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## Online Political Communication workshop

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### Report

*The workshop was held as part of the evidence-gathering stage of the Truth, Trust and Technology Commission. It was designed to feed in to the Commission's report, which is due to be published by LSE in November 2018.*

*The workshop was held under the Chatham House rule. Participants included a range of experts from academia, civil society and the public and private sectors, and included senior journalists and editors, policymakers and industry representatives. This report was prepared by the LSE Truth, Trust and Technology team as a record of points raised in the discussion. It is not a verbatim summary, nor is it a statement of a consensus position.*

### Background

The workshop was held to address the central question of the [Online Political Communication strand](#): what would a 'good' political campaign look like in the platform era, and how platforms, the media, government and civil society might work together to achieve it.

### Introduction

**Dr Nick Anstead (LSE)** set out the rapidly evolving electoral landscape that had emerged during the EU referendum campaign and the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections. Political parties and campaigners had grasped the potential that easy-to-place, low-cost platform advertising offered for reaching particular demographics. In this way, the online advertising model has leaked into the political space.

Current election law, and in particular spending limits and the public service broadcasting (PSB) [impartiality rules](#) during campaigns, were written in a pre-platform era. In a world where people share content freely, laws that prohibit collusion (such as funnelling money to like-minded organisations to avoid declaring it to the Electoral Commission) are more difficult to enforce. The Democratic Unionist Party's purchase of a pro-Brexit [wraparound advertisement](#) in the Metro newspaper on 21 June 2016 through the obscure Constitutional Research Council was an example. Metro is not published in Northern Ireland. In the online context, researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute will shortly publish a study of how [bots](#) are used to spread political

propaganda. At the moment, we have virtually no knowledge of the effects (or effectiveness) of targeted online political advertising.

Facebook has promised 'radical [transparency](#)' in the way it publishes details of political advertising on the platform, but this will have ramifications for privacy. Leveraging the data Facebook provides for genuine accountability will be challenging.

What are the fundamental values we want to institutionalise in our democracy through our approach to electoral campaigning? Some principles - such as privacy and transparency - may undermine each other. Lawmakers have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and this may hinder reform. The speed of technological change, a mainstream media-fuelled backlash against platforms and a wider context of anxiety about populist threats to liberal democracy make new regulation risky. Technology does offer potential democratic gains - to take one example, the ability to 'nudge' citizens in an effective and transparent way ([Bruns, 2018](#)) - and positive initiatives should be supported.

**Dr Damian Tambini (LSE)**, whose co-authored (with Martin Moore) [chapter](#) on social media power and electoral legitimacy in his new book is available through the LSE's open-access portal LSERO, suggested that trust in election rules was being rapidly undermined by the shift to social media advertising. The 'new propaganda model' was about understanding each voter and targeting them accordingly.

Nonetheless, credible threats (such as taxation, competition law and liability reform) were on the table and gave politicians and civil society considerable negotiating force. If platforms failed to step up - and rather than serving democracy, extracted value from it - the argument for taxing them as a harm (like tobacco) rather than a good (like PSB) gained force. Although Britain's role in a post-Brexit EU regulatory environment would be different, reform might come through the Council of Europe instead. The direction of travel is 'mining trust': now is the time to act.

**Sophie Gaston (Demos)** drew on her recent report, [Mediating Populism](#), to discuss how declining trust affects online political communication. While 45% of the UK public claims to cross-check facts with other sources, there are big variations between generations, with the young more conscientious about sharing information. Public cynicism is acute, with trust in leaks higher than that in government-issued information, and news avoidance is a problem. The news people consume is increasingly driven by partisanship, and this feeds social fragmentation.

Workshop attendees then joined one of three breakout sessions on elections (led by Nick Anstead) the role of platforms (Damian Tambini) and the public sphere (Prof Charlie Beckett).

## Is targeting desirable?

Not all the participants opposed targeting per se ('especially if it's true'), mindful of the way parties have used it to deploy emails and offline election communications: one said using Facebook was 'exactly the same'. Indeed, some voters might like to receive information that was especially relevant to them. Rational ignorance theory ([Downs, 1957](#)) suggests that time spent deciding how to vote is a poor investment from the individual's point of view: therefore, people may be more likely to vote if they feel they have to spend less time informing themselves about politics. Informed consent, however, was an important caveat to keep in mind: people should be able to find out how and why they were being targeted.

On the other hand, there is evidence in the US that targeting has been used to discourage citizens from voting, which is clearly anti-democratic. Targeting can also make it difficult to sustain shared deliberation about manifestos and policies, and undermine set-piece debates like those organised by the major broadcasters.

The degree of sophistication now involved in online targeting also favours bigger, wealthier players who can pay for specialist advice. Organisations like the BBC struggle to match this level and speed of investment.

## Filter bubbles, polarisation and hate speech

Academic evidence for filter bubbles is mixed (Haim et al, [Burst of the filter bubble](#) and Boxall et al, [Is the Internet Causing Political Polarization?](#)), but the proliferation of outlets for political news and comment may be encouraging people to hold fast to certain narratives, even while seeing dissenting views - a form of confirmation bias.

Similarly, a plurality of original sources does not necessarily mean less bias. One participant noted that outlets with a particular agenda sometimes draw - but selectively - their evidence from media perceived as less biased, such as the BBC or Bild, in order to lend them authority.

Participants identified a dwindling sense of common ground and an Establishment v anti-Establishment narrative (particularly in the Leave/Remain divide) for which politicians were partly to blame. This means identifying and prioritising certain media sources as 'better' might backfire. If these sources are behind paywalls the sense of an 'elite talking to itself' may be even more acute.

One attendee blamed Facebook's business model and advertising technology for encouraging divisive content, noting that the latter was cheaper to run.

There was disagreement about whether online hate speech should be treated differently from its offline equivalent, and whether existing laws around speech (such as defamation) could be adapted to award specific remedies for specific harms.

## Should political advertising be banned?

One participant proposed an outright ban on all paid-for political advertising, both off- and online, in order to 'level the playing field': 'a YouTube campaign video would go viral on its own merits'. There had been a 'clear regulatory failure of election advertising since 2007'.

The workshop explored this suggestion - which would have little impact on Facebook's revenues - and proposed different forms of restriction.

- A ban on **all** political advertising
- A ban on **online** political advertising ('a complete free-for-all', said one participant, which made it easy for campaigners to flout local spending limits)
- A ban on political advertising **during the election campaign**, or for a certain number of **days before the poll**, as France is considering. During the 2016 referendum campaign, advertising spending on Facebook was [weighted towards](#) the days before the vote

- **A temporary ban** on paid-for political advertising until new regulation could be developed and agreed.

Objections and reservations included:

- The right to freedom of speech (in the event of a total ban) and the difficult, labour-intensive task of identifying what is 'political'
- What would fill the void, and who might seek to fill it?
- If paid-for advertising was banned, campaigners would seek ways around the ban using new forms of technology - it is already very difficult to control bots
- Regulation of information is unrealistic. Regulation of behaviour - moderation policies, for example - is an achievable aim
- Politicians are not up to the task of devising and enforcing radical changes to electoral law and campaign spending

Damian Tambini suggested that it would be useful to examine the history of the regulation of election advertising as background for the T3 report.

## **Stricter caps on spending and greater scrutiny**

Historically the UK has looked to avoid imitating the US, where politicians can win office by massively outspending their opponents, and sought to limit campaign spending accordingly. But participants were broadly sceptical about the potential of higher fines, or a lower cap on campaign spending, to bring about positive change.

- Fines are not necessarily a disincentive when they are levied months or years after the election (as has happened since the referendum) and when they come far too late to influence the outcome
- The lower a cap on election spending, the more likely parties were to spend their funds on social media

However, some attendees were keen for greater scrutiny of online political advertising to build on the disclosure Facebook is now implementing.

### **What information should be available?**

At the least:

- The advertisement itself
- The page an advertisement is run from
- Other advertisements that page is running
- Who it is targeting

in addition, participants suggested:

- Real-time disclosure (during an election period) is vital
- A regulator should have the power to obtain the information it deems necessary

- While it will soon be possible to look at all political advertising on Facebook, will this be accessible to the general public through easy-to-use tools, or confined (for instance) to an API feed?
- New regulation (such as the GDPR) is not always clear or easy for businesses to implement, yet raises the expectations of users
- It could be helpful to craft any new law so that the greatest burden falls on bigger companies, in order to increase competition and diversity
- The data alone was not enough if there are no poses to act upon it: 'Transparency without accountability would be even worse.' One participant described the Electoral Commission as 'not fit for purpose'.

## Do we need a British BPB?

In Germany, the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung ([Federal Agency for Civic Education](#)) is tasked with 'fostering civil society' and 'strengthening democracy' for everyone in the country. It was established in 1952 and in 2016 had a budget of €42m. The BPB produces a '[Wahl-o-Mat](#)' voting advice application that tries to match a voter's views to the most suitable political party. Could the UK set up a similar organisation? Would the BBC be its natural home, or would that meet resistance from media rivals?

One attendee noted that an increase in the number of people going on to higher education in the US had not translated into greater political knowledge ([Galston](#), 2001). This suggested that better-quality political journalism was needed.

Some participants pointed out that first-past-the-post led to a (largely accurate) perception that 'most people's votes don't matter' and discouraged political engagement and turnout.

Civil society, funded by philanthropy, has made much more strenuous efforts to inform citizens about elections and candidates than central or local government. [Democracy Club](#), which supplies APIs of election data to sites like [Whocanivotefor.co.uk](#) and Democratic Dashboard, is the leader in this area.

Facebook has potential as a site for civic and political education (and indeed has already incorporated tools to encourage people to vote) and the possibility of compelling the platform to show a certain amount of content from the parties during election campaigns - as broadcasters run party election broadcasts - was mooted. But participants were also wary of encouraging platforms to co-operate too closely with government, and the platform itself is reluctant to take decisions with major implications (such as a ban on political advertising) alone.

It was suggested that the ultimate aim of any intervention should be to enable and encourage as much political discussion as possible, and to bring in a wider range of views from civil society, such as from charities.

## Points to take forward to the fourth workshop on citizenship and media literacy

- We need the views of the wider public: there is a risk of elitist moral panic leading to rushed and poor quality legislation

- How do we articulate and quantify social value? What is the responsibility of the public, what the government, and what the platforms? Is there a way of aligning platforms' interests with those of society? What is the social contract that enables trust between these actors?
- Strengthening state regulation will impact the ability of users to make their own decisions (self-regulate)
- With multiple policy reviews underway, the Commission is a chance to identify the areas in which we need to act most urgently

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**16 May 2018**

*With thanks to the LSE students who took notes of the proceedings: Claudia Cohen, Claire Pattie & Aigerim Toleukhanova.*