

Program
Villa Collina Workshop 2024
Cadenabbia, June 16-20, 2024

Reinventing Democracy: Campaigns and Discourses in the Age of Data, Computational Propaganda, and AI

In 2024, both the European Parliament elections and the US Presidential election will take place. This is a rare event which only happens every 20 years. These elections will determine legislative and government bodies whose decisions impact roughly 800 million citizens. At the same time, Twitter (now "X") has re-activated accounts previously suspended for disinformation, propaganda, and other behavior detrimental to democratic election campaigns. The platform has no team for safety and trust anymore, and Facebook has cut back its efforts to safeguard election campaigns. This all while generative AI is becoming a household tool, with parties and politicians using ChatGPT or Midjourney to create content for their social media profiles. Against this background, we can ask if democratic institutions are ready for these new campaign conditions and how they can be reinvented.

Moreover, monitoring these campaigns on social media platforms has become more challenging than ever. Platforms have always restricted data access for researchers, but analyzing how parties and politicians campaign on social media has become almost impossible. Elon Musk ended data access and Twitter's academic API in April 2023. With the Digital Services Act on the horizon, better times for data access may be coming, but too late for the 2024 election campaigns.

With the undoing of Twitter, the stagnation of Facebook, the rise of smaller platforms like TikTok and Mastodon, and new outlets like Bluesky and Threads, we may witness the end of the first age of platforms. The past 15 years have been marked by a rather stable figuration of the big platforms, where citizens conversed, politicians campaigned, trolls disrupted and foreign actors tried to manipulate. But where do campaigns move "after Twitter"? How to reach citizens and target groups in an increasingly fragmented media environment? And how can we study and safeguard campaigns under such circumstances?

The workshop seeks to bring together leading scholars from Europe, the U.S. and beyond to present and discuss preliminary results and work-in-progress analyzing not only the 2024 campaigns on social media platforms, but the broader conditions, challenges and new horizons for contemporary campaigning. It also seeks to understand how the relationship between political actors and citizens may be reshaped in this renewed media landscape. Topics to be addressed include, but are not limited to:

- Communication strategies of parties and politicians;
- Citizens' reactions to the changing media environment and campaign techniques;
- Studying new platforms, visual communication, cross-platform studies;
- Foreign interference, propaganda and dark participation;
- Cooperation with social media influencers; embedded tech workers from platforms;
- Disinformation, election denialism and false narratives of electoral fraud;
- Generative AI and political campaigning, the use of ChatGPT, Midjourney, etc.;
- Fragmentation and diversification of platforms;
- Data access and workarounds.

Organizers:

Ulrike Klinger (European New School of Digital Studies, Frankfurt)

Karolina Koc-Michalska (Audencia Business School, France)

Daniel Schmücking (Konrad Adenauer Foundation)

Program (as of May 3, 2024)

Sun, June 16

18:00 Get-Together

19:00 Dinner

Monday, June 17

9:00 Welcome and Introduction to the history of Villa Collina (Heiner Enterich, Director of Villa Collina)

10:00 Keynote & Discussion

- AI Challenges to Social Science (Bruce Bimber, University of California, Santa Barbara)

12:00 – 13:00 Lunch

13:00 – 15:00 Panel 1: Technology and Democracy

- Affordances and Algorithms: How Digital Media Technology Affects Political Communication (Sundar Shyam, Penn State University, USA)
- Data, AI and political parties: thinking beyond campaigns (Anamaria Ducteac Segesten, University of Lund, Sweden)
- Journalism reinvented. And the reasons why we do not (and neither the democracy) recognise it at all (Sergio Splendore, University of Milano, Italy)

15.30 Excursion

19:00 Dinner

Tuesday, June 18

10:00 – 12:00 Panel 2: Citizens, Discontent, and Political Behaviour

- The discourse of our discontent (Lilach Nir, Hebrew University Jerusalem, Israel)
- The influence of YouTube influencers on political opinions and behavior (Anja Bechmann, Aarhus University, Denmark)
- Falsified information, context and contested knowledge: citizens' perspective on social media platforms (Karolina Koc-Michalska, Audencia Business School, France)

12:00 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 16:00 Panel 3: Media, propaganda and foreign interference

- Structuring Russian Propaganda: Telegram and the Ukrainian War (JC Boucher, University of Calgary, Canada)

- The architecture of Russia's information space. Lost in translation (Janis Karlsbergs, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, Latvia)
- The Elections in Crisis: Media Discourse on The Postponed 2020 Presidential Elections in Poland (and What Happened Next) (Agnieszka Stepinska, Adam Mickiewicz University Poznan, Poland)

17:00 – 18:00 Roundtable

19:00 Dinner

Wednesday, June 19

10:00 – 12:00 Panel 4: Trends in Campaigning I

- Political Communication in the Era of Social Media Fragmentation (Curd Knüpfer, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany)
- The 2023 Polish Election Campaigns on Facebook – and what to learn for the EU elections 2024 (Ulrike Klinger, European University Viadrina, Germany & Karolina Koc-Michalska, Audencia Business School, France)
- Permanent campaigning or not? Party communication on Instagram in-between and during election campaigns (in Austria)(Uta Russmann, University of Innsbruck, Austria & Anders O. Larsson, Kristiania University, Oslo, Norway)

12:00 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 16:00 Panel 5: Trends in Campaigning II

- Campaign Watch: How can we trace and monitor disinformation in election campaigns? (Mona Krewel, University of Wellington, New Zealand)
- Shifting Communities? The rightward drift of the #svpol ("Swedish Politics") hashtag on Twitter/X From 2010-2022 (Anders O. Larsson, Kristiania University Oslo, Norway)
- Automation, digitalization, civic engagement, and voting: a labor market insights from France (Tomasz Michalski, HEC Paris Business School, France)

19:00 Dinner

Thursday, June 20

10:00 – 12:00 Panel 6: The Rise of Illiberalism

- Who's Afraid of the Constitutional Court? The Discursive Effect of Banning Political Organizations (Mike Cowburn, European University Viadrina)
- Democracy on the edge: political communication in the illiberal public sphere (Vaclav Stetka, Loughborough University, United Kingdom)
- Communicating Citizenship in Divided Democracies: The Rise of Illiberal Media, Institutions and Cultures (Lance Bennett, University of Washington, USA)

12:00 Lunch and Farewell

Funding

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