WEAPONIZING THE DIGITAL INFLUENCE MACHINE: THE POLITICAL PERILS OF ONLINE AD TECH

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We live in time period when advertising dominates both in media and marketing environments. Advertising becomes an absolute and necessary part of the functioning of companies, media concerns and individuals. Individually oriented advertising is often put into the context of politics, especially in times of significant socio-political changes, such as elections. We think that political advertising and political marketing currently represent an important tool of self-presentation and visibility of political opinions and preferences (e.g. in the parties) as well as the candidates themselves in elections. Since today it is increasingly difficult to influence or affect public opinion as a result of a differentiated voter spectrum, electoral campaigns are becoming more and more professional, dynamic and diverse. They often reflect themselves as „rational" fights for voters. To succeed in elections, political actors acquire different forms of political communication, they work with political market surveys or voter market segmentation to target voters as effectively as possible in their electoral campaign. One of the most significant environments where politicians present themselves is the cyberspace and virtual online interface. For example, in the USA, more money is spent on digital political advertising than on any other media. Analysts even expect that by 2020 more than a half of all global advertising costs will be used for digital advertising.

The publication Weaponizing the Digital Influence Machine discusses the issue of political campaigns and threats and risks that are brought by unfair practices of online marketing political actors. The authors of the publication are Anthony Nadler, Matthew Crain and Joan Donovan, who represent Data & Society's Media Manipulation Initiative (MMI), which is dedicated to providing access to new forms of media manipulation to journalist organizations, civil society, platforms and policy makers to ensure an informed relationship between technology research and socio-political opinions. The authors analyse and inform the reader about the functioning, specific examples and practices of the American media and political scene that are related to the impact of digital advertising tools and computers. They thus become a powerful weapon in the hands of political and undemocratic actors.

The publication is divided into several chapters that logically follow each other. The authors focus on the fundamental implications of digital advertising infrastructures and how online advertising can become a weapon of policymakers to exploit the weaknesses of the audience rather than addressing their preferences and interests. The first chapter focuses on a general introduction to the issue of political advertising and its digitalization. The authors define the term Digital Influence Machine to identify the technologies, conditions and tactics that make today's digital advertising a weapon in the hands of politicians who can disseminate misinformation, accuse other candidates, or favour selected consumer products. These activities are often implemented by strategic communication platforms such as Google or Facebook, advertising agencies or other specialized data and information technology companies. Digital advertising companies are constantly striving to streamline their campaigns and collect consumer data

to ensure that advertisers are convinced that their money is well and appropriately spent (e.g. cookies, digital footage of users – likes on Facebook, shared photos and videos, market transactions, etc.) As one headline says: „Facebook knows you more than your mother." An important strategy to influence behaviour is also the correct targeting of advertising, e.g. based on psychological aspects and audience profiling (dog owners, diabetics, etc.). An interesting fact presented in this context was that Donald Trump's presidential campaign contained 50,000 – 60,000 variations and combinations of Facebook ads each year, each aimed at a different voter segment. The second chapter is aimed at defining several factors that have allowed digital advertising to become a weapon and threat tool in the USA media environment. The authors describe a decline in professional journalism, saying that social media has become a key source (for about two thirds of Americans) of understanding and information – so confidence in the mainstream news media is declining. Such space creates opportunities for political advertisers for more control. Another factor is the way of financing the campaign itself, while the authors draw attention to the group of so-called campaigns „dark Money", where the source of financing is secret, respectively negotiable. The third major factor is the absence of online advertising regulation, which also contributes to the dissemination of misinformation and politically incorrect activities. In the third chapter, the authors focus on defining several specific tactics and strategies that policymakers use in the process of weaponizing digital political advertising. It is for example, politicians' effort to strengthen and intensify certain perceived threats and fears of the audience, while exploiting their vulnerability. As the authors say: „We consider it as a weapon whenever an advertising system is used to prioritize vulnerability over the relevance." An interesting tactic is also the application of psychological-behavioural aspects that can influence audience behaviour in favour of manipulators.

In conclusion, the authors present concrete steps that USA policymakers and technical companies can take to minimize the risk of abuse of digital ads for manipulation. For example, they propose categorical refusal to cooperate with so-called dark Money groups, publishing financial donors and costs of campaigns or more regulation and ethical guidelines and standards related to the implementation of digital political advertising activities. The activities presented can greatly help justice, development, respect for human dignity and transparency, which are the pillars of the functioning of a democratic society.

The publication Weaponizing the Digital Influence Machine is well-designed and systematically processed with logical structure and ordering, with a detailed explanation of information, enabling readers to gain greater and more complex insight into the subject matter. The reader can better realize the power of the digital media and technology, especially in the context of threats and political manipulation, based on concrete examples from the authors. The book can be clearly regarded as one of the possible tools to help us navigate, see real problems, and put forward some relevant solutions to combat threats.

Vladimíra Hladíková