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Ethical Challenges of Social Media Manipulation in Political Communication

Chen ZhiXuan¹, Dr. Mohd Haizra Hashim²

Faculty of Business and Communication, INTI International University

Abstract: *Social media has become a vital platform for political communication, given that it enables political parties, candidates, activists and ordinary citizens to spread their information rapidly and directly. However, due to the same digital ecosystem this also raises serious ethical issues. One key problem is social media manipulation, which defines the systematic and intentional deployment of digital tools and algorithms, fake accounts, emotional content, misleading information, microtargeting and coordinated online behaviour to shape and affect the public opinion. This practice in political communications can negatively impact the democratic discussion, as it can misguide the voters, limit informed decisions making and erode public trust in media and institutions. This paper conducts a critical discussion on social media manipulation as a contemporary issue of media ethics, pointing towards the general framework of how manipulation occurs through the means of disinformation, algorithmic amplification, political microtargeting, fake engagement, bots and coordinated inauthentic behaviour. The paper employs Social Responsibility Theory, deontological ethics, and utilitarian ethics in exploring the responsibilities of political actors, the social media platforms, content creators, and journalists and audiences. The paper contends that ethical political communication not only should seek to persuade people but should also consider respecting truth, transparency, privacy, human dignity and public interest. The paper concludes that more platform accountability, digital media literacy, transparent political advertising, responsible fact-checking and ethical practices during campaigns is the necessary lines of defense for protecting democratic communication in the digital age.*

Keywords: *social media manipulation, media ethics, political communication, disinformation, digital platforms, democracy, Social Responsibility Theory.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Political communication has evolved significantly in the digital era. Before, the political messages were carried by mainly newspapers, television, radio, posters, speeches, public debates. These traditional media channels were generally dominated by editors, journalists, media organisations, and professional gatekeepers. Now, the social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram, and WhatsApp enable political messages to go directly and instantly to the audiences. Thus, it generated a lot of positive possibilities for political participation. Citizens have the chance to express their opinions, to follow campaigns, to discuss the public issues, and to challenge the powerful institutions more easily than before.

Nevertheless, social media has also generated some new ethical risks. Political communication based on social media is not based on truth, fairness or public interest, however. As a matter of fact, certain political actors used the digital platforms as a means of manipulating emotions, of spreading false or misleading contents, of hiding the source of the political messages, of creating fake support, and of targeting the voters based on their personal data. This behaviour is called social media manipulation. It is a serious media ethics problem as it influences the people's perception of politics, as it influences the decision of voting, and as it influences people's trust in public information.

In fact social media manipulation is not only about persuasion. The persuasion is a normal part of the political communication. The political parties and the candidates naturally try to persuade and try to convince people to support them. The ethical problem starts when the persuasion is a manipulation. The manipulation can occur when people are influenced without enough transparency, or in the case of the information's distortion, or in the case of the exploitation for the people's fear, emotions, identity, and personal data. In my opinion this is dangerous because the democracy is based on the wise people. If people are encouraged to decide politically based on false information, or based on the influence techniques not revealed, the democratic process gets weakened.

In this paper, we will look at the ethical issues of social media manipulation in political communication. We will analyse the major types of manipulation, which include disinformation, political microtargeting, fake accounts, bots, algorithmic amplification, and the coordinated inauthentic behavior, and we will apply the media ethics theories to analyse the problem of these practices and the responsibilities which different actors are responsible. This paper's main argument should be that the political communication in the digital media should balance liberty of expression and responsibility, transparency, truth, and respect for the public interest.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: SOCIAL MEDIA MANIPULATION AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Social media manipulation can be defined as the co-ordinated application of digital communication strategies which, by intention, aim at influencing public opinion in covert, misleading, or unfair ways. It can be the work of individuals, political parties, governments, public relations companies, influencers, or foreign actors. Different from classic propaganda, social media manipulation uses more personal, quick, cheaper, and less detectable techniques. A political message can be distributed by many platforms within minutes. Fake accounts or bots can make an idea appear more popular than it is, for instance. Emotions or controversial content may receive more publicity due to algorithms, as such content usually attracts more likes, comments, or shares.

A prevalent form of manipulation is disinformation. Disinformation is false or misleading information that is made or disseminated with a specific intention to trick individuals. In the context of political communication, disinformation may refer to fake news, image or video editing, unreasonable claims about candidates, misleading statistics, conspiracy or rumour theory, or rumour about elections. This category is ethically problematic because voters require precise information to perform political decisions responsibly. The viral spread of false information leads to confusion and anger, particularly during election time.

A second form of manipulation is political microtargeting. This is when political advertisers deploy personal data to deliver different messages to particular groups of voters. Microtargeting can be beneficial in that it helps campaigns to target their communication based on the people's interests. However, the practice can become problematic when a person does not know why he or she is receiving certain messages, who paid for the advertisement, or how his or her data was used. Also, it can foster a scenario where different groups receive different promises or emotional appeals, which makes public political debates less clear.

Fake engagement can also lead to ethics problems. Political actors can use fake accounts, bots, paid commenters, or coordinated online networks to make a certain opinion appear popular. This leads to a manipulation of the "public mood" online. Seeing many accounts pushing on political opinion can make citizens think that this opinion is popular or socially acceptable. This may affect the way how citizens think and speak. In terms of ethics, "fakeness" is problematic since it is hiding the actual source and the real extent to which political support exists.

Algorithmic amplification is another factor. Social media platforms do not display all content on the same level. Platform algorithms determine what users see by engagement and personal behaviour, as well as the platform design. Emotional, shocking, or splintering political content may get more attention and thus will keep users active. This leads to an ethical problem since social media platforms could by coincidence make manipulative content to gain more attention. Even though the platform does not create such content, the engagement might give it an indirect advantage.

Consequently, it is not just one group that is leading to social media manipulation. It is related to the behaviour of political actors, the design of platforms, the business model of digital advertising, the quick spread of content online, and the low level of media literacy among some users. This requires a multi-stakeholder ethics-related response.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper discusses three ethical theories: Social Responsibility Theory, deontological ethics, and utilitarian ethics.

In the first place, Social Responsibility Theory recommends that media freedom must be accompanied by responsibility. The media cannot only focus on private interests or commercial objectives but should also contribute to the public good. In the context of social media manipulation, this theory recommends that platforms and political communicators/media professionals have a responsibility to safeguard the truthfulness of communication and the democratic debate. Freedom of expression is valuable, but it does not become an excuse to share dangerous manipulation.

In the second place, deontological ethics considers duties and moral beliefs. From this point of view, political communicators must be truthful, transparent, and respectful to audiences. Although the usage of manipulation can be a good strategy if it leads to obtaining more votes for a political campaign, it remains unethical if it concerns deception, usage of secret data, or dissemination of false information. The ethical value of an action does not need only analyze its result, but also consider if the action itself corresponds to moral duties.

The third theory considers the consequences: utilitarian ethics. The ethicality of a political practice needs to know if it produces more benefit or harm to society. The social media manipulation can appear beneficial for a political campaign, at a short term, but cause more damage generally propagating distrust, polarisation, confusion and hostility. From utilitarian point of view the manipulation is unethical if its social harm is bigger than its political benefit.

These three ethical theories allow to reveal that the social media manipulation is not simply technical problem. We can see this by the fact this type of new media is not exclusively a technical solution, but also a moral problem that involves multiple questions of ethical nature (truth, power, freedom, privacy, accountability, democratic responsibility).

A. Ethical Issue 1: Truth, Accuracy, and False information

The primary problem associated to the manipulation in the political communication arises from a loss of truth and accuracy. Truth is an element that in the political communication is fundamental because citizens require verifiable information to understand policies, assess candidates, or make decisions in democracy. The political actors' use of disinformation isn't simply a matter of expressing their opinion, it's a manipulation of the public in a pernicious way.

In the current social media context, disinformation circulates easily because many users' reactions tend to be fast to emotional content. Many users post what they read in a few seconds (the head of the post without even read the text) or watch a short 10 seconds video taking only the visual aspect. The political disinformation usually appeals the attention to a fear, anger, national identity, religion, race or a social conflict. This is ethically problematic by using human emotions as a tool of manipulation.

From the perspective of Social Responsibility Theory, the political communication should promote informed public discussion. If the political content is constructed to confuse voters or create attacks against political opponents by using false information, the responsibility is not met. Deontological point of view, the circulation of false information is wrong because it breaks the duty of the telling the truth. Utilitarian point of view, the disinformation produces the social harm by eroding the trust in the media or public institutions or in the election process.

From a media student, I think why the danger of the disinformation is that not all is always fake. Certain misleads political content has a professional aspect, as strong visuals, emotional music, edited clips or fake expert opinions. It makes the audiences believe in the credibility of the information given. Therefore, the problem of the political disinformation not only is about false facts, it's about presentation and framing.

B. Ethical Issue 2: Privacy and Political Microtargeting

The second ethical issue can arise from the area of privacy. Social media platforms accumulate mass data's about users' such as their interests, location, online behavior, their relationships and their political preferences. Political campaigns can use this data to target voters with personalized messages. This raises ethical concerns about consent, transparency, and manipulation.

Political microtargeting can become an ethical issue when the users' do not understand with clarity how the data are collected and used. A single voter may reach a political advertisement because the system anticipates her or his fears, wishes and personality traits. This can be manipulative because the message is not an open part of a public debate, but instead communicated in a private way to influence a certain individual or group. This practice also may create an inequality in the political communication. In a traditional public debate, the political messages can be the subject for journalists, the opponents and the citizens to question. However, in a microtargeted advertising one doesn't receive the same message than other. Certain messages may not be available at the end of a campaign making difficult assess whether could have been truthfully or consistent.

Use deontological ethical perspective, use personal data without an authentic consent break respect for individual autonomy. People can not be ignored and so be considered as a data point to be manipulated. Utilitarian point of view, if the microtargeting product efficiency to campaign, it may bring an additional harm is democratic transparency in a political campaign. Social Responsibility Theory, political actors and platforms must ensure that political advertising be clearly labeled, traceable and available for public scrutiny.

C. Ethical Issue 3: Fake Accounts, Bots and Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour

The third ethical issue involves fake engagement. Users utilize social media to judge the topics' importance by checking likes, shares, comments, hashtags or trending lists. Manipulators take advantage of this by making use of bots, fake accounts, paid commenters, or coordinated networks in order to make a message seem more popular than it actually is.

This type of behaviour can be considered ethically wrong, because it provides a false picture of public opinion. When fake accounts repeatedly attack a candidate, support a party or push a hashtag, regular users might assume that lots of real people share the same sentiment. This can suppress minority opinions, push undecided voters or bring an aggressive tone to public debates.

Coordinated inauthentic behaviour can be particularly harmful, as it hides the organization behind the seemingly citizen participation. Citizens, in democratic countries, have the right to support political (causes). However, fake grassroots support is different from actual public participation. It is a form of deception.

Considering Social Responsibility Theory, platforms hold a duty to identify and diminish fake networks in order to counter manipulate public discussion. Political actors also hold a duty to avoid artificially creating a sense of support. From utilitarian perspective, fake engagement may be helpful for one campaign, but harms the overall information space. From a deontological perspective, it is dishonest, as it conceals the authentic identity and intention of the communicator.

D. Ethical Issue 4: Platform Responsibility and Algorithmic Amplification

An additional significant issue is the responsibility of social media platforms. Social media platforms often argue that they constitute neutral spaces where users can share content. However, platforms are not totally neutral, as their algorithms determine what content may be viewed. Content that gets a high level of engagement may be suggested to additional users. This implies that platforms amplify manipulative political messages, whilst they do not necessarily produce or incite them.

The revenue models of many platforms are predicated on attention and advertisements. Emotionally charged content that provokes feelings of anger, fear or conflict, may have a positive effect in keeping user involvement, making them stay with the platform for longer time-scales. This produces an ethical conflict between profits and public interest. If engagement brings benefits to the platforms but they fail to take sufficient responsibility with regard to manipulation, platforms may contribute to democratic harm.

In my opinion platforms should not be political censors, but should be more transparent and responsible. They should clarify how political content gets recommended, offer clear labels for political advertisements, cut down coordinated fake networks, encourage independent research and permit users greater ability to control algorithmic recommendations.

Social Responsibility Theory is useful with regard to this issue, as it suggests that communication systems should serve society not just private profit. Social media platforms have power with regard to public communication, which also means they have responsibility. Ethical platform governance should provide freedom of expression, whilst mitigating manipulation, deception and harm.

IV. RESPONSIBLE COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

To mitigate the risks of social media manipulation, it is essential to adopt a set of responsible communication practices.

Firstly, political actors need to adhere to ethical standards with regard to campaigning. They must refrain from using fake accounts, share false statements, conceal support or resort to fear to manipulate the voters. Political persuasion needs to be founded on clear arguments, factual information and respect for the voters.

Secondly, transparency needs to be increased. Political advertisements ought to disclose which actor paid for the advertisement, for what reason is a given user receiving the advertisements, and for what audience were they targeted. Additionally, platforms need to preserve public ad libraries to enable journalists, researchers, and citizens to investigate political advertising.

Thirdly, fact-checking should be strengthened. Independent fact checkers can assist to flag false statements, but even corrections require to be visible and comprehensible. Factchecking needs to not only identify individual false claims, but also misleading narratives and manipulated media.

Fourthly, media literacy education is essential. Citizens should be equipped with the skills to check their sources, identify emotional manipulation, comprehend algorithms and refrain from circulating information that has not been verified. Media literacy needs to be taught not only at schools, but also through public campaigns, and community programmes.

Lastly, journalists ought to actively contribute to it. Expert journalism is useful to investigate manipulation networks, elaborate on political advertisement strategies, and disclose verified information. In the digital era journalism is an essential part as it can be a bridge between complicated information derived on-line and public understanding.

Finally, governments ought to construct equitable regulations, without posing a threat to freedom of expression. Regulations should revolve around transparency, data protection, accountability of political advertising, and responsibility of the platforms. Nevertheless, governments should not be the excuse of anti-disinformation laws to silence voices of criticism or opposition.

V. DISCUSSION

Social media manipulation is an example of how Media Ethics is not only related to journalists but includes platforms, algorithms, influencers, political consultants, data companies, governments, and everyday citizens. Therefore, media ethics is more complex because ethical responsibility is extended. In traditional media, the ethical responsibility often lay with editors and journalists. For digital media, ethical responsibility is distributed among a network of actors.

The central ethical challenge is to strike a balance between freedom and responsibility. Political communication requires freedom because citizens need the ability to discuss, criticise, and debate public issues. However, freedom without responsibility can become destructive if it permits organised manipulation to undermine democratic trust. Thus, ethical political communication should promote open debate and limit deception.

Another important aspect is that manipulation is not always transparent. It can present itself as normal posts, memes, comments, influencer content, or political advertisements. That is why we can say that manipulation is difficult for audiences to recognise. Thus, transparency is very important. Therefore, it is important that people can understand the nature of political content, who is behind content, and whether content is paid for or coordinated.

Social media manipulation also reveals the role of trust. When citizens are unable to trust the online information, it can lead to cynicism and disengagement from political discussion. This can affect democracy because democracy requires active and informed participation.

Thus, diminishing manipulation is not only a way to protect individuals, but also the quality of life of a population.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this case study, social media manipulation is one of the most serious ethical problems in the contemporary political communication. Social media manipulation involves disinformation, fake engagement, political microtargeting, algorithmic amplification, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour. These practices can be problematic in the ethical sense because social media manipulation can manipulate voters, involve privacy issues, generate distortions in public opinion, or undermine democratic trust.

Using Social Responsibility Theory, deontological ethics, and utilitarianism, this paper suggests that social media manipulation cannot be justified merely because it is effective. Political communication should be veracious, transparent, responsible and respectful to citizens' autonomy. Platforms also have to take more responsibility because their algorithms and advertising systems determine the public life communication.

To solve this issue, political actors should practice ethical campaigning, platforms should take more transparency and journalists should investigate manipulation, educators should improve media literacy, and governments should establish an equal regulation. Mainly, citizens should be encouraged to develop critical thinking before believing or reposting political content online.

Lastly, in conclusion, social media can be a great way to promote democracy if it is used to provide open discussions and citizen participation. However, when social media is used for manipulation, it is a threat to democratic communication. That is why ethical responsibility is very important. Political communication has to not only ask how they can focus attention and win votes, but want to know how to preserve truth, trust and the public interest.

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