Manipulation of social networks: the construction of disinformation as an electoral propaganda weapon

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ABSTRACT

Lies have always existed in the world of politics, but the phenomenon known as fake news is a thornier obstacle to democracy in algorithmic societies. The present work analyzes the phenomenon of disinformation from a broader perspective of the damages caused in social networks, in view of the inevitable collision between the regulations imposed and freedom of expression. By summarizing the regulatory scenario and the complexity of regulating disruptive sectors, I contribute to the regulatory debate by expounding some interdisciplinary premises necessary for the control of freedom of expression in social networks, especially in Brazil.

Keywords: Social Networks; Interactive Platforms; Fake News; Democracy; Fact Checking.

RESUMO

Mentiras sempre existiram no universo da Política mas o fenômeno mundialmente conhecido como fake news, representa um óbice mais espinhoso para a Democracia nas Sociedades Algorítmicas. No presente trabalho pretendemos analisar o fenômeno da desinformação em um campo mais amplo de danos praticados nas redes sociais, tendo em vista a colisão inevitável entre as regulações impostas e a liberdade de expressão. Sintetizando-se o cenário regulatório e a complexidade em regular setores disruptivos com incertezas científicas, se objetiva uma contribuição para o debate regulatório, expondo algumas premissas interdisciplinares necessárias para pensarmos a regulação da liberdade de expressão nas redes sociais, especialmente no Brasil.

Palavras chave: Redes Sociais; Plataformas Interativas; Fake News; Democracia; Fact checking.

Analysis of the phenomenon of disinformation in the universe of social networks first requires consideration of the binomial ***fake news*** and ***democracy***. It is also necessary to draw a distinction between disinformation, which is the intentional creation and spread of false or misleading information, and ***misinformation***, which is the inadvertent dissemination of false or imprecise information.

The creation of knowingly false information – disinformation – has the explicit objective of tricking or misleading people. In contrast, misinformation involves spreading information that may or may not be false, but that conveys a mistaken or illusory idea. Therefore, the topic of fake news can be separated into distinct vectors, which are truth, truth inaccurately or incompletely transmitted, and outright lie.

Making a distinction among these realities is relevant for the task of thinking about ways to counterattack against fake news, whether via regulation or by means of judicial decisions that order the removal of content from the web.

The job of defining what is and is not fake news is complex and challenging. First Draft, a nonprofit organization that disseminates good practices in the sharing of content over the internet, proposes seven different situations, namely: (i) ***false connection***, when headlines, illustrations or captions do not support the content; (ii) ***false context***, when genuine content is shared with false contextual information; (iii) ***manipulation of content***, when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive; (iv) ***misleading content***; when information is used misleadingly to frame an issue or individual; (v) ***imposter content***, when genuine sources are impersonated; (vi) ***fabricated content***, when new but entirely false content is designed to deceive and do harm; and (vii) ***satire or parody***; when there is no intention to cause harm but potential exists to fool people.

In recent Brazilian elections, the traditional media has had great difficulty in dealing with the profusion of false news, a fact regularly addressed via newspapers, television and radio. In reality, the way such news is spread these days mainly involves the manipulation of the cognitive processes of information consumers. This systemic characteristic functions as a structure for control of social networks.

The expression “fake news” is often used in inappropriate and conflicting form. First of all, false or fake news cannot be confused with other forms of public disinformation, because what happens today in the world of politics is that all strong criticism that displeases is denominated “fake news”. But this may not be the case, since there is a crucial difference between outright lying and manipulation of information through journalistic bias, which occurs when information is not essentially false, but is presented with an interpretive reading from an ideological perspective. The outcome of this bias cannot be equated with the harm caused by fake news.

The spreading of false information can generate poor allocation of resources, misconceived business investments, election flawed candidates and many other damages, as has been noted around the world. The current information system can be described as dysfunctional, culminating in the inability of individuals to coexist against a backdrop of rational and well-informed discourses about society. Instead, the trend is toward increasing ideological extremism and polarization.

The first challenges to be faced are associated with greater scientific collaboration based on the perspectives of high-tech companies and academe. In this respect, there are even those who argue for the existence of ethical and social responsibility standards that transcend the forces of the market, so that the various platforms must provide data (that is relevant and are not protected by intellectual property rules) to enable studies of the spread of false information, especially in relation to psychology and human behavior. Understanding how false news spreads is the first step to contain it.

The concept of the algorithmic society is the first that must be faced to comprehend the problem. It denotes a society organized around making social and economic decisions based on algorithms, robots and artificial intelligence agents. These agents not only influence the decisions, they often determine how they will be carried out. The various search algorithms are fundamental to our use of the internet, because without them, choosing among the millions of comments and news items posted daily would be a truly Herculean task, prohibitive in practice.

However, in a free society, people are better able to filter out undesired information, news or other matters. In turn, in undemocratic settings, people are forced to read or watch specific contents. In free countries, people have the choice of where to obtain their news, or not to obtain news. Every day people make choices about their likes, dislikes and other viewpoints.

The simple fact that the human brain makes decisions, whether about what type of food to eat or news source to choose, means we are engaging in a type of filtering. It should be borne in mind that ***algorithms***, in the literal sense of the word, are nothing more than finite sequences of executable actions that aim to find a solution to a determined type of problem. In other words, their use can be understood as *the application of a mathematical formula in a determined context to resolve a problem.*

However, the algorithms of interest to the study of information systems are sequences of executable actions with the ***purpose of filtering and directing information content.*** The social networks, along with the majority of online communication services, rely on algorithms to determine how news and any other content will be disseminated and consumed. This means that the filtering automatically carried out by our brains, which serves to choose what content to pay attention to, is preceded by preliminary algorithmic filtering by new technologies. Therefore, the information supplied by the Facebook news feed, Google searches and Twitter topics are selected and prioritized by highly complex algorithms that are the intellectual property of those companies. These algorithms have been codified to classify, filter and supply content to maximize the engagement of users with the content and their time spent on the platform.

Thus, the algorithms organize the huge volume of data produced and shared on the platforms, personalizing the content in line with users' interests and the interests of people who have similar online habits and profiles. What is different, though, is that for some time now individuals and companies have been trying to apply these filtering systems for purposes of marketing and consumption.

In a context of the dispute for attention, disinformation acts as a weapon for political and social control. According to Tim Wu, a law professor at Columbia University, various important technological and economic developments over the past two decades have led to a relative shortage of attention of listeners and readers. The first development is associated with the popularization of the internet: the drastic decline in the costs of being an online communicator since the 1990s. This fact is known as "cheap talk" or "information inundation", because with the tools offered by social networks, anyone can disseminate ideas digitally in the public sphere.

Therefore, unlike in the twentieth century, we now live in an era when citizens who use social networks receive or do not receive information because the search algorithms decide what is and is not relevant to particular individuals, or simply because their attention has been captured by other online services.

Information is abundant, and anyone can express a position, although being heard is difficult. As a consequence, the attention span of individuals has become a highly valued commodity. The second development indicated by Tim Wu, although with a longer range, is the emergence of an "attention industry", i.e., a set of agents whose business model is sale of human attention.

The conclusion is that the ascension and centrality of publicity and advertising in these business models of the attention industry have the overall effect of making the attention of internet users increasingly valuable.

The third development pointed out by Professor Wu is the emergence of *"filter bubbles"*, considering the importance of *"cybernetic cascades"* Filter bubbles can be defined as a set of data generated by all the algorithmic mechanisms used invisibly to customize online navigation. In other words, they derive from a type of personalization of content on the web, carried out by determined companies (e.g., Google) through their search mechanisms, and social networks such as Facebook, among various other platforms and content providers.

This leads to the formation, based on individual navigation characteristics, of a particular online universe, both accessible and (mainly) imposed, conditioning the user's navigation. This is done through tracking of various elements, among them the location of the user and the records of cookies and data on sites visited.

The result is that we are involuntarily inserted in a filter bubble that is meticulously defined based on our navigation preferences and customs, so that when we search for information on a given topic, we are directed to a specific type of content, while others, seeking information on the same topic, will be directed to very different content due to search algorithms customized to their particular habits.

Therefore, users are diverted from information that disagrees with their points of view, effectively isolating them in their own cultural or ideological bubbles, so that filter bubbles cause intellectual isolation.

The question of filter bubbles is even more important when analyzed from the standpoint of ***information cascades,*** extremely common in online information systems, where control algorithms are able to divide people into fragmented and polarized niches.

In this respect, social networks make it easier to hear the opinions of others who share the same beliefs, and harder to access competing views. This phenomenon is magnified in the case of users who simply exclude online links to "political opponents. For this reason, interactive platforms create fertile ground for polarization and are potentially dangerous to democracy and social peace. There are two main motives for polarization of groups. The first involves persuasion, and for this reason it is more related to information cascades. The second is associated with what is called "reputation cascades", and involves the fact that people want to be perceived favorably by other members of the groups in which they participate.

In an information cascade, people no longer trust a determined aspect of the information they receive. Instead, they decide based on signs transmitted by others. They follow the behavior of the first few people, or even one person, who in theory can produce similar behavior of countless followers.

In a reputation cascade, people think they know what is right or probably correct, but nevertheless follow the crowd to maintain the good opinion of others. Even the most confident people are sometimes victimized by this pressure, and become silent. Fearing the ire of others, people do not publicly challenge practices and values that in private they dislike.

The worry here is that for a democracy to function properly, people cannot live in information cocoons. They must have contact with other viewpoints and ideas. In reality, they should do this even without wanting to see or hear about certain topics, because this is what makes citizens aware of the plurality of other views of the world. A large portion of the information we consume is brought by social networks, and these new conveyers of information are personalizing the content we receive. This content personalization is possible based on the collection of other data and information we spread over the web.

The search algorithms have greatly improved with the emergence of artificial intelligence. The algorithms can learn a lot about people's emotions and what they want or prefer, and can even imitate emotions. And if the algorithm knows people's various predilections, it will also know what political candidates will likely attract them. The record of the sites visited by people enables predicting what products they will probably buy and what they think about contemporary public affairs.

Facebook, for example, keeps track of users' political convictions. It categorizes them as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal and very liberal, by observing the pages visited.

Another important aspect to observe is that social media did not originate as organizations of the free press or news and information services. Likewise, they were not originally established to be mediators between citizens and the State, much less mediators between citizens and other citizens. Rather, they were created to be venues for socialization. The function of social media as information transmission channels, including political news, simply occurred naturally and gradually.

This certainly was not the purpose for which interactive platforms were conceived or planned. However, these platforms are in constant mutation, in line with the relentless advance of technology. So, whether or not we are prepared for this, these platforms are now institutions of the flow of information.

Nevertheless, the missions of journalism and the platforms are to a certain extent in discord, because while good journalism aims to provide the facts necessary, even when uncomfortable, along with the pertinent context to make sense of the news and keep citizens well informed, social networks seek to supply desired and enjoyable information, to keep users happy and interested, so as to capture as much attention for as long as possible. At the extreme, this effort has created "zombies" who are teleguided by the hedonism on offer.

Serious public deliberation improves the quality of the decisions in a democracy, permitting individuals to better understand the interests in society, and even when this public debate produces more discord than accord, this also can be positive from a democratic-institutional perspective. The big challenge, however, is posed by lies, especially in politics.

The growing difficulty of harmonizing the existence of filter bubbles and cybernetic cascades holds us hostage to the algorithms developed by the social media, creating serious obstacles to access reliable information. In this respect, one can also mention the problem of algorithmic filtering and the high degree of personalization of content, a good example being the recent case of the efforts of Cambridge Analytica in the American presidential election of 2016.

The personalization of the web and targeting of information to political niches by Cambridge Analytica shocked the world, because through treatment of personal data of users collected on Facebook, the company managed to develop a "psychographic" profile for each individual, allowing delivery of a customized subjective discourse.

The mapping of preferences and customs via web data is a strategy that has long been used in large scale for digital marketing and online commerce. By individualizing consumers as accurately as possible, the platforms are able to ascertain and then influence consumption preferences, by psychologically imposing products and services. The success of this effort has made the data commerce market extremely lucrative.

Through the use of psychographic profiles, it is not only possible to identify ***which voters are more likely to be attracted to certain causes, candidates, subjects or even slogans***, but also to ***manipulate information to predict and alter the future conduct of these voters***, by means of personalized, adaptive and obsessive propaganda.

The objective is not only to correctly evaluate the probable behavior of voters, but also, when necessary, to change it by exploiting their emotions. In this respect, one of the facets of disinformation is precisely the manipulation of human emotions and instincts via content with a journalistic veneer, i.e., through appealing phrases and seductive colors and designs. By these means, emotional states can be transferred to others, promoting emotional contagion through social networks. Thus, it is possible to lead an individual to experience the same emotions as those circulating in the networks.

In at least 20 countries the characteristics of online activity suggest the coordinated use of digital robots, or "bots", to influence political attitudes. Their use in politics has three main objectives: (1) to simulate a large support base for a determined political actor (a tactic also known as "astroturfing"), (2) to disaggregate opponents; and (3) to divert attention from controversial subjects, by manipulating the so-called "trend topics".

In the context of election disputes, robots can be manipulated to distort the dimension of political movements, radicalize debates in the public sphere, and create false perceptions about disagreement and consensus in social networks. It is possible to measure the power of a fake news story by the virality of the lie that it propagates, the speed with which it disseminates and the number of people that receive and believe the false item. Many factors can spur the popularity of a story, but the pace with which lies can travel on interactive platforms is certainly enhanced by the coordinated use of bots, not only by reasons directly related to the content disseminated.

These automaton accounts seem like they are humans on Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. Some studies have estimated that Twitter has up to 48 million robot users, while Facebook has between 67.65 and 137.76 million false users, some of them utilized to help spread disinformation and others for cybernetic warfare, such as persecution of journalists. On Twitter, for example, bot accounts customarily tweet and retweet each other, disseminating links to external content with greater frequency than human accounts.

This malicious use of robots is a sophisticated and lucrative industry of "likes" and followers, operating in the shadows of the internet.

The current financial model of digital media favors and encourages the phenomenon of fake news: the larger the number of clicks, the greater the return. The remuneration from advertisements is not always related to the content they make available, but instead by the quantity of accesses. The authors of these news items thus seek to maximize the number of visitors to their pages, and consequently their profit.

Therefore, the problem is twofold. The first drawback is that false information (mainly the type that appeals to the emotions) is more lucrative than links to true news stories, because the former attract more clicks (acting as click baits). The second problem is that in the universe of this market for attention, the algorithms employed by platforms to direct us to content have high market value, and as such are protected by intellectual property rights and by business security protocols. Regarding the challenge, the interactive platforms need money from advertising, and in the business models practiced by them (in the attention capture market), money is generated by the number of clicks. The second issue is related to the lack of transparency of how the algorithms work to channel information and news through the feeds of social networks or the search engines of providers, as well as the impossibility of questioning or altering the treatment of data, since the proprietary algorithms wind up acting as content editors.

Therefore, not only can fake news be more profitable than true news, there is no control over how and why one news item appears more in detriment to others. To try to counteract this problem, many researchers have proposed that social media start to rank their information source by a quality criterion, to enable the platforms to provide consumers with signs of the quality and origin of information, through algorithmic content rankings.

However, allowing the ranking of news items can be equated with creation of a curator of the quality of public discourse, as if it were possible to put some entity (governamental or private) in the position of evaluating what does and does not deserve to be expressed. Furthermore, allowing platforms to use rankings can raise serious questions about the powers granted to these high-tech companies, which also have their private economic interests. On the other hand, with governamental solutions the problem would persist, because the State would wind up ranking press vehicles, amounting to censorship, which is inimical to the freedom of the press that is crucial for the proper functioning of democracy.

Although the platforms unquestionably can contribute to resolve these problems, in light of what they have been doing, civil society also needs to create mechanisms to ascertain the truth. The problem of dissemination of false information is not solely the fault of automaton accounts. Human behavior contributes more to the differential

dissemination of false and true news than the robots. This means that policies to deter false information also need to include behavioral interventions, such as to reward and encourage initiatives to detect the dissemination of disinformation, notably through education, instead of concentrating exclusively on restraining bots. Understanding the logic and reasons for spreading fake news is the first step to contain it.

An important step in this direction is the emergence of fact-checking agencies, with the mission of spreading awareness among internet users and the public at large regarding misstatements and lies. A recent example in Brazil is the creation of the PegaBot tool. But the traditional media vehicles also have a role to play in unmasking false information. On the side of the platforms, it is crucial to revise the terms of use and privacy policies to hamper the utilization of bots to spread fake news, besides investing in artificial intelligence able to detect false content and actions orchestrated by bots and malicious political actors.

An interesting example of the influence of fake news in electoral processes is the case of the American presidential election of 2016, when there were clear revelations of cybernetic war via disinformation, troll armies and information overload.

According to American intelligence agencies, Russia actively interfered in the presidential race in 2016 through disinformation and propaganda campaigns, conducted largely via social networks. Russian meddling has been noted in other places, because ***cybernetic war*** has occurred in various other countries in recent years, especially in the run-up to significant elections.

The influence on elections typically involves, in summary, the distortion of facts, the micro-guidance of voters to persuade them to vote for certain candidates, or only to discourage them from voting. Russia has been engaging in attempts to interfere in public opinion by supporting organizations that create and spread disinformation, false and hyper-party content, with the objective of undermining public trust and destabilizing democratic states. This is an active threat, configuring a true model of cybernetic war by spreading false information.

Sophisticated and effective groups, known as “web brigades” or “troll armies” perpetrate abusive online behavior, by threatening, hacking and offending journalists and communication vehicles, causing them to think twice before writing critical content, thus endangering open and fair political journalism.

The model that uses the “architecture of control of social networks” undermines the information system, diverting attention from key political debates to less important themes by manipulation of trend topics and strategic creation of false information and cybernetic cascades, as well as persecution of the free press.

In Brazil, during the last presidential election the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* revealed a supposed scheme of sending mass false messages via WhatsApp, focused on the last days before the second round of voting. This gives strong indications that the Russian propaganda model is now present in the Brazilian information system as a channel to distribute fake news.

Further in this line, on October 18, 2018, just 10 days before the second round of the Brazilian presidential race, the political coalition backing the (ultimately losing) candidate Fernando Haddad filed an “Action for Judicial Electoral Investigation” (AIJE) with the Superior Electoral Tribunal (TSE, the highest electoral court), to examine accusations of abuse of economic power and improper use of digital communication media carried out surreptitiously by economic groups backing the eventual winning candidate, Jair Bolsonaro, by contracting mass mailing firms to send messages via WhatsApp. This conduct is forbidden by Law 9504/1997 (Election Law), as well as a decision from the Supreme Court in a direct action for unconstitutionality (ADI), according to which companies cannot make donations to election campaigns.

In reaction to the indications of misuse of the internet, WhatsApp, which is controlled by Facebook, has been investing in improvements to avoid mass disinformation. Some examples of change in the platform are restriction of groups to at most 250 members, creation of a “forwarded” notice when messages are shared from one window to another (indicating the possible presence of a chain trying to propagate information in cascade), and restrictions on the number of users in transmission lists and shared messages.

Besides this, the company has also been working with Brazilian courts, especially the Superior Electoral Tribunal. Efforts like these have also been undertaken in countries like India, in some cases for similar reasons and in others due to different social realities, such as waves of public violence.

In this context, studies suggest that the contemporary model of political advertising, in particular the cross-border interference in public opinion, with the characteristics of cybernetic war, has the potential to be highly effective because it takes advantage of the way the human brain receives, interprets, stores and shares information to psychologically guide the interpreter to the intended objectives.

In summary, the success of the propaganda model based on techniques of the Cold War as practiced by the Soviet Union involves these main characteristics: a large volume of information conveyed through multiple communication vehicles and channels; continuity and repetitiveness; and lack of commitment to journalistic consistency.

Since these successful aspects of Russian propaganda have surprising roots in the literature on psychology and behavior, it is first necessary to understand that the model functions by producing an incredibly large volume of information (totally false, partly false and/or out of context) that is transmitted or otherwise distributed through a wide range of channels, preferably the internet and social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and messaging applications like WhatsApp.

However, television, radio and press can also be used. The content of the recurring messages involves news with the veneer of legitimate journalism, with attention-grabbing lead-ins or headlines, shocking allegations, in the same formats as the mainstream media, but without indication of the author or reliable sources. Fake news often contains manipulated images or video clips or ones that are edited to remove them from context.

In the specific context of election campaigns, the robots can be programmed to distort the dimension of social movements, manipulate and radicalize debates in the public sphere, and create false conceptions about consensus in social networks. For example, the practice called "astroturfing" works by creating multiple online identities and false pressure groups, with a large number of bots used, for example, to promote a false news story.

In the 2018 elections in Brazil, there were many reports of the creation of WhatsApp groups with the intention of spreading news, in which people were added without their consent.

The trend is for the increasing creation of automaton accounts in social media to manipulate discourses in the online public sphere, with a journalistic veneer, introducing a variety of political groups, giving the impression of broad popular support for an idea, policy or product.

Returning to the *modus operandi* of the Russian propaganda model, especially on the internet, the large volume of messages and false news stories disseminated about the same fact can easily succeed in convincing the unwary. In equal conditions of competition, the propaganda offered in the largest volume and seemingly originating from the largest number of sources becomes more persuasive. The reasons for this are fourfold. First, the large volume can exhaust the capacity for attention and divert the focus from other available information channels, discrediting the traditional media. Second, the high volume can overwhelm competing messages, creating a cacophony. Third, by sending the message or idea via several channels, the chances of its reaching the target audience are greater. And fourth, receiving the message from various places and various origins increases the perceived credibility, especially if the source is one with which the receiver identifies, such as friends and relatives.

In summary, the variety of sources is important because multiple sources are more persuasive than a single one, creating the impression of consensus about the idea conveyed. Receiving the same or similar messages from various sources causes people to suppose that the information is probably based on different perspectives, and thus deserves greater consideration. The apparent endorsement by a large number of users increases the consumer's trust in the information, often without paying attention to the credibility of the sources. Also, people tend to give greater credence to communications from groups to which they belong. The same pattern applies when the source is perceived as similar to the receiver.

Facebook has a specific sector in the company only to check false accounts, and has a channel to denounce improper behavior in the social network. But this model does not have a commitment to objective reality, and the more sophisticated the fake news transmission is, the greater will be its chance to be believed and generate a cybernetic cascade.

Another problem that should be mentioned about false information, especially the type that appeals to the emotions, is the fact it can be more lucrative than links with true news. Also, the proportion of falsehoods tends to increase when the disinformation is consistent with narratives or prejudices maintained by certain segments of the public. Such prejudices are not rare in Brazil, as is the case of most other countries, and messages pandering to these feelings are more likely to be accepted when directed at like-thinking people.

These observations explain the shocking situation revealed about Cambridge Analytica, where with the personal data of each user collected on Facebook, the company managed to develop psychographic profiles for each one, allowing the sending of more subjective discourse.

The final distinctive characteristic of the Russian propaganda model is that it is not committed to journalistic consistency. Potential losses of credibility due to inconsistency can be offset by synergies with other characteristics of contemporary propaganda.

Despite the efforts at fact checking, fake news persists. Not only does the debunking message not reach the same people who receive the fake news, since they are in their own algorithmic filter bubble, which tends to reject content (or pages and sites) that do not jibe with the user's preferences, but the reiteration of the "true" news can sometimes lend even more credibility to the fake news.

The conclusion is therefore alarming: fake news and fake rumors, one of the mechanisms used by the Russian propaganda model, are reaching increasing numbers of people, penetrating deeper in social networks and spreading faster than correct information. On the other hand, the true facts after checking can seem to reflect a minority opinion, and thus be less believable, resulting in the most devastating problem of post-truth times: the devaluation and delegitimization of the voices of specialists, authorized institutions and the concept of objective data.

All this winds up undermining the ability of society to engage in rational discourse based on shared facts, misrepresenting the majority vision, weakening the functioning of the public sphere, fabricating hate, fear and lies. The resulting climate is conducive to public clamor for a severe law-and-order system and can lead to aritificializing the natural intelligence by the artificial, to paraphrase the words of Professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos, injuring democracy and human rights, especially because of the refusal to engage in dialog with political adversaries. Ironically, the proponents of the current wave of conservatism emerging around the world are using the latest communication technology, gaining influence through the propaganda model used by their traditional enemy, the Russians, where instead of adversaries there are enemies, to be eliminated based on intolerance, hate and fear.

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