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Social Media Manipulation in Political Communication: Ethical Challenges and Responsibilities in the Digital Age

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A B S T R A C T :

Social media has changed how political information reaches the public and how people engage with political issues. It also gives political actors new ways to influence public opinion and encourage participation. However, the increasing use of algorithmic amplification, political microtargeting, automated accounts, and artificial intelligence has raised concerns about manipulation on social media. These tools can influence which political messages people encounter and how they understand them. Their use also raises questions about personal privacy, independent judgment, public trust, and democratic decision-making. This paper uses deontology, utilitarianism, and social responsibility theory to examine the ethical problems associated with social media manipulation in political communication. Through conceptual and normative analysis, it considers how four digital communication mechanisms may cross the boundary between political persuasion and manipulation. It highlights ethical issues related to hidden manipulation, deception, the use of personal data, and inequality of political participation. It also addresses the conflict between the protection against manipulation and the protection of freedom of speech. Based on the ethical analysis, this paper proposes a five-dimensional framework covering transparency, informational integrity, individual autonomy and privacy, fairness and democratic participation, and accountability. The paper concludes that responsible political communication necessitates collaboration between digital platforms, political institutions, journalists, regulators, and users of digital platforms. Addressing manipulation on social media involves more than just regulation of misinformation.

Keywords: Social Media Manipulation; Media Ethics; Political Communication; Digital Democracy; Algorithmic Amplification; Political Microtargeting

1. Introduction

The emergence of social media has considerably changed the political communication environment. Social networks like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X provide a means through which political communication actors can interact with citizens, convey political information, and promote political engagement. Unlike conventional media channels, social media enables faster and personalized forms of communication, as well as greater audience interaction (Dijck & Poell, 2013). Despite the potential for democracy that social media provides, there is an ethical aspect concerning how social media affects politics.

An example of one of such concerns is social media manipulation, which refers to the process whereby digital communication tools are used to exert an influence on the audience by means of possible deception or concealment. Political organisations may misuse targeted advertising, automated accounts, disinformation, and algorithmic distribution to manipulate public perceptions. The proliferation of artificial intelligence allows for greater possibilities of producing convincing but deceiving political material.

The issues of the ethicality of manipulation go beyond the dissemination of fake information. Political messages may contain accurate information but still raise ethical concerns when relevant sponsorship is deliberately concealed, distribution relies on intrusive audience profiling, or communication strategies exploit personal vulnerabilities. Such actions could impair people's capacity to make judgments regarding the political information and limit accountability of such process.

Nevertheless, all the efforts to persuade people about certain political ideas cannot be regarded as manipulation. Political persuasion is an essential part of democratic communication, while emotional appeals, audience targeting, and campaign strategies are common practices in political competition. Thus, the main issue is the distinction between legitimate persuasion and manipulative techniques used to influence people's opinions.

This paper examines the ethical dimensions of social media manipulation in political communication by analysing its major mechanisms through established media ethics theories. Moreover, it helps in developing a framework for evaluating ethics and examines the obligations of different stakeholders in promoting responsible digital communication.

2. Understanding Social Media Manipulation

2.1 Definition and Characteristics

Social media manipulation means the use of communication technology to change someone's perception, emotion, or behavior in such a way that it becomes difficult for him/her to think rationally.These practices may include misleading information, hidden sponsorship, false identity, intrusive targeting, or amplification of political messaging.

There is an important difference between persuasion and manipulation. Persuasion usually refers to a communication activity characterized by putting forward arguments or expressing views in a way that the audience can evaluate, and the audience can also fully understand the motivation and identity of the communicator. On the other hand, manipulative activities become unethical when they are based on concealing the necessary information or taking advantage of weaknesses of audiences (Susser et al., 2019).

For instance, a political ad advocating for a particular candidate is a typical example of political persuasion. However, a political advertisement presented as an independent citizen's opinion while secretly funded by a political campaign raises ethical concerns because its sponsorship is deliberately concealed.

Therefore, the effectiveness of political communication does not determine whether its methods are ethically acceptable. It is also important to consider other factors associated with the process of communicating.

2.2 Social Media and Political Influence

Social media platforms vary from ordinary media in that their content delivery is somewhat governed by algorithms of recommendations and user interaction. Political messages may circulate very quickly within connected networks, sometimes even getting past the initial intended audience.

Personalisation of messages may be used by political communicators based on information on users' interests, behaviour and demographics (Tufekci, 2014). Although personalised messages may improve communication effectiveness, they can also reduce transparency by making it more difficult for different audiences to compare the political messages they receive.

Coordination is another characteristic of the process. Several accounts may send out messages that are identical to create an illusion of wide support or opposition. If coordination includes fabrication of identities and engagement, the audience will have a distorted view of the amount of public agreement.

It is evident that manipulation of social media is not just about individual dishonesty. The issue has to do with platform design, economics, data usage and politics. This means that ethical consideration of manipulation of social media should be based on consideration of both the behaviour of political communicator and the medium itself.

3. Methodological Approach and Ethical Framework

3.1 Conceptual and Normative Analysis

In the current work, a normative-analytical approach is used to analyze the problem of manipulation of social media in political communication. Rather than collecting original survey or experimental data, this paper evaluates digital political communication practices through established ethical principles.

The analysis examines four digital communication mechanisms associated with potential manipulation: algorithmic amplification, political microtargeting, disinformation, and AI-generated political content. These practices are evaluated in relation to individual autonomy, informational integrity, privacy, fairness, and democratic accountability.

However, the main purpose of this discussion is not to evaluate the occurrence rate and efficiency of these manipulative political tactics; rather, it aims at determining the conditions in which this form of manipulation may be considered unethical. It is worth noting that the presence of manipulative resources does not mean that this form of communication is indeed manipulative.

The following three ethical theories form the theoretical basis of this research: deontology, utilitarianism, and social responsibility.

3.2 Deontological Ethics

Deontology is an approach which centers on the assessment of actions in terms of morality and duties rather than consequences. When it comes to political communication, it stresses the need for truth, transparency, and regard for individuals as independent beings.

The use of manipulative tactics can be considered ethically unacceptable since political actors might choose to hide their identity, falsify information, or take advantage of people's weaknesses. For instance, a political campaign using fake accounts posing as ordinary citizens can violate the ethical principle of honesty irrespective of its success in influencing the audience.

According to this approach, any political impact is not a justification for lying. Political actors have to respect the ability of audiences to make an informed decision instead of considering people as a means to reach their goals.

3.3 Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism measures actions by their contribution to overall happiness. As applied to social media, utilitarianism implies that the positive and negative impacts of political discourse need to be considered.

Social media can enhance political consciousness, raise accessibility and promote participation within the community which would not be paid enough attention otherwise. Individualized political communication can also assist people in finding information about political problems that interest them.

On the other hand, manipulation can lead to disorientation, mistrust, social tensions and misinformation. Such outcomes may influence not only individuals themselves but also the quality of public debate.

However, it should be emphasized that such results will not occur necessarily (Eady et al., 2023). They will vary according to the audience features, credibility of the message and the political situation. The utilitarian perspective must analyze the potential benefits and drawbacks of this approach and consider its unpredictability and unforeseen consequences.

3.4 Social Responsibility Theory

According to social responsibility theory, a balance between freedom and responsibilities of the communicating entity towards society is very

important (Christians et al., 2009). There may be a difference between social media sites and traditional news sources, but the former are powerful in making certain pieces of information more prominent through algorithms and advertisements.

Therefore, it is the duty of the platforms to ensure that adequate precautions are put in place against manipulation and provision of information about political ads. At the same time, political groups and communicators have their duties in the area of communication.

This perspective suggests that accountability should extend beyond individual users to include platforms, political organisations, and other actors involved in digital communication.

4. Major Mechanisms of Social Media Manipulation

4.1 Algorithmic Amplification

Social media algorithms create and suggest content based on a variety of different parameters such as user engagement, content characteristics, and future interests of users. Technology can help people to cope with huge and complex information environments, but at the same time, it impacts the selection of political messages (Bakshy et al., 2015).

The ethical dilemma arises because recommendation systems tend to promote sensational and misleading messages of politics that have an emotional appeal. Politicians may consider engaging the users rather than balancing information and reliability in their messages.

Nevertheless, recommendation systems should not be seen as being manipulative by nature. They can provide useful content and enable exposure to political information.Ethical dilemmas arise when known negative effects are overlooked, when incentive structures encourage deceptive behaviour, or when users do not understand how the recommendation mechanisms work.

Transparency is a problem as well. The user may experience certain political narratives again and again without realizing why he is being subjected to these messages. This can shape his ideas about what are the issues of public concern.

The platform needs to be clear in its explanation of how recommendations are done and give more control to the user in the management of his information environment. An independent assessment is also necessary to identify the problems without disclosing any proprietary information.

4.2 Political Microtargeting and Personal Data

Political microtargeting is the process of reaching out to people with political information based on personal data or behavior. Campaigns can utilize political microtargeting to reach out to their audiences effectively with regard to particular public issues.

For instance, the policy information about transport can be directed to individuals who are concerned about public transport. The communication through political microtargeting is not essentially unethical. Problems emerge when the process is based on invasive data gathering, insufficient transparency, and exploitation of private weaknesses.

The users may not know how their online activity influences the creation of their political profiles. This situation raises questions about consent and control over personal data. People, who voluntarily share their views on public issues online, do not necessarily assume that this will result in political profiling.

Political microtargeting may weaken public accountability when different audience groups receive potentially inconsistent political promises that are difficult for the wider public to compare (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). Unlike public speeches of candidates, personalized ads will remain invisible for people outside their targets.

The ethical acceptability of political microtargeting depends on the legitimacy of data collection, transparency of sponsorship, targeting criteria, and potential consequences for fairness. Good practice requires that profiling not be deceptive, and that there be adequate explanation of the reason why political messages are targeted at certain audiences.

4.3 Disinformation and Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour

Disinformation implies false and misleading information that is either created or shared intentionally to mislead the audience. In politics, disinformation can be used to smear political rivals, shape the way public events are perceived, or even cast doubt on political institutions.

Misleading information can be disseminated quickly using social media through personal contacts or coordinated campaigns (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Coordination can make this problem worse as accounts can portray themselves as individuals independently communicating while working under a single coordination (Ferrara et al., 2016).

For example, a political organisation may secretly operate multiple accounts that appear to represent independent citizens, creating a misleading impression of widespread public support. Coordination per se is not unethical as political organizations often organize coordinated communication. However, what is unethical in this case is deceiving audiences about the authenticity and independence of popular communication.

However, it is equally important to be able to draw a line between disinformation and misinformation. People might share false information without necessarily aiming to deceive anyone else. Even when the result is detrimental to people's wellbeing, ethical considerations should take into account different levels of intention, awareness, and control.

4.4 AI-Generated Political Content

Artificial intelligence has enhanced the capability of developing political messages, artificial imagery, video footage, sound clips, and automatic writing. AI technology can assist genuine political communication through enhanced translation services, accessibility, and content creation.

In addition to all these, these emerging technologies pose dangers in terms of manipulation. Inaccurate audio recordings may trick individuals into believing that a certain politician made particular statements, whereas the fake social media profiles may imitate real social media profiles.

This ethical dilemma becomes even more of an issue when the generated message is intentionally portrayed as evidence of a political happening (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). This is because the communication process becomes one that undermines information authenticity by making it difficult for the audience to tell the difference between reality and fiction.

At the same time, AI-generated political communication is not necessarily unethical. Explicitly labeled synthetic communication that aims at education, commentary, or satire serves legitimate goals. Therefore, the ethical assessment needs to take into consideration disclosure, consent, accuracy, audience expectations, and likelihood of deception.

Responsible AI-generated political communication should avoid deceptive impersonation and provide appropriate disclosure when synthetic content could reasonably be mistaken for authentic political evidence.

5. Ethical Implications for Political Communication

5.1 Individual Autonomy and Informed Judgment

Individual autonomy is an important moral issue since participation in democracy requires people to consider political options in an independent way.

Manipulative communication can have an effect on autonomy since audiences are misled about information sources or manipulated using techniques that take advantage of their personal weaknesses without their knowledge.

Emotional appeals are common ways of communicating with the audience in political campaigns. This is not necessarily unethical since emotions form part of political decisions. Nevertheless, the ethics of such a situation becomes more complicated when communicators take advantage of sensitive personal information or the means they use to influence audiences.

Deontology implies that political participants should respect individuals as independent thinkers. In this regard, even if the manipulation techniques are efficient, their use remains unethical if it involves deceit or lack of informed choice.

This means that ethical persuasion should give people sufficient grounds to know the source and the intention behind political messages.

5.2 Privacy and Data Exploitation

Privacy issues emerge where political communication is built on the broad data collection and analysis of personal data.

Individuals using social media may reveal their interests, views, and preferences through their actions. Their actions may help to build up a more comprehensive profile of the audience alongside other data.

The ethical issue goes far beyond whether the collection of data is possible and allowed. It also relates to whether people are aware of how their data is used and whether they have control over the use of their sensitive data (Nissenbaum, 2004).

The problem with political profiling becomes especially evident in the case where vulnerabilities that are revealed are exploited for creating customized messages. In such a way, autonomy may be undermined even if the created message includes accurate information.

Political communication that respects privacy needs to observe the principle of data minimization, proper disclosures, and privacy.

5.3 Public Trust and Political Polarisation

Political communication via manipulation may erode public trust in cases where citizens are faced with deceitful communications or unsure of the authenticity of digital communications (Lazer, 2018).

Deceptive messaging may foster divisions between political factions and make constructive dialogue difficult to achieve. Manipulated political communications may also foster misconceptions about popular opinions.

Nevertheless, there are other factors at play in the case of political polarisation, such as inequality in society, ideological differences, and political institutions.

Social media manipulation cannot be considered as the only reason for political polarisation.

The ethical problem with manipulative methods is that they have the ability to fuel further conflict while making political communication authentic increasingly difficult.

From a utilitarian approach, the negative impacts of these manipulative actions are erosion of public trust in institutions, lack of clarity on public issues, and difficulty in conducting democratic discussions.

Enhancement of public trust is therefore dependent on transparency, verifiability, and accountability in digital communication.

5.4 Fairness and Democratic Accountability

Social media manipulation also raises concerns about political fairness, particularly when unequal access to digital technologies, audience data, and advertising resources increases the capacity of some actors to exercise less transparent forms of influence.

Organizations that have a greater resource base would likely have a higher capacity for analyzing audiences and disseminating political material. Although the existence of such disparities does not imply manipulation by itself, it would result in unequal access to political influence.

Democratic accountability can be undermined when targeted advertisements are hard to review by the press, political competitors, and ordinary citizens. Various audiences can receive quite different political arguments without noticing the difference.

Therefore, proper political communication should ensure that political content sponsorship and targeting be transparent while avoiding any restrictions on small political organizations and disenfranchised communities as part of efforts to avoid manipulation.

These worries raise suspicions that social media manipulation can have implications beyond individual political decisions and into the process of democratic engagement in general.

6. Ethical Tensions and Challenges

The issue of preventing manipulation on social networks involves striking a balance between conflicting ethical values. The first ethical tension concerns the relationship between preventing manipulation and protecting freedom of expression. Often enough, political rhetoric relies on emotions,

critical statements, satire, and other politically charged information. The deletion of this kind of information may pose a threat to democracy.

This is why the moderation policies should differentiate between deceptive behaviors and normal political conversations. Possible measures could include using context tags, giving information about the advertisements, limiting deceptive coordinated actions, and improving the moderation policies. Every decision should be explained, and there should be an opportunity for appeals.

A second ethical tension involves balancing political advertising transparency with the protection of users' privacy. While revealing information about political ads promotes transparency, disclosing too much information about users might result in their personal information being revealed as well. Therefore, in terms of ethics in governance, it should be ensured that sponsors are transparent but not the users.

A third ethical challenge concerns the influence of social media platforms over political content and public discussion. It is important for social networks to address problems related to manipulation, even though their actions might have a certain effect on the accessibility of other political views. Such actions might be perceived as politically motivated.

Transparency, due process, and oversight should become the components of such a response (Suzor et al., 2019). It is crucial not to stop political discussion but to ensure its conditions.

7. A Proposed Ethical Assessment Framework

Based on the above-described ethics discussion, this paper further develops a five-factor model of the ethical evaluation of the political communication processes carried out via social networks. The model takes into account the principles of deontological duties, social consequences, and institutionality.

The model is provided as a conceptual model of ethical evaluation, not as an empirically verified measurement scale.

7.1 Transparency

Transparency demands that political communicators offer enough information regarding the sponsorship, source, and intent behind political communication messages.

Hidden political connections and fake identities may render it impossible for the audience to judge the communication independently. The core issue here is whether audiences can be informed of who is trying to influence them through political communications.

7.2 Informational Integrity

Integrity of information necessitates that political communicators should not use fake evidence, distortion of facts and misleading impersonations.

This does not preclude opinion, satire and rhetoric but rather focuses on the need for differentiating between factual statements and interpretations and the avoidance of deception.

The key issue lies in whether the audience is given a chance to tell genuine information from the false one.

7.3 Individual Autonomy and Privacy

This dimension stresses the importance of recognizing independent judgment and the responsible handling of personal information (Floridi & Cowls, 2019).

Political communication must not involve intruding into the privacy of individuals, secret use of their weaknesses, and manipulation of data beyond the comprehension and control of individuals.

The moral question in this context is whether political influence treats individuals as autonomous agents or just as objects of behavioral manipulation.

7.4 Fairness and Democratic Participation

Ethics must consider carefully how different modes of communication affect information flow, participation and the treatment of different groups of people.

Communication channels that create artificial consensus, that discriminate against certain groups, and those that reduce the possibility of informed participation create ethical problems.

It is important to consider whether digital communication creates an environment where political debate can take place.

7.5 Accountability

Accountability requires political actors and digital platforms to explain relevant communication practices, respond to complaints, and provide appropriate mechanisms for correction and review.

This aspect of ethics accepts the reality of responsibility distribution among political organizations, advertisers, technology companies, and communication agencies.

The main issue here is the ability to establish the presence of responsible actors who could be held accountable for their wrongdoings.

7.6 Practical Application

It is better to apply these five dimensions together than separately. Thus, for instance, an adequately labeled political advertisement can satisfy the conditions of transparency but cause privacy issues due to its targeted nature based on invasive data collection. In a similar vein, a political message which is factually true becomes unethical when it misrepresents organized political activity as public opinion. Hence, ethical assessment needs to take into account the extent of deception, the interference with autonomy, potential harm, and accountability.

8. Practical Implications and Recommendations

The five ethical dimensions proposed in the previous section provide a foundation for identifying the responsibilities of digital platforms, political actors, journalists, regulators, and users.

The social media websites need to have clear rules against impersonations and inauthenticity, as well as proper disclosure rules on any political endorsements that are paid for. The companies need to become more transparent about how they advertise politically, evaluate the risks related to recommendation algorithms, and put in place a process through which users can report problems.

It is crucial for politically engaged groups and their representatives to understand that having elections does not give them the right to deceive through communications. Politically engaged groups and campaigners need to avoid creating a facade of popular backing, using misleading synthesized material, and collecting personal data improperly. It could be helpful to have communication codes of conduct within and oversee outside agencies.

Journalism should critically examine political statements which seem questionable, find the source of the altered information, and raise awareness among the audience about digital manipulation strategies. Journalism should be able to separate the proven facts from the non-proven ones, and not amplify the false political narratives. Journalistic independence is crucial for the investigation of manipulation within various political entities.

The regulation and policy makers need to make sure that proper regulations on political advertisement transparency, personal privacy and platform accountability are made. However, the regulatory efforts need to protect the freedom of expression and offer protection from the political bias involved in such regulation and its enforcement.

The users and institutions can also help in practicing good digital communication. The media literacy campaigns can help citizens to verify the sources of information, identify political influences and propaganda and also to understand the working of recommendation algorithm.

However, the media literacy campaign alone cannot solve the problem of manipulation. Users might lack information about hidden political influences and coordination. Hence, public awareness needs to be a complement to institutional responsibility and not a substitute (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020).

9. Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion

9.1 Limitations and Future Research

In terms of the theoretical and normative approach used in this paper, it is limited to not providing original empirical data and hence not able to determine the frequency of social media manipulation and direct impact on political actions.

The various social networking sites have distinct differences concerning their architectural makeup, users, and regulation. In this regard, ethics may differ depending on the particular political and cultural setting.

In the final analysis, the five-dimensional approach proposed in this paper has not been empirically tested yet. Further research may test the utility of this approach by using case studies, interviews, or comparisons of political communication tactics.

9.2 Conclusion

There are several ethical issues associated with the manipulation of social media in the current political communication environment. While modern technology enhances political engagement, the communication structures provided by such platforms can also allow for manipulation and deception.

In summary, the current investigation indicates that the manipulation cannot be assessed by the sole criterion of the efficiency of the political discourse and the technology used. The ethical analysis should consider five key dimensions: transparency, informational integrity, individual autonomy and privacy, fairness and democratic participation, and accountability.

Ethics related to deontological theory, utilitarianism, and social responsibility approach offer a comprehensive approach to addressing these ethical issues. Together, these approaches show that a balance between individual rights, social impacts, and responsibilities is essential.

The above-discussed five-dimensional ethical framework provides a structure for the evaluation of the practice of political communication and possible unethical ways of influence.

Ethical digital political communication involves more than just avoiding disinformation; it includes transparency, accountability, and consideration for individual freedom. It also includes ethics in policy making, accountability of platforms, regulation, journalism, and citizen involvement. Maintaining these principles is critical to ensuring that informed political decision making and democracy is maintained in the digital sphere.

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