Potential Impact of Social Media and Data-Driven Campaigning on Democracy:

A Perspective from Québec

Submission to the Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Electoral

Administration, Electoral Matters Committee, Parliament of Victoria (Australia)

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Dear Mr Tarlamis,

Following your letter of August 11th, it is our pleasure to send you our submission as part of the Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Electoral Administration. We thank you for giving us the opportunity to provide our observations on this important issue.

Our submission is based on our recent research, the results of which have been published in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* and *Internet Policy Review,* among others. As researchers in the Groupe de recherche en communication politique (Political Communication Research Group, GRCP) at Université Laval, we have studied the impact of social media on politics in Québec and Canada. We believe our observations may be relevant in the Australian context as well.

Much has already been written on privacy issues, especially since the Cambridge Analytica scandal. This is why we address other issues related to the role of social media in politics. Our submission focuses on recent transformations in electoral communication and its consequences for partisan organizations. By adopting the perspective of political actors, we seek to analyze the impacts of social media and data-driven campaigns for three pillars of democracy: opportunities for deliberation, equal participation, and electoral management. We then mention the main actions taken by the Government of Québec and the Government of Canada to address these issues. We

end with a few recommendations which, in our opinion, should be part of a reflection on the state of democracy in a rapidly and continuously changing digital environment.

We believe that parliaments like the National Assembly of Québec and the Parliament of Victoria have an important role to play in preserving a healthy and vibrant democracy. We hope that these few observations will be useful for the work of the Committee.

Sincerely yours,

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INTRODUCTION

Political parties, like other political actors, adapt to social and technological changes by integrating new means of communication and mobilization in their campaign arsenal. This is true both for the strategic planning phase and the tactical implementation of the campaigns. Thus, social media can serve as a source of information to develop a strategy, and as a communication channel to deploy it (Giasson et al., 2019; Montigny, 2015). In a political marketing paradigm (Lees-Marshment, 2001) and a permanent campaign context (Van Onselen and Errington, 2007), digital technologies are also used for data-driven electioneering. Therefore, micro-targeting plays a central role in electoral communication.

Micro-targeting is the " strategic use of resources [...] designed to focus communication efforts on small segments of the electorate whose socio- and geo-demographic profiles indicate a propensity for supporting the sponsor [which relies on] complex voter profiling activities or databases" (Marland et al., 2014). This somewhat recent trend in electioneering "represents a shift [...] to more individualized messaging based on predictive models and scoring" (Bennett and Lyon, 2019). It is particularly useful for election advertising purposes, especially online and on social media.

Since the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018), several concerns have been raised about the electoral opportunities offered by social media, especially in a context of data-driven electioneering. Many have focused on voter privacy issues. Attention has also been turned to threats of foreign interference in national elections. These issues are obviously important, but they are not the only ones that should concern lawmakers.

According to Garnett and James (2020), three fundamental principles are requisite in a democracy: deliberative opportunities, equal participation, and electoral management. All three are challenged by digital technologies. We take these principles as the anchor of our submission. Based on the results of our recent research focusing mainly on political actors and their campaigns in Québec and Canada[1], our objective is to present how social media contributes to changing elections from the perception of electoral organizations – candidates, strategists, and activists. How campaigning on social media using data-driven techniques affect their role and their actions? How can these changes impact elections and democracy? Have the main actions taken by the governments of Québec and Canada been sufficient?

Why is this viewpoint relevant for the inquiry? First, it is a relatively little studied angle. Many studies focus, for example, on the regulatory framework, on the effect of digital communication on citizens, or on the online communication of candidates. However, we know little about how people in partisan organizations perceive what they do. In other words, the outcome (political communication) rather than the process (how to achieve it) has predominantly been the focus of previous research. And what political actors involved in the process think about it is even less studied. We therefore believe that this original point of view might be relevant for your inquiry.

Second, it is rather rare that the views of politicians and their staff are directly addressed during public inquiry, committee hearings or other legislative procedures. Members of Parliament are mandated to represent their constituents and not their own personal or

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[1] See Dubois et al. (forthcoming), Giasson et al. (2018), and Montigny et al. (2019) for details.

partisan interests. This is why during consultations and inquiries, it is generally citizens and experts who testify, focusing on the issues that affect them. However, we do believe that MPs must pay attention to partisan and electoral realities when considering issues such as those that are the focus of this inquiry.

In sum, our submission focuses on the problems with social media and online advertising that we observed in Québec and Canada – two Westminster-style parliamentary democracies[2]. We mobilize research data obtained from content analyses and interviews with politicians and their staff. This submission focuses on the effects reported by these people. We believe that these observations may help Victorian MPs to address these similar issues in their own context.

1. DIFFERENT STATES, DIFFERENT STORMS?

Québec, Canada and the State of Victoria share some political and electoral realities that make the comparison relevant. Among others, political parties are now running hybrid campaigns that combine traditional and emerging communication technologies (Giasson et al., 2019; Lesman et al., 2019).

According to many strategists we interviewed for our research[3], social media is an effective way to increase the visibility of their party not only online, but also in traditional media. Smaller parties are using it to try to get journalists' attention and generate media coverage. Paradoxically, it is also an effective way to bypass the traditional media's filter and directly address a relatively large number of voters. In addition to allowing the coordination of electoral activities within private groups, platforms like Facebook offer attractive advertising options. They allow parties to send a variety of messages to a variety of audiences. But the adoption of digital technologies in politics seems to raise concerns which in several respects are comparable between Québec and the State of Victoria.

In our latest study on data-driven campaigning in Québec (Montigny et al., 2019), we identified what we called a "perfect storm". Political parties massively adopted social media, data marketing and data-driven communication techniques in recent elections. Meanwhile, regulatory bodies like Élections Québec[4] (2019) expressed concerns about their lack of resources and powers to oversee novel forms of electoral digital communication. This situation prevents them from truly responding to digital threats to the integrity of elections and democracy. In addition, the Cambridge Analytica scandal caused a turnaround in the media treatment of party strategies: yesterday's innovations have become threats to voters and democracy. Quickly, the Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) found themselves caught between two lines of fire. On the one hand, they had to justify their use of data and digital technologies for electoral purposes. On the other, as citizens' representatives, they had to maintain public confidence in political institutions and propose solutions to insure the integrity of the electoral process.

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[2] It is important to note, however, that the electoral system as well as the party system differ between Québec/Canada and the State of Victoria/Australia.

[3] See Giasson et al. (2019), and Montigny et al. (2019).

[4] Élections Québec is an independent institution responsible for the management of provincial and municipal elections and referendums in the Province of Québec. Its mission is also to ensure compliance with political financing rules, to guarantee the full exercise of electoral rights and to promote democratic values in Québec. The Chief Electoral Officer (in French: le Directeur général des élections du Québec, DGEQ) is appointed by the Members of the National Assembly of Québec (MNAs).

Australia is also facing many elements of this same "storm". The 2018 election confirmed that Victorian political parties are integrating social media as an essential component of their strategies. Social media platforms not only play an significant role in state elections, but their importance grows from election to election (Lesman et al., 2019). While the media and the public increasingly scrutinize the strategies of political parties, the regulatory framework appears to be ineffective to address the new digital reality (Bennett and Odura-Marfo, 2019: 24-27). On this point, in its Report to Parliament following the 2018 State election, the Victoria Election Commission (VEC) calls for "new provisions that equip the VEC to respond to online threats to the integrity of an election" (Victorian Electoral Commission, 2019: 110). Furthermore, there is voter mistrust regarding the opportunities social media tools offer political parties. According to the *Digital News Report: Australia 2020* (see Park et al., 2020), a majority of Australians (52%) believe that politicians and their parties should not be allowed to advertise on social media, while they believe the opposite for television.

Thus, the conditions under which the public authorities are brought to address the problem of the impact of social media on elections seems similar between Québec/Canada and the State of Victoria in many important aspects.

2. THE CHANGING NATURE OF ELECTORAL COMMUNICATION

Faced with an electorate that is less loyal and increasingly more difficult to reach, political parties are trying to adapt. This reality is evoked by political strategists to justify the adoption of data-driven tactics of communication. Micro-targeted messages distributed by email or online ads on social media are seen as effective means to quickly reach key voters. Strategists seek to reach the right audience with the right message in order to maximize the potential impact on their voting behavior.

To do this, parties need as much information as possible about the electorate. This not only allows them to segment voters and target those most likely to be influenced by their partisan messaging, but it also provides information on how to reach them with the right message. An increasingly important part of election campaigns is data collection. In the context of a permanent campaign, this is done continuously. During the election campaign, party volunteers are no longer tasked simply with canvassing efforts geared at convincing voters to get out to vote, but rather they are primarily tasked with collecting voter data that will be useful at targeting groups of voters with the right message. As the following quote from a political strategist illustrates, the primary goal of voter outreach is first to gather information, to feed the «targeting beast».

Practitioner quote 1
"Our job is to feed [the] database… In short, we must bomb the population with all kinds of things, to acquire as much data as possible".[5]

Obviously, digital technologies play a central role in the collection and processing of data. This brings about significant changes within partisan organizations. The role of staff is not

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[5] A party strategist from Québec before the 2018 provincial election, cited in Montigny et al. (2019: 5).

the same as before. The tasks entrusted to volunteers are not the same either. These transformations are illustrated by the following two quotes.

Practitioner quote 2 and 3
"Now we need competent people in computer science, because we use platforms, email lists". "*The technological tools at our disposal means that we need more people who are able to use them*".[6]

We understand that the workforce needs to evolve with digital technologies. This has the effect of marginalizing some types of volunteers (usually older and less educated). A political organizer sums up this paradoxical situation: while activists are rarer and are usually older, whereas the youngest are missing.

Practitioner quote 4
"The activist who is older, we will probably have less need of him. The younger activist is likely to be needed, but in smaller numbers. (...) Because of the technological gap, it's a bit of a vicious circle, that is also virtuous. The more we try to find technological means that will be effective, the less we need people".[7]

In the interviews we conducted, some participants questioned the merits of data collection and micro-targeting. Some have mentioned the ethical issues of these practices, while others question their social acceptability. Elected officials have even criticized the role of social media in politics, saying that "Twitter is not a form of activism".

Forms of resistance to new technologies within political organizations are not uncommon. Recent research on traditional French parties has shown that some elites at both national and local level see these new methods as a threat to their influence within the organization (Theviot, 2019). The same goes for some elected officials and organizers who do not wish to change their ways of doing things. This can sometimes be motivated by a vision of what politics should be, or a misunderstanding of the opportunities offered by new technologies.

Yet, the trend of data campaigning remains heavy. Election after election, political parties are increasingly embracing digital technologies. They no longer use social media just as a mainstream distribution channel, but as a data source and micro-targeting tool. In Québec, as in the State of Victoria, the tools and techniques developed in the United States inspire political strategists.

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[6] Two different party strategists from Québec before the 2018 provincial election, cited in Montigny et al. (2019: 5-6).

[7] A party strategist from Québec before the 2018 provincial election, cited in Montigny et al. (2019: 7).

> **Practitioner quote 5**
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> *"We were following what was going on in the United States, including the presidential election of Barack Obama. Their online strategy, its consequences and the way it was covered by the media forced parties to change how they were campaigning based on what had been done in the States".[8]*

Although American methods cannot be transposed fully to other political contexts, the fact remains that it is the benchmark in electoral practices for several political actors. This is true in Québec and Canada, where parties retain the services of consultants and compagnies who have played key roles in past American presidential campaigns. In France, several actors active in companies offering data and targeting services to political parties were active during American presidential campaigns (Ehrhard et al., 2020). Adopting an American-style campaign approach has even been associated by past French candidates with an image of modernity (Theviot, 2019). In the 2018 election, Victorian parties identified their key themes based on market research (Ghazarian, 2018) and used micro-targeting to communicate them to their target voters. Some of them have resorted to tools previously used in American campaigns (Lesman et al., 2019).

Considering the influence of American campaigns on electoral methods elsewhere in the world, everything indicates that micro-targeting and data-driven campaigns are here to stay. Thus, the nature of political communication is evolving from a large and centralized dissemination of key messages to more targeted, more individualized and more personalized communication. This trend is illustrated in the following quote.

> **Practitioner quote 6**
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> *"Instead of one strong position a day, we had two or three strong positions, many messages, a multiplicity of ways to deliver them to many clienteles".[9]*

3. POSSIBLE THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

As Bodó et al. (2017) noted, "the biggest opportunity of political micro-targeting is also its biggest threat: sophisticated technologies allow anyone to reach any individual or group in an electorate with any message." Of course, political parties seek to mobilize their supporters and convince the undecided to support them. However, because it seeks to affect the attitudes and behaviors of the target audience, micro-targeting can also be used for unethical purposes. In addition to exploiting specific voters' interests (and vulnerabilities), micro-targeting can be used alongside other fraudulent tactics (Richardson et al., 2019: 4). Internet bots can be used to spread false or inaccurate information. Astroturfing campaigns[10] can be set up by parties or interest groups to duped citizens into believing in false grassroots initiatives. In short, there is no reason to believe

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[8] A party strategist from Québec after the 2012 provincial election, cited in Giasson et al. (2019: 337).

[9] A party strategist from Québec after the 2012 provincial election, cited in Giasson et al. (2019: 337).

[10] Astroturfing campaign refers to a centralized communication campaign where information is disseminated fraudulently by bogus citizens or groups of citizens (see Boulay, 2015; Keller et al., 2020).

that attractive opportunities for certain political actors will not be taken because they are contrary to ethical rules.

For Bayer (2020), micro-targeting represents a double threat. First, it deprives non-targeted citizens of their right to receive all the information necessary for the exercise of their political choice. Certain segments of the population are considered more electorally "useful" than others and become key targets of the communication strategies of political actors. Second, micro-targeting leads to a distortion of the public debate because it restricts the free flow of information.

Social media combined with data-driven strategies like micro-targeting may create an uneven distribution of information among voters. Advertising is therefore no longer a collective phenomenon where the masses used to be simultaneously exposed to a similar message, but an increasingly individualized and personalized experience. A voter is exposed to a message that corresponds to his or her interests, created by a party according to them. Flows of information vary from individual to individual (Miller and Vaccari, 2020). The positions expressed by the political actor can be different, even contradictory, depending on who they are addressed to. It can also generate false perceptions of the priorities of a political actor (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Obviously, this can influence the conduct of electoral campaigns, but it can also have consequences in times of governance.

The inequality of participation also represents a threat to democracy. Although social media have the potential to allow more people to participate in public debate, research suggests that only a minority of citizens use Internet and social media to engage in politics (Lalancette and Bastien, 2019; Small et al., 2014).[11] The same goes for political parties. Not all are equal in the digital world. Technological tools and expertise necessary to carry effective micro-targeting are not equally accessible to political actors (Miller and Vaccari, 2020). Also, resources and funding are factors that influence the ability of an electoral organization to take full advantage of technological opportunities. What is more, some campaigns have to deal with internal resistance. Some candidates, organizers or volunteers are slowing down the adoption of new practices in parties because they do not see their relevance or see them as a threat to their influence within an organisation. Thus, not all campaigns have the same opportunities. This unequal access to micro-targeting techniques poses a threat to free and pluralist debate since the diffusion of certain political ideas may be more effective than others depending on the techniques used to disseminate them (Bayer, 2020).

Thus, the two first principles of democracy identified by Garnett and James (2020) are endangered by micro-targeted campaigns online and on social media. Firstly, deliberative opportunities may be threatened by a distortion of the public sphere caused by unequal distribution of information to the electorate. Secondly, equality of participation may be threatened by unequal access to the resources and techniques necessary for micro-targeting and effective use of social media. If the persuasion effects associated with micro-targeting practices on electoral mobilization remain unclear until now (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019), micro-targeted ads have *the potential* to affect voters' autonomy of judgment. Even small, plausible negative effects can harm democracy. In other words, if parties are so concerned about the marginal (potential) effects of their communication actions on voters,

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[11] For example, in Québec, political bloggers are in fact a politically engaged and sophisticated minority known as "hypercitizens" (Giasson et al., 2011).

we should be equally concerned about the "small" (potential) effects of these strategies on democracy.

In this context, electoral regulation of the digital environment is of particular importance. This poses a serious challenge for electoral management – the third principle identified by Garnett and James (2020). To be relevant, electoral regulations must be able to be implemented on the ground. To do so, they must consequently be developed according to the realities on the ground. It is difficult to effectively implement a public policy that ignores or marginalizes certain practices which it aims to regulate. In the case that interests us, Leerssen et al. (2019) noted that "political micro-targeting has unique affordances that can enable new types of harms demanding entirely new regulatory responses." Not only are the current laws no longer sufficient, but it suggests that it is not enough to simply broaden their scope. A constantly evolving digital environment requires an original regulatory approach.

4. SOME THOUGHTS ON GOVERNMENT ACTIONS IN QUÉBEC AND CANADA

In recent years, governments around the world have attempted to adapt legislation in response to controversies about the role of digital technologies in politics. In Canada and Québec, concerns over the integrity of the democratic process have been largely influenced by two major events: the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the alleged online interference by Russia during the 2016 US presidential campaign. MPs and MNAs[12] addressed these issues through various legislative reforms. We are focusing on the two measures that we believe have the most direct impact on political parties.

On the federal scene, the Canadian Parliament passed the *Elections Modernization Act* (known as Bill C-76) before the 2019 election. While this new electoral act was presented as a response to potential foreign interference, it contained several measures aimed at regulating Canadian political actors' digital campaigning.[13] In accordance with this law, Facebook Canada announced in June 2019 the implementation of an "advertising transparency tool" to "give people more information about the ads they see across Facebook and Instagram, and to help combat foreign interference." The tool would be known as Facebook's Ads Library (FAL).[14] Facebook set up a validation process for advertisers who wish to sponsor content relating to social issues in Canada, including civil and social rights, the economy, environmental politics, health, immigration, political values and governance, and security and foreign policy. Advertisements dealing with these subjects are kept in the archive for a period of seven years. The archive would also allow users to view active advertisements that relate to other subjects whether or not they are part of the target audience. However, content unrelated to social issues is not stored once inactive.

Both the government and Facebook presented platform-operated ad archives as a way to increase transparency in politics. In our study of the effectiveness of the FAL in regulating

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[12] Since Canada is a federation, according to the respective jurisdiction of the levels of government, federal elections are regulated by a law adopted by the Parliament of Canada, and provincial and municipal elections in Québec are regulated by a law of the National Assembly.

[13] Available at: https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/annualstatutes/2018_31/page-1.html

[14] See Facebook Canada's press release "Facebook Launches Ads Transparency Tools in Canada Ahead of 2019 Federal Election" at: https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/facebook-launches-ads-transparency-tools-in-canada-ahead-of-2019-federal-election-807760417.html

election advertising by so-called "third parties"[15] during elections (Dubois et al., forthcoming), we show how the design of these tools influences their usefulness.[16] In the Canadian case, the information on each ad contained in FAL is not sufficient to truly ensure transparency about micro-targeting strategies. Information on the ads' producer, their expenses and their targeting practices are often incomplete, and therefore not very useful to fully grasp the core principles guiding the electoral use of Facebook. It is serves little other purpose than providing a simple description of the content of political ads. This is important because the watchdog role of journalists, NGOs, electoral regulators and public authorities can hardly be achieved in the absence of complete and transparent information on the advertising and communication practices of political actors (Bayer, 2020). It is clear that despite the recent changes made to the *Canadian Elections Act*, doubts persist about its ability to take into account the whole set of online electoral practices (Pal, 2020).

In Québec, the government seems to favor the protection of voters' personal information as a response to concerns raised by digital technology in politics. The government recently proposed Bill 64 (*Loi modernisant des dispositions législatives en matière de protection des renseignements personnels*),[17] strongly inspired by the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) in Europe. For political parties, the major impact of this bill is that they would be subject to the law on the protection of personal data.[18] The collection, storage and use of voter data would therefore be subject to more stringent control. While this is a major step forward from the current situation where political parties can do whatever they want with voter data, the bill ignores a significant portion of the democratic threats associated with micro-targeting.

We will have to wait for the final version of the bill to be able to assess its impact on the conduct of the elections. However, in its current state, we already know that it will have no decisive consequences on parties' electoral strategies and tactics. The trend of data-driven elections seems to be here to stay. The government's objective is to regulate these practices, not to question them.

The results of government actions in Québec and Canada are mixed. First, self-regulation by political parties is undoubtedly not the best solution. This is the situation that prevailed in Québec and Canada before the Cambridge Analytica scandal. It has been strongly questioned by the media and citizens, forcing politicians to take action. Secondly, measures aimed at increasing the transparency of parties' electoral strategies – such as the FAL – are not fully effective because they are not adapted to new realities and fail to insure transparency and access to information by the public. The ever-evolving digital environment calls for original and bold regulatory actions, nor mere adaptations of past electoral communication rules. Protecting voters' personal information is not enough to deal with all the threats that social media and data-driven campaigns pose to democracy. At no time, neither in Québec nor in Canada, was there any real government reflection on electoral practices and their consequences for democracy. This may be the cause of these

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[15] In Canada, individuals or organizations who want to participate in an election without seeking to be elected must register with Elections Canada. They are called "third parties" and their actions are governed by certain provisions of the *Canada Elections Act*.

[16] For a complete overview of the limitations of this kind of advertising archive, see Leerssen et al. (2019).

[17] *An Act to modernize legislative provisions as regards the protection of personal information.* The English version of the bill under consideration is available at: http://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/travaux-parlementaires/projets-loi/projet-loi-64-42-1.html

[18] In Canada, British Columbia is the only jurisdiction where political parties are subject to privacy legislation. For details, see the *Personal Information Protection Act* at: https://www.bclaws.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/00_03063_01

mixed results. Another explanation might rest with the actual British parliamentary system, where the legislators are also elected members of political parties. One may wonder what incentive they would have to drastically change electoral practices that provide them with winning campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Taking action against threats to democracy in an ever-changing digital environment is quite a challenge. Parliamentarians try to address the concerns of their voters, but no one yet seems to have found the best way to do it.

On this point, it has so far not been possible to identify the best way to update the *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic): "The committee also supports the VEC's comments about how Victorian legislation will always struggle to keep pace with technology and how social media is used for political and electoral purposes. Placing firm guidelines around a constantly evolving communication tool may be impractical." (Electoral Matters Committee, 2014). In this submission, we have shown how social media and micro-targeting have the potential to negatively impact elections. Based on the experience of Québec and Canada, we have also shown how new government regulatory actions may be insufficient.

In our opinion, the challenges imposed to democracy by social media and micro-targeting will accelerate. Two factors explain this trend.

First, according to the VEC's Report to Parliament (2019), for the first time in 2018, the majority of voters did not vote on election day in their own constituency (ordinary vote). Other types of voting, especially early voting, are steadily growing in popularity. Everything indicates that this trend will not be reversed. From the point of view of political communication, this implies that over the course of the electoral campaign, fewer and fewer voters can be reached by candidates. It is clear that political parties will seek to refine their methods of communication in order to target the right people at the right time. This will certainly promote micro-targeting techniques. While the convenience voting measures raise some concerns in the State of Victoria (see Laing et al., 2018), the acceleration of this trend coupled with the potential democratic consequences associated with social media and data-driven campaigns should hold the Committee's attention.

Second, it is possible that for some time, electoral practices will be impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, due to the necessary social distancing and other public health measures, election campaigns may happen differently (Dubois & Villeneuve-Siconnelly, 2020). This will encourage online political communication, particularly on social media using targeted advertising. The pandemic is also creating a number of concerns among citizens that can easily be targeted as vulnerabilities by malicious actors. As Wolf and Bicu (2020: 8) suggest, "it further amplified the impact of disinformation campaigns on a public that hardly built a limited level of resilience against this threat. This creates an increasingly favorable ground for malicious actors to escalate the already existing polarization." In short, COVID-19 will have effects on the flow of information and the ways of communicating during the upcoming election cycles.

To face this reality, the electoral management bodies and regulators need more responsibilities, but also more resources. The personalization and individualization of political communication leads to its transfer from the public sphere to private

communication channels. The parties no longer conduct a campaign, but a multitude of parallel micro-campaigns. While it is relatively easy to monitor advertising in newspapers and on television, it is much more difficult to do so on the Internet and in social media. Constant monitoring is therefore necessary, especially in a context of permanent campaigning.

The fact remains that to preserve democracy from digital threats, it is still necessary to identify and understand them. Partnerships should be established between public authorities and researchers in order to document electoral practices and identify solutions to emerging problems. In a constantly changing world, addressing this kind of problem periodically is not enough. Long-lasting partnerships must be put in place.

Finally, it is important to bring awareness to voters, politicians and their staff regarding the potential democratic risks posed by certain electoral practices. Politics is all about power, and the best power you can have is being informed. The more people who know about the opportunities and risks associated with social media and micro-targeting for democracy, the more people will be able to recognize and speak out against potential abuses.

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