

**Electronic public sphere of non-governmental organisations  
addressing digital society risks**

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## **Electronic public sphere of non-governmental organisations addressing digitalisation of society**

*This paper explores the electronic public sphere of non-governmental organisations in the field of digitalisation of society. Based on comparative empirical study of Slovenian and European NGOs, two distinct types of operational and campaigning digital NGOs are identified when using the Internet for prepolitical and political activities. In relation to the later, the cyber-realist approach is suggested for understanding digital NGOs impact. Interactive dimensions and extent of digital communications among NGOs observed indicate the type of the public sphere of organized presence. The findings presented in this paper support the perception of NGOs as democratic intermediaries within the pluralist model of democracy and contribute to the literature suggesting existence of sub-public spheres. Critical theory views on commodification of the public sphere are not evident in the context of digital NGOs observed in this study.*

**Key words:** electronic public sphere, non-governmental organisations, digital communication, digital society, Slovenia, Europe

This text has not previously been published or is not in press with another scientific journal or monograph. We propose the following classification of the article in compliance with the typology of documents/works for the purposes of keeping bibliographies in the COBISS system (to be added).

## **1 Introduction**

Social change is often mutually related to technological advance which enables institutions, organisations and individuals to adopt new ways of interaction. For more than two decades, this relationship is characterised by digitalisation of society which had consequently become a research subject of Social informatics discipline (Kling, 2007). Present time digital technologies, services and tools are not only providing solutions for better information and communication but also reproducing risks for human emancipation such as digital inequality, internet control, commodification of internet and technocratic governance.

These digital risks are representing a new contested field for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting and defending social justice, human rights and democracy. While channelling public voice and advocating public interest in contested fields of digitalisation, NGOs enter public space and co-create the public sphere described by Habermas (1996, 360) as a network for communicating information and points of view. Historically, the public sphere theory recognized NGOs as the anchor of the communication structures of the public sphere in civil society (Lang 2012, 50). Digitalisation of society represents not only the object of NGOs intervention within the public space but also becomes its subject as different digital communication tools and practises of NGOs are deployed for that purpose. These communication structures can exist in non- or pre-political space and can evolve towards formalized politics (Dahlgren 2005, 158). The latter is called into attention in pluralist model of political democracy, which favours the role of NGOs in forming an intermediated public space between representative government and citizens (Van Dijk 1996, 50).

Digitalisation of society is also mirroring the antagonistic nature of technological development as it produces both risks and new opportunities for human emancipation such as developing and using digital communication for constructing grass-roots participatory society (Fuchs 2008, 236-237). This antagonism is clearly manifested in an early cyber utopian visions of the public sphere later confronted by empirical studies similar to Kenix (2008) claiming that NGOs are more likely to follow corporate model of an on-line communication instead of utilizing it for engaged participation or interactivity. Other studies are pointing out the middle ground of the virtual public sphere where consumerist and civic rhetoric co-exist (Papacharissi 2009, 232).

This paper explores empirical characteristics of the electronic public sphere of non-governmental organisations in the field of digitalisation of society. Firstly, it provides

introduction to theoretical framework situating non-governmental organisations within the public sphere. Thereafter results from an on-line survey targeting Slovenian and European NGOs active in field of digitalisation of society are presented. Finally, preliminary findings based on exploratory assessment of NGOs' on-line activities and characteristics of digital communication are discussed in relation to the electronic public sphere.

## **2 Non-governmental organisations as democratic intermediaries**

Public sphere constituted itself in 18<sup>th</sup> century as a part of civil society (Habermas 1962/1991) deriving from organizations and activities not having direct economic (profit) or political nature (power) but instead providing statements and goals which are enabling individuals and groups to influence public opinion and decision-making within existing institutional and normative frameworks (Splichal 2005, 3). According to Bibič (1997, 14-15), civil society incorporates several democratic potentials such as democratic socialisation, associative pluralism and inclusion, societal and political innovation, widening opportunities for political participation and rationalisation of democratic decision-making. Because of exercising autonomy in relation to political and economic sphere, civil society represents life-long force in shaping public opinion (consensus) by either providing pressure on political decision-making or strengthening its legitimisation (Splichal 2005, 4). Organized part of civil society is represented by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which include voluntary groups, non-profit organisations, associations, foundations, charities, geographic or interest-based communities and advocacy groups (Conference of international NGO at the Council of Europe 2009, 5). The core activities of NGOs are focusing on values of social justice, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In these areas the purpose of NGOs is to promote causes and improve the lives of people (ibid.). Democracy oriented theories recognize NGOs as central actor of decentralized network politics in pluralist model of political democracy representing intermediated public space between representative government and citizens. Civic shaping, presentation and advocacy of various interest and topics also includes new technologies for informing and registering of general public as well multichannel interactive communications inside or among civil society organizations (Van Dijk 1996, 50). Participation of NGOs in policy-making and policy implementation is providing democratic merits such as accountability, legitimacy and socially relevant governance (Wright and Coleman 2012, 210).

### **3 Public sphere in digital society**

Cyber-optimists views of digitalisation of society are based on the assumption that electronic agora in the form of Athens without slaves will be created by internet users (Rheingold 2000, 298) consequently solving the overall crisis of democracy (Norris 2001, 96). These utopian visions were succeeded at the break of millennium by critical reflections of cyber-realists (Davis 1999; Margolis and Resnick 2000; Wilhelm 2000; Barber 2001) and empirically oriented analysis (Shane 2004). The latter are providing evidence based conclusions that internet usage is not having negative impact on political engagement but neither is having significant impact on strengthening democracy due to reasons related to digital divide, consumerism and uneven internet skills (Boulianne 2009, 10-11). Also, an on-line political practises indicates that internet can be regarded as a public space although not always resulting in self-evident public sphere (Papacharissi 2002, 23) and that it can widen public discussion space but not necessary strengthen democracy (ibid, 11). There are several reasons for such fragmentation of public discourse because of social, cultural and economic relations of power among individuals, absence of autonomous and rational individual, inadequate transparency of opinions, disregarded differences and not considered democratic value of extreme opinions (Dahlberg 2007, 832-833). What is more, electronic participation is fundamentally already economized from the view point of commodified market value of data transfer, which is questioning existence of virtual public sphere (Goldberg 2011, 740). It is not a surprise that value of virtual public sphere lies largely in aggregating hopes, assumptions and dreams what it could become (Papacharissi 2002, 23). Nevertheless, diversity of practices and activities performed by individuals is giving electronic public sphere its specific character and appropriate context (Oblak 2003, 65). As a result, searching for the electronic public sphere depends on concrete structural possibilities enabled by Internet (ibid, 59).

Additional approach towards understanding public sphere within digitalisation of society is provided by critical theory (Schiller 1991 and Schiller 1996) and theory of reflexive modernisation (Beck et al 1994). Critical theory derives from systematic analysis of advanced capitalism relying on information and communication technologies as well promoting its progress (Webster 2006, 125). Key topics addressed by critical theorists using political economy approach in explaining capitalist imperatives of information society include market criteria of information developments, commodification of information, class inequality,

corporative capitalism and transnational empire (ibid, 127-129). Schiller (1991, 4) claims that these developments encouraged by new information technologies are spreading corporative consumerism based relations of power into the public sphere as well across national borders instead of opening-up and democratising communication. The processes ultimately results in financial privatization of voting process and undermining foundations of national representative democracies (Schiller 1996, 39). While critical theory is focusing on societal level of reflection, theory of reflexive modernity is trying to explain the role of individual in late modernity (Giddens 1991). The origins of reflective modernity are characterised by individualised experiences effected by risk society, which can not be successfully tackled within industrial society discourse (Beck et al 1994, 6). As a result, aspiration to control socially produced risks is increasing surveillance, monitoring and violence within information society (Webster 2006, 227) and strengthening critical reflection of foundations of conventional social structures and perceptions of security made by individuals, especially in the field of decision-making and political action (Beck et al 1994, 7).

#### **4 NGOs and the electronic public sphere**

Opposite to expectations of an on-line activists, who perceive computer mediated communication as an opportunity for re-establishing the public sphere as an open and wide discussion among citizens (Rheingold 2000, 299) and cyber-optimists visions assuming that civil society organizations will enhance their mobilization, advocacy and organizational potential in electronic public sphere (Norris 2001, 172), non-governmental organizations in the United States of America are predominantly following corporate model of on-line communication aiming at fundraising as claimed by empirical analysis from Kenix (2008, 422). Other empirical studies indicate that non-governmental organizations are giving special attention to internet as a part of political action, although predominately using it as a tool for traditional activities within the scope of representative democracy such as information provision on electoral procedures and dissemination of propaganda materials (Oblak and Delakorda 2005, 118-102) and much less as a tool for electronic petitioning, forums and on-line communities (Brundin 2008, 101-105). Wider use of electronic participation tools is also contested by non-technical questions such as legitimacy and effectiveness of citizens initiatives (Hančič and Črnič 2011, 217-218), capacity of non-governmental organizations to secure adequate knowledge, personnel and resources for electronic participation (Delakorda

2014), building a new public sphere through globalised civil society (Castells 2008) as well contradictions between an old strategies of information provision and transformative visions of unlimited connectivity (Wright in Coleman 2012, 223). What is more, membership and activism of civil society movements across United States is in decline resulting in erosion of social capital as observed by Putnam (2001, 63).

## **5 Research problem and method**

Based on theoretical discussion provided in preceding sections, the following research statement is guiding our exploratory study: *Production of democratic risks of digital society is creating an electronic public sphere indicated by a new forms of non-governmental organisations participation*. Development and usage of digital technologies is reproducing democratic risks of digital society which are having an explicit and profound impact on quality of peoples' lives and functioning of political democracy. These risks include digital inequality, internet control, commodification of internet and technocratic governance<sup>1</sup>. We assume that NGOs are addressing these risks by developing and exercising new forms of participation and consequently forming a distinctive electronic public sphere. The research statement is encompassing the following research questions exploring empirical characteristics of the electronic public sphere of NGOs in the field of digitalisation of society:

- (1) What digital activities are practised by non-governmental organisations in the field of digitalisation of society?
- (2) Which are new forms of digital practices created by non-governmental organisations?
- (3) What are characteristics of digital communication among non-governmental organisations?

The first research question is assessing structural dimension of digital activities practised by NGOs within *prepolitical* and *political sector* of electronic public sphere as indicated by Dahlgren (2005, 153). The prepolitical or parapolitical domain is characterized by social and cultural topics having to do with common interests and/or collective identities. On the other

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<sup>1</sup> While not explicitly referenced in this paper, a substantial body of literature is addressing these phenomena. For a starting point see De Sola Pool (1983), Poster (1995), Margolis and Resnick (2000) and Noriss (2001).

hand, political or advocacy/activist dimension is presented by forms of political intervention including traditional parliamentary politics, interest group politics and the new politics of social movements (ibid.). For the purpose of our research, prepolitical and political dimension of electronic public sphere is operationalised by the variables indicating the corresponding use of the Internet by NGO (see Section 6.3). These political variables are to certain extent comparable with empirical study of political use of the Internet by NGOs done by Brundin (2007).

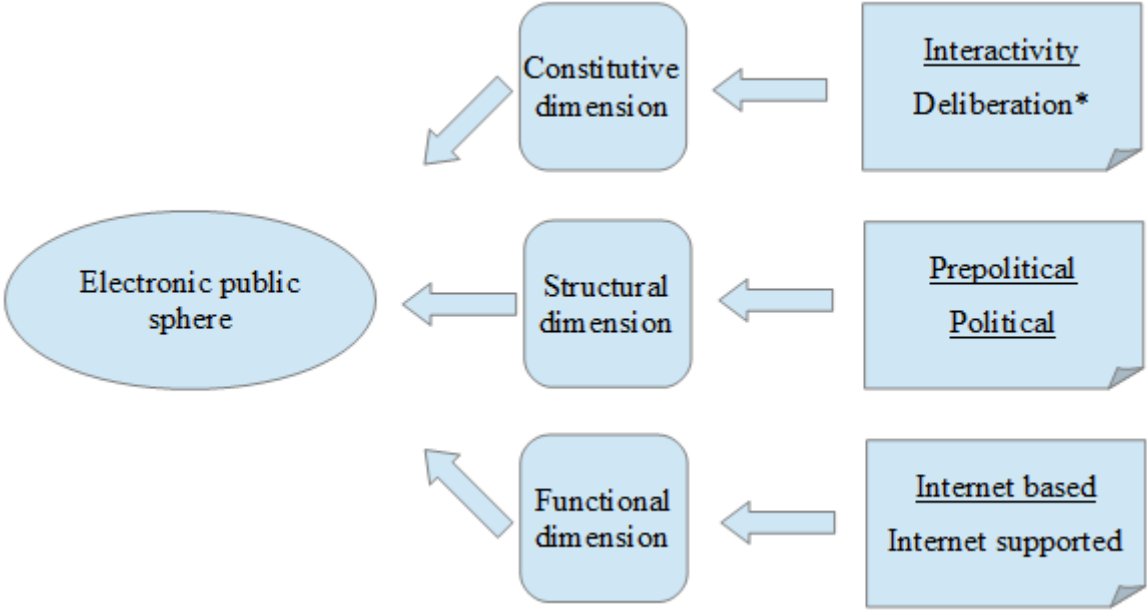
The second research question is exploring functional dimension of digital activities practised by NGOs. This dimension is grounded in a typology of action repertoire of social movements pursuing social and political change developed by Van Laer and Van Aelst (2009, 233). This functional approach is providing a distinction between “*Internet-based*” and “*Internet-supported*” activities. The first is relating to activities which are performed only because of the Internet and its potential to create a new and modified forms of participation expanding the action toolkit of social movements (creating function). The second refers to the traditional tools that have become easier to organise and coordinate (facilitating function) thanks to the Internet (ibid.). For the purpose of our research, the functional dimension of digital activities is operationalised by the presence of web sites or an on-line / mobile solutions (services) created or developed by NGOs for the purpose of performing its prepolitical or political activities exclusively through the Internet (see Section 6.4).

The third research question is aiming at the digital interactivity among non-governmental organisations. The *interactivity* is conceptualized as a constitutive dimension of the public sphere (Dahlgren 2005, 149-150). For the purpose of our research, the corresponding variables are used for operationalising the interactive dimension of electronic public sphere of NGOs in the field of digitalisation of society (see Section 6.5).

Research variables selected for our exploratory study are expected to provide sufficient empirical data which will enable us to map and initially characterise the electronic public sphere of non-governmental organisations. Operationalization of our research problem is summarized in a research model presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: RESEARCH MODEL FOR EXPLORING ELECTRONIC PUBLIC SPHERE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS.



\* Deliberation dimension is not covered in this paper due to methodological limitations of gathering relevant empirical data through on-line survey.

For the purpose of our study, an on-line survey research method was used, targeting non-probability sample of non-governmental organizations from Slovenia and from the rest of Europe active in the field of digitalisation of society. The survey<sup>2</sup> was chosen for the purpose of gathering comparable descriptive data in order to assess different dimensions of the electronic public sphere. Due to the research limitations of the on-line survey method, qualitative dimensions of the electronic public sphere such as deliberation are therefore not included in this study. Qualitative aspects will be explored during later phases of our research by using focused interviews with selected non-governmental organisations and web site analysis as a part of the triangulation of research methods. Measuring the electronic public sphere of non-governmental organisations is presenting a methodological challenge as participation in public life and the quality of opinion formation are deeply influenced by socio-economic variables and the political culture in specific contexts (Amoretti 2007, 135). Therefore, the comparative method is used to assess different dimensions of the electronic public sphere and to identify distinctive patterns of digital communication of NGOs across Europe active in addressing common democratic risks of digitalisation of society as championed by the Digital agenda for Europe.

2 The survey was created with by an open source application <http://english.1ka.si/>.

## **6 Research findings**

### *6.1 Survey implementation*

The on-line survey used for this study was realized in two phases. The first phase was conducted in August 2015 targeting non-probability sample of Slovene non-governmental organisation directly or indirectly involved with the National network of NGOs for the inclusive information society (NVO-VID<sup>3</sup>). The second phase of an on-line survey was conducted in August 2017 targeting non-probability sample of non-governmental organisations within the European network EDRI - European Digital Rights<sup>4</sup> and a few other individual NGOs across Europe in the area of digital inclusion and digital democracy. The on-line survey targeting Slovenian NGOs included 28 close-ended questions and the on-line survey targeting European NGOs included 18 close-ended questions. This paper presents comparable results of equivalent questions from both surveys. The survey questionnaires were sent to non-governmental organisations via e-mail invitations that included a web link to the survey and were addressed to persons with an overview of the organisations' digital activities and advocacy. For this reason, the survey questionnaires were sent to directors and presidents of the selected Slovene NGOs and to policy and communication officers in the selected European NGOs. The on-line survey targeting Slovenian NGOs received 23 valid responses and European survey received 13 valid responses from Danish, Dutch, German, Latvian Romanian, Spanish, UK and Brussels based NGOs. In total, 36 non-governmental organisations in the field of digitalisation of society participated in the survey. The number of valid answers to individual questions varies because questions in both on-line surveys were not mandatory. Due to the non-probability sample of surveyed NGOs, the results of the survey are not representative.

### *6.2 Surveyed NGOs characteristics*

This section describes the main institutional characteristics of Slovene and European non-governmental organisations participating in the survey. NGOs' background data include legal status, status of NGO acting in public interest, number of years of operation, number of people employed, number of active members / volunteers and main sources of funding (Table

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3 <http://www.nevkladni.info/vsebinske-mreze/mreza-nevkladnih-organizacij-za-vkljucujoco-informacijsko-druzbo/>

4 <https://edri.org/>

no. 1).

Table no. 1: *INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEYED NGOS.*

	Slovenian NGOs*	European NGOs*
<b>Legal status</b>		
Association	5	6
Private not for profit organization	11	3
Charity / foundation	0	1
Youth organisation	0	0
Other	3	1
<b>Status of NGO acting in public interest</b>		
Status	74 %	92%
<b>An average number of years of operation</b>		
Years	6.7	15.5
<b>An average number of people employed</b>		
Full time	1.7	7.1
Part time	0.3	2.6
Reduced time	0.2	1.7
External contractors	4.7	14.1
<b>An average number of members / volunteers</b>		
Members	51	634
Volunteers	61	193
<b>Main sources of funding</b>		
Public financing	63%	38%
Memberships	11%	54%
Donations	26%	46%
Sponsorships	47%	15%
Contractual services / market activities	79%	23%

\* Number of responses included in this table is lower than total number of surveyed NGOs because questions assessing institutional characteristics were not mandatory.

As seen in Table 1, Slovene NGOs participating in the survey had on average fewer years of operation (6.7) in comparison to the European NGOs which had 15.5 years of operation. Slovene NGOs also had lower number of people in different types of employment arrangements (1.7), while European NGOs had (6.4). They also had smaller communities of members and volunteers engaged in organisations. Slovene NGOs were less often holding the

status of public interest and they had higher proportion of public funding (63 percent) and contractual/market funding (79 percent) in comparison to the European NGOs which had higher proportion of funding source from memberships (54 percent) and donations (46 percent). In general, European NGOs participating in the survey are likely to be larger organisations in comparison to Slovene counterparts, having a longer track of record, greater operation capacities in terms of people employed and bigger pool of human resources available from member and volunteers. Moreover, they are commonly recognized as acting in public interests and are probably less dependant from external sources of funding in comparison with Slovene NGOs.

In addition to institutional characteristic, NGOs participating in the survey were also asked to list the areas of digitalisation of society they are most often working on (Table no. 2). These areas are relating to the democratic risks identified by literature overview and include the following:

- digital equality (computer literacy, access to hardware and software, internet access, websites accessibility for vulnerable groups etc.);
- Internet control (digital privacy, internet censorship, on-line information filtering, digital security etc.);
- Internet commodification (affordable on-line services, digital copyright, internet neutrality, web content commercialization etc.);
- electronic government (open data, open government, user-friendly public e-services, G2C services etc.);
- electronic participation (on-line engagement in democratic processes, digital activism, e-voting, digital citizenship etc.).

Table no. 2: *NGOs ACTIVITIES IN AREAS OF DIGITALISATION OF SOCIETY.*

	Slovenian NGOs (n = 23)	European NGOs (n = 13)
<b>NGOs activities in areas of digitalisation of society</b>	Mean	Mean
Digital equality	3.7	2.8
Internet control	2.7	4.5
Internet commodification	2.5	4.1
Electronic government	2.9	3.3
Electronic participation	3.0	3.1

As seen in Table 2, Slovenian NGOs participating in the survey are on average more active in the area of digital equality (3.7) and least active in the area of internet commodification (2.5). On the contrary, European NGOs are most active in the area of internet control (4.5) and less active in the area of digital equality (2.8). The measure scale for NGOs' activity used for this question ranged from 1 - never to 5 - very often. These differences can be explained by the fact that most European NGOs participating in the survey were members of the European Digital Rights (EDRi) association defending rights and freedoms in the digital environment, while most Slovenian NGOs participating in the survey were involved in the Network of NGOs for an inclusive information society. Moreover, linking these data with institutional characteristics of NGOs gave the impression that areas of internet control and internet commodification acquire substantial amount of human expertise (legal, economic, technical) and are therefore less likely to be addressed by smaller, voluntary based NGOs in the field of digitalisation of society.

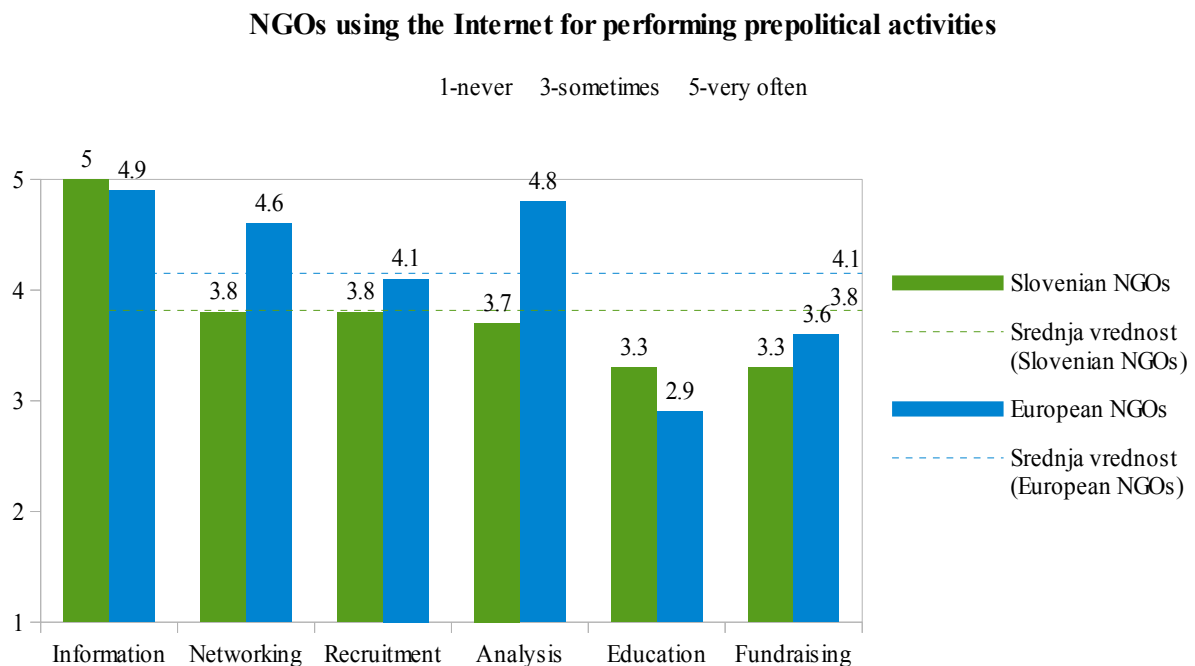
### *6.3 Prepolitical and political variables of NGOs' digital activities*

The surveyed NGOs are intensively using the Internet for performing various digital activities in the field of digitalisation of society. Separating these activities by the line of structural dimension of the electronic public sphere, distinction among prepolitical and political variables can be observed. As seen in Graph 1 and Graph 2, European NGOs are more often using the Internet for prepolitical and political activities in comparison to Slovenian NGOs. An average value for the first sample is 4 and for the second sample is 3.5 on the scale ranging from 1 - never to 5 - very often. What is more, the array of digital activities used on frequent basis among European NGOs is wider. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the digital repository of the European NGOs is more intense and diverse. Prepolitical and political dimensions of NGOs' digital activities is presented in detail in the following sections.

As illustrated in Graph 1, Slovenian NGOs very often use the Internet for prepolitical activities in the area of information and dissemination (5). The same organisations use the Internet less often for networking or cooperation with other organisations (3.8), recruitment of members or volunteers (3.8) and analysis or research (3.7). The Internet is sometimes used for fundraising (3.3) and education or training (3.3). European NGOs on the other hand exercise greater variety of prepolitical activities through the Internet on a more frequent basis. They very often use the Internet for formation and dissemination (4.9), analysis or research (4.8)

and for networking or cooperation with other organisation (4.6). Recruitment of members or volunteers (4.1) is also often practised on the Internet by European NGOs. However, the Internet is less often used or sometimes used for fundraising (3.6) and education or training (2.9).

Graph 1: USING THE INTERNET FOR PREPOLITICAL DIGITAL ACTIVITIES.

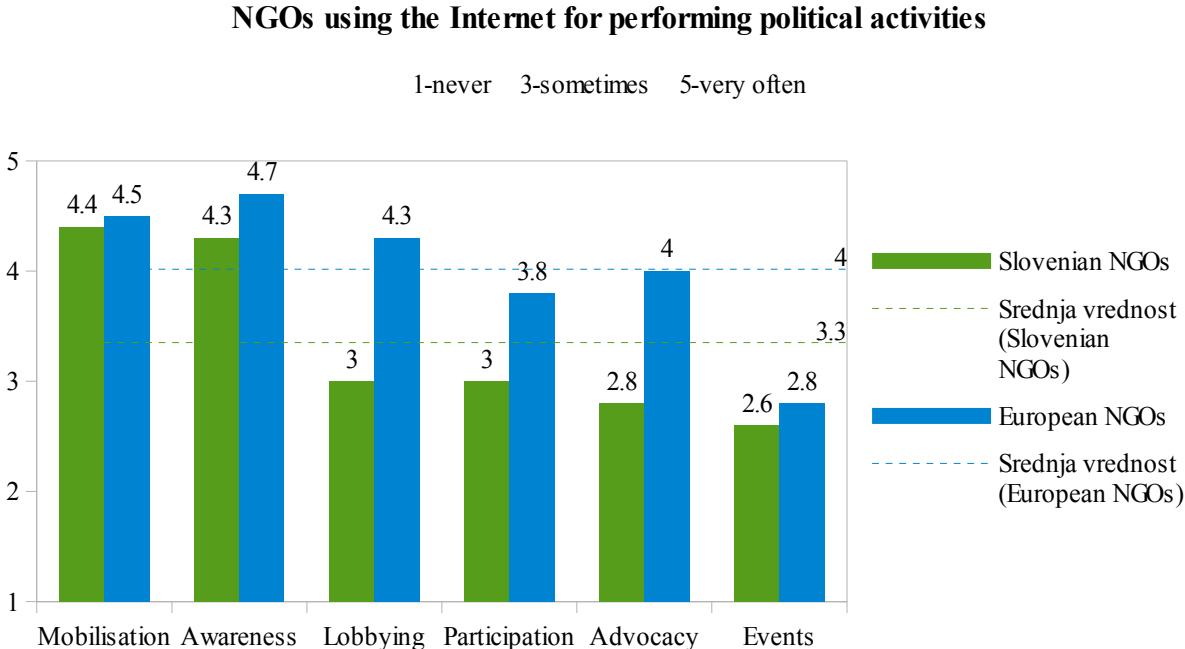


In general, Slovenian NGOs participating in the survey are slightly less intensively using the Internet for prepolitical activities. They also exercise lesser variety of prepolitical activities on-line on a very frequent basis. The most noticeable discrepancy between Slovenian and European NGOs is relating to the frequency of using the Internet for analysis or research (EUR = 4.8 vs. SLO = 3.7). The difference is presumably grounded in advocacy oriented sample of European NGOs which tend to perform analytical oriented activities for the policy purposes more often. The later is highlighted in the following section describing the use of the Internet for political activities. What is more, there is an interesting, although relatively small difference among Slovenia and European NGOs relating to the frequency of using the Internet for education or training (SLO = 3.3 vs. EU = 2.9). This variable is the least often used by both samples of NGOs, still Slovenian NGOs exercise it somewhat more often in comparison to the most of other prepolitical variables, where European NGOs perform more active. This

difference gives the impression that Slovenian NGOs sample is more likely to use the Internet for educational activities aiming to improve computer literacy and digital skills as a part of addressing digital inequality. The latter is relatively often addressed by Slovenian NGOs in comparison to other areas of digitalisation of society<sup>5</sup>.

As seen in Graph 2, Slovenian NGOs often use the Internet for mobilisation of supporters or call to action (4.5) and for rising public, media or institutions' awareness (4.3). They sometimes use the Internet for lobbying or influencing decision-makers (3), participation in policy-making or law-making (3) and for advocacy, activism or watchdogging (2.8). Organizing debates or round tables is the least frequently (2.6) used digital political activity by Slovenian NGOs. Similar to the prepolitical activities, European NGOs exercise wider variety of political activities through the Internet on regular basis. They very often use the Internet for rising public, media or institutions' awareness (4.7) and for mobilisation of supporters or call to action (4.5). What is more, lobbying or influencing decision-makers (4.3), advocacy, activism or watchdogging (4) and participation in policy-making or law-making (3.8) are also often used as a part of European NGOs' digital political repository.

Graph 2: USING THE INTERNET FOR POLITICAL DIGITAL ACTIVITIES.



<sup>5</sup> Slovenia is performing below EU average in development of digital skills by individuals for communication in digital environment and for problem solving according to the Digital Economy and Society Index (Zupan 2016).

On average, Slovenian NGOs are less often using the Internet for political activities (mean value 3.3) in comparison to their European counterparts (mean value 4). This can be observed across all digital political variables. The differences among the two are the most indicative when using the Internet for lobbying or influencing decision-makers, advocacy, activism or watchdogging and participation in policy-making or law-making. We can assume that the sample of European NGOs is dominated by advocacy and policy oriented NGOs while Slovenian sample includes variety of NGOs predominantly oriented on information dissemination and awareness rising about digitalisation of society. The later can be linked to the disparity in institutional capacities these two samples are possessing.

#### *6.4 Internet-based activities created by NGOs*

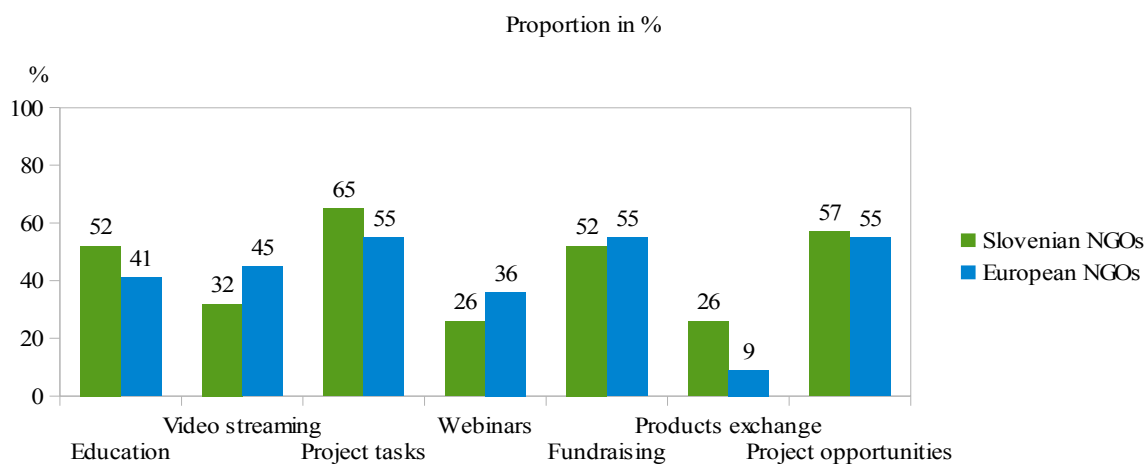
NGOs participating in the survey seem to be active in creating on-line and mobile solutions for the purpose of performing their prepolitical or political activities exclusively through the Internet. As illustrated in Graph 3, Slovenian and European NGOs do not significantly differentiate in setting up digital tools for prepolitical activities. On the contrary, Graph 4 displays a very clear gap between both samples as a much higher percentage of European NGOs developed a web site or mobile service for the purpose of performing political activities. Internet-based activities created by NGOs are presented in detail in the following sections.

As seen in Graph 3, Slovenian and European NGOs do not significantly differentiate in setting up web sites or developing an on-line / mobile solutions for the purpose of performing their prepolitical activities. More than 50 percent of NGOs in both samples developed digital tools for joint implementation of project tasks, sharing information about project calls or collaboration opportunities and fundraising. Less than 50 percent of NGOs produced digital services for enabling access to education content or recording of non-formal education and enabling video streaming of events. The lowest proportion of NGOs (less than a third) created digital tools for conducting webinars and exchange of goods or services offerings. However, more Slovenian NGOs created digital tools for education purpose than European (52 percent vs. 41 percent) and products exchange (26 percent vs. 9 percent). On the other hand, larger percentage of European NGOs created digital tools for video streaming (45 percent vs. 32 percent).



Graph 3: *PREPOLITICAL INTERNET-BASED ACTIVITIES CREATED BY NGOs.*

**Web sites or on-line / mobile solutions created by NGOs for performing prepolitical activities**



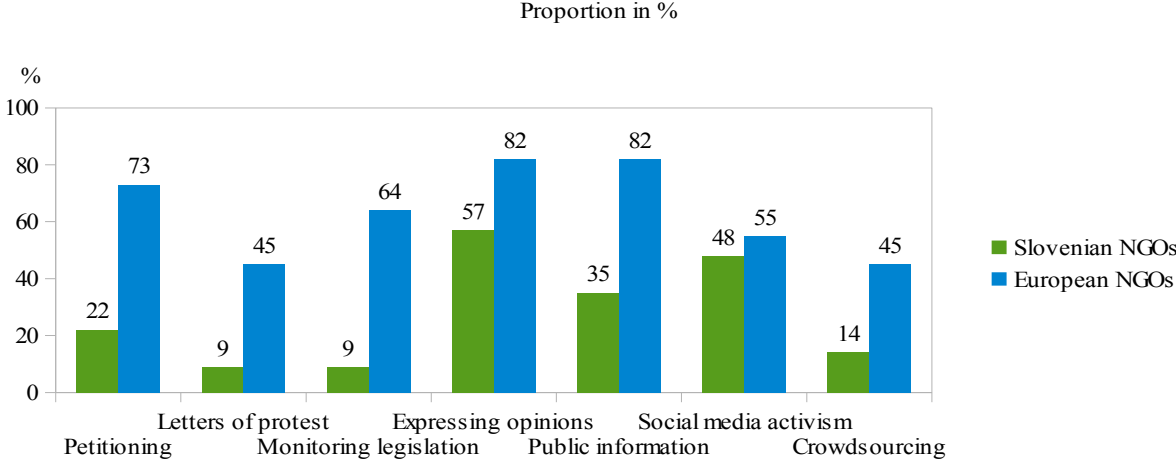
An interesting observation could be made from Graph 3 that digitalisation of NGOs' prepolitical activities primarily encompass development of digital tools for operational purposes such as conducting project tasks, fundraising and applying for project calls. In practice, these activities are vital for NGOs' performance and capacity building. Nevertheless, NGOs also create digital tools for externally oriented practices such as video streaming and products exchange. Moreover, education oriented digital tools are again established as an important aspect for Slovenian NGOs. We can conclude that both samples of Slovenian and European NGOs favour development of digital tools in prepolitical sphere for the purpose of their own operational practices.

A very clear divergence between Slovenian NGOs and European NGOs in creating web sites or mobile solutions for performing political activities is displayed in Graph 4. There is considerable higher percentage of European NGOs that developed digital tools in all observed political variables. The most significant differences appear in setting up on-line or mobile tools for monitoring legislation infringements (EUR = 64 percent vs. SLO = 9 percent), signing a petition or an initiative (EUR = 73 percent vs. SLO = 22 percent) and public information access (EUR = 82 percent vs. SLO = 35 percent). Other less significant but still obvious differences occur in sending letters of protest, expression or exchange of opinions and crowdsourcing. The smallest divergence among Slovenian and European NGOs is in the area of social media activism. The higher proportion of European NGOs developed digital tools for public information access, expression of opinions and petitioning. On the other hand,

the larger proportion of Slovenian NGOs developed tools for expression of opinions and for social media activism.

Graph 4: *POLITICAL INTERNET-BASED ACTIVITIES CREATED BY NGOs.*

**Web sites or on-line / mobile solutions created by NGOs for performing political activities**



Empirical data presented in Chapter 4 confirm our assumption, that the sample of European NGOs participating in the survey is heavily dominated by advocacy oriented type of non-governmental organisations. Advocacy NGOs are often characterised as “watch-dog” organisations focusing on defending public interest or pursuing policy change. For that purpose, they might employ a substantial repository of action oriented digital tools as observed in our study. On the other hand, Slovenian NGOs participating in the survey are very much less like to create digital tools for political purposes. Lack of advocacy capacities could be partially explained by the unfavourable environment for development of a strong digital policy oriented NGOs in Slovenia which include limited public funding and poorly developed donation practices. As a result, there is no Slovenian NGOs members in the European Digital Rights network.

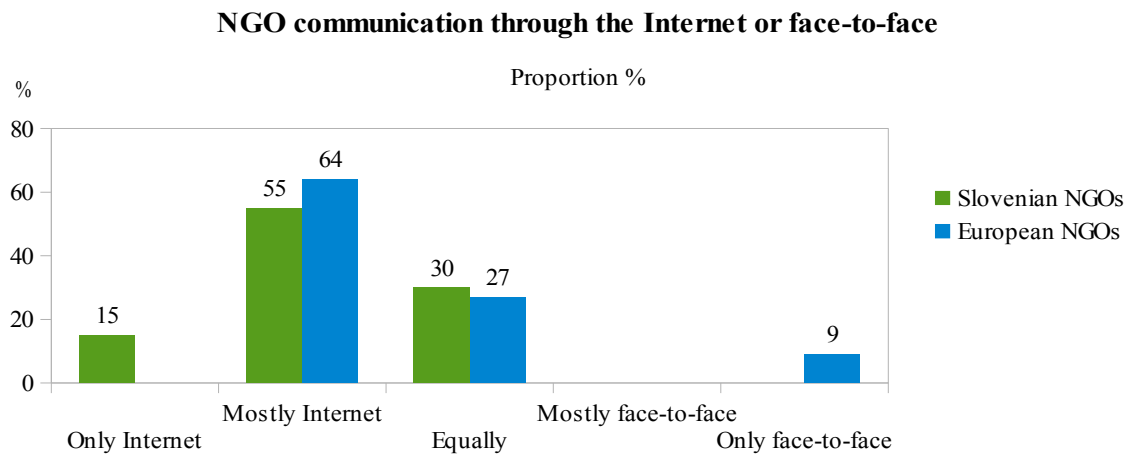
*6.5 Digital interactivity among NGOs*

This section describes characteristics of digital communication among non-governmental organisations with the focus on digital interactivity as a constitutive dimension of the public sphere. The following variables are observed for that purpose: (a) the extent of Internet or face-to-face communication among NGOs, (b) number of digital contacts among NGOs, (c) the frequency of publishing on-line content among NGOs, (d) origin of on-line content shared

among NGOs and (e) the extent of NGOs' collaboration in the field of digitalisation of society. These variables will be further examined in the following section.

Slovenian and European NGOs have approximately similar extent of digital communication, as seen in Graph 5. More than 50 percent of NGOs in both groups had mostly used the Internet for communication with other non-governmental organisations in the last year. There is somewhat higher proportion for European NGOs in this segment (EUR = 64 percent vs. SLO = 55 percent). Approximately one third of NGOs communicated with other NGOs equally through the Internet and face-to-face (in person). A minor proportion of Slovenian NGOs communicated only through the Internet and a minor proportion of European NGOs only by face-to-face.

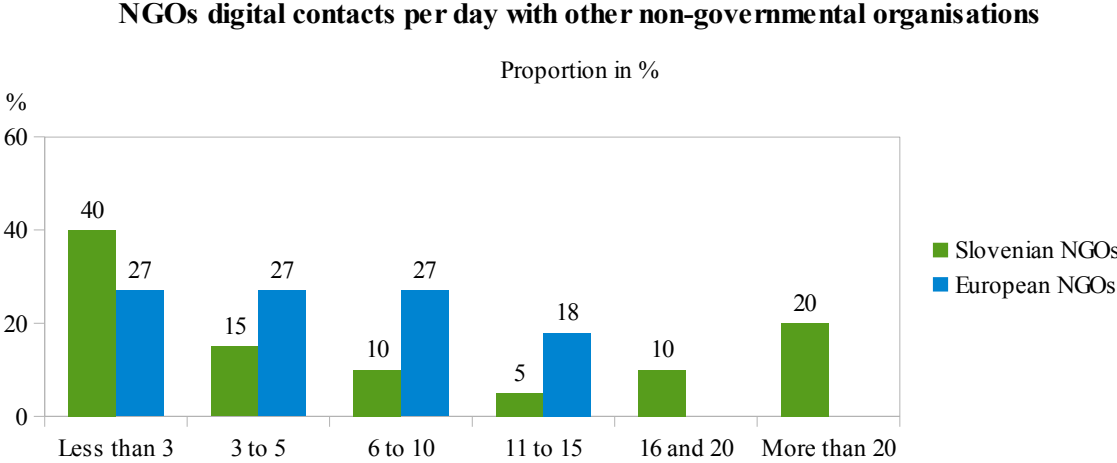
Graph 5: *DIGITAL COMMUNICATION WITH OTHER NGOs.*



As illustrated in Graph 5, almost equal proportion of Slovenian (55 percent) and European (54 percent) NGOs had between 0 to 5 digital contacts per day with other non-governmental organisations through web sites, e-mail and social media in the last year. There is a significant group of NGOs from Slovenia constituting 30 percent of national sample which had at least 16 digital contact with other NGOs per day during the last year. It appears that two different subgroups of Slovenian NGOs can be recognized. The first had a relatively limited digital contacts with other NGOs per day and the second had a much more extensive digital contacts on daily basis. The difference observed gave an impression that Slovenian sample is actually composed of two types of NGOs, one voluntary based and another professionally based. Similar to Slovenian sample, European NGOs are also constituting two different subgroups as

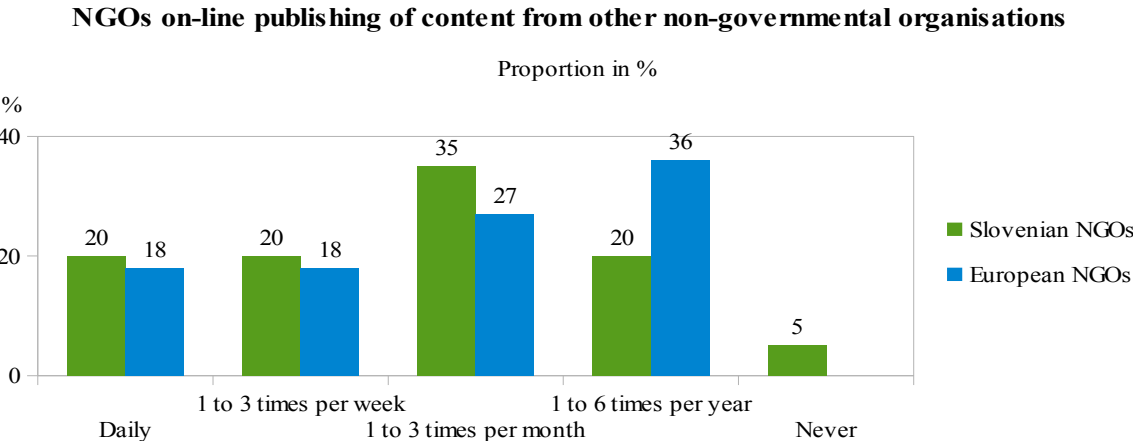
significant proportion (45 percent of NGOs in this sample had between 6 and 15 digital contact per day with other non-governmental organisations.

Graph 6: NUMBER OF DIGITAL CONTACTS AMONG NGOs.



As observed in Graph 7, around 55 percent of Slovenian NGOs published content or links from other non-governmental organisations on its web sites or social media profiles in the last year on monthly basis (aggregated value of monthly and yearly segment), while 40 percent published on daily basis. Similar proportions can be noticed in relation to European NGOs within a segment of daily publishing (36 percent) and monthly publishing (63 percent).

Graph 7: SHARING ON-LINE CONTENT AMONG NGOs.

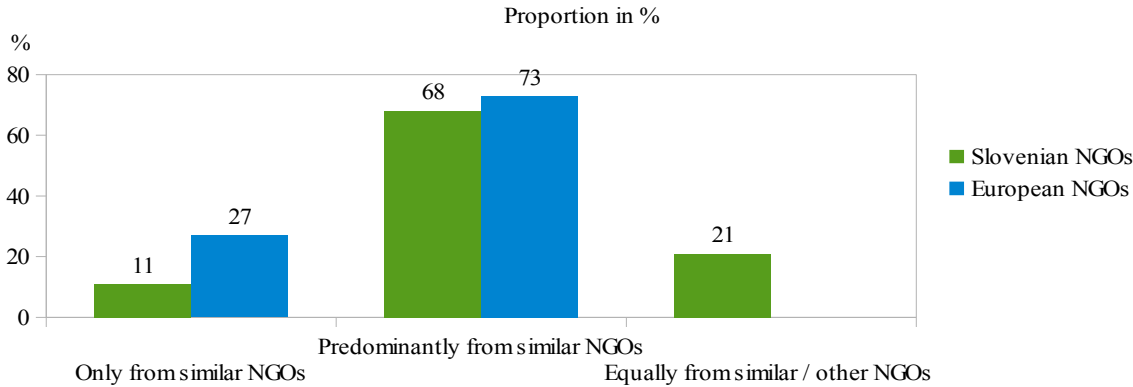


Large proportion of Slovenian (68 percent) and European (73 percent) NGOs published content or web links predominantly from similar non-governmental organisations on its web

sites or social media profiles during the last year. As seen in Graph 8, a minor proportion of European NGOs (27 percent) published only content from non-governmental organisations in the field of digitalisation of society, while 21 percent of NGOs from Slovenia published equally from them and from other NGOs.

Graph 8: *ORIGIN OF AN ON-LINE CONTENT PUBLISHED BY NGOS.*

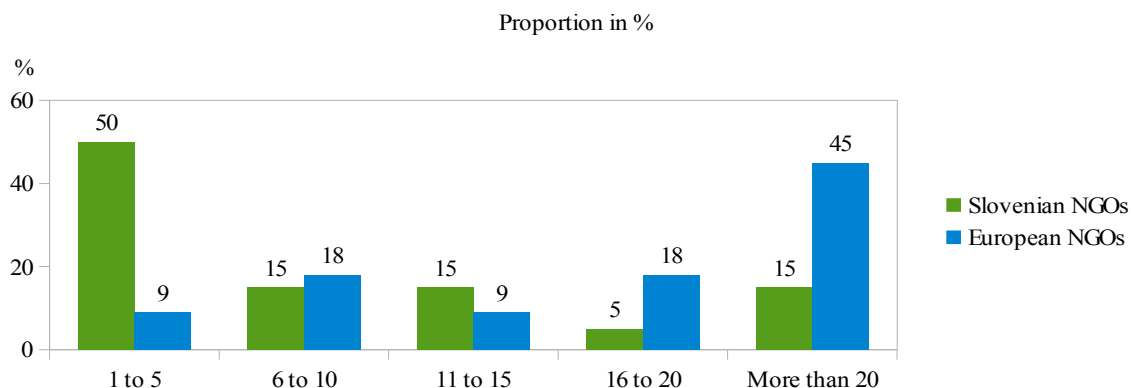
**Origin of an on-line content published by NGOs from other non-governmental organisations**



The last variable used for assessing interactivity among surveyed NGOs is not directly relating to the digital communication. Instead, it is providing an insight into the extent of NGOs' collaboration in the field of digitalisation of society as illustrated in Graph 9. Again, a large proportion of European NGOs (63 percent) had collaborated or had contacts with at least 16 other non-governmental organisations in the field of information society during the last year. Slovenian NGOs are displaying a more disperse character. There is a significant group composing 50 percent of national sample that collaborated only with 1 to 5 other NGOs. Another group encompassing 35 percent of Slovenian NGOs had collaborated with at least 11 other non-governmental organisation in the field of digitalisation of society. We could assume that European NGOs are benefiting from the networking effect at the European level which enables NGOs to develop a dense web of collaborations and contacts. What is more, at least half Slovenian NGOs are probably more oriented on national and local level of operation and constrained by limited institutional capacities therefore not benefiting from international networks. However, these is a group of Slovenian NGOs having similar extent of collaboration as the majority of their counterparts in Europe.

Graph 9: NUMBER OF CONTACTS WITH NGOs IN THE FIELD DIGITALISATION OF SOCIETY.

**Number of non-governmental organisations in digital field that NGOs have collaborated with**



To sum up, the following findings on NGOs' digital interactivity could be made deriving from an overview of corresponding variables:

- 70 percent of Slovenian NGOs and 64 percent of European NGOs had only / mostly used the Internet for communicating with other non-governmental organisations;
- 72 percent of European NGOs and 60 percent of Slovenia NGOs had at least 3 digital contacts per day with other non-governmental organisations;
- 40 percent of Slovenian NGOs and 36 percent of European NGOs had published content or links from other non-governmental organisations on its web sites or social media profiles on weekly basis;
- all European NGOs and 79 percent of Slovenian NGOs had published content or web links only/predominantly from similar non-governmental organisations in field of digitalisation of society on its web sites or social media profiles;
- 91 percent of European NGOs and 50 percent of Slovenian NGOs had collaborated or had contacts with at least 6 other non-governmental organisations in the digital field.

## 7. Discussion

Aggregating on key findings from survey presented in Table 3, we can conclude that surveyed NGOs had transferred a prevailing part of their everyday communication and activities into the digital space. This process of digitalisation is supported by regular use and creation of digital tools. Observing survey data from the generic perspective, two distinct types of digital NGOs could be recognized. The first type is *operational type* of digital NGO which is significant for Slovene sample of NGOs. The second type is *campaigning type* of digital

NGO, which is common for the European sample of NGOs. Survey data also indicate the existence of the *electronic public sphere of organized presence* encompassing extensive digital interaction among non-governmental organisations in the field of digitalisation of society.

Table 3: *AGGREGATED RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY.*

	Slovenian NGOs	European NGOs
<b>Prepolitical activities performed on the Internet</b>	Mean = 3.8	Mean = 4.1
Variables above 4 (often)	information	information analysis networking recruitment
<b>Political activities performed on the Internet</b>	Mean = 3.3	Mean = 4
Variables above 4 (often)	mobilisation awareness	awareness mobilisation lobbying advocacy
<b>Digital tools created for prepolitical activities</b>		
Variables above 50 %	project tasks project opportunities fundraising education	project tasks project opportunities fundraising
<b>Digital tools created for political activities</b>		
Variables above 50 %	expressing opinions	expressing opinions public information petitioning monitoring legislation social media activism
<b>Digital communication with NGOs</b>	mostly the Internet	mostly the Internet
<b>No. of digital contacts with NGOs</b>	0 – 5 (55 %) 16+ (30 %)	0 – 5 (54 %) 6 – 15 (45 %)
<b>Publishing an on-line content from NGOs</b>	daily (40 %) monthly (55 %)	daily (36 %) monthly (63 %)
<b>Origin of an on-line content published</b>	similar NGOs (68 %)	similar NGOs (73 %)
<b>No. of NGOs in digital society field collaborated with</b>	1 – 5 (50 %) 11+ (35 %)	1 – 5 (36 %) 16+ (63 %)

### *7.1 Operational and campaigning type of digital NGO*

Aggregating survey data from Slovene NGOs according to the structural and functional dimensions of the electronic public sphere, we can conclude that they are more oriented towards prepolitical area of digitalisation of society occupied with societal development such as computer literacy, access to hardware and software, internet access, websites accessibility for vulnerable groups, etc. In that domain, they most often perform information and dissemination activities, supplemented with an education. When creating digital tools, they do it predominantly for their own performance and operational purposes. This sort of social and organisational orientation is followed also in political dimension, where they most often use the Internet for mobilisation of supporters or call to action and rising public, media or institutions' awareness. The most favoured digital tools are those for expression of opinions. In short, Slovenian NGOs could be labelled as operational type of NGO in the field of digitalisation of society. According to (Willetts, 2002), the primary purpose of this type of NGOs is the design and implementation of projects and programs in order to achieve small-scale change. Looking at aggregated survey data gather from European sample of NGOs, we can conclude that they are actively engaged in prepolitical and political dimensions of electronic public sphere. Within both dimensions, they demonstrate diverse repertoire of activities which is most often focusing on information, analysis, networking, recruitment, awareness rising, mobilisation, lobbying and advocacy. Their main orientation is on policy intensive issues such as digital privacy, internet censorship, on-line information filtering, digital security, digital copyright and internet neutrality. Not surprisingly, European NGOs are therefore very active in creating digital tools for political activities such as expression or exchange of opinions, public information access, signing a petition or an initiative, monitoring legislation infringements and social media activism. These characteristics could be labelled as campaigning type of NGO in the field of digitalisation of society. The main purpose of this type of NGOs is to defend or promote a specific cause by raising awareness, acceptance and knowledge by lobbying, press work and activist events in order to achieve large-scale change promoted indirectly through influence on the political system (Willetts, 2002).

### *7.2 Electronic public sphere of organized presence*

The third dimension of electronic public sphere explored by our survey aimed at the digital interactivity among non-governmental organisations. The interactivity is considered a



constitutive dimension of the public sphere encompassing “one to many” forms of communication or “one to one communication” Dahlgren (2005, 150). As suggested in section discussing methodological limitations of this study, qualitative elements of deliberative component of electronic public sphere such as quality of dialogue, discourse and argumentation (e.g. the “publicity test”) are not explored in this study. Instead, the digital interactivity is explored in the context of quantity of interactions among NGOs. Survey data suggest that Slovenian and European NGOs share a very similar extent of digital interactions with other NGOs. They both communicated with other NGOs mostly through the Internet and had similar number of contacts with other NGOs per day. What is more, they both published an on-line content from similar NGOs in the field of digitalisation of society more often on monthly basis than on daily basis. On the other hand, European NGOs seem to had more extensive web of collaboration with other NGOs in the field in comparison to the Slovenian NGOs due to the networking effect at the European level. Observed characteristics of NGOs' digital interactivity could be related to the *public sphere of organized presence*. The terms refers to the construction of a “we” identity and the engagement in collective action as part of the associational life in order to gain access to the public sphere and acquire deliberative capacities (Maia 2007, 80). Data from the survey also suggests, that the public sphere of digital NGOs is not a coherent communication arena as distinct patterns of digital interaction coexist depending on the national context and institutional characteristics of individual NGO. In this sense, NGOs and their networks might form mini-publics (Fung 2004) or subpublics (issue public) that can act to some degree independently of dominant media (Lang 2012, 54) and make strategic decisions as to when and how they engage in public policies and implement an effective control upon such policies (Maia 2007, 83).

## **8. Conclusion**

Several implications for the social science and political science theory in the field of non-governmental organisation, public sphere and democratic participation within the context of digital society can be depicted from empirical data gathered by this study. Firstly, the extent of using and creating digital tools for political activities by campaigning type of digital NGOs supports the pluralist model of democracy perception of non-governmental organisation as democratic intermediaries. It also confirms democratic potentials of the NGOs in endorsing the vision of grass-roots participatory society deriving from communication of civil society

and citizens. Secondly, the characteristics of using the Internet and creating digital tools by NGOs for performing prepolitical activities do not provide solid evidence of corporate or commodified on-line practices. The operational type of NGOs is favouring the Internet for their own performance and operational purposes, still additional empirical data are needed to support the critical theory on this. Thirdly, cyber utopian expectations that digital tools will enhance mobilization, advocacy and organizational potential of NGOs by transferring their activities into the digital space are to certain degree funded in empirical data. However, the actual social and policy impact of digital communication is very much depending from institutional capacities of NGOs. The later is more in the scope of cyber realist views. Finally, the extent and characteristics of digital communication observed in the survey confirms the existence of digital space of NGOs. Since this particular digital space is focused on NGOs active in the field of digitalisation of society, the literature suggesting co-existence of multi-public spheres as specialized communicative spaces is supported by this study. The interactive dimension of digital communication and specific character of public space detected are mirroring the type of the public sphere of organized presence where different types of digital NGOs coexists. Due to the methodological limitations of this study, further research will focus on deliberative dimensions of this particular public sphere by assessing its sub-public/sub-politics character and its contribution to the social and policy change when addressing risks of digital society.

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