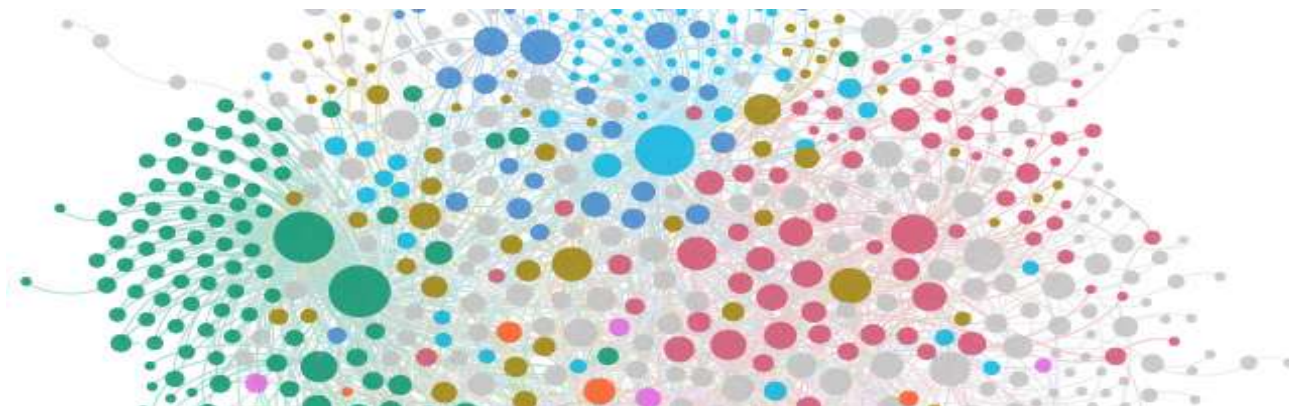


# SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING IN ELECTIONS



## 1. CONTEXT

Social media have become essential infrastructure for public debates and the forming of political opinion. In established democracies, traditional media still play a significant role, even if their content is distributed through social media, while in many new democracies or transition countries, social media have become the dominant platform of political exchange. Facebook's 'Free Basics' initiative for 42 developing countries is creating a social media monopoly in these countries. In some countries, people have come to understand Facebook as 'the internet', since most online interaction is mediated through Facebook.

## 2. ELECTORAL RELEVANCE

For the integrity of elections, the following social media related themes are relevant:

- **Campaign financing:** Social media are used for electoral campaigning, but there is no transparency to the funding and the extent of such campaigns. This is true in particular for targeted advertising that only the user and the provider can see. Social media monitoring may be able to detect some such advertising, but it is unlikely to establish the extent of it. It may, however, be able to establish sufficient facts to create a debate on campaign financing and social media. Additional concerns in this context are dominance by one political player and foreign interference exerted through buying advertising.
- **The conduct of candidates and parties:** Social media are an essential tool for electoral campaigning. While Election Observation Missions (EOMs) typically track the campaign on TV, radio, newspapers and on the ground, they do not follow it on social media. Monitoring candidates and parties on social media is feasible because they usually use public pages.
- **Electoral violence or fraud:** Social media has been used by some observers and researchers to detect electoral violence and electoral fraud. Often, social media provide the first clues that can then be investigated further by on-site visits.
- **Perceptions of integrity:** Social media may reveal the level of trust in the electoral process. Significant concerns with electoral integrity may be tracked on social media. The communication of election management bodies can also be monitored on social media.
- **Manipulation:** Observers can monitor efforts to sway opinion with disinformation or social bots. Such projects have been undertaken, though not specifically in the domain of election observers.
- **Hate speech:** There have been many projects to monitor the diffusion of hate speech, though not in the context of elections.
- EOMs can also monitor the impact of their own work on social media, for example, how users respond to preliminary statements and reports and how the mission is being perceived.
- The online coverage of elections by state and private online media (though this is not only about social media).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Monitoring of social media cannot be compared to the monitoring of traditional media. The latter involve the analysis of a limited quantity of information (x hours of TV or radio reports; y newspaper articles), which is carried out by media experts. By contrast, the available material on social media is practically infinite. For example, for the German elections, DRI collected around 900,000 tweets with the main election hashtag, #BTW17, during a period of four months. On election day, we collected nearly the same number of tweets in only a 12-hour period with a collection of other hashtags. In all cases, we could have collected millions of more tweets with other relevant hashtags. In other words, social media monitoring is highly **selective**. It is not possible to have a comprehensive view of what happens on all social media in an election. Making the right choices of what to look for is one of the main challenges of social media monitoring. It requires good knowledge about the local context and the population's social media habits. In many countries it also involves various languages that are used on social media.

In contrast to traditional media monitoring, many more issues can be assessed by monitoring social media. Social media provide an insight into the discussions and behaviour among a significant number of voters. Social media in some way serve as a 'permanent poll'. Social media monitoring provides interesting possibilities to understand and analyse a public debate, for example, with user locations (to understand the debate in a specific geographic area), the identification of bubbles (political opinions that remain isolated from others) and the relation of social media to traditional media content.

The current observation methodology generally does not include social media in a significant manner. For example the EU election observation handbook (2016) hardly mentions social media and only includes a short chapter on observing the online environment.<sup>1</sup> This approach risks missing important information on the formation of public opinion. Indicative of this lack is the OSCE/ODIHR report of the 2016 General Elections in the US, which includes no analysis of social media, although in retrospect this has turned out to be one of the most critical areas of these elections.<sup>2</sup> This gap is inconsistent with EOMs stated mandate to comprehensively assess an electoral process. It is also a missed opportunity to foster digital education by reporting on digital aspects of elections.

### 4. NEXT STEPS

Social media monitoring is not yet sufficiently developed for it to be fully integrated into international EOMs. However, the following should be considered:

- Gather practitioners of social media monitoring to develop a methodology for social media monitoring in elections (DRI is currently drafting a paper with a skeleton methodology).
- Fund social media monitoring by local or international NGOs in parallel to EOMs and explore social media monitoring in practice.
- Integrate more social media skills in EOMs, so that they can at a minimum follow social media debates on election observation and enhance social media messaging by EOMs.
- Create social media monitoring coalitions to monitor specific areas of social media during election.
- Assess emerging legislation governing social media during elections around the globe. What are good and bad practices and what is their relationship to freedom of expression?

\*\*\*

## ABOUT DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL

Democracy Reporting International (DRI) is a non-partisan, independent, not-for-profit organisation registered in Berlin, Germany. DRI promotes political participation of citizens, accountability of state bodies and the development of democratic institutions world-wide. DRI helps find local ways of promoting the universal right of citizens to participate in the political life of their country, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. <http://www.democracy-reporting.org>

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.eods.eu/library/EUEOM\\_Handbook\\_2016.pdf](http://www.eods.eu/library/EUEOM_Handbook_2016.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/usa/294196?download=true>