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Microtargeting through interacting: the use of community groups for political campaigning

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MICROTARGETING THROUGH INTERACTING: THE USE OF COMMUNITY GROUPS FOR POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

Research on microtargeting is normally focused on advertising to specific demographics or interest groups and communities. However, political campaigning has begun to approach microtargeting using the spaces for interpersonal and community discussion facilitated by social media platforms and applications. Targeted messaging through conversations within community group spaces ensures greater resonance for the messages and enhanced proximity between the messenger and the targeted community. This strategy is explored through three case studies. First, we explore the activities of candidates and councillors representing the Green party of England and Wales who use Facebook neighbourhood community groups to promote their individual activities and campaigns, as well as linking local concerns to party policy, which evidences a co-created form of microtargeting. Secondly, we analyse the activities of supporters of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil's neighbourhood and community groups, who increased the salience of issues that favoured their candidate. Thirdly, we focus on the dissemination of pro-Russian content to Orthodox Christian community groups in the Balkans on the Telegram platform, involving real people as well as some fake accounts and potential bots, inciting fears of the destructive liberal values of the European Union. Our data suggests the strategies and tactics adhere to the notion of microtargeting, and may be highly effective, but highlight ethical concerns and the challenges that these practices pose for democracy.

KEYWORDS *Political Communication, Targeting, Social Media, Communication Strategy, Propaganda.*

1. Introduction

Microtargeting has been highly successful in commercial contexts. Messages directed at consumers by their postal/zip codes were tailored to the

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socio-economic and demographic compositions of specific localities. Political microtargeting adopted similar methods, for example Deutsche Post gave parties the opportunity to target voters by their neighbourhood. However, largely political microtargeting was done through canvassing where messages were delivered as part of a conversation with voters that could be adapted to suit the person who answered the door (Nielsen 2010). The digitalisation of campaigning allowed matching specific voters with data on them from public and commercial databases, this was soon augmented by data from social media platforms, allowing conversations to be increasingly specific to the individual (Lilleker 2014, 110-11). Advertising on social media platforms revolutionised political microtargeting. Messages can be delivered to appeal not only based on gender, ethnicity, employment etc but also tailored to match with the interests of individuals which allows predictions of their likely political views. It is argued that this has led to unprecedented levels of micro-segmenting which includes fairly precise predictions of the impact of a message within a specific target audience (Agan 2007).

Research on microtargeting is normally focused on the high-level microtargeting strategies and the use of advertising appeals to suit specific demographics or interest groups and communities. However, there are concerns in the advertising industry that targeted advertising is not the silver bullet it once was. Not only have social media users become savvy to the tactics of advertisers, but they are also actively avoiding engaging with sponsored or paid-for content. There are also fears of a backlash effect, where people dislike both the incursion of advertising into their lives and the use of their data for targeting purposes; the backlash can be a negative view of the advertiser. Hence, other microtargeting approaches are being adopted. Here we focus on the use of spaces for interpersonal and community discussion facilitated by social media platforms and applications. Targeted messaging through conversations within community group spaces allows not only greater resonance for the messages but enhanced proximity between the messenger and the targeted community. This strategy is explored through three case studies which highlight how different actors employ contrasting approaches and tactics relating to microtargeting within discussion groups.

The first case study explores the activities of candidates and councillors representing the green party of England and Wales. Their use of Facebook neighbourhood community groups to promote their individual activities and campaigns as well as linking local concerns to party policy evidences a co-created form of microtargeting. Participation in neighbourhood discussion groups allows the promotion of policy but also information gathering on local relevant issues and the adaptation of party policy to local contexts. The second

case study draws on observations from the 2018 and 2022 presidential election campaigns in Brazil. Activists and supporters of Jair Bolsonaro were highly active in neighbourhood and community Whatsapp groups, emphasising problems with criminality and promoting his «law and order» messages. The approach taken by Bolsonaro's supporter network was to increase the salience of issues that favoured their candidate, inciting ordinary members to focus on certain issues and discuss them, allowing pro-Bolsonaro supporters to present his presidency as the antidote to their concerns. The third case study explores the dissemination of pro-Russian content into Orthodox Christian community groups in the Balkans on the Telegram platform. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and declaration that it was fighting fascism, it has also positioned itself as the defender of traditional and conservative Orthodox values within eastern European societies. The strategy employs real people, as well as some fake accounts and potential bots, to incite fears of social liberalism and position Russia as a protective force against the destructive liberal values of the Eu. This practice evidences a more propagandist approach depending heavily on disinformation and conspiracy theory.

The article offers insights into these strategies arguing interactions within community groups as a form of micro-targeting which has the potential to have greater influence over the attitudes and behaviours of ordinary members of these groups. The case studies highlight that while microtargeting is inseparable from persuasion, it is also an amoral practice. Usage depends on the political objectives of the user and so microtargeting can be successfully employed to empower and inform, as well as to manipulate and misinform.

2.   Political microtargeting: a critical perspective

Political microtargeting promises to optimise the match between the electorate's concerns and political campaigns, and to boost campaign engagement and political participation. Most research in the field focuses on advertising, the most visible and easy to reach form of microtargeting. Targeting by profiles and algorithms has become a key feature of social media campaigning and is increasingly being supported by artificial intelligence solutions. Machine learning algorithms can identify micro groups of users, which can potentially be targeted with special campaign messages, leading to a national electorate becoming increasingly segmented (Papakyriakopoulos *et al*. 2018). Some have argued practices resemble nano-targeting due to the pinpoint accuracy by which marketers can match a message to the interests of a single potential consumer (Barbu 2014). However, significant questions have been raised

about the ethics of political microtargeting as it occurs below the radar and so there is minimal accountability. Some researchers have raised concerns that a political party could, misleadingly, present itself as a different one-issue party to different individuals and attempt to manipulate them emotionally and polarise their opinions (Zuiderveen Borgesius *et al.* 2018). Given that exposure to microtargeting is found to increase willingness to post divisive contents, use hate speech and discriminatory language and to focus on single issues that increase partisanship and polarisation these predictions may be fairly accurate (Barocas 2012). Some voters also disengage due to perceived violations of voters' privacy and a range of privacy concerns have been raised which could lead to a backlash when consumers feel their information has been used without their knowledge by an organisation they do not wish to engage with (Korlova 2010).

However, political microtargeting is proven to be effective, commercial microtargeting is found to increases profits by between 150% and 183% (Danaher 2023). However, there are concerns that in a political context the practices may not be ethical, and the messaging may be divisive or negative (Magnani 2022). Regardless of the method of delivering a message, political campaigns tend to focus on symbolic images or resonant slogans to target key demographics (Lilleker and Moufahim 2022). In an era of campaign celerity and audience fragmentation, to «cut through the clutter» campaigners must produce eye-catching and dramatic or comfortingly familiar slogans or images (Lilleker 2019). Campaigns also employ symbolic representation within communication, talking of issues and using images which appeal to specific target groups. Effective campaigning is argued to involve creating a sense of closeness, what is referred to as proximity politics (Grieco 2016), hoping voters infer that the candidate or party with similar values and concerns will deliver effective representation if they are elected. Campaigns also focus on issues and concerns that are particularly salient among target voter groups (Lilleker 2014) or they try to increase the salience of their platforms (Adida *et al.* 2020). Experimental research has proven that under the right conditions microtargeting produced a relatively larger persuasive impact than alternative messaging strategies (Tappin *et al.* 2023) due to achieving proximity and salience.

However, questions are raised regarding the extent political microtargeting is not only unethical but also damaging for the health of democracy. Firstly, there are fears that microtargeting focuses more on issues that are divisive, so-called wedge issues, which have identitarian appeals. While they can employ phrases and images that engage and inspire targeted voter groups, it is unclear whether the engagement is due to experiencing positive or negative attitudes: for example, messages can include disinformation designed to mobi-

lise voters' fears (Seybold 2023). Many campaigns play on confirmation bias, reinforcing the existing prejudices of target voter groups (Lilleker and Ozgul 2021). Although research demonstrates that voters are far more likely to be targeted by the party they already support anyway (Lavigne 2021). Secondly there are questions of inclusivity. As parties segment voters using an increasingly sophisticated combination of characteristics and data trails, it can lead some voters to receive no mobilisation messages at all. This concern has been raised in relation to nations which operate a proportional representation system for elections, as all energies are focused on specific areas which are deemed as being electorally volatile leaving the safe territories to experience a lacklustre or non-existent campaign. Savigny (2011) suggested that around 20% of the population of the Uk experience a high-intensity campaign. More recently, research has found older voters are targeted particularly, possibly because of their higher propensity to vote (Endres and Kelly 2018). Such evidence raises the concern that not only are certain groups targeted more but policies are designed to be salient and attractive to those groups and not others. A failure to appeal to and target certain groups, such as the youth vote, can lead to a spiral of non-engagement (Maloy 2000).

But questions are also raised regarding the efficacy of microtargeting generally. Cognitive resistance to advertising is prevalent (Farahat and Bailey 2012). Eye-tracking shows users pay lower attention to sponsored posts (Wang and Hung 2019) and gaze tends to concentrate most on certain zones of pages mostly likely to contain solicited content. Privacy concerns also lead to resistance among many social media users who habitually resist accepting all but essential cookies and try to minimise their data trails to avoid leaving information that can be used for targeted advertising (Strycharz *et al*. 2021). Research on political microtargeting also shows that the mistargeting of messages can result in alienation on the part of the receiver. A lack of message salience and congruence with their values, as well as feeling one is a target voter of a party that is perceived to be antithetical to ones' values, increases apathy and disaffection with the election (Johnson and Grier 2011). There is also evidence that political microtargeting has minimal effects. One experiment demonstrated that exposure to personalized advertising from a political party informs receivers but there is minimal evidence of persuasion. Given parties seek to increase the reach of messages within target communities, targeted advertising may not achieve this goal either. The same experiment showed exposure does not increase the likelihood of sharing information and there was also no effect, positive or negative, on source trustworthiness (Kruikemeier *et al*. 2016). Hence, despite contrary evidence regarding microtargeting, it may be that political mi-

crotargeted advertising is a waste of money although it remains an inexpensive way of informing voters.

Advertising is not, however, the only form of microtargeting. Political campaigns use email campaigns, door-to-door canvassing, hustings, street campaigning and rallies and a range of other means of connecting to voters individually or in their communities. Social media also offers numerous means for campaigns to connect directly to community groups. Groups are created for numerous purposes, often based on locality, such as a neighbourhood, or on interests. These groups have positive impacts on members' feelings of belonging (Smith *et al.* 2021) and so mental health within communities that are physically atomised (Gruzd and Haythornthwaite 2013) but also become important for sharing information and news of relevance to community members (Swart *et al.* 2019). Social media has changed the dynamics of power within political campaigning, citizens can question parties and candidates, promote or distort their messages, or completely avoid the campaign. The demand among voters for authenticity, personalisation and interaction is ignored at the peril of parties, and so some campaigns actively seek out spaces where target voters may be found in order to connect more organically with potential supporters (Jensen 2017). Again, the more visible aspects of these dynamics have been well-researched, especially focusing on engagement and interactions on Twitter. However, political campaigns also engage in further below the radar microtargeting, attempting to simulate and stimulate organic supportive activity. It is this aspect that the paper explores asking how party uses of community groups mirrors microtargeting strategies, how it overcomes some of the challenges with reaching people better than advertising, and the extent it raises further ethical concerns regarding the nature of political campaigning.

3.   Methodology

The paper explores how differing political parties or activists use community groups for campaigning purposes in very different environments, drawing on data from two very different research projects. Two of the projects involved working with teams of postgraduate students who managed to join communities and collect data on the popular themes and posts being shared. The teams also made assessments of the authenticity of the users based on their activities across different groups – the assumption being that accounts that were automated, so-called bots, tend to post identical content across groups (Bolsover and Howard 2017). All content for the Brazil election was collected by postgraduate research students at Fluminense University in Niteroi. All content

within the Balkan region was collected by postgraduate research and taught students working in partnership with the University of Zagreb in Croatia. The Whatsapp and Telegram groups were closed groups, but all requests to join were accepted. The student researchers did not make group members aware of the purpose of joining and monitored content only, a practice used previously for research of private groups where misinformation or extreme content could be shared (see Krona 2020; Chagas 2022). Due to the covert nature of the research all content was completely anonymised including the names of the groups but especially the accounts posting or responding to the content collected. Relevant content was collected, translated and organised thematically, highlighting common features of the posts designed to stimulate discussion and promote a particular party, candidate or ideology. The research on the Green party of England and Wales (greens/green party) involved openly monitoring the activities of party activists (candidates and serving councillors) in twenty-four open Facebook community groups comprised of residents of three large English town and cities where the party has higher than average representation. Content by Green party activists, which is identifiable on their profiles, was collected and anonymised. To explore the strategic thinking three interviews were conducted with two serving Green party councillors, selected due to their prominence in local groups in their town, and a regional digital strategist for the Green party. The interviews provide granular insights into the strategic thinking behind communicating in these groups, the interviewees are fully anonymised in compliance with research ethics guidelines.

The findings are organised by each case study highlighting the philosophy and strategy as visible through the posting or in the case of the Green party as derived from the interview data.

4. Community engagement: Green party engagement with resident groups

The twenty-four community pages monitored were for residents of suburbs of the towns or cities, some had elected a green councillor, others were green target seats and had a prominent candidate. Due to the nature of the Facebook platform, the Green party activists are clearly identifiable when posting and usually state their roles and party allegiance clearly, some councillors have the «Cllr» monicker as part of their profile. The pages report local events, share news items of relevance, and residents often talk of hyper-local issues such as parking, litter, dog waste or anti-social behaviour. Groups allow users to post anonymously, and that affordance is exploited a lot but usually it would appear

by residents. There is no evidence of identical or even similar posts appearing across neighbourhood pages in any of the three towns and cities. There are also numerous references to very specific locations within a suburb that only a resident would know. Hence there are no indications that the groups are in any way manipulated by external sources of influence, and this is certainly the perception of greens who connect with posters. One interviewee argued that they are all residents and so have shared concerns and similar values: «they are from [here] and so am I. These are my actual or potential voters, I need to build connections between their issues and my role». This highlights the core strategy greens adopt and is reflected in their uses of the community groups.

Green activists will only post on local party events, ranging from public meetings, planning meetings or initiatives such as neighbourhood litter picking which they are organising. The majority of their activity is responding to resident's posts, some posts apologise if a user's post reflects a deficiency on behalf of a council they run. One response to a comment on litter after a council waste collection reads: «I can only humbly say sorry. I will look into this. I will let you know what we can do». This councillor did also follow through as well as offering to lead residents tidy up the street if a cleaner could not be deployed. Some posts highlight that more could be done about an issue if there was more green representation on the council. On a post complaining about access to furniture recycling, an activist posted: «Sadly this council just does not prioritise free disposal of large items, we are fighting but we are just shouted down. There's an election coming, you know what to do...». This sole mobilisation to vote green indicates these activists only promote the party when they feel it completely appropriate. Rather their interactions are part of a long-term strategy of demonstrating presence and building parasocial relationships with communities. The green strategist put it simply: «We need to be where the people are and talking about local issues». During the period of monitoring the groups, in a year with no local elections, councillors argued that they used the community groups as a means of demonstrating their representative functions. One councillor argued: «We are their representatives, they don't write us letters, they just say what's on their mind. By responding we show we care too». This strategy is particularly prevalent among councillors who are not part of the local administration. One interviewee suggested these activities shows their personal commitment and their value to those who elected them: «We have to show we are taking some sort of action, we are the minority and really pretty powerless». This councillor organised litter-picking walks with residents, using each to highlight that the council leaders were not doing enough. They posted: «[our] council does not prioritise keeping our environment clean and tidy, so it's up to us as residents to get it done. Come

join us». Interviewees indicate this form of activism was an expression of their values and those of the Green party. All the work had a political campaigning dimension as it gives broad policies and party values a more practical dimension: «They need to know what we would do differently». This indicates that the greens' use of community groups for political campaigning mirrors microtargeting strategies but is an ethical and authentic means of connecting with a community. Their posts seem to gain traction, green posts gain between 50 and 479 likes, which for community pages represents a reasonable reach with only posts advertising large events gaining more engagement.

5.   Shared community concerns: Bolsonaro's foot soldiers on Whatsapp communities

Jair Bolsonaro was the right-wing populist president of Brazil 2019-2023 who ran controversial campaigns in 2018 and 2022. One innovative dimension of his campaign was the cascading of his messages into local community groups via the Whatsapp application. Mobile chat applications like Whatsapp offer the notion of peer-to-peer communication. Content is not directed at users by algorithms but by other users (Santos 2019). Communication and content sharing can be from one user to another, if they have shared their mobile telephone numbers with each other, or from users into groups. The use of community groups is prevalent, especially in Brazil. Community-based discussion groups have a maximum capacity of 256 people and usually bring together family members, friend groups, coworkers, neighbours, or people with common interests (Chagas 2022). Hence, communication with those groups is assumed to be authentic and organic to that community and not the product of computational propaganda strategies (Rossini *et al.* 2021). Sharing material from other platforms, such as memes, sometimes with a relevant comment is a common behaviour and hence these groups can be sites for political content to circulate (Massuchin *et al.* 2021).

The pro-Bolsonaro posts or comments were not attributable to any source close to the campaign but appeared to come from accounts that were ordinary members of the communities. A particular target seemed to be the Whatsapp communities connecting residents of secure city blocs, a largely socially liberal middle-class group but who voiced strong dissatisfaction with conditions in cities, particularly security, crime and personal safety. Several posts within these groups in Rio de Janeiro referenced «mendigo assustador» (scary homeless guy). Many residents posted their concerns about feeling intimidated when

alighting public transport or when stuck in traffic queues, some shared videos of him in front of a burning brazier, others of him ranting aggressively. The posts appear organic and do not mention the election, these references appear in the comments. During elections 'decide' is a common phrase (Evangelista and Bruno 2019), and the pro-Bolsonaro supporters used this tactic by offering zero-sum choices in their comments, asking if voters wanted crime and chaos under the Workers party or greater security offered by Bolsonaro, many such comments used the phrase «O que decidu?» (What did you decide?). Others talked about extremely scary experiences with «mendigo assustador», arguing they lived in fear on a daily basis and were looking to Bolsonaro, these posts tended to repeat the phrases «precisamos de segurança» (we need safety) or «o medo deve acabar» (fears must end). Similar phrases followed posts about shootings, stabbings and other violent crimes in cities, Bolsonaro was often positioned as the solution to these problems and depending on the context posters employed similar straplines and slogans.

But as the 2018 campaign progressed there was evidence of accounts attempting to radicalise community members, often sharing stories or themes prevalent in right wing media like the independent *O Antagonista*. Stories posted included some that positioned opponents of Bolsonaro as heretics who act counter to social mores. One story which used out of context images from Norway read: «feminists invade church, defecate and have sex, don't let anti-Bolsonaro trash take our nation». Another image from a gay pride march in the US was accompanied by the message: «This is the right they want. If you don't agree, they will call you homophobic: People from Globo-Trash who do not support Bolsonaro!!!». While the posts on community issues evidenced some level of co-ordination, through the use of similar slogans, the accounts that share more extreme content and disinformation normally only react to or share content from rightist media or Bolsonaro supporting local, mayoral or presidential candidates. This leads some analysts to characterise the accounts as sock puppets (Chagas 2022). What is clear is that the accounts were active across multiple groups. But, within any individual group the pro-Bolsonaro supporters appeared like any other members of community discussion groups, and their posts could be read as an organic and spontaneous response to societal events which led to their interest in the candidate. However, research shows it was «a structure composed of a set of administrators of multiple groups and users who can send thousands of messages» (Chagas 2022, 2438). The pro-Bolsonaro groups became sites for astroturfing, and single individuals would be participants of multiple community discussion groups, sharing identical or slightly adjusted content, extending the reach of these messages directly to susceptible communities (Chagas 2022). Their tactic for promoting pro-Bolso-

naro or Conservative values was forcing choices and questioning uncertainty about Bolsonaro. If attacked a common response was «que Brasil você quer» (what kind of Brazil do you want). In this sense pro-Bolsonaro posts resemble political advertising, and strategies employed in microtargeting but targeted directly to members of community groups by accounts that appear authentic to the community. While we cannot assume complete inauthenticity of all pro-Bolsonaro accounts, some appear suspicious due to them belonging to several communities and posting identical content at around the same time. This practice suggests an unethical philosophy underpinning the campaign. More problematic is the more extremist disinformation that can fuel culture wars.

6. Shared community values: pro-Russian propagandists flood Telegram

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has polarised many societies in Eastern Europe, especially those where some still look to the east as the centre of their religious and social values rather than the social liberalism of the Eu. Telegram is an instant messaging app founded in 2013 and which has over 700 million monthly active users worldwide. It offers users complete anonymity and thus has been employed by extremist groups to recruit followers and has facilitated the spread of misinformation and is widely used by conservative communities across central and eastern Europe (Cee) and the Balkans (Bareikytė *et al*. 2024). Research on the uses of Telegram focus on the circulation of disinformation and conspiracy theories (Urman and Katz 2022), practices which are facilitated by the lack of moderation (Willaert *et al*. 2022). However, it has also been found to be an important tool for Ukrainians reporting from the ground during Russia's invasion and maintaining contact across the nation (Bareikytė *et al*. 2024). Simultaneously it is a site of contestation, with Russian propagandists and pro-Russian activists seeking to undermine support for Ukraine within many of the Cee and Balkan nations (Bokša 2022). A significant amount of overtly pro-Russian propaganda has been found circulating on Telegram, some of which makes its way into the media of the former Yugoslav republics of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia via Serbian influencers (Grbeša Zenzerović and Nenadic 2022). The propaganda tends to focus on evidencing Zelenskyi's fascist sympathies, including fake images of swastika tattoos, or debunking Russian atrocities in Ukraine as fake or false flag attacks.

However, a more insidious method of spreading a pro-Russian message involves «creating an atmosphere of tension and influencing the mass con-

sciousness in order to demoralize and spread panic» (Jacuch 2022, 166). Research has found that pro-Russian propagandists have developed strategies around emphasising the cultural traditions and distinctiveness of the Cee nations to create moral panics and deepen societal divisions (Kuczyńska-Zonik and Tatarenko 2019). European liberal influences are a common theme, stories about Muslim immigrants or homosexuals committing crimes or transgressing social norms are popular. The presence of these «outgroups» within Cee societies is blamed on the imposition of liberal values by the Eu and calls on recipients to reject those values and any influence from the Eu. These posts also reinforce a certain view of the region as having a common character shaped by its traditions. A popular image of Putin surrounded by children dressed in traditional Orthodox costumes was used with the slogan «one people, one religion». Putin is thus presented as defender of true national values and culture as well as the Russian Orthodox church. Threats to the church, or the response to Ukraine leaving the church, are used to confirm the divisions over the souls of the countries. The slogan «to je ono što on štiti» (it is this he protects) circulated alongside numerous posts in Croatian Telegram groups. Such content, often with evocative images of Putin, are posted as comments to posts which bemoan the collapse of traditional family, religious and social values. One image juxtaposes a male Russian soldier with a young man in make-up with the tagline «odgojite našu djecu kako treba» (Raise our children correctly). The view of two Europes, the values of one being suppressed by the other to the detriment of the values of Cee communities is very common. Messages are also empowering, such as «toto môže byť stále váš svet» (this is still your world) targeted towards communities of conservatives in Croatia.

At points the Russian invasion of Ukraine is mentioned directly. One meme uses a scene from Professor Balthazar, a popular cartoon that ran 1967-78, when he was thinking or puzzled he paced backwards and forwards. This excerpt became a basis for memes, for example: «ako Rusija brani vaše vrijednosti zašto podržavati vladu koja financira svoje napadače» (If Russia is defending your values, why elect governments that funds their enemy). The groups targeted by these messages are 50+ year olds with conservative values who long for the certainties they enjoyed in their past, older voters find modern liberal values unsettling and feel their ways of living are under threat and need protection (Damjanovski *et al.* 2020). Pro-Russian propagandists exploit the challenges many faced in the overnight transition to capitalism which created winners and losers as well as the rapid social changes caused by emigration, immigration and greater openness about diversity. The posts and comments attempt to align Russia with the position of the protector of Orthodox Christian values and Slavic traditions, some posts include misinformation about Eu

laws and rules similar to pro-Brexit memes which are intended to create moral panics (Dawson and Innes 2019). Such content, especially when linked to whether the receiver should support Russia or Ukraine, attempt to highlight inconsistencies in thinking and seem to intentionally attempt to polarise societies. Some posts are also blatant attempts to influence voting, a tactic likely to increase during the campaigns for the 2024 European parliamentary elections. The character of the content is again similar to advertising, but in a more manipulative form as it appears that the content is posted by ordinary users. In reality, the accounts which post pro-Russian content are a mix of real users and unknown accounts. Some accounts are responsible for sharing very similar content into large numbers of different groups and so could be bot accounts. As with the practices in Brazil, pushing content into susceptible community groups is an unethical practice but one that is difficult to attribute to any particular actors. There are some propaganda outfits which are original sources, but there is both bot and organic sharing showing the embeddedness of these ideas within these societies. It is widely reported that the Russian intelligence research agency (Rira) exploited Facebook's targeted advertising infrastructure to efficiently target ads prior to the 2016 Us election on divisive or polarizing topics (e.g., immigration, race-based policing) at vulnerable sub-populations (Ribeiro *et al.* 2019). It would be no surprise that the Rira is engaged in similar activities within these countries as well as spearheading information warfare by other means. The extent that the content reinforces existing beliefs or changes attitudes is an open question; given the success of influencers in commercial contexts, and of pro-Trump narratives in 2016 in the Us, it may have a significant impact.

7. Conclusions: the psychology of community-based interactive microtargeting

Community groups are important ways in which ordinary members of a society connect with one another, often they form due to locality or shared interests. Few communities are overtly political; however, they can become politicized through the tactics of actors who use them for political campaigning purposes. While many citizens can be guarded against advertising generally, and perhaps even more sensitive to political advertising (Kruikemeier *et al.* 2016), this form of targeting messaging may bypass cognitive warning systems and filters. The community groups are seen as bounded, restricted to a clearly defined segment of a population, and therefore content is seen as indigenous to the community. Given that trust in politicians and various corporate elites

is low, but that trust in ordinary people remains higher and stable especially in fragile democracies (Kołczyńska 2023), this form of peer-to-peer influence may have a significant impact on attitudes and voting behaviour. Of course, this is more likely to be the case with the second and third case studies as the green party activists make their allegiances clear. But even in these cases, their self-identification as residents of an area give their content the appearance of being «naturally» salient and resonant. For the greens in particular, their responses to community member posts heightens the salience and relevance of their content.

But in the cases of pro-Bolsonaro and pro-Russian propaganda the persuasive mechanism is through conversations and asking questions. This form of persuasion is less blunt than much traditional advertising, including the tactics used in microtargeting which has to get a message across within a second. Even when disseminating disinformation and extreme content, there is an organic dimension in the text. Posts about the feminists purportedly invading churches and performing acts of desecration were prefaced with «can this be true» or the single word «brabo» or «putz», colloquial Brazilian words meaning mad. Memes appropriating excepts from Professor Balthazar cartoons are introduced with texts that ignore the political message but rather say «remember this guy, this is cool». This form of questioning invites engagement with the content, but the engagement is not pushed but invited in the style of peer-to-peer communication. These more organic forms of delivering political messages are more likely to gain acceptance among susceptible communities and can be a gateway to greater radicalism. Evidence demonstrates that groups can adopt a more extreme tone and ideological position as a result of increased exposure to radical content (Govers *et al*. 2023). The tactics of discuss, provoke, politicise and radicalise is a common feature of political communication in community groups, even for green party activists; as one interviewee argued «we have to get them thinking about the environment, the climate crisis, we have to make them angry if we can, even if it is about litter».

Returning to the questions posed, firstly we ask whether the use of community groups for political campaigning mirrors microtargeting strategies. The evidence posits that this is the case. In fact, arguably, this could be a far more effective form of microtargeting as it delivers a political message to a community within a space they created and when talking about issues which are already of concern to them. Unlike sponsored ads or sidebar advertising on social media platforms which can deliver content when it is lacking relevance, these messages are usually delivered in response to other user comments. For the person posting as well as others who have engaged with the post, the more political comment has direct relevance. It is thus likely to be considered cogni-

tively and deeply while advertising can be dismissed or ignored (Lilleker 2014, 134-150). The above argument suggests that the use of community groups for political campaigning can overcome some of the challenges parties and candidates have in reaching prospective supporters. Microtargeting is often viewed as essential for reaching key groups with relevant and resonant messages, this form of community engagement adds a further dimension of resonance. In an era when social media users are becoming increasingly resistant to targeted advertising and find other users more persuasive and prefer «organic» content, this tactic has significant potential for meeting organisational objectives.

However, the uses of community groups for political campaigning raises further and even more serious ethical concerns. At the most basic level there are issues with individuals sharing misinformation within groups already, and these can lead people to become exposed to a range of extreme and conspiratorial ideas and find them believable due to them being endorsed by another member of a community of belonging (Smith *et al.* 2021). But the suggestion in the cases of pro-Bolsonaro and pro-Russian supportive content is that some of the accounts posting content are at best part of a co-ordinated campaign and some accounts could be sock puppets or bots. Such phenomena are not new features of commercial or political campaigns on social media, and they are a global problem, however normally they are considered marginal practices which can have significant impacts on shaping attitudes and buying and voting behaviour (Schoch *et al.* 2022). However, the combination of organic posts and reinforcement through astroturfing can lead community discussion groups to become «echo chambers» with a dominant political mood suppressing dissenting voices through a spiral of silence as these groups are founded on belonging (Sohn 2022). Furthermore, there are dangers that rather than just being echo chambers, members of community discussion groups can also become radicalised. The tactics of terrorist groups such as Isis and Al Qaeda show how covert chat can be used to groom young people and lead them to join causes and commit acts of violence (Windsor 2020). It took lengthy and painstaking research and investigation to unpick the flows of influence of these groups, the difficulty being that the processes of discuss, provoke, politicise and radicalise take place within private spaces which are not easy to monitor. Many of the actors involved in such activities have little care for the ethics of their work, in the case of pro-Russian propagandists their aim is to undermine democracies. Others are far more aware and, like the green party activists, are very careful: «We inform and persuade, we never manipulate. We're making people aware of the dangers of doing nothing» one interviewee reported. Therefore, as with many affordances offered by digital technology they can be used ethically or unethically, it depends on the user and their value system.

Microtargeting through community groups does not have to only benefit the extremist ideologies of anti-democratic forces, the problem is that the lack of ethics among those groups mean they exploit those affordances best.

The article offers a range of insights into how political campaigning can spread ideas and ideologies through strategic posting and commenting within community groups on social media platforms. The case studies represent three very different contexts and as such are snapshots of what we argue can be viewed as a form of microtargeting. More systematic research is needed to map the flows of content and influence (as per Chagas 2022), especially in contexts where computational propaganda techniques might be employed (Bolsover and Howard 2017). Studies are also needed to measure the impact of exposure to such forms of propaganda, including utilising an experimental research design (see Tappin *et al*. 2023). It is highly likely that information environments during many elections globally are, to some extent, being shaped by such practices. What we do not know is how widespread exposure is, to what extent attitudes are changed by exposure, or whether exposure shapes voting behaviour, or if these tactics only reinforce existing prejudices and voting intentions. It is necessary and vital for the research community to provide greater understanding of these practices and their effectiveness, as argued above this form of microtargeting could have a significant, positive or negative, impact upon the health of our democracies depending on who adopts these strategies and the objectives underpinning their engagement.

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