FINSBURY GLOVER HERING

THE DIGITAL READINESS OF GERMAN POLITICS - WHAT DID PARTIES AND PLAYERS LEARN FROM THE PAST?

- This year's German Federal election campaign will be the most digital of all times. With it come a lot of opportunities – as much as many threats such as uncontrollable viral videos. Besides, cyber risks have put the reputation of political parties and players into question.

- Parties have still a lot to learn: As recent examples show there is huge amount of fake news and disinformation politicians have to deal with. The case of the ethical hacker who found lacks within the CDU mobilization app and was accused of hacking by the party afterwards shows also that grasp of digitalization has to improve.

- In the end, this election campaign will be decided, partly at least, in the digital space. Owning that playing field is thus a decisive building block to win the race for chancellery. Finally, Rezo's recent new "destruction" videos will be a central challenge.

The most digital election campaign of all times - and disinformation is all around

This year's super election year - and especially its main event the German Federal Election - will be driven by the most digital election campaign of all times in German history. This entails a lot of chances: mobilization apps, precise stakeholder targeting, data-based analyses and so on. But, at the same time, an extremely digital campaigning environment leads to some major threats to the political parties and players, but above all, to the liberal democracy.

Political parties, decision makers and other players that are navigating those campaigns, have experienced a lot of examples for the difficulties and dangers of digital political campaigning in the past years. For example, the massive cyber-attack on the German Bundestag in 2015, when more than 16 GB of confidential data and emails from and to Chancellor Angela Merkel and other deputies have been addressed to and saved on foreign servers. Or, also very influential, the fake story of the allegedly kidnapped teenager in 2016 which caused a lot of damage to the reputation of the German government due to questionable reactions from the involved parties and players.

All those Wake-Up-Calls should give the impression, the German parties would have learned from the past. Right?

Short recap: Youtuber Rezo's "destruction of the CDU" in 2019 (and 2021?)

Although no case of disinformation, another impressive example of the vulnerability of a government and its leading parties and players, especially during an electoral campaign, is the so-called "destruction of the CDU" in the run-up to the 2019 European elections. Back in May of that year, YouTuber Rezo (1,5 million subscribers) released a 55-minutes video, criticizing the German government parties of the time.

In the video, he accused the Union parties of contributing to the ever-widening gap between rich and poor in Germany, the consequences of the climate change and "advancing with and supporting the USA unquestioningly in their armed conflicts".

Although a [study conducted by Statista](#) in September 2019 states that the video by Rezo did not directly influence the election results, it is quite clear, from a communication perspective, that it has harmed the reputation of the CDU among younger voters.

Parties and politicians had to watch the video going viral: 18 million views on YouTube alone and many more clicks, views, and impressions. Long story short: the German parties - especially the CDU - faced one of the biggest reputational crises of their history. And that just at the dawn of the European elections.

The big question: have the political parties learned from the past?

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First, elections are not being decided in the analogue world (alone) anymore - something that everyone should have in mind at latest since the 2017 US elections and the digital mobilization of voters by the Trump campaign. In the case of the 2019 European elections, this holds true particularly for the online protest and digitally organized participation in the political process of the youngest voters, mostly around the topic of climate change and copyright.

Second: The German parties and politicians were not prepared for this at the time. This is observable, for example, based on party members´ reactions to the Rezo video: Denying most parts of it, not taking it seriously enough, not realizing the extent of the

impact this would have on their public perception after all.

Excitingly enough, German politics has ben given a second chance to prove their crisis resilience - sooner then they might have hoped: Rezo just recently published a [second "destruction" video](#) - and again, he is criticizing especially the CDU; now in person of its candidate Armin Laschet. This time, the party remained quiet – at least until the editorial deadline of this paper. It may not be the best way to not to communicate actively in such a case. But certainly, this is likely to cause less harm than the offended and uncoordinated reaction of the party two years ago.

We can see: in 2021, the digital component of the political process has advanced further. Online party conferences, apps and microsites, new methods of targeting. The amount of "onlineness" in the electoral campaign has increased a lot, not just due to the corona pandemic that drove digitalization in all kinds of sectors. Following up on this, the big question is: are the parties and politicians ready for the risks and challenges that come along with digital campaigning? Two more recent examples may provide an answer to this question.

Example 1: Germany as the number one target of Russian disinformation campaigns within the EU

Shortly before the federal elections, Germany is the main target of disinformation campaigns, especially from Russia. Respective platforms such as [Russia Today (RT) Germany](#) are reaching more and more people on social media and especially within right-wing organizations. The fake news that those organizations are publishing are then getting shared by right-wing users of Twitter and Facebook.   A phenomenon which could be

observed around the regional elections in Saxony-Anhalt.

As an analysis of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue shows, RT Germany is the third most shared medium in Germany on Twitter. Another reason why this has a high relevance is, besides its massive disinformation campaigns, that RT Germany clearly favors AfD positions in comparison to other political parties' stances.

German political parties do have an answer to this: So-called digital task forces, organized via Telegram, consisting of digitally exposed voices and accounts are one of the most effective instruments. But it remains questionable if these efforts are sufficient.

Example 2: The CDU and the "Responsible Disclosure"

Most of the parties in the German election campaign are using "mobilization apps" to engage with their potential voters and to gather personal information about them and their election preferences. In July 2021, the IT expert Lillith Wittmann gave the CDU a hint that there was a rather dangerous security gap in the conservative party's app "CDU Connect". Such an activity can be called "ethical hacking" or "responsible disclosure" and is usually not officially prosecuted by those involved since it is helping them to improve the application.

In the described case, the CDU chose another, rather aggressive approach: after correcting the error based on Wittmann's intervention, they first offered her a post within the party - which the IT expert declined. Shortly after the job offer, the CDU party management reported her to the police for "hacking" and disclosing confidential data - only to take back the accusation and apologizing to her some days (and some critical articles in the press) later.

Conclusion: ready or not?

In general, one can observe that political players usually are innovative and pick up the pace earlier than companies do. Regarding the described incidents in the German election campaign, one could doubt that rule of thumb. The described cases demonstrate weak spots within the digital system, program and approach of Germans largest political party but can be easily applied to its competitors.

At the same time, it makes sense to take a closer look at the different parties. A quick glimpse into it shows that Germany's biggest parties, the Greens, the CDU/CSU, the FDP, the SPD and the AfD are handling the digital aspect of their campaigns quite differently. Also, some politicians are keener on speaking openly within the digital sphere, like for example being guests of digital influencers such as Rezo or Thilo Jung. Armin Laschet (CDU) and Alice Weidel (AfD) are rather cautious in exposing themselves in the digital world; Olaf Scholz (SPD), Robert Habeck (Greens), Christian Lindner (FDP) seem to be accepting most of the invites they get.

In the end, this election campaign will be decided, partly at least, in the digital space. It remains to be seen how the second part of Rezos new "destruction campaign" will unfold, for example. Owning that playing field is thus an important building block win the race for chancellery. Rezo's latest video is called "Destruction Part 1: Incompetence". A second part will follow - the only question is when.