Protecting Political Campaigns from Digital Threats

Insights from Tunisia, Panama and Bolivia

OVERVIEW

No political campaign ahead of an election takes place without an online component. Globally, all political parties and candidates focus a significant amount of resources and effort on their online campaigns, seeking to influence the conversation taking place online and on social media. Moreover, political campaigns online have in recent years been at the centre of controversy when it comes to their alleged contribution to polarization, manipulation of voters and rendering politics more opaque (Tucker et al. 2018). Political campaigns online have demonstrated that they can help candidates win elections, include more citizens' concerns in political debates or allow upcoming parties to gain political exposure. Yet social media can potentially have a negative effect on political and electoral integrity by attacking an essential principle of democracy: the fundamental right of citizens to access trustable, reliable information to form their political opinions and, ultimately, decide their votes.

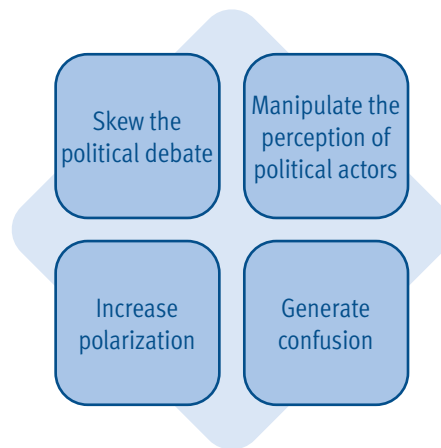> **Box 1. What is a *digital information operation*?**
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> Using different techniques to manipulate public opinion online has been given many different names. Often media have focused on disinformation or *fake news*, but those terms cover only a fraction of the wide array of techniques available. The most comprehensive term is probably *digital information operation*. This is defined as a 'coordinated attempt to inauthentically manipulate an information environment in a systemic/strategic way, using means which are coordinated, covert and inauthentic in order to achieve political or social objectives' (Krasodomski-Jones et al. 2019: 12).
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> These actions encompass the use of different tools, such as the spread of disinformation and fake news, the use of bots and trolls, *astroturfing* (creating artificial support for an idea) or *doxxing* (coordinated attacks on an individual about personal matters). They do not shift public opinion from one day to another but rather act slowly by placing ideas and topics at the top of the agenda—and the feed—of voters. For this reason, measuring their exact influence is still extremely difficult.

Today it is argued that the capacity to access trustable information has become hindered by social media (Tucker et al. 2018). Social media is the main source of political information for many and a key forum for political debate. Given this, manipulating information online can potentially be a threat to the integrity of democracy (see Figure 1). The potential for manipulation creates a disruptive tool for political parties, candidates,

interest groups and political operatives in general, as they can skew and alter one of the most important information environments available to voters (Tucker et al. 2018).

Figure 1. The effects of digital information operations in political public opinion

These attempts at interfering in the capacity of voters to access trustable information equally are based on well-structured and well-financed *digital information operations* (see Box 1). The final aim of these operations is to alter public opinion significantly with the objective of influencing the results of an election, by focusing the debate on certain topics, increasing polarization, attacking political figures or seeding doubts about the fairness of the process itself (Krasodomski-Jones et al. 2019).

In this context of potential manipulation of public opinion through digital information operations, electoral management bodies (EMBs), monitoring authorities, legislators and political parties face increasing difficulty in protecting the integrity of the political process. This is of especial relevance ahead of elections, when the stakes are higher and tensions mount. Legislative measures are often insufficient, outdated or totally absent, adding to the difficulty. The recent elections in Tunisia, Panama and Bolivia can help with gathering a few overarching recommendations and discerning a way forward based on how these types of activities may have potentially influenced the elections.[1] All three countries saw digital information operations that may have affected the quality of the information available to voters. The different patterns and platforms in each country respond to the diverse presence of social media in the three countries. Whereas in Tunisia most actions took place in Facebook groups, Panama's focus was Twitter, and WhatsApp was the preferred vector in Bolivia. Yet the preparedness of the electoral and monitoring authorities of each country and their capacity to act point to the role that EMBs can play to protect democracy from digital threats.

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1. The information used in this Fact sheet stems from the work of International IDEA in these three countries analysing digital campaigns on the ground and providing technical assistance to electoral authorities on how to address these challenges.

Tunisia

Electoral debates and conversations in Tunisia have increasingly occurred online and that trend is continuing. In the same way as Tunisians use social media—especially Facebook—in their day-to-day life, parties and candidates have moved part of their campaigns online to harness, and profit from, the active use of social media that Tunisian society makes. However, entities in charge of protecting the integrity of democracy and elections have faced significant hurdles to tackle the negative effects of online manipulation. Institutionally a significant effort has been made to increase understanding and capacity. The main oversight bodies—the Independent Higher Authority for Elections (Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections, ISIE) and the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle, HAICA)—have stepped up their capacity and focus. This is especially true of HAICA given its mandate to oversee media activities. Yet these institutions could still take advantage of more resources, a more conducive legal framework—especially for the ISIE—and stronger support from the platforms' owners.

During the campaign, Pages in Facebook have been the epicentre of most attempts to manipulate public opinion (Association Tunisienne pour l'Intégrité et la Démocratie des Elections 2019). Pages allow people with common interests to enjoy a closed space for discussion on Facebook, yet these Pages are controlled by their administrators. In Tunisia, a multitude of Pages are active on sport, TV, society, religion and politics. Given their importance, it was only natural that digital information operations during the campaigns in Tunisia used these Pages to influence and manipulate public opinion (Association Tunisienne pour l'Intégrité et la Démocratie des Elections 2019).

During the campaign Facebook Pages were used in distinct ways to alter public opinion. Pages were used to mobilize support for one or other candidate or party, without a clear or direct link to the candidate or party. Other Pages became vehicles for foreign influence, as was highlighted by Facebook taking down a network of Pages linked to foreign governments (Facebook 2019b). Pages changed sides and/or shifted focus to become overly political even if their original content—what attracted their followers—was not political. Lastly, some Pages contributed to the spread of disinformation and to the polarization of the political debate, as highlighted by the Association Tunisienne pour l´Intégrité et la Démocratie des Elections (2019).

Panama

The 2019 election in Panama took place amid a significant legislative change that shifted the way political parties could campaign, limiting the actions of parties outside the campaign period (Tribunal Electoral de Panama 2017). It was also the first national election in which the Electoral Tribunal of Panama was actively focusing its message

and actions on protecting the election from the risks of online campaigning. This was done by, on one hand, creating a unit capable of monitoring online activities by political parties and in constant contact with online platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. On the other hand, the tribunal implemented a communications campaign, called the Digital Ethics Pact, asking Panamanians to maintain a healthy political use of social media. This strategy sought to protect the integrity of the 2019 election in Panama from digital information operations.

The monitoring unit of the Electoral Tribunal, through its capacity and contact with the platforms, was able to detect actions online that did not comply with the electoral legislation, such as campaigning outside the stipulated period, and to jointly define with the platforms how to act when the electoral legislation was breached. The unit detected various digital information operations trying to manipulate the political debate and based abroad. These took the shape of networks of coordinated accounts— predominantly on Twitter—seeking to polarize the political debate and manipulate the perception of the different candidates and political actors. Thanks to the increased technical capacities of the tribunal, many of these networks were detected and taken down in close collaboration with the platforms. At the same time, citizens' collaboration with the tribunal was fundamental to identify and address disinformation and violations of the electoral legislation, especially on paying for campaign ads outside the allowed period. The tribunal facilitated channels for citizens to report disinformation, for instance a WhatsApp line on which citizens could forward dubious messages spreading through the platform.

By having technical and human resources in place, the tribunal was able to partly counter the potential negative effect of digital information operations in the 2019 election and meet the difficult challenge of implementing the electoral law on actions taking place online too. This allocation of resources increased the capacity of the tribunal to monitor social media. This gave the tribunal more power to apply the electoral legislation and act against the use of false profiles, the spread of disinformation and expenditures not allowed by law. It also allowed the tribunal to reduce its response time to these events from months almost to minutes. Of special importance is the collaboration of citizens in highlighting possible infractions of the electoral law to the Electoral Tribunal, which helped the authority to gain valuable information.

Bolivia

The political campaign ahead of the 2019 election in Bolivia was probably the most heated one in recent times in terms of polarization, including online. In fact, the campaign started online, when one of the main candidates used a YouTube video to announce his intention to send for election. For the first time in a general election, all candidates heavily invested in online campaigning. This fact follows the increasing adoption of social media as a predominant method of communication and debate

among the country's citizens (AGETIC 2017). In recent years the use of the Internet in Bolivia has seen exponential growth. Political figures and parties have also been part of that growth by devoting increasing resources to their online presence. The political campaign ahead of the constitutional referendum of 2016 brought to the fore the debate about the influence of social media on public opinion, and how some political actors might be able to use social media to wage a dirty war online. This increase has been underpinned by two key factors—the exponential growth of digital infrastructure in the country, and a young population entering politics for the first time (CEPAL 2019).

In the midst of a highly polarized campaign, online digital operations found fertile ground in Bolivia to spread disinformation and heighten political polarization. The official profiles of candidates on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube remained mostly communication channels, but in some cases also supported attempts to increase polarization and disinformation. Yet the activities with most capacity to influence and manipulate public opinion took place on other accounts and profiles not officially linked to any candidate, and very often with WhatsApp as their origin. These manipulation attempts were multiplatform, spreading through WhatsApp and jumping to other platforms such as Facebook or Instagram quickly. Although fact-checking initiatives such as ChequeaBolivia or Bolivia Verifica focused on debunking some of the main disinformation attempts, it is plausible that the manipulation of public opinion was more successful than the debunking of it (ChequeaBolivia n.d.).

The rapidly spreading disinformation attempts and the wide net of online profiles acting in favour of the different candidates became an important part of the political campaign in Bolivia ahead of the election in 2019. The effects of these digital information operations are nearly impossible to measure. However, the prevalence of certain issues in the political debate—corruption or who was behind one or other candidate—emphasizes how these operations may have dominated and steered the political debate.

Key issues to consider

The overviews of the three cases presented imply that political campaigns online differ from country to country yet there are certain commonalities that can be identified. These commonalities revolve around how they influence and attempt to manipulate public opinion and what actions can be taken by oversight and monitoring agencies to counter this influence.

The first element that is found in all the cases is the importance of political finance in both advancing and curtailing information operations online. The financing of these activities largely escapes the control capacity of many authorities (International IDEA 2019). In the case of Panama, a strong effort to control payments yielded significant results in terms of detecting violations of the current electoral legislation and acting upon them. Yet countries such as Bolivia or Tunisia struggle to monitor the expenditure

of political parties in online campaigns. Being able to control online expenditure is a joint effort that requires internal capacity at the EMB or the monitoring authority, clear rules, good bookkeeping practice by political parties and candidates, and the collaboration of the platform's owners.

Second, all these cases have clearly shown the importance of contextual political dynamics. Influencing and attempting to manipulate voters online work only if those attempts are well integrated and based on national power and political dynamics. In the cases of the three countries analysed, the different digital information operations perfectly reflected the main political debates of each country, were situated within them and attempted to exploit them. Focusing the debate on one topic or another is part of the effects of these operations, but their influencing capacity is defined by how well they manage to boost certain topics that are already present in the debate. These may be the role of religion in society, migration, the personal life of a candidate or corrupt practices.

Third, understanding how and where information operations unfold within each country can be done only with deep contextual knowledge. This, in turn, can determine the possible actions that are taken by political actors, by EMBs and by civil society to address these attempts to distort fair political debate. In Tunisia both Facebook and civil society organizations made efforts to understand how information operations were taking place on Facebook Pages, as those are the main political discussion forums in the country. For Bolivia WhatsApp was where political debates online started, whereas for Panama most coordinated network activity was on Twitter. It can be argued that information operations go where the people are.

Fourth, the role of monitoring and oversight institutions is paramount, as well as the importance of having a legal context that enables them to act. In the three cases analysed, the reach of EMBs and the legal framework in which they had to act differed significantly, yet the agencies with more capacity to act and with a more conducive legal mandate and framework showed the most promising results, in particular Panama's Electoral Tribunal and HAICA in Tunisia. Equipping these oversight and monitoring institutions with an online mandate and the means to fulfil it should be a priority.

Possible actions to increase the integrity of political processes online:

by electoral management bodies:

- Together with oversight and monitoring agencies, and the authorities creating the legislation they are based upon, they should strive to increase their technical and human resources to monitor online activities by political parties and candidates. By increasing their capacity to monitor campaign activities online, they will increase their ability to apply existing legislation online as well, and to monitor the political activities under their mandate.

- They should focus on the current political finance law, and the potential vulnerabilities which that law might create when activities take place online. In the cases analysed, political finance legislation remains behind the realities of political activities online and does not fully cover them. Increased resources and attention should be given to applying the existing political finance legislation for online activities as well.

by legislators:

- A proactive dialogue should be opened among all parties involved on how to create a legislative framework that allows the communicative potential of social media to be harnessed while at the same time protecting voters' fundamental right of access to unbiased, trustable information.

- Legislative efforts should be made to reform political finance laws to protect the integrity of elections online. These laws should demand detailed disclosure of information about costs of and expenditure on online campaigns, and the source of such funding, including when these activities are done from abroad. Certain countries, such as Mexico, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, are taking some steps in this direction.

by political parties:

- Proactive transparency on how each political party is using online campaigns should become the norm rather than an exception. Political parties can create online information platforms where all their expenditure is clearly stated in a readable format and share the information publicly. Knowing what each party is doing online, and how much resources they are pouring into those activities, is the beginning of protecting the integrity of democracy.

- Political parties should commit to an ethical code on how to behave online, refusing to use communication techniques that cannot be scrutinized by the public or by monitoring and oversight authorities.

by platform owners:

- Platform owners should expand their transparency tools to all countries, and not focus only on the bigger markets. A good example of this is how the Ads transparency functionality of Facebook is not available in any of the three countries analysed, and other functions, such as Facebook Pages tracking, only partially (Facebook 2019a).

- Platform owners should provide EMBs and monitoring and oversight entities with all the information that they require to fulfil their legal mandate. Accordingly, all information regarding payments should be readily and promptly disclosed, as well as the activities behind political campaigns.

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