facilitating online politics. The Internet of Things, simply known as IoT, the inter-networking of different devices able to collect and exchange data, is based on machine-to-machine communication and is overall a very disruptive trend, constantly evolving. The cyberspace has become a part of our everyday lives, providing a framework for broad social participation. As expected, the internet has also started to be a great influence in terms of politics as it “has become indispensable for the growth of advocacy and issue politics, social movements and activist networks outside parliamentarian party politics” (Dahlgren, 2009:161) Social media, in particular, is an essential tool to mobilize reactions and to develop citizens’ knowledge of political issues, thus facilitating their participation in the civic and political life. While it is noticeable that there is chemistry between the online social movements and the offline ones it is difficult to establish a relationship of causality between the two: “the metadata demonstrate a positive relationship between social media and participation in civic and political life. The question remains whether the relationship is causal and transformative” (Boulianne, 2015)

Nevertheless, since the digital took over our lives entirely, new concepts have materialized, or old ones have simply shifted and adapted to these times. For example, online communities have emerged ever since the Internet became popular, and they are praised for nurturing a climate of solidarity and trust. (Dahlgren, 2009:199) People, and especially internet users do not feel the need to have traditional social ties anymore, or face-to-face communities, as they can just as well connect and bond with someone from the other side of the world, who have similar sets of values. As Wu Song puts it, “for many, these new forms of social connection promise not only a fundamental change in our experience and understanding of interpersonal relationships, but also a change in the process, a transformation of public life as we know it.” (Wu Song, 2009:1) Virtual communities have been a recurring topic in
analysing contemporary social capital, raising the question of whether “early examples of social capital still hold true with and for Millennials.” (Jill W. Sinha, 2016) Nevertheless, it is obvious that in this age, the youth have turned away from any conventional forms of involvement and are fostering their own set of social ties. “The concept of ‘community’ has become so brittle in the face of modernity’s new social and technological realities, that it has become a term made increasingly confused and meaningless in its overuse.”(Wu Song, 2009:28) What brings people together online nowadays is the knowledge that the internet and its online communities are “inherently democratic” (Wu Song, 2009) and also usually have a flat hierarchy, leading to no ideological control whatsoever, as it is a common fact that young people tend to prefer less hierarchical and loose networks to the more traditional ones. “Many scholars have argued that romanticized views of the face-to-face communities conveniently forget the social control and lack of individual freedom that often accompany the stability and richness of tight-knit communities.” (Wu Song, 2009: 27) Fortunately, it is less simple to exercise ideological control over online communities, if not impossible. And social media is one of the “core building blocks of communities and developing of social capital.” (Johnson, 2016:165) Another argument why online communities and activism in general are so popular, is the fact that the internet has simplified certain organizational steps, has reduced the costs of organizing a manifestation, and has also allowed for incidental information to be shared, and therefore has made raising awareness much simpler. As stated in a Pew Research Center report, approximately half of the Facebook users “are exposed to news incidentally through social network ties and due to this exposure, they might be exposed to mobilizing information without having to actively seek it out.” (Boulianne, 2015) Xenox, Vromen and Loader, also mention the benefits of social media in their article regarding the patterns of the former: “by lowering the costs for engagement and providing new ways to discover and get involved with issues, social media may have a great potential for not just mobilizing but also broadening political participation”(Xenox et al, 2014) Therefore, as it has been stated by many scholars researching the topic of civic engagement, “virtual communities have been hailed as novel new ways of jump-starting civic engagement” (Pasek, More, Roner, 2009)

“The use of net helps create new conditions for democratic engagement and citizenship as social agency has found new forms of expression in this milieu. This sense of empowerment that can follow from net activism supports newer forms of citizen identity, emerging in tandem with newer ways of enacting democratic politics” (Dahlgren, 2009:199)
As Dahlgren states in his book, the internet has become a participatory space that empowers the young users, allowing them to create a climate of solidarity and trust among themselves and engage in social change actions. There are many loose and fluid activist networks being set up, networks that have a flat non-hierarchical organization and grassroots foundation, being overall powerful organizational tools for mobilizing activists as well as social movements. What social media is able to provide is basically an enhancement of dissemination of information and many-to-many communication, appropriate for politically engaged individuals as these “communities appear to function most powerfully as a tool for individuals who are politically and socially inclined and motivated to participate in collective action” (Wu Song, 2009:126) What we witness nowadays, are not collective actions anymore, but connective actions, as the internet has managed to create new modes of the diffusion of protest and solidarity, and has overall become a decisive force in the process: “with its global architecture, the internet allows for collaboration and participation beyond time and space constraints.” (Van Laer, Van Aelst, 2010)

2.4. Online activism

“The internet is not only an embodiment of a society’s priorities and assumptions but also a powerful agent that intervenes in ongoing social activity and the maintenance of social order” (Wu Song, 2009:7) At the moment, social media represent the primary news source for the youth. It is mainly online that they react, engage, inform and co-exist altogether. “Social media can be seen as the contemporary equivalent of what the newspaper, the poster, the leaflet or direct mail were for the labour movement.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:4) As mentioned before, social media and the Internet overall have been regarded as contributing to the civil decline of the youth. However, we are witnessing a cultural change. There is not a discontinuity but rather a redefinition of civic engagement. As Castells was saying, “formal organisations are losing their grip on individuals and group-ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid networks.” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) Young people nowadays find new ways to voice their concerns and to “garner new agents of representativeness.” (Loader, Vromen, Xenon, 2014) Social media have proven to have the power to create social network ties that can be mobilized, allowing people to “come in contact with social movement networks and creating a sense of collective identity based on common interests and a shared agenda.” (Lomicky & Hogg quoted by Mico & Ripolles, 2014) Thus, the Internet has become, over time, a potent tool for civic and political participation, a crucial motivation for the core constituency of movements. Social media is based on weak ties which on their end, can facilitate incidental information exposure and thus increase the chance of
participating to the civic and political life, having trusted friends as curators for everyday news content. “Participation becomes self-motivating as personally expressive content is shared with and recognized by others, who, in turn, repeat these networked sharing activities.” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) It is well known that many protests such as the Indignados, #Occupywallstreet, the Arab Spring, only to name a few, have emerged online and then were taken to the streets. “Modern media have always constituted a channel through which social movements not only communicate but also organize their actions and mobilize their constituencies.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:4) What is special about social media, and about social networks, in particular, is the fact that they foster horizontal, non-hierarchical organization as well as their ability to reduce the costs for communication and coordination of a manifestation. “Social network sites have become a genre of social media that lowers barriers to communication, facilitates the display of identity information and enables like-minded individuals to easily discern their common ground, thus helping users cultivate socially relevant interactions.” (Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe, 2004) Vromen, Xenox and Loader call this “organizationally brokered coalitions”. Young people have a rather individualistic approach to politics, instead of a collectivist one, which seems to be the norm, and get engaged with ad-hoc campaigns and movements instead of committing on a long-term to a certain political party. “Digitally networked actions are emerging during a historic shift in late modern democracies, in which younger citizens are moving away from parties, broad reform movements and ideologies.” (Bennett & Segerberg)

These organizationally enabled networks usually foster everyday political talk, which is essential to maintaining political engagement. While many scholars have tried to pin social media down to being a catalyst for offline action, it is clear that social media is actually a debate space where people engage and connect over shared ideals. “Social media use may be initiating new patterns of political engagement in the digital age.” (Xenox, Vromen, Loader, 2014) We can refer to social media as a mediator of emerging forms of social gatherings, a cyberspace where people interact and choreograph massive sit-ins, protests, assemblies. Nevertheless, even if all the online movements insist they are leaderless, horizontal, non-hierarchical and spontaneous as Gerbaudo states in his book, Tweets and the Streets, there are actually leaders, although soft, who take care of the internal communication and “help setting the scene for the gatherings, by constructing common identifications and accumulating or triggering an emotional impulse towards public assembly”. (Gerbaudo, 2012:13) If we were to consider one of the previous sub-chapters of the current research, we could call Gerbaudo’s choreography of assembly, the bridging social capital of the Internet, consisting of stable cooperation
leading to a sense of community based on weak links. Thus, a sense of unity and togetherness is created among the participants, fighting for the same ideals, contributing to the participatory culture that social media entails, or as Castells stated, “fearful around the world, united on the web”. While online activism encompasses activities such as online petitions, donations, online sit-ins, hashtag activism, corporate activism, it is the mobilization that it is most prominent nowadays. As Gerbaudo defines it, mobilization consists in a “performative act of gathering or assembling which spatially recomposes together in a temporary unity what was previously torn apart, and which in doing so creates public space as a form of collective and emplaced experience.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:39)

Considering our contemporary society, and especially the current socio-political context, without a complex process of technical and symbolic mediation it would be impossible to assemble a group of dispersed individuals but otherwise united by the same convictions. The tools social media has to offer are only appropriate for these kind of actions, allowing the social capital to come together and through a logic of consensus to make an impact.

The concept of “slacktivism”

“Mobile phones and internet websites offer a virtual proximity that no longer requires physical closeness.” (Bauman quoted by Gerbaudo, 2012:33) Social media and its tools can now bring together people on the ground, as well as people following the events from a certain distance, invoking a sense of solidarity altogether. As stated before, the connective logic that the internet provides has been criticized repeatedly by scholars who believe in the traditional forms of engagement, scholars such as Putman, who eventually admitted that the internet can, in fact, be beneficial to civic engagement. However, there are still scholars who are inherently against the bottom-up and grassroots movements organized online. Such a belligerent scholar is Evgeny Morozov, who wrote a book on “slacktivism”, called The net delusion: the dark side of internet freedom. “‘slacktivism’ is the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation. Why bother with sit-ins and the risk of arrest, police brutality or torture if one can be as loud campaigning in the virtual space?” (Morozov, 2009) He argues for the non-existing causality between the online and offline stating that, “if a tree falls in the forest and everyone tweets about it, it may not be the tweets that moved it.” (Morozov, 2011:35) He also believes that online activism consists of social loafing, considering that if there are many individuals engaged in an action, people will implicitly put less effort into a task: “the number of participants diminished the relative social pressure on each and often results in inferior outputs” (Morozov, 2011: 183) More than often, scholars critiquing online activism state that young individuals only get engaged to increase their morale, and
to present a positive image to others, thus due to narcissistic behaviours. Kristofferson et al see “slacktivism” as “a willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change.” (Kristofferson, White, Peloza, 2014) In this context, tokens of support are often used to reinforce the participation to a cause and to prove the de facto support. However, this token of support, in most cases, can lead to a more meaningful form of social engagement, representing a stepping stone for the civic participation of a certain individual. “Once individuals have engaged in a particular behavior they will be more likely to engage in congruent behaviours in the future.” (Kristofferson, White, Peloza, 2014)

Nevertheless, while “slacktivism” may indeed not be as efficient as active participation, it is a means of raising awareness altogether. “‘slacktivism’ is a derogatory and damaging label, particularly when associated with youth. Simple actions may be signatures of a slacktivist but they’re also the first powerful steps of a cause champion.” As mentioned in the Introduction, the youth nowadays, although representing a powerful voice for awareness-building tend to be monitorial citizens, engaging in rather latent forms of participation. “Latent forms of participation are crucial to understand new forms of political behavior and the protests for political participation in different countries.” (Ekman, Amna, 2012) It is “self-evident that the future of democracy lies in its youth” (Dahlgren, 2009: 199) and downsizing this aspect as well as their forms of participation is erroneous. However, while dissenting the idea that “slacktivism” is beneficial as well, people could start embracing the idea of active disengagement, which supports participation through unconventional channels, which is exactly the approach Millennials have to civic and political participation, keeping distance but still supporting the cause.

2.5. Democracy 2.0

Throughout this theoretical framework on civic engagement and related concepts, we have reached the conclusion that although there is an apparent declining level of civic engagement and participation to political life, there is a shift from traditional forms of participation to more unconventional ones, soon to become regarded as the norm. “There has been major growth in political activity on social networking sites since 2008 and discussions on SNS can lead to further engagement with political

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issues.” (Smith, 2013) Social media thus acts as a debate scene, where people sharing the same ideals meet, interact, and exchange opinions, regardless of the physical space. However, as Alison Novak states in her book, social anxiety on behalf of older generations is experienced with every new generation of youth, and thus there is a trend to berate on everything that that certain generation might do. “Older generations fear the changes reflected in the youth’s behaviours are indicative of new social forms. These new social forms replace the behaviours of the older generations thus causing concern and social anxiety in those who favor old practices.” (Novak, 2016:99) This could explain the constant persecution of the Millennial Generation and its practices, or as Novak calls it, why they are seen as the evils of social change. “The negativity surrounding millennials is a ubiquitous phenomenon in the aging process, a complicated social context of coming of age.” (Novak, 2016:171)

“The internet might be able to mobilize politically inactive populations. The convenience of internet may entice a broader set of citizens to engage in politics. Increased information access may reduce knowledge deficiencies that are used to excuse disengagement and it might also help with the identification and organization of like-minded citizens, expanding engagement across diverse populations.” (Boulianne, 2009)

The internet can, in fact, reinvigorate civic life, as it acts as a vehicle for social change. In the end, it is “the engagement of the citizens that gives democracy its legitimacy as well as its vitality, as something propelled by conscious human intentionality” (Dahlgren, 2009:12) although constantly critiqued on their low levels of engagement, and depicted as a scapegoat for the current political context, young people have not actually abandoned engagement but rather refocused their political engagement on what may be called alternative politics. We are thus assisting a civic regeneration, as Dahlgren calls it. What social media offers is a connective logic, which even Putnam supports: “The more and better connected one is, the more likely one is to participate as an effective citizen.” (Dahlgren, 2009:159)

The conclusion we can draw here is that the Internet can only be beneficial to political participation in the digital age, allowing for new forms of engagement to arise and become the new norm, not alienating us, but bringing us closer, facilitating the organization of social movements.

Instead of saying that young people are apathetic when it comes to politics and constantly belittling their practices and behaviours, it would be more fitting to acknowledge the fact that young people have developed a high degree of skepticism, and are not attracted by the traditional forms of participation anymore: “young people may be abandoning traditional modes of so-called dutiful citizen participation in favour of a more personalized politics of self-actualization and expressive engagement with greater emphasis on non-traditional modes of engagement.” (Xenox, Vromen, Loader, 2014)
Thus the millennial generation is walking away from the dutiful conception of political participation that was highly dominant for previous generations. “Young people practice politics in ways which take advantage of a permeable public/private divide to politicize morality and practice a micro-politics of everyday life.” (Manning, 2013) As stated before, there is a generational shift in civic engagement, and these attitudes and political values that the youth are displaying should be regarded as important agents of political and social change, a *recalibration of modern political institutions and practices*. The youth are therefore “disrupting the normative repetitive depictions of the dutiful citizen.” (Xenox, Vromen, Loader, 2014)

“Young people are the heaviest users of social media and are also in the process of forming norms and habits of citizen engagement that are typically stable across the life course.” (Xenox, Vromen, Loader, 2014) Therefore, the generation Web 2.0 might be reconfiguring the current democratic practices, leading to a new control culture, based on online participatory practices as well as *a preference for online, discursive forms of political engagement and organizing*, Democracy 2.0. (Xenox, Vromen, Loader, 2014) A new system based on connective action, on interactivity and interpersonal communication, which are paramount in the digital age. “History and generational life cycle predicts that Millennials will eventually be viewed as the control culture by most media sources.” (Novak, 2016: 158)

2.6. Overview

The concepts reviewed in the current theoretical framework have helped set the direction of the current study. As this chapter has tried to establish, civic engagement does not have a single agreed-upon meaning, especially in these times defined by an increased level of individualization. People are now growing a sense of personal autonomy, do not concur with the authorities’ ideologies and embrace new forms of politics, informal ones, where there are no more boundaries. What is discernible from the theoretical framework is that indeed the youth have critically distanced themselves from traditional institutions and their resolutions, as the latter do not have any positive impact on the socialization of individuals anymore. However, that does not implicitly mean that they have lost interest in political issues. What we are experiencing nowadays is a feeling of civic regeneration, as youth prefer organisms with no implied ideological control, such as the grassroots movements with no strict echelons, organisms where they can have a peer to peer communication, where they create their own notion of *social capital*. Hence the youth are fostering political innovation to some extent, by “forming new publics, new ways of framing social reality, that foster the formulation of new issues and strategies, that problematize or denaturalize conventional perceptions and entrenched ideological
positions.” (Dahlgren, 2009:91) The concepts discussed in this chapter are crucial to the present research and to the sample chosen for discussion as they define the contemporary social movements, which are a hallmark of the millennials’ approach to politics overall. They have been included and scrutinized in the current research as a means of support to the hypothesis, that civic engagement behaviours have been redefined with the generational shift and the development of new media.
3. Materials and Methods

“The Internet has brought us together in myriad new ways, but still much of the interpretative work that goes on to embed it into people’s lives is not apparent on the Internet, as its users weave together highly individualized and complex patterns of meaning out of these publicly observable threads of interaction.” (Hine, 2015:11) The current research, as stated before, aims to determine how civic engagement has been redefined through a generational shift, as well as to identify the Romanian youth’s approach to their apparent civic and political engagement. In undertaking the current research, I will employ a combination of qualitative analytical methods: online ethnography and semi-structured interviews. “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” (Denzin&Lincoln quoted by Flick, 2007:2)

“Different research methods carve out different versions of reality, and all fail to capture in total the messy contingency of everyday life,” (Hine, 2009:185) Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods aim to assess the “validity of the study with reference under study not following exclusively abstract academic criteria of science.” (Flick, 2009: 20) While quantitative research focuses on an accurate account of outcomes, qualitative approaches aim at describing an entity or event in a more comprehensive manner: “quantitative data lead to results in the actual sense of the word, whereas qualitative data play a more illustrative part.” (Flick, 2009: 43) Mixed method approaches are very often employed by scholars in their research, as they allow for multiple approaches to be used and to have the quantitative data explained further through the use of a qualitative approach. Nevertheless, qualitative research is more open and reflexive than the quantitative one, being less canonized. Therefore, the goal of a qualitative research study is to rather develop new or empirically grounder theories rather than test the already known ones. “Quantitative methods are only research economic shortcuts of the data generating process, whereas only qualitative methods, particularly the objective hermeneutics, are able to provide the actual scientific explanations of facts.” (Flick, 2009:25) The target audience of the current study is represented by the Millennials from Romania, as they have shown new forms of engagement and exhibited a desire to bring social change to the political arena
of Romania. As scholars such as Novak, Manning, Vromen, Xenox and Loader started to re-examine the definition of political engagement and to acknowledge the new forms of participation employed by young people, it is clear that there has been a generational shift in practices in terms of engagement, therefore the focus right now should be casted on young people and on how they can actually “redefine he nature of engagement and with it challenge the traditional definitions and categorizations of political and civic participation.” (Novak, 2016:43) In identifying this target group, I have initially taken into account variables such as gender, class, ethnicity, but age and location seemed to be the most applicable ones when it came to such a big population. The vast majority of the people protesting peacefully consisted of young people, with their children and pets. Undoubtedly, just as in the case of the Arab Spring, most of the protesters seemed to have been belonging to the middle class, based on their political or professional affiliations. However, this data is not carved in stone as there were no surveys undertaken on this topic, but it was covered by the media, stating that corporate employees constituted a big part of the population present at the protests. Given that the 21st century youth are mainly known for their use of digital media, it only seemed appropriate to undertake an online ethnographic study to try and decipher concepts such as soft leadership, online communities, online social capital, and the overall the dynamics between the online and offline milieus.

“Online ethnography takes scrutiny, and some prolonged immersive engagement to pick up the nuance of how any particular group of people who may come together on Facebook may make use of its features. For another, not everything that we want to know about Facebook, as an ethnographer, is apparent publicly on Facebook itself. To find out how some particular group of people understand themselves through Facebook it may well be necessary to look at how these Facebook activities are produced and consumed, how they travel beyond the online location and are embedded in other forms of activity.” (Hine, 2015: 38)

However, in my study I am also aiming for an authentic account of reality, that is why I have chosen to employ a sequential explanatory strategy, having a follow-up method as well: qualitative semi-structured interviews, which will help explain and interpret the findings of the former. I have chosen interviews as a follow-up method because they can offer deeper insights to the background of the subject. “Interviews are a useful way for the ethnographer to drill down on a specific issue in depth and focus to emergent themes.” (Hine, 2015: 87) I have considered quantitative data to be inconceivable for my current research given the limited time resources, even though a quantitative

approach would have been inherently helpful for a representative outcome. Thus, I have chosen a qualitative approach, as it allows for more initial insights, that could eventually become a stepping stone for further extensive research.

3.1 Pilot Study

The pilot study for the present research was conducted in December 2016, and consisted in a research project which aimed to determine, whether online activism could drive offline action, as well as to document to some extent the way in which millennials approach social activism scenarios. Data used in the pilot study was gathered and analyzed through a mix method approach, by using a survey, with 55 participants, as a quantitative baseline measurement, along with a qualitative follow-up method, a focus group, with 4 people attending, which helped balance out eventual representative issues. A very important variable in this study was represented by the age of the participants. It was essential they were born between 1980-2000. Their education level and location also played an important role in the implementation, as the population was narrowed down to the millennials living and studying in Sweden at that moment. These variables were important as the surveys were administered online, in academic groups from Stockholm: Media Master JMK, Svenska Institutet Scholarship, on the premises that millennials are known for their digital presence and also because there is “less social desirability bias for online administered surveys” (Fowler, 2012:25, ch. 4). The focus group allowed access to insights which were unattainable. “The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group.” (Morgan, 1988, quoted by Flick, 2015:203). The study only came as a reinforcement for the claims already covered by media regarding the social media presence millennials have. However, it did unearth the fact that the participants had different opinions as to what civic engagement is and how it should be approached. The research questions were adapted to be more specific and oriented towards the actual nature of civic and political engagement, dismissing the fact that social media may or may not be a catalyst for it, as it was shown even before the pilot study that no causality whatsoever can be proven.

Another informal pilot study was undertaken at the beginning of February 2017, when there was a peak on online engagement regarding the subject of corruption. I have monitored all the calls to action that surfaced on my personal Facebook newsfeed, from influencers, friends, mutual friends, trending users, groups and Facebook pages. Using Evernote I took screenshots of all the online reactions of the Facebook users and I have tried to find a common ground to analyse them. Although influencers
such as renown journalists, cooks, actors, singers played a significant role in mobilizing the crowds, it would have been impossible to retrieve any relevant conclusions from their personal pages and furthermore to collect any tangible insights on how they managed to do it. A more realistic approach therefore was to closely monitor a Facebook page that stood out during the peak of the protests, Comptia Ucide. As Paulo Gerbaudo states in his book Tweets and the Streets, “influential admins and activist tweeps have played a crucial role in setting the scene for the movements by constructing common identifications and accumulating or triggering an emotional impulse towards public assembly.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:13) Drawing on Gerbaudo’s findings, I identified on the group the concept of choreography of assembly, and thus decided to follow it closely to see whether it was indeed a leaderless, horizontal and spontaneous social movement, promoting unity and togetherness between the Facebook users.

3.2. Online Ethnography

By undertaking an ethnographic research, I am aiming to answer the 1st Research Question. Virtual ethnography, as Christine Hine puts it, is a “way of bringing into focus both the assumptions on which ethnography is based, and the features which are taken to be special about technologies concerned.” (Hine) Thus online ethnography allows the researcher to get a clear insight by analyzing online communication techniques and the overall interaction of the group participants. In conducting an ethnographic study, one must “identify common threads and patterns, explore prevailing discourses and analyze emergent structures.” (Hine, 2009:92) Online ethnographic allows the researcher to closely study the social media setting by being, at the same time, immersed in it. Therefore one must pay attention to the kind of connections that are being made online and how can any meaning be built out of those diverse influences, eventually identifying the power structures and the mediation bodies. The internet is a very accessible place to realize this kind of research, as it acts as a proxy for behaviours. The online ethnographer thus uses the Internet as an everyday mirror for people’s behaviours, although this collected data can be somewhat distorted. “Ethnography is about trying to get inside practices of meaning making, and where these are fluid, contingent and individualizes, it seems fair enough that the ethnographer’s practices mirror that state of affair.” (Hine, 2009:132) However, when doing online ethnography or any other kind of qualitative research, there is always a chance that the researcher’s own opinions will interfere to some extent with the results, filtering the collected data through their own personal lens.
3.2.1 Sampling

“Selection decisions in qualitative research focus on persons or situations, from which data are collected, and on extracts from the material collected, from which novel interpretations are made or results are presented as examples.” (Flick, 2009:131) Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative research methods employ different sampling logics, aiming for relevant, in-depth, information as well as for a coverage of an “as wide a field as possible and to do analyses which are as deep as possible” (Flick, 2009:112)

“Sampling decisions cannot be made in isolation. There is no decision or strategy which is right per se. The appropriateness of the structure and contents of the sample, and thus the appropriateness of the strategy chosen for obtaining both, can only be assessed with respect to the research question of the study” (Flick, 2009:123) In order to be able to answer the first research question of the current study, a Facebook activist group, that had been previously praised by both the Romanian and the international media, was chosen as the main case for observation. As Flick states, cases “may be selected according to the intensity with which the interesting features, processes, experiences and so on are given or assumed in them.” (Flick, 2009:123) This certain group, mobilizing the Romanian youth, had been particularly active during the peaceful demonstrations that had taken place in Bucharest in February, therefore it was chosen as the main object of the online ethnographic study. Other Facebook groups, as well as social media influencers had been considered but due to scarce time resources, I employed a selective and purposeful sample, “shaped by the time the researcher has available to him, by his framework, by his starting and developing interests, and by any restrictions placed upon his observation by his hosts.” (Schatzman & Strauss, quoted by Coyne, 1997) However, many scholars consider that sampling in qualitative research is inherently purposeful, being based on their individual beliefs and perceptions.

3.2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

In order to realize the current research I have chosen one particular Facebook Group, Corupția Ucide, for my analysis, as I believe that it was there where most of the engaged individuals expressed their opinions regarding the situation in Romania, interacted, called for reactions, and overall organized the movement in Romania. I have spent approximately one week, when the protests happened, monitoring the Facebook page, using Evernote as a tool to keep track of my notes. The following three weeks I have only observed their calls to action, and the posts raising awareness to what was going on in the Government and tried to identify whether there were any soft leaders exercising any
kind of concealed leadership. I have introduced all the collected posts in an Excel spreadsheet in order to be able to have a clear view on the data. Online ethnography “provides a distinctive and very useful way of examining the Internet, which allows us to develop an in-depth understanding of the textures of social experience that arise as people engage with the various technologies that comprise the contemporary internet” (Hine, 2015:42)

Digital discourses and communication sharing provide impressive data collection opportunities. While collecting the data for the present study I took into account two main variables: the timeline and the nature of the posts, as it was important that they were not simply shared from another influential user but posted by the admins of the page. Albeit I did notice that the admins are social media savvy users and used influencers to their benefit in order to increase their reach, I chose not to follow those posts as they did not display the true nature of community building or a symbolic construction of public space, although they did share the same set of values as the ones promoted by the Facebook page itself. During 31st of January and the 2nd of March there had been more than 500 posts shared by the Facebook page, ranging from shared links, influencers statuses, proposals, etc. These posts have been downloaded from the Facebook page analytics setting. All my observations however consisted of screenshots, stored in Evernote and later on the captions have been introduced in another Excel spreadsheet chronologically for analysis purposes. Due to the page's dynamic character, the hour of the posts was not taken into consideration when undertaking the research, as it varied depending on the day and the corresponding events. Even though monitoring a very active Facebook page may imply massive amounts of data, as I have mentioned before, I chose only those posts that had been posted by the page in a time span of one month (31st of January to the 2nd of March. After going through all the posts twice, I have selected only 94 that I had considered relevant to my research. Observation took place daily. After one month, I reassessed the entire data collection, added some posts I found relevant on a second look and removed others I had considered relevant in the first stage of the research but were in fact trivial. As there were so many posts, I decided to categorize them and split them in 4 categories: call to action; raising awareness; peer solidarity; criticizing. I have employed the four categories drawing on Paulo Gerbaudo’s findings from his book, Tweets and the Streets regarding the choreography of assembly, as well as Peter Dahlgren’s book Media and Political Engagement, regarding networks. I picked these exact categories after I have identified the patterns they each shared: mobilization calls, cry for help, dissemination of information, disapproval of the system. I considered they were paramount to the current research’s aims, to pinpoint the organizers’ approaches and actions
in times of turmoil. Moreover, they mirrored their means of creating a sense of anticipation, essential to mobilizing crowds join forces and act as a collective.

“By becoming immersed in setting and in forms of mobility we can develop in-depth understanding of the sense which people make of their various forms of engagement with this set of technologies” (Hine, 2009:42) There is a recurrent debate regarding ethnography studies as to whether the researcher should or should not be involved in the online activities. While undertaking this research I had a participant-observant approach, in order to be able to make some meaning and to work out what was going on in the group's social media activity, thus to better understand and identify the main topics of discussion. My participative approach implied liking the page and setting the Facebook settings to See first, to make sure I get access to each and every post or event. However, I had previously been a fan of the page, as I definitely agree with and support their causes. Therefore, I am also aware of the fact that my sympathetic understanding of the setting might be reflected in the depiction of the occurrences. "Ethnographers are putting into words what was previously unspoken and their reflexive insights into what themselves can know become an important part of accounting what is distinctive about the setting." (Hirschauer quoted by Hine, 2012:92) Ultimately, I have also interacted directly with the admins of the page in order to conduct in-depth interviews, as it is useful to "be able to specify exactly in what ways the few people who have participated in the in-depth aspects of the study are typical or distinctive" (Hine, 2012:90) I contacted Florin Badita, the main admin of the aforementioned Facebook page, and let him know about my research and about my purposes. FB, the main organiser, granted me an even higher level of access to insights, as he made me analyst of the page and thus I also gained direct access to the analytics that Facebook has for pages.
3.3 Interviews

Online ethnography studies are most often followed by interviews, to allow a deeper insight into the researched topic. “Whilst the ethnographer can get a long way in understanding by observing and participating, and by exploring interactions both in the raw and in aggregated and visualized summaries, it is still often very useful to ask direct questions. Ethnographers often use interviews as a means of having an in-depth one-to-one conversation about the topic that most concerns them at the time.” (Hine, 2009:78) Although ethnographers might get a lot of insights by identifying common threads and patterns in the online milieu, a more formal interview will allow them to focus on an exact set of issues that are particularly appealing to him. Online ethnography implies having a highly individual, embodied agenda, with highly subjective accounts of the events. The interviewees’ account of the events can thus offer the researcher some clarity regarding the topic, helping him to understand how the former has come to have that exact perspective. By conducting interviews the researcher can take “a snapshot of the population”. However, interviews are not just about describing populations as representations of broad populations are not the aim of qualitative research methods, but they allow the researcher to deepen the researcher’s understanding, and to test his preliminary findings.

“The pervasiveness of conversation in human life is both a burden and a blessing for qualitative interviewers. On the one hand, qualitative interviewing appears as a very significant tool with which to understand central features of our conversational world. Contrary to widespread criticisms that qualitative research is too subjective, one might argue—given the picture of the conversational reality painted here—that qualitative interviewing is in fact the most objective method of inquiry when one is interested in qualitative features of human experience, talk, and interaction” (Brickman, 2013: 4)

In qualitative research interviews follow more than often the interviewers purpose of obtaining knowledge, and thus they involve a high degree of interpretation, based on descriptions previously established by the researcher. “There is never one correct way to understand or practice a method or a technique, for everything depends on concrete circumstances and on the researcher’s intentions of conducting a particular research project. Th is does not mean that “anything goes,” and that nothing is never better than something else, but it does mean that what is “better” is always relative to what one is interested in doing or knowing.” (Brinkman, 2013:25) The employed interviews should however have a low degree of structure, a flexible interview guide, in order to allow the interviewer to explore the context in a far greater degree of depth. In this sense, semi-structured interviews are one of the most common type of interview used in qualitative social research. (Dawson, 2007:28) “It is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order
to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena.” (Kvale & Brinkmann quoted by Brinkmann, 2013:21). This research method aimed to answer the second Research Question of the present research study. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted both on the telephone and online, through Google Forms. Internet interviews represent a very common method nowadays, even though they imply an asynchronous interaction in time. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed the interviewees to answer freely and to make further comments. Nevertheless, the interview guide had been prepared in advance, having been based on the theoretical framework and on insights gathered after the analysis of the first research method employed. “An interview situation may be experienced as exciting by the interview subjects and the interviewer, with continually new information, stories and insights turning up in their interaction.” (Kvale, 2007) The interviews had thus a more receptive style, the interviewees being free to control the way in which they addressed each of the questions.

3.3.1 Sampling
Identifying potential interviewees who own the appropriate competences is primordial when conducting qualitative interviews as a follow-up method. “Whether or not interviewees are identifiable and easy to contact is itself a characteristic of the field. In an ethnographic study, the interview is an important moment of data generation, but so is the process of deciding who might be interesting to interview and finding some way to forge a connection with them.” (Flick, 2007:80) The main target audience considered for the second part of the current research consisted of a very particular and purposeful sample: people engaged in the organization of the Romanian protests #rezist from February 2017, who could provide some thought-provoking invaluable insights regarding the concrete framework of the online and offline actions. The interviewees have been asked the same questions to ensure consistent measuring.

3.3.2 Data collection and analysis
The aim of the interview guide was to acquire an understanding of how the administrators of the Corruption Kills made use of the Facebook page to mobilize broader constituencies and to eventually take to the streets, while using social media. Their perceptions and viewpoints of the events are particularly valuable in mapping out the dynamics between the online and offline. The standardized open-ended interviews have been conducted online and by phone, over a period of three weeks. Before conducting the interviews a pilot test was undertaken with three activists that had attended the events, in order to make the necessary revisions before the implementation of the study. Therefore, the interview guide has been carefully revised prior to its application. In designing the interview
questions I took into account McNamara’s recommendations to create “effective research questions for interviews which includes the following elements: (a) wording should be open-ended (respondents should be able to choose their own terms when answering questions); (b) questions should be as neutral as possible (avoid wording that might influence answers, e.g., evocative, judgmental wording); (c) questions should be asked one at a time; (d) questions should be worded clearly (this includes knowing any terms particular to the program or the respondents' culture); and (e) be careful asking "why" questions.” (McNamara quoted by Turner, 2010). The interviewees were asked 10 questions regarding civic engagement and 3 demographic questions. The four interviews have been distributed online, by attaching a link to the interview in the message stating the aim and why I thought they would be appropriate respondents.

The first interview conducted for the present research consisted in a phone interview with the main organizer of the group, Florin Bădita, whom I contacted on Facebook, presented the aim of the present thesis and the idea of answering some questions regarding the #rezist protests. By conducting a phone interview, I was able to also ask probing questions, as a means of follow-up. He did not only answer my questions thoroughly but also offered to grant me access to the page’s analytics, by inviting me to be an analyst of the page, thus to have access to the page’s analytics and to every post in detail, without the possibility to contribute. Thereafter, I could see who the administrators and editors of the page were. I contacted six other people on Facebook, all of them active on the page, and I managed to get four more answers. However, it was not an easy task to reach the respondents, as all of them are only part-time activists with full-time jobs, thus have very busy agendas. Moreover, Facebook settings can additionally complicate the process, due to the message filters, therefore most of the times the messages sent to a person that is not in one’s agenda will most probably receive the message in the ‘Others’ folder, and these messages tend to be overlooked. Fortunately, however, people did see my messages and were quick to react and contribute. The collected data was very rich with qualitative data, leading thus to a cumbersome process of interpreting the results, in a way that would accurately convey a comprehensive account of the responses. The data was thus compiled into sections, identified beforehand, with the use of the theoretical framework. “These themes or codes are consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas that were common among research participants.” (Kvale, quoted by Turner, 2010)
3. Results & Discussion

The two quantitative methods, online ethnography and semi-structured interviews, employed in the current research generated a substantial amount of data relevant for the main aim and managed to answer the research questions. Analysis and interpretation have been conducted using a sequential explanatory strategy, drawing on the findings of the first research method in order to develop the latter.

4.1 Online ethnography

The Facebook page *Corruption Kills* (*Corupția ucide*) has at the moment of writing over 50000 likes and is very active on issues regarding corruption in Romania. The posts of the page range from calls to action, awareness raising posts, influencer opinions, users’ proposals, etc. As stated above, the data collection took place during the time span of 31st of January – 2nd of March. However, as Paulo Gerbaudo states, “one danger when approaching the field of social media is the possibility of being overwhelmed by the sheer abundance and diversity of the communicative practices they channel.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:3) Employing an online ethnographic approach to the current research turned out to be time consuming as well as manifold. Categorization seemed to be a suitable approach to be able to make sense of everything that was going on the page as well as to draw on the extensive data collected throughout the study. The observations made during the research focused on concepts such as calls to action, peer solidarity, criticism and awareness raising and overall to the *choreography of assembly* employed. Thus, the aim of the current research method was to understand how Millennials from Romania understand and make use of these new forms of engagement that technology has to offer. To be more precise, the online ethnography study aimed to answer the first research question employed in the current study, *How did Romanian Millennials devise and apply The Facebook page Corruption Kills* (*Corupția ucide*) *during the protests in February 2017?* Hence, the aim was to understand the role social media has in contemporary social movements by looking at the interaction that *soft leaders* have with users supporting the same cause and how they mediate *emerging forms of social gatherings.* (Gerbaudo, 2012) Drawing on Gerbaudo’s findings, my starting ground was that “social media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a choreography of assembly as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical assembling of a highly dispersed and individualized constituency.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:7)
The *About* section of the page describes the group’s aim: Corruption kills has been created after the #Colectiv tragedy: “We, the Corruption Kills community, have taken upon ourselves to educate, empower and inform people in regards to their own rights, freedoms, and the vile matters in the Romanian socio-political context. We are young, ambitious, blonde, dark-haired, red-haired, funny but most importantly we are serious, we come from all the social, working and age classes. What unites us is the will to lie in a better, more responsible Romania, a country that would be respectful of its citizens and of their rights. At the moment, the group has over 600 persons in a Slack group, where we debate on how to fight corruption and its corresponding effects.” The section also links to the community’s website, undeprotestez.ro which is more or less a collection of events all around the country, providing people with the necessary information, such as time and location, to take to the streets.

By looking strictly at the numbers, one could notice that there was significant activity on the Corruption Kills page. More exactly, more than 500 posts have been published in a time span of one month, with an average of 15 posts per day. The page has 7 main administrators, 22 editors, 1 moderator, 1 advertiser, and 2 analysts, the latter category consisting of two individuals undertaking online ethnography on the page, myself included. However, common users cannot post on the Facebook page, but they can send private messages, which have an 83% response rate, the administrators being quite receptive and thankful for any suggestions from their followers. The page also has a rating of 4.2 and 1,373 reviews most of them appreciative of the work the people behind it do. The administrators do use paid ads on their page but most of their extensive reach is done organically,

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22 “Coruptia Ucide este pagina care a fost creata dupa tragedia de la #Colectiv. Noi, comunitatea Corupția ucide, ne-am asumat un rol activ de a educa, responsabiliza si informa cetatenii asupra drepturilor acestora, libertatilor dar si lucrurilor mai putin sanatoase de pe scena politico-sociala a Romaniei. Suntem tineri sau mai putin tineri, ambitiosi, blonzi, bruneti, roscati, amuzanti dar seriosi, provenim din toate categoriile sociale, de varsta ori profesionale si ne uneste numai dorinta comuna de a trai intr-o Romanie mai buna, mai responsabila, o Romanie care sa isi respecte cetateanul si drepturile acestuia. In prezent reuneste peste 600 de persoane intr-un grup de Slack, unde ne consultam ca sa gasim solutii pentru a combate coruptia si efectele ei.”
which means that a high number of unique Facebook users have seen the posts through unpaid distribution.

What was also peculiar during the data analysis stage was noticing the spike in the number of likes that the page had gotten during the first troubling days of February. For example, on the 3rd of February only, there was an impressive boost as Corruption kills was liked by almost 3000 new Facebook users. In one month the page increased incrementally, booming from approximately 15000 likes to almost 48000. As mentioned before, this was achieved organically, showing us that people have probably shared the same set of values that the page was promoting.

Another thought-provoking finding was the fact that the page had been considerably active and engaging with its followers before the 31st of January decree event. In fact, the organizers had been raising awareness about the plans that the current Government had for the country since early January, and a protest was scheduled on 29th of January to alert the Government that people were watching it. Therefore, the page had been building loyalty and commitment for their cause beforehand. Undoubtedly, ever since the page was created, it had gained a constant followership that shared their principles and ideals, but what I was not aware of was the fact that it had been active in mobilizing
citizens, and creating a sense of anticipation, days before Romania’s biggest demonstrations since the fall of communism. What is visible in the charts is that the page had been considerably active in January 2016 and in the first half of February, the posts decreasing towards March and April, when the waters calmed down on the Romanian socio-political scene. However, they did remain constant in posting about corruption related matters. This can also be observed in their reach, which more or less matches the posts’ analytics, showing a spike in engagement before the beginning of February and during the month of February, numbers being steady to some extent during the following months.

However, as I have previously mentioned, I have only kept 94 posts for the current research, that I found relevant in terms of concepts employed. I have selected the aforementioned posts while monitoring the page and after assessing the analytics spreadsheet, provided by the main organizer, content-wise. Subsequently, in order to be able to analyse the data efficiently I have divided it in four categories:

- **Call to action:** As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary a call to action represents “something such as a speech, piece of writing, or act that encourages people to take action about a problem.” In his book, Paulo Gerbaudo talks about the power of assembly or mobilization, a process by which “a social movement is created and begins to take action, by assembling followers, funds and resources.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:37) In my categorization I have used the more generic term ‘call to action’ to define all the posts that pushed people to acting collectively. I have included in this category posts which included choreographies, invitations to join the peaceful manifestations, suggestions as to how to react, etc. Therefore the posts mainly consisted of leaders proposing “collective images and forms of actions, organization or scrips.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:44)
• **Raising awareness:** Also known as consciousness raising, this concept implies spreading information regarding the concerning topics, establishing thus a strongly participatory space, providing a feeling of *initiation* so to speak, as well as maintenance, ensuring thus a stable informed membership.

• **Peer solidarity:** This category is based solely on the concept of social capital discussed by a plethora of scholars in the past. New media has always been regarded as reducing social ties. However, what is interesting about online activism is that it gives participants a strong feeling of social solidarity, which in its turn leads to *a vibrant civic culture*. As Dahlgren states, there is “a climate of solidarity and trust promoted among activists, a feeling of commonality between those who in various ways are struggling for progressive social change.” *(Dahlgren, 2009:199)*

• **Criticizing:** This category includes those posts disapproving of the government and the actions taken by the Romanian officials. The posts did not fit any of the aforementioned categories, but did fit the variables set for the current research study.

In his book, Paulo Gerbaudo talks about the power of assembly or mobilization, a process by which “a social movement is created and begins to take action, by assembling followers, funds and resources.” *(Gerbaudo, 2012:37)* In my categorization I have used the more generic term ‘call to action’ to define all the posts that pushed people to acting collectively. I have included in this category posts which included choreographies, invitations to join the peaceful manifestations, suggestions as to how to react, etc. Therefore the posts mainly consisted of *leaders* proposing “collective images and forms of actions, organization or scrips.” *(Gerbaudo, 2012:44)*

I have done so to manage to grasp the organizers’ approach to collective actions, facilitated by technological innovation, and whether these online movements are truly leaderless, horizontal and spontaneous. However, as data above shows us, we can already rule out *spontaneous* as the community had been engaging in mobilization actions beforehand. Moreover, Gramsci also states, “collective action is never truly spontaneous, given that pure spontaneity does not exist.” *(Gramsci quoted by Gerbaudo, 2012:21)* As for leaderless and horizontal, I can say that there is a moderately concealed leadership, maybe *soft* leadership behind it, but exercised only in order to moderate the actual movements as well as to raise awareness and spread the word. Nevertheless, if one looks at the interactions between users on the page, in the comments sections, one could see that there is a feeling sense of community that has no organizational control whatsoever, just people sharing similar sets of values regarding their views on democracy and social justice. *(Dahlgren, 2009)*
What is overtly clear is the fact that the page has been mostly engaging in mobilizing people and encouraging them to act collectively through calls to action. From the 94 posts, 55,3% of them consisted of these kinds of persuasion techniques, aimed at creating a climate for participation in democracy. The 4th and the 5th of February were the most hectic days, as it was the midpoint of the February protests. On the February the 5th, there was the biggest protest in Romania since the Revolution, with more than 500000 citizens taking to the streets all across the country. The dynamics between the online/offline are however a delicate matter as it is difficult to determine whether the online movements had offline traction. However, what online activists did manage was to spread the word and to keep people engaged in regard to that particular political context. They created choreographies to keep the protesters engaged and coming, they made up routes, suggested slogans and overall tried to mobilize people in an orderly manner. They have been very helpful in times of trouble, when the protests were disrupted by agitators, by advising people to remain calm and distance themselves from the former. What they also managed to choreograph was the crowd of lights, the Romanian flag and the European one by launching calls to action and by sharing their suggestions with their followership.

Another important category identified was the *peer solidarity* one, as it showed that these loose and fluid activist networks do have a sense of civic identity, more precise 21,2% of the collected data support this affirmation. To some extent I would say that there is social capital in these diverse networks of
activists, because they exchange resources and work together for a common goal. “Virtual communities liberate the individual who has long suffered under the weight of impersonal bureaucracies and historical prejudices. They have the potential to be an idyllic social space characterized by authenticity, honesty and trust among people. Built on assumptions of freedom and empowerment, these groups can encourage citizens to engage in bottom-up grassroots movements” (WuSong, 2009:122) I find this quote relevant in this context, as I see the Corruption Kills group as a community, trying to constantly empower people and to keep them informed, proving that the Internet does have the power to build social capital, as long as people stand united for the same democratic ideals. They openly asked for help from other people that felt the same way about the situation, people that would volunteer to bring social change to Romania. Most of the peer solidarity posts however consist of inquiries addressed to the followers, usually asking to help other protesters. For example, on the 5th of February, students from Cluj-Napoca, travelled 450 km to Bucharest to attend the protests organized in Victory Square. Therefore, the posts on the page were mainly seeking volunteers that would welcome the students at the train station, at 6am, with sandwiches, hot tea and coffee. The post had 3.3k likes. Another example is on the 6th of February, when the organizers were seeking other protesters in Belgrade who could join the sole protester there. This particular post had been liked 4.7k times, and shared 1110 times. They also asked all the participants nicely to clean the square after protests so that the protests would be truly peaceful.

Raising awareness is the third category identified in the present study. I find it relevant here as it represents one of the aims that the community has: “We, the Corruption Kills community, have taken upon ourselves to educate, empower and inform people in regard to their own rights, freedoms, and the vile matters in the Romanian socio-political context.” They tried to inform people about other acts of corruption or other actions that the Government is planning, and explaining the matters thoroughly so that everyone would be aware of the consequences and of the need to react. For example, they informed citizens about another ordinance that was being prepared at the time, OUG 9, regarding the budget. They also constantly encourage people to exercise their rights to have access to public information. I believe that raising awareness is an important matter in civic engagement, in order to create a more engaged and informed citizenry.
4.2 Interviews

The five interviewees were active organizers of the #rezist movement in February, and also to date. As mentioned before, the interviews have been conducted over a period of three weeks, in Romanian, translated and interpreted. The respondents were given the option to not fill their name in. The rest of the questions were compulsory. The interviewees had been informed, beforehand, that their answers would be included in a research study regarding civic engagement in the digital age. The main topics of the interviews were: 1) Reflections on forms of civic engagement; 2) Civic agency; 3) Choreography of assembly.

Four of the respondents were active on the Facebook page Corruption kills. The fifth respondent I.D, was more active in another activist organization, the first one of its kind in Romania, de-clic.ro, also involved in the organization of the protests, through direct mail techniques, as well as social media. Their community is made up of designers, graphic artists and activists, with a common cause. I sought her opinion in particular, because she was the one who created the #rezist hashtag, the symbol of the Romanian protests this year. Moreover, the de-clic.ro community also came up with innovative initiatives throughout the month of February, such as a protest kit, or a “Guide to civic non-compliance”. However, they have been acting as an NGO ever since 2015, when the Romanian protest culture took shape, with the Rosia Montana protests.

Civic agency

Civic agency implies a rather high degree of motivation, as participation and engagement should have an affective drive. As Hall says, “without passion people lack energy and commitment to take action, because they lack the sense that their actions will have any meaning or effect. In order to become politically involved, people must care about an issue, they must have some vision of how things ought to be done and they must have hope that at least some progress can be made toward realizing this vision” (Hall, quoted by Dahlgren, 2009: 85) Therefore it was imperative to identify the reasons that made activists get involved in civic mobilization, and to see what their guiding principles were. It was important to find out the story behind. The first question of the interview aimed to pinpoint their reasoning regarding their involvement in the organization of the protests, and it was formulated explicitly “How did you decide to be an active organizer of the protests?” I was surprised to notice that for the 5 respondents, the answers differed, which, on a second thought is not that startling, as they are unique.

23 The original transcripts are stored on Google Drive and can be shared upon request.
individuals, with diverse backgrounds, united by the same set of shared values. For example, while three of the respondents had been previously involved in civic engagement activities, two of them joined the movement on the go, because they shared the same ethics. However, even if the interviewees had different motives for their involvement, I did manage to identify some patterns in their responses. What one could notice easily in their discourse is the civic talk, the passion for the topic, and the need for social change, “not consenting with the loopholes and political games favouring the Romanian politicians, overall detrimental to the rule of law and to common sense in general.” Three of the respondents had already been involved in civic engagement activities, having participated in the organization of previous manifestations such as the Rosia Montana ones in 2015 or the Colectiv one. One of the respondents, LD, mentioned above, is working full-time for an online campaigning organization, therefore it was “somewhat compulsory to engage in mobilizing their own members of the community, taking into account that the aim of the protests matched their own set of principles. Being involved in NGO’s that advocate for social change is nonetheless not a requirement but rather a common thing among activists. As Felicia Wu Song as well as Michael Xenox et al repeatedly state, young people are usually more “likely to express their political opinions and involve in various political activities if they have already developed civic competencies.” (Xenox et al, 2014) One of the respondents, mentioned that she had been “volunteered often for NGOs dealing with good governance and public transparency” thus it came naturally to her to become involved, as she also concurred with the overall aim of the protests. Furthermore, what was peculiar about one of the responses was the frankness that the interviewee showed, admitting that she had joined because she had felt that “such a large scale manifestation needed a direction” and that she could help with that. The main organizers, FB was guided by the same grounds, by the need to help people find unity in their collective action. Judging from this first set of questions one could notice that young people are not politically apathetic as often described, but rather flexible in their understanding and practice of politics: “I have always believed in the necessity to go beyond being a simple spectator in order to have tangible results”; “I want to be part of this generation’s movement to positively change the Romanian political situation.” They are more driven by individualized behavioural contingencies, engaging with issues “as they arise, rather than in a broad systematic fashion according to a particular ideology or set of principles.” (Manning, 2013)

The second question related to the concept of motivation had to do with the group’s overall purpose: “What was your target when you organized on the page?” The answers confirmed, to some extent, my initial
assumption, about awareness raising, but they also blatantly asserted the fact that this was only one of their main objectives. The participants were also determined to bring change to Romania’s corrupt political system and governance, as well as to motivate other people: “First of all, our objective was to raise awareness regarding the situation in Romania. Second, our objective was to achieve the desired results and the necessary legislative changes. Third, we began to build a community that is still active and that takes a stand with regard to the political corruption acts.” As stated by another respondent, their main objective altogether was to defend the rule of law as well as the democracy. Nonetheless, the impetus for the movement was not specified anywhere, as “they did not have a charter; each of us played our own parts, and each had their own objectives.” Moreover, according to one of the five interviewees, motivation also arose from the fact that citizens took to the streets the same day that OUG 13 was passed, which showed commitment, as well as the need for a change and the need to act, leading to the development of a Romanian protest culture, acknowledged and praised by international media. A protest culture that managed to inspire other countries to stand up for their rights and freedoms. One can thus assert that although there was a collective action altogether, the participants and organizers acted based on their own personal action frames and agendas, each bringing their individual contributions to a symbolic construction of a sense of togetherness in the long run.

Reflections on civic engagement

Bearing in mind Carl Boggs’s great retreat, a downturn from politics and a “retrenchment into ‘enclave consciousness’, away from larger collective identities and community sensibilities” (Dahlgren, 2009:23), I sought to identify the attitudes that activists themselves have about their citizenry and their sense of belonging to a political and civic society. In recent literature, an erosion of traditional institutions is being mentioned to a great extent, stating that young people have now become indifferent to any institutional decisions and approaches. The media is already known to belittle the youth and lessen their participation to the civic and political realm by demeaning them and downplaying their actions to ‘slacktivism’ only. “As the audience is repeatedly told the value of engagement, discourses of millennial disengagement become more and more obvious, leading the audience to believe that it is problematic.” (Novak, 2016:99) What is not often heard however is the youth opinion on topics such as their own civic engagement. In conducting this interviews I was pursuing their perspectives regarding different forms of activism and civic engagement.
The fact that young people do not believe anymore in traditional forms of engagement has been a recurrent theme for scholarship. To quote one of the scholars asserting this, “the narrow hegemonic definition of politics is outdated and does not reflect contemporary social conditions and the political repertoire available in late-modernity.” (Manning, 2013) We are apparently witnessing a turning point in patterns in terms of contemporary politics. I wanted thus to explore this topic further and to identify the organizers’ reflections regarding this particular matter. Thus the first question addressed focused on the traditional forms of engagement: “What do you think about traditional forms of engagement?” For a generation defined by its swiftness and by its digital proneness, the results came as a surprise, as all of the respondents were well aware of the legitimacy of the traditional forms of engagement, which were, notwithstanding, not regarded as obsolete. While they did not necessarily associate them with the digital age we live in nowadays, they acknowledged their practicality as consistent instruments for civic and political engagement: “The idea of ‘global village’ crosses my mind right now but I do not associate the signing of petitions with it”; “They make up a functional democracy. A real democracy, not a flawed one.”; “I don’t consider them to be entirely outdated; some are still functional, because they are renown to the public opinion and are recognized procedures of standard civic and political engagement.” “I certainly do not consider them outdated. Traditional forms of engagement are still very much up to date and can be very efficient if employed correctly.” However some of the respondents did admit that it does depend from one form to the other and that at times, it might seem that they are to some extent archaic, especially for the young generation of activists. On the other hand, one of the respondents stated clearly that it has been proven that young people do not engage in traditional forms anymore which was proven by the voter turnout in Romania, allowing other generations to decide their future.

Nevertheless, it has been apparently shown by scholarship on youth and politics that young people “have a distinct set of political interests and interactions with politics” (Xenon et al, 2014) Recent studies have shown that there is a “shift in young people’s citizenship from dutiful norms to personalised self-actualizing norms, with a preference for online, discursive forms of political engagement and organizing.” (Xenon et al, 2105) The following two questions addressed to the interviewees dealt with online activism behaviours and their perceptions on this topic as well as with the preconceived concept of ‘Slacktivism’: “Do you believe online activism is enough to consider oneself a civically and politically engaged individual?”; “The term ‘slacktivism’ has been used lately to describe the youth that only engage online. Do you think this is the approach that young people have nowadays?” Taking into account that 90% of
the respondents were millennials, it struck me to notice that they did not see online activism to be enough for true citizenry, given that most of the theoretical framework concerning this certain generation assumes that their only form of engagement is online. The respondents acknowledged that online activism is a tool that gives access to information, distribution and promotion making citizens more informed and implicitly keener to get involved, “however, in order to be involved in the true sense of the term, would mean that the opinions shared online would have traction in the offline actions.” “Of course, it is not enough, but if a big amount of people get involved at least online, it would help motivate the people that are more active offline, who are obviously fewer.” Generally speaking, all the respondents admitted that online activism is useful for raising awareness, but that there is still a need to see tangible results, to have a consensus between the online and offline dynamics in order to produce change. Online activism was mainly described as a “pillar of civic engagement”, “a promising beginning” or as “a first step in calling oneself engaged.” Moreover, the concept of prior engagement re-emerged in this case, as it was stated by one of the respondents, that if one individual engages online then he/she will be more prone to also get involved in real life and that “even if you share a petition or an article you can still positively influence the online.” This is also reckoned by scholars: “Political social networking site users are frequently active in other aspects of civic life.” (Smith, 2013) As for ‘slacktivism’, the research question had the opposite effect, as the respondents did not regard it as a negative approach but rather as a useful one, as “the least one could do”: “Online activism can have remarkable results as long as it is done intelligently.” Although it is an extremely popular approach among young people it does not necessarily define them as “there are many young people who have proven, by participating to the protests, that they are involved and that they are not afraid to make their voices heard offline too, that they are persistent, they support their opinions in real life and are ready to advocate for them.” One of the respondents went as far as blaming the education system in Romania for the lack of civic engagement among young people, defending thus their proneness to only react online, which was, in her opinion, praiseworthy: “it is a shame, but it is also a sign of failure of the Romanian education system, which doesn’t stress the importance of civic engagement enough.”

**Choreography of assembly**

Drawing on Paulo Gerbaudo’s premises, I sought to identify whether there had been the case of choreographed collective movements as well as soft leadership during the #rezist protests. As he states, “the crucial element in understanding the role of social media in contemporary social
movements is their interaction with and mediation of emerging forms of social gatherings. Social media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a choreography of assembly as a process of symbolic construction of public space, which facilitates and guides the physical assembling of a highly dispersed and individualized constituency.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:10) The results of the interviews come as a confirmation to Gerbaudo’s findings. The answers to the question “How did you come up with the idea of having choreographies at the protest” revealed the fact that the collective actions were not spontaneous, but rather carefully thought through, and the crowds mobilized, creating altogether a collective identity that showed unity and emotional impetus. The main motivation of the organizers in this case was to mobilize citizens and to keep the crowds attending by offering them a sense of novelty and direction simultaneously, constructing thus a feeling of anticipation for the upcoming events. As one of the main organizers stated, “it is important to have choreographies for people to keep coming to protests, to keep them motivated”. Another respondent argued that these methods were a smart move in order to maintain people’s interest in the protest. Through these choreographies, a connection was created between the protesters, conveying the unanimous opinion of the collective. There have been routes, flags, children protest, and anyone was free to come up with any ideas as they had a “relatively anarchic system, not a chaotic one, just one that was not based on a top-down hierarchy.” Ideas came from protesters as well as from organizers, from people who identified problems that needed a solution. For example, as FB states, the protests needed to be regarded as peacefully, especially after there had been certain altercations one of the first nights. Therefore, one woman came up with the idea to have a children’s protest, that would inherently be a peaceful one, since children were involved. The organizers welcomed the idea, particularly because they had not thought of it beforehand. Therefore, any kind of input from the audience and from participants was welcome.

The prior organization was also beneficial in terms of numbers. When asked about the prior choreography of the protests (“Do you think that without a prior choreography there would have been so many people taking to the streets?”), all the respondents agreed that the number would have been constant only in the first days of the protests, and then they would have rapidly decreased: “The first night people took to the streets spontaneously. I saw many Facebook posts from opinion-makers, who were encouraging people to go out ad-hoc. Later on, the days after, people would have still gotten out but definitely not so many.” Moreover, it was acknowledged by the organizers that without a prior organization, people would not have been as united as they were, but rather divided in sporadic groups,
therefore no sense of unity or participatory character would have been passed on to the higher authorities that they were protesting against. Undoubtedly, the prior organization would not have been possible without the guidance efforts of the online activists. However, as Gerbaudo states in his book, “in collective action leadership has no figureheads.” The interviewees confirmed this affirmation when they answered the question “Do you consider yourself a leader of the #rezist protests?”, where they all denied any associations with the leader denomination. While some disagreed entirely with the concepts of soft or concealed leadership, others admitted that the most they could be called is facilitators for the movement, disseminating information, promoting events and offering suggestions and advice. However, activists can and do influence social movements through their hard work, throughout the phases of both initiation and sustainment. (Gerbaudo, 2012:135) What was noticeable about the #rezist movement was that although it may not have had any leaders, it had a liquid form of organizing, through continuous communicative engagement. “Social media create the impression that nobody is leading because it is assumed that these media are inherently participatory and that by using them people are simply communicating, interacting, sharing, participating. However, enshrined in simple communication there are forms of soft leadership, whih make use of the interactive and participatory character of the internet.” (Gerbaudo, 2012:145)

Finally, the respondents have been asked to appreciate social media’s mobilizing potential, given that nowadays social media has become an essential tool for civic engagement, allowing citizens to engage in bottom-up, grassroots movements. “How do you think things would have turned out if there was no online?”. Anew, they have all agreed that social media did pay an important role in mobilizing so many people, and helped create a sense of unity altogether. “Right now, social media is a very valuable and useful tool, if used appropriately, making the information dissemination easier. Without the online, #rezist would have been several groups of people. With online there were hundreds of thousands.” Most of them agreed that probably traditional media would have picked up the news about the protests, and would have probably promoted it, in the likelihood the subject suited their political economy vision. However, it would eventually have been a matter of manipulation and propaganda, depending on the news agency and its principles. Therefore, social media did influence citizen’s participation to the civic realm during #rezist. However, it cannot be pinned down whether there was consensus between the online-offline dynamics or it was a purely correlational relationship between the two settings.
4.3 Conclusions & Discussion

“The central ideas guiding qualitative research are different from those in quantitative research. The essential features of qualitative research are the correct choice of appropriate methods and theories; the recognition and analysis of different perspectives; the researchers' reflections on their research as part of the process of knowledge production; and the variety of approaches and methods.” (Flick, 33) The present research, however, integrated two qualitative research methods, the online ethnography study and qualitative semi-structured interviews, in order to “understand in the round and in depth how people make sense of their lives.” (Hine, 2015:8) As Flick stated, ethnography is characterized by “extended participation and a methodological pragmatism oriented towards adapting methods to the field and using whatever methods lead to more insights.” (Flick, 2009: 250) Given the fact that the target audience of the present research consisted of a Facebook group that had just emerged, there was quite little prior knowledge in regard to it, thus a need for an explicit interest to explore this setting was implicit. Online ethnography was regarded as a social process that would allow the researcher to approach the issue, the viewpoint of the participants. Combined with semi-structured interviews, they would allow for an in-depth observational study, going beyond the online location. Nevertheless, as Flick says in his book, there is no one right method to use in qualitative research. The main drawback of the current study however is the futility of generalization, as it did not employ a representative sample in terms of numbers, given the fact that the sampling was a purposeful one, aiming at identifying the Corruption Kills group’s motives and approaches to civic engagement. Employing the two qualitative research methods helped answer the main Research questions proposed for the current study, RQ1: How did Romanian Millennials devise and apply The Facebook page Corruption Kills (Corupția ucide) during the protests in February 2017?; RQ2: How does the Romanian youth define and reflect on the diverse nature of their “contemporary” civic and political engagement?

The present study was set in motion by the hypothesis that civic engagement has been redefined with the generational shift and development of social media networks, starting from the idea that “the narrow hegemonic definition of politics is outdated and does not reflect contemporary social conditions and the political repertoire available in late-modernity” (Manning, 2013). As argued throughout the present thesis, young people do not necessarily share the same ideology that the older generations used to, thus leading to the media documenting them as having an inadequate approach to civic participation. However, what has happened is that young people nowadays adopted a more flexible attitude regarding their political participation, being rather monitorial citizens, employing latent
forms of participation. This finding is pinpointed by the viewpoints of the respondents, as well as by the analytics generated through the online ethnographic study, showing that people react on the go, especially if they feel that their civil rights are being threatened. What this study, as well as others before, shows us, is that young people are not politically apathetic, but rather in the know, as “citizens do a lot of things that may not be directly or unequivocally classified as political participation, but at the same time could be of great significance for future political activities of a more conventional type.” (Ekman, Amna, 2012) As was the case in Romania, citizens had been aware beforehand of what the Government was preparing, and they were on stand-by, “watching”, proof being their large mobilization in the days following the decree being passed, as well as one of the hashtags emerged during the days of protests, “#vavedem” (We are watching you). The fact that the media discourses are not positive towards the generation has been frequently mentioned throughout the current research. What I believe however, alongside many other scholars, is that “younger adults are just as likely as older adults to be engaged in many political activities, and are much more likely to be politically active on social networking sites.” (Smith, 2013) Social media represents a playground for the digital natives, thus demeaning their forms of participation to apathy and ‘slacktivism’, seems to be at odds with the reality of their participation. What social media and the online altogether do is facilitate the proper tools and weak ties, which allow users to create reaction, to raise awareness, to build communities and to find other people that share the same sets of values and opinions, and to overall disrupt the stranded reality of political participation practices. The empirical material confirmed my assumptions, that first and foremost, millennials nowadays are engaging actively in their communities and in the socio-political scene, but they do it in a peculiar way, which has not yet been adopted or acknowledged by the media and older generations, which throughout the present thesis I have called the control culture.

When blending the findings from the employed research methods, the first striking pattern, identified supported by both methods concerns the peer solidarity behaviour. The online ethnographic study showed that 21% of the posts analysed aimed at mobilizing people by creating a sense of community and of support. The collected data proved that fluid activist online networks do have a sense of civic identity, leading to the idea of social capital. All the actions undertaken on the Corruption Kills page during February 2017 suggest so: from knowledge sharing, awareness raising, “cries” for help, to simply working together towards a common goal. As stated by J.R. Cook the requisites for building social capital imply: a sense of belonging, a sense of making a difference with one another, sharing values and resources and sharing an emotional connection. As I was able to deduct from the analytics
and the respondents’ answers, it seems that the online community Corruption Kills does amass all the above-mentioned characteristics, and creates a sense of unity, through continuous communicative engagement, enabling action among individuals. Therefore new media does have a positive influence on young people’s social ties. “Everyday sociality and friendship connections inherent to social media are becoming key in maintaining contemporary political engagement.” (Vromen et al, 2015) Many scholars have argued whether the Internet is able to build social capital. And it is. Online communities such as the one discussed above have emerged in times of turmoil, allowing people to effectively advocate for social change and to show unity through their homogenous messages, slogans and collective actions. Social media empowers young people, gives them the numeric advantage, by allowing them to disseminate their messages swiftly and to mobilize massive crowds in a matter of hours. Their participatory online practices define them, as they have become networked young citizens. However, what can be drawn from this is that while social media can indeed build social capital through weak ties and enable communication and coordination, it is only a debate space for users and not a catalyst for action.

Another key finding resulted from the present research study showed that there is an acute sense of civic agency among millennials, as they are aware of the socio-political situation in their surroundings and feel the need to change it. However, they do employ a distinct set of political interests and interact differently with politics than other generations had used to. The discourses pinpointed both through online ethnography and interviews displayed their civic talk and passion for their political ideas. What research showed was that Romanian millennials are more prone to be civically engaged if they had already developed civic competencies in previous situations. The concept of prior engagement emerged repeatedly throughout research, when analysing millennials’ reflections regarding their civic and political forms of participation. Therefore, the assumption that millennials are disengaging from politics can be questioned, as they are very much engaged and eager to bring social change, and to battle corruption. Therefore, a re-examination of their new forms of participation and of how they define political participation in particular is imperative for further research. It is paramount to discern how millennials apply reflexivity in their dealing with politics.

What the present research has suggested however, is that connective actions tend not to be as spontaneous as they are promoted. As was the case of Romania’s #rezist protests, they did not emerge impromptu, but had been previously orchestrated, albeit with a different scope initially. The analytical data collected through choreography showed that there had been activity one week before the spike
in engagement, and the interviews confirmed that there had been a choreography of assembly employed. The organizers admitted that there was a need for direction, which they sensed they needed to help create, offering the protests “a feeling of novelty and direction simultaneously as well as anticipation.” The movement, was characterised by a strong participatory character, and turned out to be successful in displaying unity and a unanimous reaction to the political situation in those troubled times. The organizers have all agreed that without prior organization the manifestations would have been divided in sporadic groups. Although not overtly unfolded, I believe that the #rezist movement did benefit from soft leadership expertise, applied by the organizers of the Corruption Kills group, as well as other groups such as de-clic.ro, #rezistenta, to only name a few. The interviewees did not accept any form of association with the idea of being leaders, but by only looking at the post spreadsheet and its categories, one can notice that organizers employed their own cultural narrative through a constant conversational connection with their followership, allowing thus for steady pragmatic input.

As far as limitations are concerned, one of the limitations was represented by the very particular sample, which consisted of the organizers of the events in February 2017. Therefore, the participants to the study had a higher level of engagement than the average protester. However, I believe that their level of engagement was essential for the current study, in order to get a clear understanding of how online social movements emerge, and what drives the organisers to act as they did. The main shortcoming of the present study is, however, represented by the width of the millennial generation label. Given the short time-span of the current study, the only denominator employed was the age group. The participants to the study had to be born between 1980-2000. Class and gender did not constitute a prerequisite, although it would have been compelling to be able to analyse the above findings and have more nuanced results by taking into account other attributes as well. However, it should be mentioned here that all the interviewees had higher education. It was not possible to document whether the page’s followership had tertiary education, since the study was purely qualitative, it did not employ a quantitative approach. Nevertheless, for further research it would be helpful to apply other denominators as well, in order to target and segment the generation more specifically, going beyond demographic data. In marketing for example there are many demographic segments being employed at the moment, ranging from progressive pioneers to savvy seekers or reserved resisters, based on preferences and predilections. In a more extensive research study this approach could be applied to political and civic engagement behaviours, in order to identify the types of activists that
have emerged nowadays.

Having taken all of the above findings into consideration, this study shows that millennials do have a particular approach to civic and political engagement, challenging the assumptions and the inaccuracies of media bias. The data collected throughout the present research support millennials’ depictions of themselves as engaged and informed citizens, eager to bring social change and to fight for their freedoms and rights, being indeed, as Novak calls them, *metaphors for social change*. Perhaps with another change in generation and political beliefs, this young generation will accomplish a total reform in the nature and demands of citizenship, and will thus become the new control culture, setting new thresholds in terms of civic and political participation for the generation to follow them, Generation Z.
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Annex

Interview guide

1. How did you decide to be an active organizer of the protests?

2. Do you think that without a prior choreography, there would have been so many people taking to the streets?

3. What do you think about traditional forms of civic and political engagement?

4. Do you believe online activism is enough to consider oneself a civically and politically engaged individual?

5. The term ‘slacktivism’ has been used lately to describe the youth only engaging online. Do you think this is the approach that young people have nowadays?

6. How did you come up with the idea of having choreographies at the protests?

7. What was your target when you organized on the page?

8. How do you think things would have turned out if there was no online? Do you believe social media truly has mobilization potential?