



Lab 12 –Big data: campaigning or manipulation

Moderators:

Mr Bjorn BERGE, Director General and Secretary to the Committee of Ministers (CM) in the Council of Europe
Mr Fausto GERNONE, Member of Youth Department's youth delegation

Initiative:

Next Generation Engagement Through Direct Grassroots Investment (USA) by Mr Dan J. KESSLER, MBA
Candidate at MIT Sloan School of Management

Discussants:

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Ms Alice Mary HIGGINS, Member of Parliament and Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

The lab in brief

Big data is the latest technological invention to affect politics and political engagement. Political parties have been using the immeasurable online data of the electorate to run political campaigns. But such micro targeted political initiatives often hover around the grey boundary of campaign and voter manipulation. While big data offers political parties a better understanding of the electorate and their pressing needs, it has been used on multiple occasions to incite fear and hatred based on anxieties and uncertainties for sheer political gain. While social media and big data can be used to engage more people in political discussion, it can also be used to prevent fruitful discussion and debate.

Rapid technological innovation in the form of bots, artificial intelligence, psychometric profiling, real time data collection etc. makes it difficult for regulators to catch-up in order to ensure fairness and balance in political campaigning. This is made more challenging by harvesting and opaque use/profiling of data. There is also little regulation about data ownership and data vendors.

Older voters, millennial voters (a person reaching young adulthood around the year 2000), and generation Z voters (born between 1995–2009) are completely different groups of people. Generation Z voters are the most vulnerable and often most ignored. But their political engagement depends on their voting habits in the first two elections of their lives. Their emotions are being tapped by social media and they are faced with mass misinformation with their attention being drawn away by counter-campaigns fueled by bots.

Social media has brought politics to our doorsteps and everyday lives. We are moving from periodic democracy events such as general elections every 4/5 years to everyday political information/misinformation and propaganda. Therefore it is imperative to disburse more critical thinking and better media literacy if political processes are to generate dialogue and trust. Only then we can ensure better voter engagement since many millennial are averse to voting and the whole political discourse.

The lab participants debated how big data affects democracy and how citizens can be made aware of its possible misuses. It also explored possible regulations to secure privacy rights online.

About the initiatives

Next Generation Engagement Through Direct Grassroots Investment, USA

Millennials are America's largest generational group. However, only half of eligible voters aged 18-29 cast ballots in the 2016 US Election. This disengagement is largely due to the deliberate disinclination of Millennials for electoral politics. Therefore, the mission of this initiative is to engage the millennial generation in the political process through grassroots fundraising or, "direct grassroots investment".

The effective use of online social media tools by political parties for their campaigning is considered to encourage millennials to be more involved in politics and decision making

processes. According to the presenter, the younger generations need to be addressed using their means of communication, namely social media, and not through conventional media. 30% of millennials globally are averse to governments and do not trust them. A key strategy of this initiative is to make political involvement more fun by organizing affordable fundraising events with a high level of networking opportunities. This included the involvement of celebrities in public events and in interact activities with youngsters in order to make a social media trend out of it. In more than 20 events in 10 cities, Mr Kessler raised more than 270,000 USD for Hillary Clinton's Campaign. In Philadelphia, millennial turnout in the primaries grew 279% thanks to such initiative.

Key points issues by the debate

Youth engagement and social media in political propaganda. Youngsters, such as millennials, have varying degrees of political knowledge and are more vulnerable to computational propaganda which triggers their emotions rather than their reasoning. Social media can be easily used to polarise people, in particular to provoke fear, incite hatred, and generate distrust. Although it is important to engage young people in "proxy arenas" such as social media, it does not mean that they engage in a real dialogue. Social media activists do not lead to the streets in real political struggles. It is, therefore, fundamental to engage online activists in offline activism. The regulation of political advertisements, advancing pluralism and dialogue, as well as the breaking of social media "bubbles" and social media propaganda, represent key challenges. Germany offers a positive example of a country whose legislation requires social media companies to take down hate speech content within 24 hours. In other terms, the Inter-generational dimension is considered a key element for a better understanding of political processes: parties do not invest in "Generation Z", while they should, as their political views and level of engagement are developed during the first two elections of their lives. In Ireland, for example, high-school students, aged between 14 to 18 years old, attended parliamentary sessions to discuss environmental issues.

Data ownership, transparency and ethical implications. Technology is moving fast (bots, AI, psychometric profiling, real time data collection etc.). The lack of regulation undermines fairness and balance in political campaigning. This is made more challenging by the harvesting and opaque use/profiling of data which negatively affects democracy.

The case of companies buying data from data-brokers to micro target selected groups of voters poses serious challenges in terms of transparency and data ownership. The use of data to rate people (such as in the context of the Chinese Social Credit System) poses ethical concerns, too. Data is massively available and inexpensive, making very easy to generate large amounts of fake information. "Clickbait" headlines of fake news are an example, diverting the attention away from traditional media. All media, today, sell data including those emanating from phones, GPS, wifi networks and subway ticketing systems. Among latest technological developments posing serious ethical concerns, the facial recognition where data holder companies can target users based on their real time psychological moods is the most controversial one.

Recommendations

- ✓ To strengthen critical thinking and better media literacy to generate dialogue, trust and higher voter turnout (especially among young generations).
- ✓ To burst social media “bubbles” to facilitate a contamination of opposing views in the political spectrum.
- ✓ To connect social media “debates” with offline debates for a more accurate information and more in-depth exchange.
- ✓ To invest in the “Generation Z” (i.e. those born after 2000), as their political views and level of engagement are developed during the first two elections of their lives.