
Reining in the Spread of Political Misinformation and Disinformation

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Background

Nature of Political Disinformation and Misinformation

Political disinformation generally refers to the purposeful spread of false information about politics. Political misinformation can also be defined as the unwitting spread of political information that is false. The events of the 2016 U.S. election drew attention to the emergence of political disinformation and misinformation on social media. However, political misinformation and disinformation is not new to U.S. politics, nor has it faded away since 2016.

Fake news has a long history in the U.S., and political misinformation and disinformation has always made its way to the U.S. electorate. Salient examples include exaggerated perceptions about the generosity of U.S. federal welfare and foreign aid. For instance, a representative survey of Illinois residents conducted in the late 1990s found that fewer than one in ten respondents knew that welfare spending amounts to less than 1% of the federal budget (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Another well-known example is the public's misperception about foreign aid. Many people believe that it is a much larger amount than it actually is. A 2016 nationwide poll found that Americans on average estimated that 31% of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, and that only three in 100 knew the correct answer of less than 1% (DiJulio et al. 2016).

How are citizens often misled? When engaging with politics, citizens often lack the time and motivation to obtain political information, opting to use informational short-cuts ("heuristics"), such as "cues" from elites with shared preferences (e.g. opinions of co-partisan elites). For

example, Republicans often choose to automatically support the policies espoused by Republican leaders, instead of doing research about policy options, weighing their pros and cons, and determining on their own which policy is the most appropriate. Democrats follow the cues from Democratic leaders and automatically reject the policy options supported by Republicans, assuming they share preferences with the former and not the latter. Scholars have lamented about how uninformed citizens are about politics and how easily they are manipulated by elites with shared identities and partisanship.

Political Disinformation and Misinformation and Social Media

What differs the recent spread of misinformation from the previous runs is its speed and scale. The wide availability of user-provided content on social media allows for the rapid dissemination of misinformation and disinformation. In other words, social media has amplified and sped up the spread of political misinformation, letting it go “viral” very quickly. One study found that public pages that disseminate alternative, controversial information, and advance conspiracy theories, circulate among major Facebook groups and users within 20 hours (Del Vicario et al., 2016).

The popularity of social media as a news source has also contributed to the proliferation of political misinformation and disinformation on the platform. Across the globe, citizens increasingly rely on social media to learn about politics. 69 percent of the respondents to an April 2020 poll in Germany reported that they use online sources for news. More than half of online news users—39 percent of all respondents—said they rely on social media for news. In contrast, only 26 percent of the total said they use print media to learn about news (Newman et al. 2020). Similarly, other research shows that about two-thirds of Americans and between 40% and 60% of adults in most developed countries get news on social media, with Facebook being the leading source.

Case Study

During the 2016 U.S. elections, bad actors emerged, aiming to influence the election by spreading political misinformation and disinformation. They included the Russian government and the individuals and groups it sponsored, such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a firm hired to spread disinformation on social media. They allegedly waged political disinformation campaigns targeting the U.S. electorate, spreading disinformation and sowing division among citizens. Ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, the influence campaign in 2016, aimed at

the U.S. presidential election, was designed to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, to denigrate Secretary Clinton, and to harm her chances of election.

Specifically, the Russian government hired “internet trolls” to write fake posts and comments in public forums. In particular, the IRA was one of the major Russian “troll farms”. Its employees were given quotas and instructed to influence conversations about regional, national, and international issues during the election. The Russian government’s employing of trolls against the 2016 U.S. election was part of its conscious strategy to sway public opinion in its favor and against the United States and its NATO allies, both domestically and abroad.

The Russian government also allegedly used “bots” (software applications that run automated tasks on the Internet) in their influence campaign. The bots were used to spread disinformation automatically and at low cost. The bots were very effective at producing pro-Trump and, to a lesser extent, pro-Clinton content during the election. Researchers identified around 400,000 bots responsible for posting about 3.8 million tweets during the final month of the election campaign, constituting about one-fifth of the total volume of online conversations they collected about the election. The bots also engaged in harassment and hate speech in political conversations, generally contributing to a climate of polarization and enmity in online political discussions.

The campaign evolved over the course of the election season based on Russia’s assessment of Clinton and Trump’s electoral prospects. When Moscow became convinced that Clinton was likely to win the election, the Russian influence campaign started to focus more on undermining her future presidency. This strategy was accompanied by covert intelligence operations (such as cyber attacks against the U.S. election infrastructure) as well as overt efforts by Russian government agencies and state-funded media outlets like RT (formerly known as Russia Today).

Despite the efforts, it turned out that political disinformation spread by the Russian campaign on social media affected relatively few U.S. voters during the 2016 election. Researchers found that most political news that American users on Twitter and Facebook were exposed to during the election still came from mainstream media outlets. For example, of the tweets sent by the 16,442 false accounts that were active from August 1 to December 6, 2016, one analysis found that engagement with fake news sources was extremely concentrated; only 1% of the users were exposed to 80% of the tweets with fake news, and 0.1% of the users were responsible for

sharing 80% of the tweets with fake news (Grinberg et al., 2019). In other words, fake news traffic was dominated by a small number of users (known as supersharers) who shared it a lot—as well as users who consumed the traffic a lot (superconsumers). In its analysis of a survey of 3,500 respondents and their 1,331 Facebook accounts and activities in 2016, another study found that sharing fake news on Facebook was a relatively rare activity (Guess et al. 2019, 1). Both studies suggest that fake news may not be more “viral” in its spread than real news overall.

Both studies found that engagement with fake news was concentrated among small groups of conservative-leaning and older individuals. As expected, fake news from “incongruent” sources were shared at significantly lower rates than “congruent” sources on Twitter. In other words, conservative users were more likely to share fake news from conservative sources than fake news from liberal sources, and liberal users were more likely to share fake news from liberal sources than conservative sources.

Ultimately, there was no evidence that the Russian disinformation campaign changed the outcome of the 2016 U.S. election. There is little evidence that the Russian disinformation campaign affected political attitudes of U.S. voters, let alone their votes, in the 2016 election. For instance, a study that analyzed 1,239 Republican and Democratic Twitter users found no evidence that interaction with IRA Twitter accounts substantially impacted political attitudes and behaviors during the 2016 election (Bail et al. 2020, 243). Despite the IRA’s extensive efforts on Twitter, which produced more than 57,000 Twitter posts, 2,400 Facebook posts, and 2,600 Instagram posts, the IRA failed to persuade Twitter users: the disinformation campaign did not affect their attitudes toward the Democratic Party and GOP or their political ideology. It is likely that IRA efforts failed because it mostly interacted with American Twitter users who were already ideologically polarized. They found that the IRA reached mostly Twitter users who belonged to the communities with like-minded users. The IRA also mostly reached Twitter users who were highly interested in politics and used Twitter frequently.

However, as many experts predicted, political disinformation and misinformation re-emerged during key political events after the 2016 election. During the 2020 election, the volume of political disinformation greatly increased in comparison to 2016. Fake news was more popular in 2020 than in 2016—the level of engagement with articles from fake news sources increased 102 percent since the run-up to the 2016 election (Kornbluh et al. 2020). During the 2020

election, political misinformation was more widespread than during the 2016 election. Even now, the level of engagement with articles from outlets that repeatedly publish verifiably false content has increased 102 percent since the run-up to the 2016 election. Interactions—i.e., retweeting, liking, commenting, and sharing—with articles from deceptive sites increased by 242 percent between the third quarter of 2016 and the third quarter of 2020.

Moreover, political misinformation spilled over to other areas in 2020 and 2021, including the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian racism, and COVID-19 vaccines. Social media became rife with conspiracy rumors about the origin of COVID-19 and misinformation about the vaccines. For example, rumors spread online that the vaccines are “a medical fraud” and that the injections do not prevent infections, provide immunity, or stop transmission of the disease. These fake news articles claimed that the vaccines “alter the genetic coding” of individuals getting the shots, turning them into “a viral protein factory that has no off-switch.” These articles spread quickly on social media and were picked up by anti-vaccination activists, who repeated these claims. One article was circulated on Facebook and “reached 400,000 people” according to data from CrowdTangle.

Focus Questions

- 1) What is political misinformation and disinformation? How does the former differ from the latter?
- 2) What are some examples of political misinformation? What percentage of the federal budget goes to foreign aid? What percentage of the federal budget goes to welfare spending?
- 3) Why does political misinformation exist? Why do citizens not have a good grasp of political facts? Why do citizens believe in and share fake news on social media?
- 4) Why does political misinformation spread quickly and widely nowadays? What is behind its speed and scale?
- 5) Why should we worry about political misinformation and disinformation on social media?

6) Did the Russian disinformation campaign influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S. election? How did the Russian disinformation campaign interfere with the democratic process in the U.S.?

Thematic Reflection and Discussion

Freedom of Speech vs. Censorship

According to Amnesty International, freedom of speech is “the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, by any means”. In a democracy, an individual’s freedom of speech is an important right that should be protected and respected. In particular, the ability to make political speeches, obtain political information, and engage in political discussions is crucial for keeping democracy healthy. Without political speech, it is impossible for citizens to hold leaders accountable. Consequently, censorship of political information is a grave threat to democracy.

Censorship, or suppression of communication, is a tool of political repression often used by autocrats. It prevents citizens from voicing their opposition to the government, discussing the inequities of current policies, or coordinating with each other on political actions which aim to replace autocrats.

Freedom of speech can be restricted in democracies, given the right contexts: communication that harms others may be restricted. For example, obscenity and child pornography are not protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Speech that harms specific economic interests of others (e.g., copyright violation, fraud, and commercial speech such as advertising) are also not protected by the First Amendment.

Discussion Questions

- 1) When should an individual’s freedom of speech be restricted? What should be the criteria for restricting it? What are some examples of the situations in which freedom of speech should be curtailed?
- 2) One may argue that Big Tech’s regulation of social media may be censorship by corporations. Do you agree? Is it reasonable for Big Tech to practice censorship?

3) Does regulation of social media count as discrimination by political belief? According to existing research, most of the super-spreaders of political misinformation and disinformation tend to be conservative. Thus, regulation of social media for misinformation would result in punishing more conservatives than liberals.

4) Could the U.S. government have prevented the spill-over from political disinformation during the 2016 election to misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic? What should the U.S. government have done to do so?

Free Market and Market Regulation

Most democracies have adopted the capitalist system. Capitalism is an economic system whereby private actors, not the government, own the means of production and their operation for profit. A capitalist society is driven by a free market: a market where exchanges of goods and services are made by free will. It is a market in which the laws of supply and demand dictate, free from any intervention by governments. In a free market economy, private individuals are unrestrained in their freedom to choose where to invest, what to produce or sell, and at which prices to exchange goods and services.

Free markets are what drive and energize capitalism. Put simply, firms and individuals would not be less motivated to engage in economic activities if governments constrain them and/or take a large chunk of their profits (i.e., via exorbitant tax rates).

Given this context, it is fair to say that social media companies are pursuing their profits by letting political misinformation run amok on their platforms. They are choosing the free-market principle to dictate the activities on social media and enjoying the fruits of a free-market economy. One may argue that such freedom is what may have started social media and empowered its success. Social media and its underlying technology wouldn't have emerged if it weren't for a free market.

On the other hand, it is also possible that social media companies are taking advantage of their freedom and causing negative externalities. Negative externalities arise when the actions of one economic agent directly, negatively affect another economic agent outside the market mechanism. For example, a steel plant that pollutes a river used for recreation can be said to cause negative externalities for the public. Similarly, one can argue that social media companies

are causing negative externalities by enabling the spread of political misinformation and harming the public trust in democratic politics.

Negative externalities often imply that the free market failed. They imply that the market needs to be regulated. As the steel plant with pollutants needs to be restrained and punished for polluting the river, it may be reasonable to argue for regulation of social media companies.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Is it morally correct or justifiable to restrain Big Tech for the public good?
- 2) On what grounds can we justify regulating Big Tech and social media?
- 3) How can we regulate Big Tech and social media?
- 4) How can we prevent Big Tech and social media from spreading political misinformation?

Wealth, Influence, and Democratic Politics

The case of political misinformation on social media highlights the role of corporations (i.e., social media companies) on democratic politics. Inadvertently or not, social media companies have provided virtual space where citizens can participate and engage in politics. Such virtual interactions have become central to politics, drawing politicians, policymakers, leaders, and journalists to the “virtual town square.” Eager to draw attention from voters, many of them are highly active on social media, using it to inform and communicate with citizens and campaign for political office. As the “owner” and creator of the virtual town square, social media companies have accumulated great power to influence politics. Intentionally or not, by virtue of their size, profit margins, and governance structure, these companies have ended up influencing politics.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why should we care about the influence of wealth on democratic politics? What’s wrong with it?
- 2) When can we justify the influence of wealth on democratic politics? On what grounds can we justify it? Under what condition is it OK for money to influence politics?

International Cooperation vs. Foreign Influence

Countries need to cooperate with each other. It benefits the U.S. to politically and economically cooperate with other countries. Trading with other countries makes the U.S. wealthy. Being allies with other countries makes the U.S. secure.

However, cooperation with other countries also may invite “foreign influence” on domestic politics. Foreign governments may try to influence the U.S. government, coaxing it to choose a policy that benefits them but not the U.S. public.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why is it problematic that foreign entities try to influence U.S. domestic politics?
- 2) Should domestic politics be free from foreign influence? Why or why not?
- 3) How should we assess whether an action is intended to build foreign influence on the U.S.?
- 4) What should we do about foreign influence on the U.S.?