EUROPE 23.04.2018 | Jan Cornillie

What if Facebook hijacked the European elections?

Facebook has the motive and the means to influence the outcome of next year's European elections. What are we going to do about that?

Last week, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg put on a charm offensive. The social media giant took out full-page adverts in several UK and US newspapers to apologise for the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

The London-based political consulting firm, which was affiliated with President Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign, got a hold of Facebook data on 87 million people and is alleged to have harvested the data to sway users to vote for Trump.

The Leave camp, which won the Brexit referendum, is also reported to have purchased data gleaned off Facebook to sway voters.

There is nothing wrong with that in itself – provided users gave their consent. But therein lies the problem; these millions of people never gave permission for their personal data to be used this way.

Facebook vs. Europe

Facebook's initial defence was to point to the safeguards it has in place – as a rule, data is only sold to third parties in accordance with the company's privacy policies. The trouble is that Facebook can't prove that those rules were upheld in the Cambridge Analytica case.

So how vulnerable are our elections if their outcome can be influenced through targeted social media messaging?

It seems reasonable to assume that this issue will also play in next year's European elections.

The recent Cambridge Analytica revelations have focused attention on

the misuse of Facebook data by political campaigns affiliated with a particular candidate or issue. But shouldn't we consider the company's own interests in influencing the outcome of political elections, especially European ones?

The European Parliament is currently working hard to tighten privacy rules, while the European Commission is mulling plans to levy a digital tax on internet giants like Facebook to ensure that such companies pay their fair share. This so-called 'Google tax' is expected to saddle companies with an extra tax bill of 4.5 billion euros in total. Will Zuckerberg just stand back and let this pass?

A critical election year

Facebook has the motive and the means to undermine support for an assertive EU. That means we need to muster up the courage to ask ourselves: What if Facebook succeeded in turning European voters against the EU? What if Facebook hijacked the European Parliament elections?

Next year will mark a critical election year. There is a huge chance that voters across Europe will vote against the current political establishment. Such a vote could be a democratic expression of displeasure, but we need to be vigilant because internet giants like Facebook have their own agenda.

So how do we as citizens ensure that we keep the reins of our European democratic process? How do we protect ourselves against manipulation through targeted social media messaging? Dutch journalist Caroline de Gruyter wants Europe to go the way of China and come up with its own social media network.

Facebook's market share in China is a lot smaller than that of its domestic competitor. 'We mustn't be naive,' De Gruyter says. 'It's better to be on the safe side by putting European data under European control.'

Digital watchdogs

A home-grown, European version of Facebook, as a political project at least, seems like one step too far in my view. Developing a new social network from scratch doesn't seem like our best option in view of the challenges ahead.

But the least we can do in the EU is to obtain total transparency over

Facebook's practices – especially when the freedom of elections and European democracy itself is at stake. With the European elections just a year away, it is better to act now than regret it when it's too late.

What I propose is a European digital election watchdog with digital election observers, just like the observers that we send out in person to oversee the voting process and to ensure fair and impartial elections. A watchdog that keeps an eye on social media networks and looks out for irregularities that adversely influence the balloting process.

A watchdog like this can monitor whether paid-for, targeted social media messages identify the parties or groups behind these ads, and this way yield more transparency over this kind of online political messaging.

In my columns and blogs over the past few years, I have always emphasised facts. This piece is not based on fact; rather it is pure speculation. I don't know whether Facebook wants to influence the elections in European countries or whether it is already doing so.

But what we do know is that Facebook that has the power to do so without us knowing. So that begs the question: who can provide facts demonstrating that Facebook *can't* hijack the European Parliament elections, if Mark Zuckerberg decided he wanted to?

This article was first published on Knack.be in Dutch.



Jan Cornillie

Brussels

Jan Cornillie worked as chief of staff for various Belgian ministers between 2003 and 2014. He is currently political director of sp.a, the Flemish social democrats. He is an economist and writes frequently on European issues for the Flemish weekly, Knack.