
Government Propaganda, Twitter Discourse, Political Disinformation

Government Propaganda

To maintain an effective propaganda machinery, it might be tailor-made for the target audience otherwise it will render itself futile (Hunt, 2016; Baines & Shaughnessy, 2014; Larsson, Bynander, Ohlsson, Schyberg, & Holmberg, 2015). Most governments have crisis management experts on their payroll because crises and scandals are the inevitable, and they require immediate action (Chen, N., 2012; Jong, 2010). Due to the control of the government over the information, it can manipulate public opinion by cultivating ideologies to the masses and by justifying its control through its programs and policies (Anstead & Chadwick, 2017; Brady, 2009; Chen, D., 2012; Chen, N., 2012; Zhu, Lu, & Shi, 2012; Stiver, 2012).

The government uses spin and diversionary tactics in situations where a person or a group exposes alleged corrupt practices done by the government (Bammer, van Bommel, Kerstholt, & Giebels, 2017; Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010; Jong, 2010). Usually, government spokespersons immediately conduct press conferences when scandalous events, in which the government is accountable, unfolds (Briant, 2018; Sparkes-Vian, 2018; Zhu et al, 2012). The government recognizes the power of public opinion to make it accountable for its policies and actions (Bammer et al, 2017; Chen, D., 2012; Gelders & Ihlen, 2009; Stiver, 2012).

In addition, some governments possess the tendency to suppress or censor information that will bring backlashes (Chen, D., 2012; Meng, 2016; Zhu et al, 2012). Some governments already mobilize the internet, usually through social media in order to spin and create diversions for high-profile issues (Anstead & Chadwick, 2017; Aro, 2016; Kyriakopoulou, 2011; Toepfl, 2012). In contrast, critical citizens also use the internet to express indignation towards any form of corruption and to bring back to life issues that the government propaganda machinery is trying to sweep under the rug, for example the issue of Russian interference in the US 2016 elections. (Aro, 2016; Chen, D., 2012; Kyriakopoulou, 2011; Toepfl, 2012).

Twitter Discourse

Through the years, social media has proven itself pivotal in the electoral process and political because of its accessibility, ubiquity, and ability to propel discourse (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013; Fenton, 2010; Konnelly, 2015; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Nilsson & Carsson, 2014, Park, 2013). For example, the social networking platform Twitter already became a one-stop shop of discussion, debates, and campaigns which are all rooted from varying stances (Gan, Lee, & Li, 2017; Jungherr, Schoen, & Jürgens, 2015; Kasmani, Sabran, & Ramle, 2014; Loader, & Marcea, 2011; Mourão, 2014). In addition, it can be suggested that Twitter is an effective government propaganda tool especially in instances where public relations and crisis management are involved (Graham, 2014; Yaqub, Chu, Atluri, & Vaidya, 2016).

For example, during elections, Twitter was used to support politicians and their platforms (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013; Gaber, 2016; Kreiss, 2014; Lefky, Brewer, & Habegger, 2015;

Yaqub et al, 2016). On the other hand, Twitter was also weaponized by political parties, politicians, and their supporters for it became a tool to discredit and destroy perceived opponents (Alemanno, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Brumette, DiStaso, Vafeiadis, & Messner, 2018; Marshall, 2017; Khaja, AlKhaja, & Sequeira, 2018). As the preponderance of opinions in Twitter increased, the amount of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda joined the trend (Fallis, 2015; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017).

Twitter succeeded in promoting democracy but ironically, “fake news” proliferated together with machinations to silence dissent and the minority opinion (Brumette et al, 2018;). In addition, Twitter discourse was not spared from incivility and indecency, which are mainly sourced from the apologists of political figures and ideologies (Glynn, 2017; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Ott, 2017). Because of its power to influence several kinds of audiences, affluent political kingpins are mobilizing Twitter through the propagation of disinformation, for the sole purpose of staying in power (Marshall, 2017; Merloe, 2015).

Political Disinformation

The rise of social media brought with it a surge on disinformation which includes “fake news”, “alternative facts”, “post-truth”, and historical revisionism (Mejias & Vokuev, 2018). Before, disinformation can easily be distinguished from what is factual, but now the former does a mimicry which can only be spotted by the discerning (Alemanno, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). During this era, the terms “fake news”, “alternative facts”, and “post-truth” and even historical revisionism took the entire digital world by storm (Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018).

For example, the oxymoron “fake news” is very widespread, particularly those that are political in nature (Balmas, 2012; Spohr, 2017; Wasserman, 2017). Fake news is usually political because they are produced by opposing political parties or politicians who are mudslinging each other for personal gain (Glaser, 2017; Guo & Vargo, 2018; Zengerle, 2016). Such disinformation is prevalent on social media because of its wide reach and because a significant number of netizens have tendencies of easily being swayed by the things they see on social media (Tandoc, Ling, Westlund, Duffy, Goh, & Wei, 2017; Nelson & Taneja, 2018).

Meanwhile, the heavily assailed concept of alternative facts is basically falsehood which is under the guise of an information spin that is intended to mislead the public, particularly when the facts can tarnish the government’s reputation (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Post-truth, on the other hand, is a widespread phenomenon on disinformation politics in which emotion and intuition trumps reason and facts when it comes to shaping public opinion (Peters, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2018). Furthermore, historical revisionism is a deliberate attempt to revise history by distorting facts, particularly to sow bogus ideas to the minds of the public in support of people, groups, or ideologies that were not judged well by history (Cohen, 2017).