

Press Release Forum Privacy



Political micro-targeting needs regulation to avoid harm for democracy

The German research consortium Forum Privacy invited experts and interested citizens to discuss the highly topical question of whether and to what extent political micro-targeting damages democratic processes - and how regulatory authorities should respond.

Advertising surrounds us daily, whether in newspapers, on television, on posters or in social networks. But what if advertising on the Internet is used to spread political propaganda? And what if the advertisements are tailored to the individual addressees without them noticing? These questions were discussed by researchers and practitioners on 30 January at the CPDP in Brussels. The Forum Privacy member Dr Nicholas Martin noted that “the use of such micro-targeted ads for political purposes online had been pioneered in the USA and seems to be spreading to continental Europe, but only gradually and unevenly.” Regulators would still have a chance to get ahead of the curve. The political scientist, who works at the Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research ISI, added: "Micro-targeting is about conveying personalized political messages to voters that correspond to their individual interests, convictions, socio-economic circumstances and even their psychological profile.”

„Political micro-targeting has an impact on democratic processes in the EU“

Katerina Pouliou, legal officer at the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS), stressed in particular the implications and consequences for the European Union: „It is true that micro-targeting for political purposes is an old and extensive practice in the US, however there is progressively more evidence that similar practices have been brought to the EU as well. The EDPS opinion on online manipulation and personal data shed some light on the topic, and so have done a number of national DPAs by developing rules or guidelines on data processing for political purposes. The intensified discussions in the EU, both on EU Institutions and national level, during the last years, constitute a clear indication that online political micro-targeting practices already have an impact on EU citizens' civic engagement in decision-making and on public involvement in democratic processes”.

"Clear risks to the democratic process" – „Social Networks offer an ideal breeding ground for micro-targeting“

The scientific community and the regulatory authority agreed that micro-targeting and the increase in micro-targeting pose clear risks to the democratic process. "It is therefore incumbent upon regulators to step in," argued Martin. The use of social bots as part of micro-targeting strategies, often referred to as computational propaganda, was also discussed. "Social-psychological studies such as those of the famous communications scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann showed as early as 1974 that people tend to accept majority opinion because they are afraid of isolation and fear negative consequences if they join the supposed minority," said Forum Privacy member Dr Elias Kyewski, media psychologist at the University of Duisburg-Essen. In his opinion, the interactivity in social networks and the presentation of user-generated comments „offer an ideal breeding ground for the use of micro-targeting“.

<Forum Privacy> is an interdisciplinary German research consortium funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research to address the increasingly urgent questions of privacy and data protection. It provides a platform for exchange between academics, policy-makers, technologists and citizens.

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