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How algorithms affect women in politics and divide our societies

“Go and shave your armpits”, “you need a good screwing, bitch”, “this will cost you a kidney”.

These are just a couple of the many reactions I as a woman in politics have received on social media. And I am not alone.

Today I am going to talk about how algorithms affect women in politics and divide our societies.

Online, women increasingly encounter hate, threats, sexual harassment, and threats. Especially women of colour and women with a public function. This is not about a couple of angry people sending a nasty Tweet. These waves of online hate often emanate from coordinated groups. We see that there are large groups of trolls who specifically target people from certain groups, such as progressive women, women of colour, migrants, and LGBTIQ people, and we know that the trans, intersex and non-binary are the biggest target within the LGBTIQ community of these trolls.

The purpose of online hate is clear: to silence us. Unfortunately, it works. More and more young girls, lgbtiq+ , racialised and disabled young people are afraid to post their opinions online because they fear a wave of hate in response.

At the same time, our public discourse is increasingly taking place online. Online hate discourages marginalised groups from participating in public debate and it creates obstacles for women, but also minorities, to enter politics. Due to online hate, 51% of women have second thoughts about sharing their opinions online.

This is where online hate directly strikes the heart of our democracy. We can only speak of equality and democracy when everybody can participate freely and safely in any public debate, be it online or offline.

But, to change this, first, we need to change the profit-driven toxic algorithms that currently further accelerate and spread online hate.

Now you may wonder: what is the role of algorithms in online hate and affecting women in politics?

There isn't one single reason why the public debate is becoming more harsh, politicians are increasingly threatened at their homes and violence against the media is increasing. What we do know is that recommender systems of social media propel the spread of online hate and disinformation online. The algorithms of social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok and Instagram are programmed for profit. This means they show us content that will give them clicks, likes and interaction. Because engagement means people will stay on their platform for longer and they can show people more ads, gaining more profit.

As some of you may have seen while scrolling Twitter or Facebook, that online debates are often a lot harsher. The online dynamics are often: the more you roast someone, the more extreme, harsh or witty a comment is, the more likes, clicks and interaction.

And it turns out: content that makes people angry, that causes commotion, also leads people to click and respond. This means platforms serve people shocking messages that lead people to respond, and these are often controversial messages, messages with hate, discrimination or disinformation. As these platforms also keep detailed track of your online behaviour, and what it is exactly that you tend to click on. And the algorithms tend to recommend you more of the things you have clicked on in the past. This also means they can send the people that are extra vulnerable to disinformation down rabbit holes of fake news and conspiracies, and even into alternative realities. This exacerbates polarisation and radicalisation and is a threat to our democracy and national security.

The entities creating online waves of hate against women know exactly how to exploit these dynamics. They use these dynamics against us: with their hate messaging, their mass-interaction at the same time, which ensures their hate attack is further promoted and through complex networks of bots and anonymous accounts. It is a handshake between the far right trying to erode women's rights, foreign entities trying to destabilise Europe and erode our democracies and capitalism, accelerating these messages for profit.

This is also how a small group with extreme opinions spreading hate, keeps gaining more space online, at the detriment of minorities, as women, people of colour and LGBTIQ+ people. Dutch research from the Groene Amsterdammer shows 1 in 10 messages sent to women in politics is hateful or threatening. The online environment is increasingly hostile to them and they can participate less in the online public debate.

This means women think twice before becoming politically active and ultimately joining the table where decisions are made. In a healthy democracy, everybody should be able to express themselves and be heard, and policy should be made based on different views. It is absolutely crucial that everybody can participate in discussions, online or offline, safely.

Reporting violence or harassment online and offline is already complicated. But, if you want to take online hate offline, you are completely dependent on the platforms on which that hate takes place.

These platforms often don't even respond to a report of harassment or threats. If you get a response at all, you have to appeal to the same platform if you disagree. This often leaves women empty-handed. The Digital Services Act, the DSA already takes some crucial steps in the area of reporting, content moderation and transparency of the algorithms. Still on the dynamics of these algorithms and the systematic recommendation of hate and disinformation, the EU is blowing its own trumpets about audited self-assessments and voluntary codes of conducts. This is something that is too urgent and impactful on our society for us to outsource to private companies like this. This is where we still urgently need to step in.

We can still step in, but we need political courage and ambition. We need technical requirements for recommender algorithms. We need to include recommender systems in the European AI Act, so they too have to meet technical transparency and human-oversight requirements and people will always be in control. And we need to step in urgently to prohibit interaction-based recommender algorithms, which we know consistently spread disinformation and hate.

We can only truly speak of democracy if women too can speak freely and safely in the public debate. The internet needs to serve people and democracy, not the profits of tech companies or the spread of hate and disinformation by the far right, bots and Russian troll farms. We need to fix the internet and ensure that in our society social media connects us instead of divides us.