EuroPCom session report

Social media in the 2019 elections: what was expected, what happened, what next

Friday, 8 November, 09h15 – 10h45

Speakers: Thibault Lesenecal, Head of Web Communication Unit, European Parliament; **Stephen Turner**, Head of Public Policy, Government and Philanthropy, Twitter Belgium; **Sean Evins**, Head of Facebook's Politics & Government Outreach team in the UK for Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA); **Anamaria Dutceac Segesten**, Senior lecturer in European Studies, Lund University

Moderator: Tom Moylan, Speechwriter for the Commissioner for Trade, European Commission

Nowadays, public debate is taking place more and more on social media, and so is campaigning. The ground game strategy was thus a major part of the European Parliament election campaign. But (how) did the institutional input affect the national debate on social media? What were the challenges faced by those managing the election campaigns? And now, how do we carry on and what are the lessons for next time? Experts will give answers to those and other questions during this session on social media in the 2019 European elections.

Tom Moylan opened the session by introducing the theme of social media and electoral campaigns, looking back on the EU elections, the lessons learned from the campaign and the opportunities for the future.

Thibault Lesenecal presented the EP's campaign "This time I'm voting" and the importance of running a *ground game* parallel to the *air game* (informing everybody) – the overall information campaign. The "big win" of this campaign was the highest turnout for the last 20 years, with 51% of Europeans voting. **Mr Lesenecal** explained that the main focus of the election strategy was on targeting youth, students and opinion leaders, defined as pro-Europeans, who benefit from the EU but had never expressed themselves before as the urgency to do so was less apparent.

Among the four pillars of the strategic campaign (air-game and ground game, supported by media and social media), the ground game was the most innovative, as it targeted certain people, asking them to take action and vote and convince people around them. He explained that the "hero movie" was the success of this campaign, notching up 135 million views: this highlighted the value of a digital strategy combined with an emotional element for the first time as an institution.

Anamaria Dutceac Segesten discussed a study carried out during the 2019 European Parliament elections with data collected from Twitter. The aim was to explore the potential of Twitter for hosting a possible pan-European discussion platform for citizens. **Ms Dutceac Segesten** discovered that the English language cluster on Twitter was not a pan-European arena but dominated by UK politics and Brexit topics. However, climate change, feminism, internet privacy and the election results were the transnational topics that united the European public on Twitter. While Brexit is tweeted about as a national topic, it might also be a European topic. The specific UK players using the topic on Twitter support the argument of it being framed as a national issue.

Sean Evins discussed his work on the big picture inside the European election campaign related to the expectations from the EU elections. He listed five relevant areas as regards recognising the problems and threats in the 2018 elections. First, disrupting "bad actors" and their patterns. Second, knowing how to decode real accounts and third, understanding how false information is produced. Fourth, the commitment to focus on transparency to get information on what companies are spending their money on. Finally, promoting civic engagement, thinking ahead, and trying to engage individuals. To be able to make social media platforms a safer space, investment in technology and people is being increased. However, the line between freedom of speech and security is thin and companies have a difficult time bridging this. This is why transparency is increasing so that false accounts and bad actors can be detected by the public through the patterns they use. For the European elections, the priority commitment the company made was to security, focusing on using partnerships and civic engagement and on improving knowledge about their tools.

Stephen Turner shared with participants how Twitter tried to bring more integrity into the EU elections process and how the conversation on the elections overall went on the platform. Mr Turner covered several similar aspects of the success of the European Parliament, showing activities taking place around the elections. Twitter's goal is to further the commitment to healthy public conversation and election integrity within the EU. To be able to empower users to detect potential threats, increased digital skills and media literacy will be necessary. He also touched on the importance of managed and leveraged technology to more proactively detect misleading information.

Questions during the **Q&A session** ranged from the identification of fake accounts on Facebook, to whether other fields are using AI and what would be the next steps to build trust on the internet.

Mr Evins believed that it was worth looking at the process and that more transparency in artificial intelligence was very much needed. The internal checks are an example of commitment to election security. With AI getting better, they were able to block 99.8% of the fake accounts before they could even engage in conversation on the platform. Regarding transparency, **Ms Dutceac Segesten** believed that Facebook had done a great job, but more information was needed to help understand the database. All the platforms had to deal with the question of how to use AI for this. She pointed to several ongoing projects looking at how the algorithms work that identify fake news without looking at content but at metadata such as the properties of imagery. The platforms were working towards the same aim but perhaps with different tools or strategies. **Mr Lesenecal** claimed that for a European campaign to work, NGOs needed to first follow a European agenda to approach both east and west Europe. Secondly, the

European political parties were crucial players in building democracy, when showing and sharing common views among national politicians. **Mr Turner** emphasised that to make people understand what can and cannot be done, a balance had to be established between understanding how the content worked and clarifying the rules. He concluded that facing issues at a global level was crucial to finding the right approach.