Social media in the age of disinformation

Source of false information: Official accounts

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Media freedom and media pluralism: the role of social media in modern democracies on the two sides of the Atlantic / an international webinar organized by MET, the Hungarian Europe Society, 11/9/2020.

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Social media has become the primary source of online news for billions of people all across the world [according to a 2016 survey, nearly 64.5 percent [of internet users receive breaking news from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram instead from traditional media[1]]. It also has been a tool for many political organizations to manipulate the voting public, to target their opponents, and to gain social control. According to a study by the University of Oxford's Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard[2] on the political abuse of social media platforms in 48 countries, social media disproportionately serves far-right politicians by helping them stoke social divisions.

These sites are valuable platforms where it's easy for false information to go viral despite the tremendous effort of fact-checkers and warnings added to these posts. Often when these sites remove posts that include disinformation, harmful rumors have already been circulating for days or even weeks. Propaganda works because fake news is more likely to spread than the truth [according to a MIT study misinformation moved six times faster than the truth on Twitter and that false information were 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than the truth[3]]. With more than 3.8 billion users at this point, we need to ask how social media is going to shape our values, elections, and our democracies.

Hungary has been at the center of discussions about media freedom and disinformation for the past years in the European Union. Conspiracy theories in this Central European country are not only spread in closed Facebook groups but elevated to the level of government communication as well. The former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker appeared on many government-funded billboards in 2019. The billboards baselessly claimed that Juncker is "Endangering Hungary's safety" and "offering migrants visas". Similar ads were run about the Hungarian-born American billionaire and philanthropist, George Soros, who is often the subject

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[1] Martin Kibaba, *Here's why social media poses no threat to traditional journalism,* World Press Institute, 2019

[2] Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard, Troops, *Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation,* Oxford University 201

[3] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy & Sinan Aral *The spread of true and false news online,* Science Issue 6380 pp 1146-1151, 2018

of various conspiracy theories. These ads were present all over the Hungarian government's Facebook page as well.

When false information becomes official communication, it is much harder to find credible information sources, especially because the remaining independent media workers in Hungary are regularly delegitimized and smeared as political activists or foreign agents by government politicians and pro-government columnists.

A pro-government media foundation, Central European Press and Media Foundation [KESMA in Hungarian] dominates the media landscape. Eighty percent of the market for political news is financed by sources controlled by Fidesz, the ruling party [this includes pro-government private media as well as public media].[4] These pro-government outlets often publish and echo disinformation. [In 2010, the pro-government Origo.hu lost 21 libel suits, Pesti Sracok lost 11 and TV2 lost 8. In 2018, pro-government outlets lost 109 lawsuits for making false statements.[5]]

Hungary's far-right government, similarly to other illiberal regimes, has used Facebook to demonize minority groups like refugees and Muslims, claiming they are a "threat to Hungarian culture and values". Government ads in 2019 were showing a large group of people (the same image that UKIP used for its Brexit campaign in Britain) with a 'Stop' sign, suggesting Hungary was "under invasion", even though the Hungarian government received only 671 asylum applications in 2018. This tool is often used by far-right parties across the globe to paint certain groups, especially asylum seekers as "scary" "dangerous" and as a huge, "faceless crowd".

In 2018, right before the parliamentary elections, state-run television channel M1 broadcast an interview with a Hungarian-Swedish woman, Natalie Contessa, who claimed she had moved back to Hungary after living in Stockholm for 40 years because of violent attacks by migrants. The woman portrayed a grim picture of the Swedish capital, claiming women in Stockholm "can't even use the subway" without being sexually assaulted by migrants. A few days later, the independent media outlet Index reported that the woman had never lived in Stockholm and that she had been convicted of seven counts of defamation, violating public trust, and harassment. The original M1 interview had already been shared countless times on social media, and the state-run channel has never issued a correction. During this time, pro-government Facebook pages spread anti-immigration videos and posts, reaching hundreds of thousands of voters.In 2018 the ruling party had a landslide victory after promising protection "from the flood of illegal migrants".

When it comes to politics, social media appears to be better suited to dividing rather than uniting regardless of where we are, especially around election time. During this year's US elections [just to mention a more recent example from the other side of the Atlantic], the close race between the

4 South East Europe Media Organisation Ossigeno per l'Informazione European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) International Press Institute (IPI) ARTICLE 19 Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) Reporters Without Borders Free Press Unlimited (FPU), *Conclusion Of The Joint International Press Freedom Mission To Hungary*, 2019

5 Katalin Erdelyi, *109 helyreigazítási pert vesztett 2018-ban a kormányközeli média,* Atlatszo, 2019

candidates and the long waiting period for votes to be counted created a perfect opportunity for misinformation to spread across Twitter and other platforms.

One of the most common pieces of misinformation on social media platforms was that unlawful votes were added in swing states, leading to a "suspicious jump" in vote counts, mainly for the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden. Another popular conspiracy theory was about lost (and found) ballots suggesting voter fraud - but in reality, there was nothing unusual about the vote-count process. Many of these false claims, including the election being "stolen", came from the President of the United States, Donald Trump's Twitter account - the social media platform quickly added a label to these types of tweets saying the post contained disputed or misleading information. Even with the warning, it didn't stop hundreds of Twitter accounts trying to amplify these false claims.

Conclusion:

Social technologies can be a useful tool to share crucial information (about natural disasters or even terrorist attacks) rapidly. However, these platforms can also play a huge part in spreading hate speech and disinformation. Social media platforms can slow the spread of false information with additional measures by implementing campaign silence periods before elections, fact-checking, or implementing a stricter system for verifying profiles. Sources of misinformation can not only be private profiles but can reach the level of government accounts, which can lead to public distrust in democratic institutes.

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