Short Session Report

Session Title: DigiMeddle – Kidnapping Democracy in the New Digital Age

Date & Time: Wednesday 24 October, 12.00-2.00
Report prepared by: Laure Brillaud, Policy Officer, Transparency International EU

Experts:

- Rebecca Rumbul, Head of Research, MySociety
- Catalina Uribe Burcher, Senior Programme Officer, Political Participation and Representation Programme, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)
- Duncan Hames, Director of Policy, Transparency International UK
- John Wonderlich, Executive Director, Sunlight Foundation

Moderated by: Vitor Teixeira, Policy Officer EU Integrity, Transparency International EU

Session coordinated by: Vitor Teixeira, Policy Officer EU Integrity, Transparency International EU

Main issues raised in kick off remarks. What’s the focus of the session?
The session aimed to respond the question of how digital tools can be used or misused to influence politics both in a positive and negative fashion. The session examined various tools in use these days in political campaigns ranging from online targeted advertisement campaigns on social media to tools and vehicles for political campaign financing such as cryptocurrencies or shell companies. In this regard, the recent examples of the US elections and Brexit referendum campaign were used to illustrate the corruption risks associated with these new tools. Looking at the bright side of things, the session also provided the opportunity to zoom in on existing initiatives to foster citizen engagement.

What initiatives have been showcased? Briefly describe the Game Changing strategies/ ideas (if applicable)

The session provided insights on a couple of interesting initiatives, in particular:

- Civic participatory tools developed by MySociety, an organisation developing digital tools to facilitate access to information as a way to increase civic engagement and participation. Some of the tools presented included a platform called TheyWorkForYou.com allowing citizens to identify their MPs, what they think and say, how they vote in parliament, what issues are discussed in parliament and how often, etc. The code is running worldwide including in countries like the UK, the US, Kenya, South Africa, etc.

- Research and analysis into how cryptocurrencies can be used (or misused) in political campaign financing by IDEA, an organisation composed of 32 Member States looking into issues related to elections, political participation, etc. The speaker emphasised that cryptocurrencies were not by design non transparent and therefore risky if used as a tool for political campaign financing. However, they should be designed in a way that offers greater transparency than traditional financing channels (e.g. certified exchanges, etc.). Other challenges related to the use of cryptocurrencies as a possible tool for political campaign financing were mentioned such as the lack of clarity on whether cryptocurrencies should be considered as money or asset which are usually treated differently by political campaign financing.
The session also served to highlight a number of emerging risks and threats to democracy drawing lessons from the recent Brexit referendum campaign and US elections:

- The opacity in the way the Brexit campaign was financed was scrutinised by the panel. More specifically, it was highlighted that 100 donors - individuals or corporate entities – provided 95% of all the reported donations for the two officially recognised campaigns. The use of shell companies also appeared as a particularly concerning feature of the campaign. The panel highlighted the risk of seeing politicians indebted to particularly wealth individuals.
- The session examined the influential role of Cambridge Analytica and other actors such social media platforms in the US elections emphasising the difficulty to draw a clear between the legal and illegal sides of the story. A number of grey areas were given such as the way Facebook operated that may have been legal but may have been questionable in light of political expectations. On the contrary, the shaddy way Cambridge Analytica syphoned out data from the social media platform via an application that Facebook users would download appeared to have crossed the line of legality in many ways.

Briefly describe the highlights including the thematically interesting questions and ideas that were generated from the discussion or from the floor, and session quotes.

- The panel mentioned TI Mexico proposal to create a special cryptocurrency with specific features allowing high level of transparency and traceability to become the exclusive channel and tool for payments to finance political campaigns.

Quotes:
- “Information is power, the more you know about what your government is doing the more empowered you are to engage in..."
The political debate”
- Fake news, misinformation, subversion of information is part of the competitive effort between different interests. What we witness today is just new forms of an issue that has always been going on. We need to define contemporary solutions to contemporary manifestation of something that’s not new in nature.

What are the key recommendations, follow-up Actions (200 words narrative form)

Key recommendations included:
- The need to assess the risks associated with the use of new tactics, digital in particular to influence political campaigns
- Adapt political financing rules to the challenges of the 21st century, in particular adapt or clarify how the rules function for new payment methods like cryptocurrencies, regulate online advertisement
- The need to think about incentives to create good culture and change bad culture in political financing
- The need to address emerging threats and risks such as money laundering through campaign financing, foreign influence in political campaigns, the misuse of tech platforms to influence political campaign outcomes through troll groups, fake news, etc.
- The need to allow the emergence of intermediaries / infomediaries for online campaigning to digest the information, and recreate a unified experience of political debate online as much as what traditional media allows.
- The need to bring this discussion at regional and global levels as elections are no longer merely a domestic issue (e.g. influence of foreign actors)

The panel concluded by highlighted that what we witness today is not different in nature to what we used to see in politics before. It’s that the scale and forms it takes today has changed.
Key Insights that could be included in the IACC Declaration

Bringing transparency to the digital medium – whether payment of political campaigns through cryptocurrency, political online advertisement, etc. – is key to fight the influence of money in politics in the future.

Rapporteur’s name and date submitted

Laure Brillaud, 24 October

This Short Report needs to be submitted within 2 hours after the session.