Europe Votes 2019: how to unmask and fight online manipulation - Opening speech

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It is a pleasure to welcome you all here.

The purpose of this event is to explore different perspectives on a problem which we all recognise and want to solve.

That is why we have such an eclectic mix of speakers.

Our title is "Europe Votes 2019: how to unmask and fight online manipulation".

A year ago, we published an Opinion called "Online Manipulation", which looked forward to the challenges the EU would face in 2019.

National elections taking place in at least 13 Member States this year, and local or regional elections in many more Member States.

Between 23 and 26th May this year, all EU citizens will have the chance to vote in the European Parliament elections.

Ten years after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty.

Thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

And forty years since the first popular vote on the European Parliament.

But it is not only "Europe votes".

We might even say "most of the democratic world votes".

Because this year sees also general elections in India and in two of the most populous countries in Africa – South Africa and, this week, Nigeria.

The integrity of elections and trust in democratic process has been shaken in recent years.

Disinformation campaigns, cybersecurity breaches and foreign interference have all contributed.

At least as important - but only now getting proper attention - is the way that personal information is being abused on a massive scale.

We have sleepwalked into allowing a particular business model to become dominant.

This is a model whose premise is to collect as much personal data as possible, and to monetise it by predicting future human behaviour.

We are often told that this is inevitable, but this only began less than two decades ago in the wake of the dot.com bubble.

It was only a matter of time before those with political agendas discovered how to weaponise this volatile and opaque system.

"Fake news", for me, is not the real issue.

People who care about civil liberties care just as much about freedom of speech as about respect for privacy.

In fact, you cannot have one without the other.

There have always been, and there always will be, people who seek to spread deliberately false and polarising messages and stories.

The difference with the current digital information ecosystem, is that it has become so much easier.

It is so easy because they just need to target a handful of platforms who are in effect the gatekeepers for most people's internet experience.

These intermediaries spread information according to algorithms whose primary goal is maximising "engagement".

And, sadly, few things "engage" as much as anger, sensationalism and fear.

So the goal should not be to stop people from expressing themselves, even if we deeply disagree with what they are saying.

Instead the goal should be to prevent manipulation and to hold accountable those who profit from that manipulation.

That is why we avoid terms like fake news, or even disinformation or misinformation.

It is a trap to suggest there can be arbiters of what is true and false – that is not democracy.

What do we mean by manipulation?

Manipulation is defined as a form of control.

A form of control where you get someone else to do something that benefits you, using deceptive and often skilful means.

So manipulation involves control, unequal benefits, deception and skill.

The digital environment makes this feasible on an enormous scale.

The "control" element is the formula of constant tracking, secret profiling and unexplained microtargeting.

The "unequal benefits" may be seen in the enormous power of the internet gatekeepers who have become the biggest companies in the world - some argue this has been at the expense of individual consumers and workers, advertisers and publishers and journalists.

The "deception" is there in the terms and conditions and privacy policies which nobody has time to read, nor the ability to contest and negotiate.

And the "skill" is in big data analytics and artificial intelligence.

So now is the most relevant time to talk about the use of personal data for political purposes.

Over the last decade, digital tools have been increasingly used in political campaigning.

Social media and video sharing have revolutionised political engagement.

It has given politicians direct access and granular intelligence on the electorate to an unprecedented degree.

And not just politicians. Anyone with a political agenda can use these tools. We need look no further than the *gilets jaunes* movement which has mobilised as a result of a couple of videos posted online and without any trade unions or political affiliations.

You may ask why a data protection authority is organising an event on elections.

Online manipulation is complex and cannot be tackled by one arm of regulation alone.

This must be a concerted effort across sectors.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal was just the tip of the iceberg.

The UK ICO has been at forefront of investigating data analytics for political purposes.

So I am delighted that Elizabeth Denham will be keynoting later this morning, and that the head of the Spanish DPA Mar España along with many other data protection authority representatives are in the room.

In 2013, an EU research project noted that there was no cross-regulatory cooperation between data protection, electoral or media authorities.

Each regulator has limited tools and competences to hand, so cooperation has become necessary if we are to preserve free elections and freedom of expression.

The European Commission has recently adopted a package of measures which include a mechanism for regulators to work together.

Elsewhere there is a focus on transparency measures.

In response to this, many platforms are creating ad repositories.

But transparency is not enough – it places the burden on the ordinary consumer of news and content to discern where they are being manipulated.

We must also hold accountable the key players that are profiting from this system.

Without fair, free and impartial elections, the integrity of democracy is threatened.

We hope that by bringing together different domains – regulators, platforms, independent journalists, adtech experts, cyber security specialists - we can fill the gaps and build networks of cooperation.

Today's panels will lead us through the current picture.

We will look at the elections last year.

We will identify the problems the vulnerabilities for this year.

After lunch we will look at solutions.

The final word will go to Professor Shoshana Zuboff, who has just returned to Harvard following 10 days in Europe talking about her new book Surveillance Capitalism - and how the current data ecosystem poses profound challenges for our basic values.

So Ladies and Gentlemen,

Democracy is more than elections.

The digital revolution should be, can be a force for empowering people, to give a voice to those whose voice has tended to be ignored

The strength of democracy is tied to that of the rule of law.

And the rule of law in Europe includes the obligation to use personal information responsibly and with respect for individuals.

We believe that consistent application of data protection can help rebuild social trust after the events of recent years.

Thank you for attending today.

I hope you find this event informative and worth your active participation.