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Manipulation as an element of the political process in social networks

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Abstract

The relevance of the research comes from the extent of the influence of information and communication technologies in socially significant areas, where the manipulation of public consciousness, in the Internet space, particularly in social networks, is an obvious phenomenon. The aim of the study was to discuss the opinion that the main driving factor in the use of social networks, as a proven platform for the manipulation of public consciousness, has been increased by social restrictions on personal contacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. General and special research methods were employed to achieve the stated objective. It is concluded that, despite the obvious advantages of the use of social networks in the political process, the political manipulations that currently exist in the virtual environment are often of a destructive nature and carry hidden symbolic threats to destabilize the life of a given country, as well as to worsen the quality of life of each of its citizens. Most of the time, political manipulations in the virtual environment take place at various stages of the electoral process.

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Keywords: virtual political processes; political manipulations; public management; social networks; political communication.

La manipulación como elemento del proceso político en las redes sociales

Resumen

Relevancia de la investigación viene por la por la extensión de la influencia de las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación en ámbitos socialmente significativos, donde la manipulación de la conciencia pública, en el espacio de Internet, en particular en las redes sociales, es un fenómeno evidente. El objetivo del estudio fue discutir la opinión de que el principal factor impulsor del uso de las redes sociales, como plataforma probada para la manipulación de la conciencia pública, se ha incrementado por las restricciones sociales en los contactos personales provocadas por la pandemia del COVID-19. Para el logro del objetivo planteado se emplearon métodos de investigación generales y especiales. Se concluye que, a pesar de las evidentes ventajas del uso de las redes sociales en el proceso político, las manipulaciones políticas que existen en la actualidad en el entorno virtual son a menudo de naturaleza destructiva y conlleva amenazas simbólicas ocultas de desestabilizar la vida de un determinado país, así como de empeorar la calidad de vida de cada uno de sus ciudadanos. La mayoría de las veces, las manipulaciones políticas en el entorno virtual tienen lugar en varias fases del proceso electoral.

Palabras clave: procesos políticos virtuales; manipulaciones políticas; gestión pública; redes sociales; comunicación política.

Introduction

The role of social networks in everyday human life is significant, especially as demonstrated by the events triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic when personal contacts were restricted, and isolation measures were applied. This period of social distancing demonstrated how, with the help of the virtual environment, it is possible to successfully manipulate many people's minds without resorting to overt psychological pressure.

Thus, politics, as an important component of the social life of individuals, received already proven mechanisms of manipulation, which existed in the world before this historical moment but have not yet shown

their effectiveness in a practical way. Yes, from the very beginning it was a question of mechanisms for manipulating public consciousness, as used by the public administration system in health care. Still, subsequently, the sphere of influence spread to other spheres of social life.

Given the relevance of the research topic and its practical importance, the issue of the mechanisms of political manipulation in social networks and beyond causes a lively discussion among scholars around the world, “manipulation checks are often advisable in experimental studies, yet they rarely appear in practice” (Kane and Barabas, 2018: 240). Thus, Manuel Goyanes explores the issues of political pressure on the media and notes that “the journalistic field of Spanish public service broadcaster has traditionally been questioned for its “lack of political autonomy because of pervasive news manipulations over the course of years” (Goyanes *et al.*, 2020: 1079).

Relevant to the analysis in this study were the works of scientists devoted to the problem of the use of social networks for the implementation of manipulations at all stages of the electoral process. Nicolas Martin devoted his research paper to “the analysis of election fraud in Pakistan and India and the political manipulations that were used during the elections” (Martin and Picherit, 2019: 15).

The use of political manipulation techniques, particularly the issue of financial support for the electoral process, is also addressed by Seeun Ryu, who “examines how state tax and expenditure limitations (TEs) affect the size of fiscal reserves over election cycles” (Seeun *et al.*, 2020: 379). Regarding the importance of studying the financial aspect of the political process and the manipulation that occurs in its various forms, Pierre Mandon also notes in his writings, however, it is much clearer that researchers selectively report that national leaders do manipulate fiscal tools in order to be reelected (Mandon and Cazals, 2018).

Natália S. Bueno also devoted her scholarly work to exploring the interplay of finance, manipulation, and the electoral process, noting that distribution without attribution reduces the likelihood of political budget cycles compared to distribution with attribution, which together reinforces pre-election expansion of policy benefits (Bueno, 2021).

Manipulative techniques do not exist in isolation, whichever sphere of social life they touch - politics, education, culture, or health care. “The issues of political manipulation” have been comprehensively examined in the work of Norbert Paulo, who notes that “influence (on voters) can be exerted through manifold means and to different degrees, from communicative information and rhetoric over mass media advertisements and propaganda to exploitation of psychological weaknesses, subliminal priming, etc.” (Norbert and Bublitz, 2019: 58).

Draws attention to the complexity of the political process and Christopher M. Federico, in his opinion:

Stronger need for security and certainty attracts people to a broad-based politically conservative ideology, thus, a person's preference for a political idea specifically conservatism will be influenced by its psychological need for security, which can also be used in one or another political manipulation in social media" (Federico and Malka, 2018: 38).

It is difficult to understand the nature of political manipulation by examining generalized experiences, so Jonathan Matusitz chose to study the specific case of political manipulation on social media, comparing it to terrorism, Luis Posada scandal involved more than just the terror; it also involved the questionable collaboration of several U.S. presidents, government officials, and agencies with entities in Cuban-exile communities (Matusitz and Simi, 2021).

Robert Gorwa also preferred to examine one particular object of political manipulation on social media, namely the creation and use of so-called "bots" in the political process, noting that most recently, platform companies like Facebook and Twitter have been summoned to testify about bots as part of investigations into digitally enabled foreign manipulation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Gorwa and Guilbeault, 2018).

Whichever element of the political process is investigated in terms of its use of social media manipulation, it is imperative to examine it comprehensively, taking into account all the causal relationships and peculiarities of its legal nature. As correctly notes Luke Fowler, "... apply Kingdon's multiple streams framework (MSF) to policy implementation to reflect a nested process separate from but interdependent with policymaking" (Fowler, 2021: 418).

The results of these scientific works testify to the powerful psychological potential of social networks for their use in the implementation to influence the public consciousness. Political manipulations implemented in the virtual environment are used for election campaigning, legal and illegal activities of different political groups of a particular country, if we are talking about their use at the national level, for information warfare at the interstate level.

1. Materials and methods

To achieve the goal and objective of the study and to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the nature of political manipulation existing in social networks, their impact on society, we used general scientific methods of research, as well as legal and sociological methods.

2. Results and discussion

In the era of globalization and the introduction of information and communication technologies, almost all socially significant areas of society, accompanied simultaneously by the democratization of political processes and the political system, cause the rapid development of network technologies, innovative means of communication, and other attributes inherent in the life of the post-industrial world community.

These changes can be implemented as liberal-democratic transformations in socio-political life, the creation of the ombudsman institution, the formation of e-government, or as nominal changes taking place at the level of populism, the content of which consists only in a claim for democratization as the main demand of society without real changes in the political process of a particular country. An example of such changes can be defined as permanent reforms with respect to state structures, reorganization, and the creation or elimination of certain state agencies.

Consequently, it is the realization of the political aspect in the digital society that is remarkable in this trend of transformation, which manifests itself, first, in the diversity of subjects, both representatives of society and direct participants in the political process, second, in the diversity of the forms in which it is directly realized, and also “findings suggest an important “interaction occurs among problems, policies, and politics during the policy implementation process” (Fowler, 2021: 418) because the forms of its implementation cover almost all spheres of social life: education, culture, science, sports, health care, etc.

Obviously, whatever political processes take place in any given country, the influence of the media and social networks on their outcome will be significant, as evidenced by studies such as, “drawing upon 45 in-depth interviews with TVE news workers, our findings first illustrate the reach and morphology of political pressures in TVE, examining how the news production management structures the anatomy of political interferences in the newsroom” (Goyanes *et al.*, 2020);

By examining both overt and subtle mechanisms of electoral manipulation and fraud during electoral seasons in India and Pakistan, this special issue moves away from the dominant legalistic framework for examining electoral malpractice and demonstrates how electoral processes in the region cannot easily be insulated from an increasingly criminalized political landscape (Martin and Picherit, 2020: 08).

From the above, we can conclude that the most vulnerable element of the political process that falls under the influence of manipulation is the electoral process, and it is through the media and social networks that it is possible to influence the sympathies or antipathies of voters, for example by forming identical messages in social networks that are repeated many times.

Social networks are actively used with the use of political manipulation, as we have noted, for campaigning, despite the fact that the voting process itself has traditionally remained offline.

Furthermore, increasing use of social media technologies appears to expand citizen input at greatly reduced cost (Piccorelli and Stivers, 2019). The use of social media and the successful use of political manipulation during the electoral process allows for less costly election administration at all levels of government.

Politics in a state does not exist in isolation from other social phenomena and has close links with culture, sociology, and psychology, "... cognitive and emotional deficiencies can affect moral y political decisions" (Norbert and Bublitz, 2019: 70).

A characteristic feature of the political process at the present stage is the total informatization of the social space, information, methods, and mechanisms of its presentation in social networks have a direct impact on its recipients, "... information manipulation theory, which postulates that information is packaged through manipulative messages; it is transmitted from a sender who gives false information to a receiver, the audience" (Matusitz and Simi. 2021: 63).

Equally important is the issue of funding the manipulation of the political process carried out on social networks. Unscrupulous participants of the process, having more economic opportunities than their opponents, often resort to dirty manipulations, such as spreading fake information about them with the help of so-called "bots".

And cases of financial manipulation in the political process are not unique to our state, so in the United States "using a panel data set of 47 U.S. states from 1986 to 2013, we find that the persistent pattern of electoral cycles in general fund balances (GFBs) disappears in states with stricter TEL" (Seeun *et al.*, 2020: 382).

However, it is difficult to prove the fact of political manipulation in a virtual environment through the use of financial means in the implementation of various forms of the political "process, based on data collected from 1037 regressions in 46 studies, our meta-analysis suggests that little if any, systematic evidence can be found in the research record that national leaders do manipulate fiscal tools in order to be reelected" (Mandon and Cazals, 2018: 301).

At the present stage, some countries in the world are trying to eliminate illegal financial influence on the electoral process in order to avoid possible political manipulation. Brazilian rules banning credit claiming before elections while allowing the distribution of benefits until Election Day provides an opportunity to differentiate between distribution and credit

claiming combined with distribution as an engine that reinforces political budget cycles (Bueno, 2021).

Consequently, the political processes taking place in the constantly transforming modern digital society remain unchanged in their content. It is a peculiar interaction between the participants of the political process, the political elite, state structures, as conductors of the political activity of political subjects and society, according to a particular historical stage, only the nature of this interaction changes, which entails the reformatting of the political system in this or that country as a whole.

Social networks provide great advantages for the development of society, first of all, it is about the interactivity of the virtual environment, through which the global network acts as an effective mechanism to provide feedback between the authorities and society, the new technology opens up great opportunities for participants of the political process.

Also at the present stage, there is wide use of social networks by participants of the political process, relevant to it and perspective for the development of the political segment of the Internet in the future, propaganda is carried out by means of various Internet technologies which allows to draw more attention of the electorate to itself and leads to increase of political activity of citizens.

However, despite the obvious advantages of using social networks to implement policy objectives, we are inevitably confronted with the threats that it hides in itself. We are talking about unscrupulous participants in the political process and the manipulation techniques they use in the virtual environment of social networks.

Amid widespread reports of digital influence operations during major elections, policymakers, scholars, and journalists have become increasingly interested in the political impact of social media bots (Gorwa and Guilbeault, 2018).

An example of such political manipulation on social media is also deepfake, a set of technological transformations of images and videos created using artificial intelligence. Deepfake is a fabricated video, created from scratch or based on real-life footage, which aims to reproduce the appearance and voice of a real person performing actions or expressing speech that she never actually performed.

The basis of the action of political deepfakes is the technique of manipulating people. These techniques may use copies of images of political figures as the subject and people around the world as the object. Electronic social media play a crucial role in the promotion of deepfakes.

As social networks are getting more and more popular day by day, large numbers of users becoming constantly active social network users

(Bayrakdar *et al.*, 2020), which is related to the development of human civilization and the historical events it is experiencing: “Man is a social being” “...we argue that relationships between dispositional attributes and political preferences vary in the extent to which they reflect an organic functional resonance between dispositions and preferences or identity-expressive motivation to adopt a political attitude...” (Federico and Malka, 2018: 40).

According to this, political manipulation in social networks is quite effective in achieving certain goals, for example, using the issues of national minorities of a particular country. Language maintenance and revitalization efforts are increasingly important as languages spoken by smaller languages continue to be lost as globalization prioritizes larger languages of economic and political importance (Lou-Magnuson and Onnis, 2018).

“Being suggestible to each other’s expectations enables pro-social skills that are crucial for social learning and adaptation” (Duerler *et al.*, 2020: 65). It is an undeniable fact that a person’s expectations regarding a certain phenomenon and event are subjective and are also actively used in the implementation of political manipulation in social networks. We are talking primarily about the application: “... on communicative patterns prominent in social media: algorithms to aggregate news, filter bubbles, echo chambers, spirals of silence, false-consensus effects, fake news, and intentional disinformation” (Höttecke and Allchin, 2020: 445).

Social networks at the present stage should be seen as a trend - the direction of development of the political system. As practice shows, in large cities, which are centers of political and economic activity, this trend has already been fully implemented, it has become part of the daily life of man. In this case, we can argue about the actual informatization of political processes at the regional level.

“While the governance of the Internet is often assumed to be merely a technical matter, it is actually a fiercely contested political arena, in which institutional arrangements are still being shaped” (White, 2019, 465). Such informatization brings both positive changes to the political system and creates certain risks for it.

It is necessary to consolidate the political Internet community, preventing the disintegration of network segments based on ideological or other similar criteria. In addition, an important point in the functioning of social networks is state control over security in the virtual environment, which is not reduced to authoritarian methods of total control and non-admission of political forces in the arena of social networks based on their political perceptions, provided that the latter carry out their activities within the law.

It is also necessary to dwell on the problem of political manipulation in social networks, such as the role of the political elite in their implementation. “Many posts socialist countries are run by an elite with links to the socialist legacy and often share similar challenges and issues” (Pulatov and Ahmad, 2021: 1248). “The latter shows how sub-national transfer systems are affected by political manipulation, specifically that transfers are directed toward co-partisans of the politician who sends the funds” (Pickard, 2020: 113).

Like the media, political elites can use social media to satisfy their own needs, such as “scoring” votes for politicians. This leads to a loss of public trust in the government and the degradation of the political system as a whole, as well as the problem of manipulation in social media, which is carried out “...by the communicative tactics of provocation, warning, menacing, blackmailing, persuasion and flattery” (Bigunova and Kosovets, 2021: 100).

Conclusions

Thus, at the present stage of development of digital society, mechanisms of manipulation in social networks are one of the main means of information methods of confrontation, both between the states of the world, for the necessary “transit” of external ideas, values, symbols from the political control to destroy the traditional political space.

Social networks have a high potential to exercise covert large-scale manipulative influence on the consciousness of Internet users of a particular state and beyond its borders in the presence of external stakeholders competing with each other by improving the mechanisms of manipulation themselves and increase the effectiveness of their application in the information and communication environment.

Democratization is unthinkable without the development of network technologies, innovative means of communication, and other attributes of post-industrial society. The political processes taking place in today’s transforming society remain unchanged in their underlying essence.

The possibilities of social networks have tied together on a single communication platform most of the real political processes that are unfolding on the Internet, from pre-election campaigning to the illegal activities of marginal political groups.

An important characteristic of social networks is their interactivity, through which the global network acts as an effective mechanism of feedback between the authorities and society. The new technology opens up great opportunities for participants in the political process.

Propaganda with the help of various Internet technologies and social networks allows attracts more attention from the electorate, which in turn entails an increase in the political activity of citizens.

The Internet makes it possible to organize elections at all levels of government at a lower cost, a significant factor in its development as a means of political communication is the need to protect databases, ensuring state security, and other issues of cybersecurity.

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