Who (really) targets you?

Facebook in Polish election campaigns

How does political microtargeting differ between the U.S. and Europe, given Europe's more modest advertising budgets, stronger legal protections, and varied political cultures?
Are we ready to name concrete problems with microtargeting and identify which ones can be solved by regulators?
And last but not least: Who should be the focus of such regulation?

These were just some of the troubling questions raised by the Cambridge Analytica scandal that we set out to answer in this research project. With the goal of fueling European policy debate around political microtargeting, as well as providing concrete recommendations, we monitored and analysed political ads published on Facebook in the Polish parliamentary elections in October 2019.

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Lessons from the Polish elections:

- **Polish political parties did not engage in microtargeting**: they did not narrowly define audiences or present different messages to different groups.
- **Facebook's role** in optimising ad delivery (selecting users who will see an ad) might have been **significant**.
- Facebook's **transparency tools are insufficient** to verify targeting criteria and determine whether voters' vulnerabilities were exploited (either by political advertisers or by the platform itself).
- **Control tools offered by Facebook to its users are superficial** and do not give them real control over the use of their data in (political) advertising.
- **Online campaign financing** is beyond effective supervision due to inadequate regulations.

What does this all mean?

- Online platforms' role in targeting and delivering political ads should not be underestimated.
- Their practices and capabilities are hidden in the shadows, which makes it impossible to examine (micro)targeting practices.
- It should not be up to platforms to decide what information about the targeting process they disclose.
- The EU might not have the competence to define campaign rules for political parties, but it can and should regulate online platforms' role in ad targeting.

How to regulate targeted (political) ads

- **Full transparency of the ad targeting process** covering decisions made by advertisers as well as by the platform.
- **Insights about targeting for all ads should be archived in ad libraries** and accessible for researchers via a fully-functional API, with minimum technical standards defined by law.
- **Users should have access to and control over their full marketing profiles**, including opt-in for the use of behavioural data for advertising and a separate opt-in for political ads.
- **Limitations on PMT in order to protect societal interest**, e.g. prohibition on the use of certain characteristics; transparency of fairness criteria used in ad optimisation models; PMT defined as a high-risk application of AI.
- **Constraints on financing online political campaigns**, e.g. requirement to submit direct invoices from the platform to the supervisory authority.