

The Impact of Facebook and Twitter Disinformation on Canadian Politics:

A 21st Century Threat to Democracy

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In modern day politics, the phrase “fake news” has become a regular part of political banter. Interestingly, the phrase was popularized by the 45th President of the United States as an attack against news organizations that did not report in a way that suited his liking (Beaujon, 2019, para. 5). However, the phrase now has a new meaning that has crossed borders and become a problem all over the world. This problem is social media disinformation. In the 2019 Canadian federal election, Canadians experienced this problem first-hand with unreputable news organizations like *The Buffalo Chronicle* popping up on Facebook pages and spreading fabricated information about political leaders and candidates (Lytvynenko et al., 2019). Given that social media is increasingly setting the agenda for public discourse, it is important to explore the impacts disinformation has on the political process. The impact of social media on the political process and our democracy is one of the most important political issues facing Canadians today. In this paper, I argue that social media disinformation is what continues to polarize politics in Canada and this paper works to identify ways in which social media policies, specifically on Twitter and Facebook, can be improved to combat disinformation.

Review of the Literature

This review of the literature focuses on research that examines the effects social media and disinformation can have on democratic processes; they are organized chronologically.

Lee (2019) looks to define what constitutes as fake news and determine how fake news impacts the democratic process (p. 15). The article argues that with a lack of presence of impartial mainstream media sources, the public loses trust in this institution and turns to

information online to fuel their opinions. Furthermore, Lee suggests that the term fake news has existed for over a century, but now takes on a new meaning as “a way to describe a political story, which is seen as damaging to an agency, entity, or person” (Lee, 2019, p. 15). Lee reinforces the importance of reliable information in the political process by saying that, “the entire political process of democracy is based on reliable information” (Lee, 2019, p. 20).

Freelon and Wells (2020) review disinformation as political communication in their article. The article seeks to define and decipher exactly what falls into the category of disinformation. The pair largely cite a degradation of trust by the public in the institution of traditional media as a reasoning for why disinformation is becoming ever so prominent online (p. 147).

Pal (2020) considers the current gaps in Canadian election law pertaining to political advertising via social media (p. 200). The article focuses on Elections Canada, the non-partisan federal electorate management body, and the Elections Act, the legislation that guides the political and democratic processes in Canada (p. 201). Pal’s analysis provides a modern outlook on the state of the Canadian institutions and legislation that assert authority over how social media companies like Twitter and Facebook function during Canadian elections.

The Rise of Disinformation on Twitter and Facebook

Whether false information is shared innocently or with an intent, it can have damaging impacts on how Canadians make decisions about their politics. To understand this issue, it is important to decipher the differences between misinformation and disinformation. As defined by the high-level expert group on fake news and online disinformation for the European Commission, “Disinformation includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (2018, para. 2,

as cited in Freelon & Wells, 2020). In “Disinformation as Political Communication,” Freelon and Wells (2020) explain that the “major distinctions between disinformation and misinformation is that the former is specifically constructed to produce effects, ones which assault key assumptions undergirding collective political decision-making” (p. 151) This information is vital in making the public more aware of the fact that false information on the Internet is not innocent, and that it is actually a communication weapon used by those trying to undermine political systems.

For groups to spread disinformation, they need a platform to send their messages from. In recent years, Facebook and Twitter have become key targets for disinformation campaigns. According to a recent study out of Princeton University that tracked the Internet usage of 3000 Americans in the lead up to the 2016 presidential election, Facebook was by far the worst outlet for the spread of disinformation (Travers, 2020). One of the key failures of Facebook in the election was its role as a referrer site for untrustworthy news sources (para. 3).

In addition to the failures of Facebook, a recent study from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology revealed that false information spreads the quickest on Twitter (Dizkes, 2018). Interestingly, their research found that false information was not being spread quickly by bots, but instead was being created by legitimate Twitter users retweets of false information (para. 4). While already concerning, the same study came to conclude that in fact Twitter users are 70 per cent more likely to retweet false information rather than the truth (para. 8). Unfortunately, Americans are not the only ones exposed to false information, as Twitter and Facebook have a reach far beyond the United States border.

While it may seem as though Canada does not experience these same problems, the truth is that America’s neighbor to the north is just as vulnerable when it comes to disinformation campaigns. One of the most current and high-profile examples of disinformation online

infiltrating Canadian politics was the 2019 federal election. From a meme saying that famed comedian Rick Mercer was a Conservative Party of Canada supporter (Jackson, 2019, para. 8), to a fake New York publication spreading rumors about political sex scandals days before the polls opened (Lytvynenko et al., 2019), the 2019 election proved that the Canadian political process has also been infiltrated by disinformation meant to sway the electorate and generate income for disinformation actors.

With an extremely educated population (Coughlan, 2017), it is sometimes shocking to consider how Canadians are duped by inaccurate information online, yet it happens. In fact, in a recent Ipsos poll released during the 2019 election, only three in five Canadians stated that they could regularly determine the accuracy of online content (Ipsos, 2019, para. 3). Gordon Pennycook, an assistant professor at the University of Regina who studies fake news in Canada says that the most common ways fake news is spread on Facebook and Twitter is through such tactics as memes and fabricated news articles (Jackson, 2019, para. 6). Even then, it is hard to believe that outrageously false news stories and simple captioned pictures on the Internet could influence Canadians' political positions. However, as Gordon Pennycook says, "[these tactics] create immediate and strong reactions of fear or disgust from the viewer" (Rogers, 2019). Furthermore, those that are spreading this disinformation online have found help in tailoring their messages from Twitter and Facebook's targeted advertising, which allows these agents to target groups that they know will be influenced by the content, no matter how absurd the information presented may seem (Media Smarts, n.d.b, para. 2).

Social Media Disinformation and Political Polarization

To understand how disinformation impacts the Canadian electorate, it is important to look at the origins of disinformation online. Remember, it was only a short time ago that Facebook and Twitter did not exist, and they have only evolved into an effective communication strategy for political campaigns in the last decade. In the United States, the 2012 presidential campaign is recognized as one of the first instances where Twitter and Facebook played a meaningful part in connecting with voters (Haridakis et al., 2016, pp. 219-220). Even more recently, the 2015 federal election in Canada is widely recognized as the campaign where political parties acknowledged the importance of social media and adopted strategies to target voters online (Pammett & Dornan, 2016).

While North American political parties started to adopt social media into their strategies at the start of the 2010s, it was not until around 2017 that major research about disinformation from social scientists started to appear (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 148). The 2016 American presidential election is widely recognized as the event in which disinformation online became a popular topic of discussion (p. 149). For reference, research from Freelon and Wells looked at Google Scholar results that contained “disinformation” in their titles from 2010 to 2019 and found that 70 per cent of the results were published after 2016 (p. 149). This example shows just how new the topic of online disinformation is, and the need to investigate the effects it has on modern politics in Canada and democratic countries across the globe.

It is important to recognize that while online disinformation is new, the idea of using disinformation campaigns to target domestic and foreign audiences is not (Lukito, 2019, p. 238). However, as noted previously the tactics of those propagating disinformation campaigns has improved through targeted advertising on mediums such as Twitter and Facebook. As Haridakis

et al. (2017) explains in Chapter 13 of “Social Media and Politics: A New Way to Participate in the Political Process,” research in the social sciences backs up the belief that political parties and electorates are increasingly polarized (p. 220). One of the reasons to blame, specifically in the United States, for the increased polarization of voters is the lack of mainstream media that does not come across as biased (Lee, 2019, p. 18). For example, as the Pew Research Centre discovered in a survey before the 2020 presidential election, self-identified Democrats are extremely unlikely to trust Fox News, while Republicans feel the same way about media outlets like CNN (Gramlich, 2020, para. 8). With a lack of trust in the media, Americans are increasingly turning to the Internet and their social media feeds to fuel their understanding of political issues (p. 20). Ultimately, this provides opportunity to those who develop disinformation campaigns to easily target voters to undermine certain ideologies (Marwick & Lewis, n.d., p. 27).

As Americans and some Canadians turn to the Internet for media they deem to be unbiased, many Canadians are also starting to rely on social media for their news simply because of convenience (Media Smarts, n.d.a, para. 7). According to Media Smarts, a Canadian organization that promotes digital and media literacy, over 40 per cent of Canadians between the ages of 18 to 29 are now getting their news from Facebook (Media Smarts, n.d.a). Interestingly, Gabrielle Lim, a researcher at the Data & Society Research Institute who focuses on the implications of disinformation, propaganda and fake news in society, says that Facebook is a “hotspot” for spreading disinformation because it is such a popular platform in Canada (Rogers, 2019). This is concerning given the large number of Canadians who are adopting Facebook and Twitter as their main sources for news. While it can be argued that Canadians can decipher whether a story is fake or not, disinformation campaigns are continuously evolving and

becoming more sophisticated to reach larger audiences (Lukito, 2018). Furthermore, even if Canadians are able to debunk disinformation, it has been proven that being exposed to disinformation can still shape a person's attitude towards the specific issue (Marwick & Lewis, n.d., p. 44).

The political polarization of the electorate can be further manipulated with the ways in which Facebook and Twitter were developed. More commonly when speaking of political polarization on the Internet, scholars and researchers cite the idea of "echo chambers" (Bail, 2018, p. 9216). Echo chambers are the idea that social media users tend to only follow people with similar ideals and views, which reaffirms and polarizes the social media user's existing views (p. 9216). An example of this theory would be the way in which white supremacist groups use social media to recruit and share their messages, appealing to individuals, specifically young men, they would not otherwise reach without the Internet (Donovan et al., 2020, p. 49). Another theory as to what fuels political polarization online is the idea of the "backfire effect". Contrary to the theory of echo chambers, the backfire effect is the idea that those exposed to opposing political views on social media can become more defensive of their original views (Bail, 2018, p. 9217). Ultimately, these contradicting theories prove that no matter the audience one follows on their Facebook and Twitter, disinformation campaigns can be curated to polarize beliefs for or against specific ideologies.

Improving Facebook and Twitter's Role in the Political Process

The effects of disinformation on Twitter and Facebook must not be overlooked. Disinformation campaigns proved to be an effective strategy for influencing domestic and foreign audiences long before the Internet and have only become more sophisticated with the help of social media (Lukito, 2019, p. 238). Overall, if the tactics used in disinformation

campaigns can sway the electorates' opinions on political issues, this could also affect the outcome of an election.

Media Smarts (n.d.b) has analyzed this issue to a great extent and has identified four ways in which disinformation could undermine Canadian democracy. First, they mention the ways in which disinformation agents can target vulnerable communities with messaging on Facebook and Twitter (para. 3). By creating tailored messaging that appears to come from people of the same community or political beliefs, the audience is more likely to believe and share the information on their own feeds, resulting in further spread (para. 3). Second, disinformation can be used to energize or suppress different groups of voters (para. 4). For example, voters can be targeted on social media and suppressed on election day through the spread of false information as to where they vote. Thirdly, disinformation online can undermine traditional media sources, a foundation of democracy, by setting the agenda of breaking news stories through the spread of false facts and information related to the story (para. 6). Lastly, widespread disinformation on Facebook and Twitter can lead to topics trending online and affect the stories in which reputable news organizations decide to investigate (para. 7).

With all the ways in which disinformation can infiltrate democratic processes, it is important that social media companies and government start to consider ways to combat this problem. In recent years, Twitter and Facebook have started to take measures to monitor and flag possible disinformation campaigns on their platforms. As of 2020, their efforts include the use of fact-checking, verifying the authenticity of images and attempting to detect disinformation through algorithms (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 2). Leading up to the 2020 presidential election, further measures were introduced including the labelling of tweets, which some critics say do not go nearly far enough (Fowler, 2020).

The Canadian government has also investigated what can be done to combat disinformation on social media in recent years. Leading up to the 2019 federal election, plans were introduced that set out to establish transparency guidelines for political advertising, a cybersecurity taskforce and investments into digital literacy initiatives to help broaden Canadians' understanding of disinformation (Samuel, 2019, para. 3). While some have praised the efforts of these plans, disinformation was still a part of the election.

Michael Pal, an associate professor for the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa recently published an article called, "Social Media and Democracy: Challenges for Election Law and Administration in Canada" (2019). Pal's article addresses the gaps in Canadian election law pertaining to social media. The professor's argument in his article is that Canada will be unable to have free and fair elections without taking measures to regulate the spread of information to voters online. One possible solution he cites is the labelling of Facebook as a broadcaster, similar to other media organizations in Canada which must adhere to specific rules in order to ensure information does not favour one political entity over another (p. 208). Further suggestions include the regulation of political advertising online, and stricter transparency and enforcement measures (p. 201). Whatever a government decides on to combat disinformation on social media, they must ensure that it is considerate of free speech. The biggest challenges to the election laws introduced to address problems with social media's role in the political process thus far have surrounded Canadians' freedom of expression (Karanicolas, 2019).

Conclusion

As the role of social media continues to expand in the democratic processes of Canada, both government and social media giants like Twitter and Facebook must investigate and invest in ways to curb disinformation online. Disinformation online has proven to hurt all actors and

parties of the political spectrum and as a result, should be recognized as a nonpartisan issue.

Taking the threat of disinformation seriously is important in maintaining the foundations of Canadian democracy. If Canadians allow this problem to grow, it will continue to polarize the electorate and undermine elections at all levels of government.

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