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## (15) Disinformation and elections: lessons learned 9 November, JDE52

**Speaker:** Alexandre Alaphilippe, (Director of Studies, EU DisinfoLab); Marije Arentze (Education Coordinator, DROG) Sam Jeffers (founder, WhoTargetsMe); Liz Carolan, (founder, Transparent Referendum Initiative)

**Moderator:** Ian Vollbracht (Joint Research Centre, European Commission)

To open the session, the moderator Ian Vollbracht, quoted Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union speech given in September where he mentioned that Europeans should be able to make their political choices in fair, transparent, and secure European elections. Mr Vollbracht pointed out that the session on disinformation and elections was linked to the recommendations given in that speech: election cooperation networks, online transparency, protection against cyber security incidents, and fighting disinformation campaigns.

**Sam Jeffers**, founder of "Who targets me", explained that his research project tracked highly targeted political advertising on social media. The initiative had started with the goal of tracking spending on advertising, particularly on Facebook, in the UK's general election in 2017, with the aim of determining whether people and political parties were involved in this campaign in a legitimate way. He pointed out that elections in the 1990s had been more television based, with controls on mass media. In 2000 Barack Obama had initiated his grassroots online campaigns to mobilise people in the online sphere and, over the years since then there had been an increase in viral communication using the sharing option, which allows promotional messages to spread easily through social networks. More recently we had moved into a period where Facebook had become a paid social platform for advertising. The use of this new type of advertising had been observed particularly in the Brexit campaign and in Donald Trump's presidential campaign, where the biggest challenge had been a lack of understanding of how current opaque campaigns with huge volumes of ads worked. Consequently, new tools and research methods were needed in order to understand the use of targeted paid media in campaigns. "Who targets me", a browser extension to collect Facebook ads, had been created to respond to this need. In one year, 20 000 people in 52 countries had installed it, in 10 languages. The project had been used for example in elections in the UK, Germany, Austria and Brazil in order to help citizens understand targeted ads. Mr Jeffers explained that users of "Who targets me" got a personalised record of the advertisements they had been targeted with, and that it was also a research project providing data for civil society, media and researchers. Furthermore, the project was intended to develop policy ideas for how to



better monitor and regulate campaigns, based on full transparency and clear rules. The project was expected to be launched in all EU Member States before the next European elections.

**Liz Carolan**, founder of the Transparent Referendum Initiative, explained why she had come up with the initiative in the context of a referendum on access to abortion in Ireland in 2017. The aim of the initiative had been to make sure that the discussion and activity happening online would be exposed to the same amount of scrutiny as activities in the public domain. She noted that Ireland had strict rules for expenditure on TV and radio ads, but none for digital ads. Therefore, the goal had been to highlight the challenges present in many regulatory frameworks and to build a foundation for regulatory reform. Ms Carolan teamed up with Mr Jeffers in order to use "Who targets me" to give individuals an opportunity to understand the ads they were seeing. Without any budget for the project, in cooperation with data scientists and universities, various ads were filtered in order to find those targeting the Irish people and trying to influence their views on abortion. Afterwards, the Transparent Referendum Initiative organised a journalist collective who helped them bring stories from the online world to newspapers, national broadcasting networks, the BBC, CNN, Politico etc. As it turned out, there had been some overseas interference from US, Canadian and French registered organisations trying to influence voters before the referendum. The turning point for the Transparent Referendum Initiative had been when Facebook decided to ban all overseas groups from advertising on their page and Google decided to ban all political advertising within Ireland just before the referendum happened. Nevertheless, the evening before the referendum Google had displayed five different "vote no" ads to a person who was simply trying to buy a necklace. The aim of the regulation currently being developed was to give the public access to a balanced array of information and ensure that the flow of information could not be monopolised by one group. Ms Carolan said she intended to replicate the initiative in Ireland in time for the European elections.

At DROG, **Marije Arentze** teaches people how to create their own fake news, with the aim of showing people how disinformation works by exposing the techniques behind it. She believes that, to fight disinformation, we should try to train news consumers to recognise fake news. The "Bad news game" was launched (getbadnews.com) last February, inviting players to spread their own fake news. The game is thought to act as a vaccine against disinformation –users have to cross their own ethical boundaries and be as bad as possible, which also activates their defence mechanisms. The game is divided into six aspects: polarisation, conspiracy, impersonation, discredit, emotion, and trolling. Players gain points for using each of them. The research for this game was conducted in cooperation with the University of Cambridge and is based on the inoculation theory from social psychology, which states that people can become resistant to misleading information if they are presented with a weakened version of a misleading argument before being exposed to the "real" information. The results of the research show that people get better at spotting fake news. Ms Arentze also presented another initiative called the "Dutch Troll Army", a recently organised event to spread disinformation on the 2019 European elections, following the same approach of "vaccinating" people against fake news and creating a playing field with their own rules.

**Alexandre Alaphilippe** presented the EU DisinfoLab, a project that brings together various civil society initiatives fighting disinformation in Europe. He said it was necessary for civil society to take the lead on the disinformation issue facing not only politics but also science and the social spheres. He mentioned the example of a recent fake news video that had been spread via Whatsapp in India and had led to the deaths of many people. He explained that disinformation was very diverse, taking on various forms and contents, as observed in France during the last elections, in Spain during the referendum, and in the recent Italian elections. Mr

Alaphilippe considered that citizens were not ready for the wide diversity of techniques being used by the people who spread fake information, in part because they evolved so quickly. There was thus a need for many different forms of expertise in all the fields affected by disinformation. He also highlighted the lack of cross-border communication initiatives, which would have been possible if people had known about each other's activities. More data access was therefore needed for these initiatives to succeed. He stressed the importance of ensuring that technology was used to safeguard democracy.

After these initial presentations, **Mr Vollbracht** opened the floor for questions from the audience and for a debate. The first set of questions related to the limitations of the "Who targets me" project, to an initiative planned for the upcoming election in Ukraine, and to the possibility of Finland joining NATO.

**Mr Jeffers** explained the current limitations on the use of 'Who targets me' on a mobile device and talked about the exchange that was taking place with software built in Ukraine as part of the preparations for the next election. **Ms Carolan** answered that the best way to counter disinformation in the Finnish case was to give people access to trusted and reliable information. **Mr Alaphilippe** added that disinformation did not only come from foreign states but was also circulated at local level by polarised groups.

Another set of questions asked whether Facebook ads had won the presidency for Mr Trump, whether they had caused Brexit and whether they had changed democracy, about the risks of the provocative approach used in **Ms Arentze's** initiative, and about the reaction of the government in Ireland.

**Mr Jeffers** answered that fake news might indeed have caused Mr Trump's election and Brexit, while, on the question of democracy, it depended on the country's system. **Ms Arentze** replied that the radical approach was part of the uniqueness of the project. **Ms Carolan** explained that the Irish government had made few concrete commitments, and that she had given them some recommendations.

The last set of questions concerned current trends in the field of disinformation and the practical dimension of the political ads repository. **Mr Alaphilippe** described the project, saying that it was primarily a policy recommendation. He felt that the new trend was WhatsApp, with groups that were very difficult to monitor. **Ms Carolan** added that one of the trends was targeting subscribers of email lists.

The key recommendation of the session was: "**Democratic processes are not the same as selling plane tickets online**".