CS 6474/CS 4803
Social Computing: Misinformation and Disinformation

Munmun De Choudhury
munmund@gatech.edu
Week 9 | March 9, 2021
Grade distribution change

>75% voted; >50% wants reduction in the # reading reflections
The birth of the Obama 'birther' conspiracy

Anthony Zurcher
North America reporter
@awzurcher

16 September 2016
Defining “fake news”
Sources of misinformation/disinformation

- Rumors and fiction
- Governments and politicians
- Vested interests
- The media

Lewandowsky et al 2012
The societal costs of misinformation
Examining the Alternative Media Ecosystem Through the Production of Alternative Narratives of Mass Shooting Events on Twitter
Summary (1)

• The paper presents the first study of “fake news”

• The context: in recent years, alternative media outlets have appropriated social media platforms for their perceived economic and political reach and for hosting inaccurate or under-sourced content
Politically Stances of the Alternative Media Ecosystem

- Seven had articles explicitly denying one or more of the alternative narratives of mass shooting event
- Most salient themes included the shooter’s claimed affiliations, the shooter’s background, and the shooter’s motivations.

### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leaning</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Alt Right</td>
<td>U.S. focused, anti-mainstream media, pro-Christian, anti-LGBT, anti-feminist, anti-globalist, climate change denying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Alt Left</td>
<td>U.S. focused, anti-mainstream media, anti-corporatist, critical of police, prison reform, pro-BlackLivesMatter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Anti-Globalist</td>
<td>Internationally focused, anti-globalist or anti-New World Order/Cabal, anti-corporatist, conspiracy-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Nationalist and/or Anti-Semitic</td>
<td>primarily white-nationalist or anti-Semitic positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Defense</td>
<td>primarily challenges mainstream narratives of terrorist attacks by Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Propaganda</td>
<td>primarily supports Russian interests, anti-globalist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Link colors refer to political leaning: Purple = mainstream media; Aqua = alternative media; Red = government-controlled media.*
Renewed interest
POLITICAL SCIENCE

Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election

Nir Grinberg\textsuperscript{1,2*}, Kenneth Joseph\textsuperscript{3*}, Lisa Friedland\textsuperscript{3*}, Briony Swire-Thompson\textsuperscript{1,2}, David Lazer\textsuperscript{1,2†}

The spread of fake news on social media became a public concern in the United States after the 2016 presidential election. We examined exposure to and sharing of fake news by registered voters on Twitter and found that engagement with fake news sources was extremely concentrated. Only 1% of individuals accounted for 80% of fake news source exposures, and 0.1% accounted for nearly 80% of fake news sources shared. Individuals most likely to engage with fake news sources were conservative leaning, older, and highly engaged with political news. A cluster of fake news sources shared overlapping audiences on the extreme right, but for people across the political spectrum, most political news exposure still came from mainstream media outlets.

We distinguished among three classes of fake news sources to allow comparisons of different operational definitions of fake news. The three classes correspond to differences in methods of generating lists of sources as well as perceived differences in the sites’ likelihoods of publishing misinformation. We labeled as “black” a set of websites taken from preexisting lists of fake news sources constructed by fact-checkers, journalists, and academics (8, 9) who identified sites that published almost exclusively fabricated stories [see supplementary materials (SM) section S.5 for details]. To measure fake news more comprehensively, we labeled additional websites as “red” or “orange” via a manual annotation process of sites identified by Snopes.com as sources of questionable claims. Sites with a red label (e.g., Infowars.com) spread falsehoods that clearly reflected a flawed editorial process, and sites with an orange label represented cases where annotators were less certain that the falsehoods stemmed from a systematically flawed process. There were 171 black, 64 red, and 65 orange fake news sources appearing at least once in our data.

Voters on Twitter
To focus on the experiences of real people on Twitter, we linked a sample of U.S. voter reg-
The spread of true and false news online
The impact of social media “fake news”...
Social bots distort the 2016 U.S.
Presidential election online discussion
by Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara

Abstract
Social media have been extensively praised for increasing democratic discussion on social issues related to policy and politics. However, what happens when this powerful communication tools are exploited to manipulate online discussion, to change the public perception of political entities, or even to try affecting the outcome of political elections? In this study we investigated how the presence of social media bots, algorithmically driven entities on the surface appear as legitimate users, affect political discussion around the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. By leveraging state-of-the-art social bot detection algorithms, we uncovered a large fraction of user population that may not be human, accounting for a significant portion of generated content (about one-fifth of the entire conversation). We inferred political partisanship from hashtag adoption, for both humans and bots, and studied spatio-temporal communication, political support dynamics, and influence mechanisms by discovering the level of network embeddedness of the bots. Our findings suggest that the presence of social media bots can indeed negatively affect democratic political discussion rather than improving it, which in turn can potentially alter public opinion and endanger the integrity of the Presidential election.

Contents
Introduction
Methodology
Data analysis
Conclusions

Introduction
Various computational social science studies demonstrated that social media have been extensively used to foster democratic conversation about social and political issues: From the Arab Spring (González-Bailón, et al., 2011; Howard, et al., 2011), to Occupy Wall Street (Conover, et al., 2013a; Conover, et al., 2013b) and many other civil protests (Varol, et al., 2014; González-Bailón, et al., 2013) (Bastos, et al., 2014). Twitter and other social media seemed to play an instrumental role to involve the public in policy and political conversations, by collectively framing the narratives related to particular social issues, and coordinating online and offline activities. The use of digital media to discuss politics during election times has also been the subject of various studies, covering the last four U.S. Presidential elections (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Diakopoulos and Shamma, 2010; Bekafiou and McKee, 2013; Carlisle and Patton, 2013; DiGrazia, et al., 2013; Wang, et al., 2016), and other countries like Australia (Gibson and McAllister, 2006; Burgs and Burgess, 2011; Burgess and Buns, 2012), and Norway (Enil and Skogerboe, 2013). Findings that focused on the positive effects of social media such as increasing voting turnout (Bond, et al., 2012) or exposure to diverse political views (Bakshy, et al., 2015) contributed to the general praise of these platforms as a tool to foster democracy and civil political engagement (Shirky, 2011; Loader and Mercea, 2011; Effing, et al., 2011; Tufekci, 2014; Yang, et al., 2016).

However, as early as 2006, Philip Howard raised concerns regarding the possibility of manipulating public opinion and spreading political misinformation through social media (Howard, 2006). These issues have been later proved true by several studies (Ratkiewicz, et al., 2011a; Ratkiewicz, et al., 2011b (MetaXas and Mustafaraj, 2012)) (El-Khalili, 2013; Ferrara, 2015; Woolley and Howard, 2016; Shorey and Howard, 2016). Of particular concern is the fact social media have been demonstrated effective in influencing individuals (Aral and Walker, 2010). One way to perform such type of manipulation is by using social bots, algorithmically controlled accounts that emulate the activity of human users but operate at much higher pace (e.g., automatically producing content or engaging in social interactions), while successfully keeping their artificial identity undisclosed (Hwang, et al., 2012; Messias, et al., 2013; Ferrara, et al., 2016).

Evidence of the adoption of social media bots to attempt manipulating political communication dates back half a decade: during the 2010 U.S. midterm elections, social bots were employed to support some candidates and smear others, by injecting thousands of tweets pointing to Web sites with fake news (Ratkiewicz, et al., 2011a). The research community reported another similar case around the time of the 2010 Massachusetts special election (MetaXas and Mustafaraj, 2012). Campaigns of this type are sometimes referred to as astroturf or Twitter bombs. Unfortunately, most of the times, it has proven impossible to determine who’s behind these types of operations (Kollanyi, et al., 2016; Ferrara, et al., 2016). Governments, organizations, and other entities with sufficient resources, can obtain the technological capabilities to deploy thousands of social bots and use them to their advantage, either to support or to attack particular political figures or candidates. Indeed, it has become increasingly simpler to deploy social bots, so that, in some cases, no coding skills are required to setup accounts that perform simple automated activities: tech blogs often post tutorials and ready-to-go tools for this purposes [1], [2], [3]. Various source codes for sophisticated social media bots can be found online as well, ready to be customized and optimized by the more technical savvy users (Kollanyi, 2016). We inspected several of these readily available bots and this is a (non-comprehensive) list of the capabilities that they provide: Search Twitter for phrases/hashtags/keywords and automatically retweet them; Automatically reply to tweets that meet a certain criteria; automatically follow any users that tweet something with a specific phrase/hashtag/keyword; Automatically follow back any users that have followed the bot; Automatically unfollow any users that follow a specified user; Automatically add users tweeting about something to public lists; Search Google (and other engines) for articles/news according to specific criteria and post them, or link them in automatic replies to other users; Automatically aggregating public sentiment on certain topics of discussion; Buffer and post tweets automatically. Most of these bots can run in cloud services or infrastructures like Amazon Web Services (AWS) or Heroku, making it more difficult to block them. Finally, a very recent trend is that of providing Bot-As-A-Service (BaaS): companies like RoboLike (https://robo-like.com/) provide "Easy-to-use Instagram/Twitter auto bots" performing certain automatic activities for a monthly price. Advanced conversational bots powered by more sophisticated Artificial Intelligences are provided by companies like ChatBots.io that allow anyone to "Add a bot to services like Twitter, Hubot, Facebook, Skype, Twillo, and more" (https://developer.pandorabots.com/).
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bots are less central than verified accounts during contentious political events

Sandra González-Bailón and Manlio De Domenico

See all authors and affiliations

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Edited by Nicole Ellison, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, and accepted by Editorial Board Member Margaret Levi January 30, 2021 (received for review June 27, 2020)

Significance

Online networks carry benefits and risks with high-stakes consequences during contentious political events: They can be tools for organization and awareness, or tools for disinformation and conflict. We combine social media and web-tracking data to measure
Zuckerberg tells Congress Facebook is not a media company: ‘I consider us to be a technology company’
Starbird found that alternative media sites may give the false perception of being exposed to a diverse information diet. Most of them, seemingly different on the surface, harp on the same political (e.g., anti-globalist) agenda.

Can social media platforms ensure information diversity while curbing the negative impact of fake news?
Should social media platforms censor the “free speech” of harmful bots?
Sites by partisan attention (Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts, and Ethan Zuckerman)
Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg admitted on Wednesday that he was wrong to dismiss the idea that fake news shared on the giant social network affected last year’s presidential election.

Zuckerberg’s statement came in response to a tweeted attack from President Donald Trump hours earlier. Trump claimed that Facebook was “always anti-Trump” and accused it of colluding with news outlets that the president has deemed to be “fake news.”
Class Exercise

Assume you work at Facebook. Design a study to measure if disinformation campaigns from social bota may have impacted the outcomes of the 2016 Presidential elections.
Facebook targets 'false news' amid growing pressure from advertisers

By Marianna Spring
Specialist disinformation and social media reporter

30 June 2020

Facebook's new media literacy campaign will ask users questions about what they see online.
Deplatforming Trump Is Already Having a Huge Impact

A new report finds election misinformation online has fallen 73 percent since the president’s ban from Twitter.
Working to Stop Misinformation and False News

We know people want to see accurate information on Facebook – and so do we.

False news is harmful to our community, it makes the world less informed, and it erodes trust. It's not a new phenomenon, and all of us — tech companies, media companies, newsrooms, teachers — have a responsibility to do our part in addressing it. At Facebook, we're working to fight the spread of false news in three key areas:

- disrupting economic incentives because most false news is financially motivated;
- building new products to curb the spread of false news; and
- helping people make more informed decisions when they encounter false news.
Anti-social network

In Myanmar, Facebook struggles with a deluge of disinformation

Weeks before an election, Burmese social media are awash with fake news and vitriol
So social media sites are starting to label fake news or take down posts. Is this enough? What else can be done to stop the spread of fake news?
Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing

Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, Colleen M. Seifert, more...

First Published September 17, 2012  Research Article  Find in PubMed
https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612451018

Abstract

The widespread prevalence and persistence of misinformation in contemporary societies, such as the false belief that there is a link between childhood vaccinations and autism, is a matter of public concern. For example, the myths surrounding vaccinations, which prompted some parents to withhold immunization from their children, have led to a marked increase in vaccine-preventable disease, as well as unnecessary public expenditure on research and public-information campaigns aimed at rectifying the situation.

We first examine the mechanisms by which such misinformation is disseminated in society, both inadvertently and purposely. Misinformation can originate from rumors but also from works of fiction, governments and politicians, and vested interests. Moreover, changes in the media landscape, including the arrival of the Internet, have fundamentally influenced the ways in which information is communicated and misinformation is spread.