

### 3/3 – Digital players at the heart of the European elections

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*On the eve of the 2019 European elections, Lighthouse Europe is offering a series of articles to help you understand how the European Parliament works and what are the challenges of this electoral period. The series is made up of three articles, published every Wednesday:*

*1/3 – How are the Members of the European Parliament elected and what are their functions?*

*2/3 – The European political groups in Parliament*

***3/3 – Digital players at the heart of the European elections***

#### ▶ The integrity of the elections threatened

Since the **2016 US presidential elections**, it turned out that the dissemination of **fake news** on the Internet has severely hampered the election process across the world. For example, a Twitter account run by a third country's propaganda agency usurped the identity of one of the parties' offices in order to spread false information. The majority of voters are therefore likely to be misled by this type of messages during a campaign.

In 2016, the **Brexit campaign** was also subject to the influence of fake news. Misinformation techniques have been widely used by some people to convince British citizens of the importance of leaving the European Union (EU). Thus, the benefits of leaving the EU were maximised while the costs of divorce minimised. Voting was therefore instrumentalized to the benefit of the Leave supporters who did not provide the British people with all the information they needed to take an informed decision.

**Interference foreign powers** and the **circulation of erroneous information** greatly undermine democracy. Citizens no longer have the means to understand the issues specific to each election. The decisions taken are thus subject to a lack of information.

In the digital age, it is easier for detractors to spread their information. News circulates **quickly**, has **no geographical limits** and can be **published by anyone**. In addition, **paid advertising services** offered by social networks increase the impact of political campaigns through algorithms that target specific audiences. Because advertising is personalized, it is easier to reach precisely certain people and therefore to be more effective.



In response to these threats, Member States have initiated a debate to **protect the integrity of elections**. All stakeholders must therefore strike a fair balance between **regulating information sharing** and **respecting freedom of expression** which is inherent to democracy.

#### ▶ **The Code of Practice on Disinformation**

As part of these debates, digital actors have begun to take measures and have committed to work with the institutions to ensure the integrity of elections.

On September 26 2018, several **digital actors** met to coordinate their **actions against disinformation** through the establishment of a [Code of Practice on Discrimination](#). The signatories committed to take the necessary measures to ensure the integrity of European and national elections: increase **transparency** in political advertising, **remove false accounts** on social networks, enhance cooperation with **fact checkers**, etc. Among the signatories, tech giants and online advertisers.

To ensure the integrity of the elections within the EU, some platforms already took proactive **initiatives** to address the reliability of their contents by preventing the expansion of **fake news**, removing **fake accounts** and increasing the **transparency of political advertising**.

#### ▶ **French legislation on disinformation**

At the national level, the ["fake news" legislation](#) was promulgated on December 22 2018. It aims to combat disinformation, in particular by establishing rules on the **transparency** of platforms concerning the distribution of paid **political advertising**. These publications are now regulated by law. The identity of the authors and the amounts involved must be disclosed in order to prevent attempted manipulation during an **election period**.

With regard to **fake news**, the hearing the **application for interim relief** may be asked to rule on the **manifest intention** of an author to manipulate public opinion via his publication.

Aside from electoral periods, digital giants must coordinate their actions to fight against the spread of fake news.

The implementation of this legislation is extremely recent and can be complex, as it has been observed with the suspension of a French government campaign. #Ouijevoté, ("Yes I vote") was launched by the executive to encourage French citizens to take part in the European elections. In order to comply with the legislation on disinformation, the social network has decided, unlike other platforms, to oppose the publication of all political advertising. Twitter finally reversed its decision by declaring its support for the [campaigns inciting electoral participation](#).

#### ▶ **The involvement of civic tech in the elections**

In order to strengthen citizens' **participation in democracy and public decision-making**, some actors have taken up technological innovations. **Civic tech platforms** have been created to respond to the current crisis of representation and to recreate links between citizens and decision-makers. The various civic tech that have emerged make it possible to consult citizens on a range of subjects. Civil society can thus participate in decision-making through actions and campaigns carried out at local, national and European levels by these new digital actors.

In the run-up to the European elections, some civic tech companies have set up consultations on the future of the EU in order to improve our current political systems. **CIVICO Europa** association and **Make.org** civic tech gathered to launch a **pan-European consultation**, [WeEuropeans](#). Its purpose is to identify the main wishes of citizens and then to transmit them to European decision-makers. Decisions would no longer be imposed but proposed by citizens who would take back European policies and priorities. Through this initiative, citizens from all over the EU were invited to answer a question: “What are the steps we can take to reinvent Europe?” Following the participation of 1.8 million citizens and 11.3 million votes, 10 proposals emerged from this consultation. CIVICO Europa and Make.org invited public decision-makers to consider the results of this consultation in order to put the citizen at the heart of European policies.

The current challenge for digital actors is therefore to guarantee, together with public actors, the integrity of the European elections and to provide citizens with the keys to informed decision-making.

*With a few days before the European elections, the series of articles offered by Lighthouse Europe is coming to an end. The aim of these publications was to explain in an intelligible way the functioning of the European Parliament and the challenges surrounding this electoral period. The elections will mark a turning point in the European political life as new citizens' representatives will be elected, new political groups will emerge and new alliances will be formed. The renewal of the institutions' composition is a period of transition to define the future European political challenges and priorities that will impact our whole societies in the coming years.*