

What The US Senate Already Knows About Political Manipulation On Social Media | Forbes

By Chiara Rustici

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Chiara Rustici argues that the September 5, 2018 congressional hearings of Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg are likely to be informed by the findings of the United Kingdom's Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) on the Cambridge Analytica scandal that occurred earlier in 2018. She claims that the way online political manipulation has been dealt with in Europe will lead US politicians to indict tech leaders, political parties, and businesses in their investigation.

The charge against tech leadership is that the electoral tech ecosystem is no longer "just tech": (a) data-driven individual voter profiling and prediction of personal preferences and inclinations; (b) high-frequency automated policy message-generation; (c) voter segmentation on the basis of hot-button issues, jointly taken, are hollowing out the democratic election process. Tech leadership needs to take responsibility for failing to draw a sharp and brilliant line between the use of techniques and technology deployed for direct marketing to consumers and the use of those same techniques and technology deployed for political communication with voters. The underlying engineering and predictive analytics principles are identical. Their uses are not. Selling advertising for an apparel brand and selling advertising for a political party must never be treated as one and the same line of business.

The charge against political parties is no less damning. Political institutions can no longer afford to "wait and see" how digital interactions impact the way voters access and disseminate political messages. Electoral Commissions and National Parliaments must not procrastinate regulation of online electoral campaigning: in fact, it may already be too late. Recently held political elections in the United Kingdom (including the Brexit referendum) have already been played according to the marketing bible of cross-device tracking, followed by profiling. Political parties themselves can no longer afford to shrug off responsibility for poor data lineage

and opaque algorithmic techniques: the market for voter analytical services and the grey market for voters' personal datasets, whichever way obtained, only exist because of political parties' steady demand.

The charge against all kinds of businesses is also serious. The business community is complicit in online voter manipulation when, through a lax application of privacy and data protection rules, it allows data collected for marketing purposes to be repurposed or sold on for unspecified further uses. Once released into the grey data markets, these personal datasets are then available to voter profiling and messaging consultancies and parties. To avoid being complicit, businesses should audit their own personal data trades, maintain a permission and purpose lineage (what future uses did individuals give permission to when they surrendered their data?) and should perform data due diligence on third parties before engaging their services.

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