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Diaspora Communities and Computational Propaganda on Messaging Apps

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Key Points

- Computational propaganda harms democratic processes since public opinion can be manipulated by state or non-state actors relying on popular emerging technologies.
- To rein in the spread of false and misleading information and limit its automated distribution, social media platforms have adopted content moderation regimes.
- Existing content moderation does not reach messaging apps, which are of a more closed nature and hence protected. Breaking encryption is not a good solution; instead, countering computational propaganda on messaging apps requires a bottom-up approach.
- Diaspora communities in the United States use messaging apps much more frequently than majority parts of the population. Their voices must be included in media literacy initiatives as well as policy making.

Introduction

Computational propaganda affects all citizens in democracies, but diaspora minority communities may encounter it in somewhat distinct forms and spaces and suffer particular consequences. This policy brief assesses these possible consequences and suggests appropriate policy recommendations to counter computational propaganda. The importance of messaging apps to these communities and the varying languages of the content, along with perceptions of trustworthiness due to a combination of these, are the key factors influencing exposure to and impacts of computational propaganda.

Overall, the manipulation of public opinion domestically and internationally has risen to new levels due to major technological advances in the last two decades (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018), including the advent of social media generally and people's reliance on social media for news consumption (Newman et al. 2023). In attempts to disrupt news agendas and reach citizens with false and misleading information, political strategists — state or non-state actors aiming to influence public opinion or benefit commercially — have increasingly relied on computational propaganda tactics.

About the Author

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What Is Computational Propaganda?

These technological developments necessitated new terminologies to understand and address contemporary attempts at public manipulation, such as *computational propaganda* — the “use of algorithms, automation, and human curation” (Woolley and Howard 2018) to manipulate public opinion via social media and other digital means. This includes the opportunity to create inauthentic — or fake — accounts that pretend to be connected to an actual person, the reliance on automated software applications programmed to perform tasks online (bots) to game social media algorithms (Monaco and Woolley 2022), as well as image and video manipulation; for example, via “deep fakes” that have been readily taken up by manipulative actors around the world (Pavlíková, Šenkýřová and Drmola 2021).

This miscellaneous manipulation affects political systems worldwide — including liberal democracies such as Canada and the United States (Tenove et al. 2018) — and occurs in two key respects. First, legitimacy of institutions is a major pillar of functioning political systems and, in democracies, the legitimacy of institutions is distinctly correlated with trust in the people who run them. This trust can be attacked and severely affected by false and misleading information. This decline in trust has increased especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (van der Crujisen, de Haan and Jonker 2022). Second, office holders from local officials to the president are subject to regular popular scrutiny — in the form of elections. Within the plethora of information targeted at voters, false and misleading information can become dominant if tactics of computational propaganda are employed. This can ultimately harm the democratic process if voters make decisions based on false and misleading information or end up not voting at all due to false information about voting procedures, for example, which is something the author has come across in their own research.

These two aspects highlight how interference into democracies via online manipulation can be particularly harmful since computational propaganda can attack the credibility of and, therefore, trust in institutions, and manipulate online content shown in newsfeeds that unduly influences political opinion formation and/or deters citizens from voting at all; finally, this can hurt minority inclusion and representation, in particular, due to specific targeting of minorities.

Focusing on Undemocratic Effects for Diaspora Communities

In research undertaken by the Propaganda Research Lab at the Center for Media Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin, the author and other colleagues found that minorities are targeted via different platforms and with different narratives than the majority population (Trauthig and Woolley 2022b; Mimizuka and Trauthig 2022; Kumleben, Joseff and Woolley 2022). For example, Cuban Americans in the United States are heavily targeted via WhatsApp and Telegram and Chinese Americans on WeChat, next to Facebook or X (previously known as Twitter).

As part of the research in the United States, qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Chinese, Cuban, Indian, Mexican and Venezuelan diaspora community members active on messaging apps (Kallio et al. 2016). Interviews were analyzed using open coding, whereby to the best of their ability, researchers allowed theory to emerge from a close reading of the data (Sarker, Lau and Sahay 2000). In addition, the Propaganda Research Lab conducted a survey in the United States asking 1,544 adult WhatsApp users to answer questions about their perceptions of the platform, their news and information consumption behaviours and their encounters with false information.

Accelerating Concerns

A political system that represents the will of the people, is accountable to its citizens and includes minorities in a meaningful manner to ensure plurality requires constant commitment and protection against challenges. Of course, computational propaganda is not the only threat to liberal democracy, but it is one that has substantially evolved in recent years and continues to advance at a rapid pace, along with artificial intelligence, for instance (Woolley 2022).

In the race to develop counter mechanisms and societal resilience against computational propaganda, the inclusion of minority voices has been under-represented — this goes hand in hand with the focus on platforms that are overwhelmingly important for majority parts of the population. In recent years, WhatsApp in particular has risen to prominence and civil society organizations have started initiatives such as Factchequeado, which operates a WhatsApp tipline in Spanish where users can ask for fact checks on information they found

on WhatsApp.¹ Overall, countering computational propaganda targeted at diaspora communities on messaging apps is particularly challenging due to, first, the closed nature of these platforms that renders traditional content moderation futile; and, second, the structural underpinnings that these platforms are disproportionately used by diaspora communities — exposing questions along minority/majority societal dynamics.

Building on several years of studying how social media and other digital tools are used to manipulate public opinion and spread propaganda, this policy brief will examine how computational propaganda reaches racial, ethnic and socio-demographic minorities via different platforms and consider why they are affected differently.

To address the challenges, unconventional approaches to countering computational propaganda are necessary. This policy brief will argue that sustainable democratic efforts to combat propaganda need to include diaspora communities in two main pillars: media literacy training design and policy making.

Diverse Platforms and Narratives Targeting Different Demographic Groups

Especially in the lead-up to elections, different parts of the population are targeted with computational propaganda to influence their opinions and subsequent voting behavior. However, outside of election season, computational propaganda has been employed by state and non-state actors to sway people — for example, Chinese propagandists trying to convince foreign audiences of their “fight against terrorism” when suppressing the Uighurs (Trauthig 2023).

Minorities in the United States are targeted via different platforms and with different narratives than the majority population (Fernando 2023). Among those targeted are a broad range of diaspora communities. To segment this massive population of

¹ See <https://factchequeado.com/english/>.

voters — consisting of people who have roots, and often family, in other countries across the world — political campaigners and groups have increasingly been trying to employ deceptive and illegitimate methods of outreach (Trauthig and Woolley 2022a).

The logic of political strategists is simple — these populations are growing and therefore gaining more civic clout. For example, in Houston, Texas, where the Propaganda Research Lab carried out research, Asian Americans are the fastest-growing broad demographic throughout the city’s sprawling suburbs (Baumann 2021). In Fort Bend County, to the southwest of the city, the community is primarily made up of Indian and Chinese Americans. In North Texas, Asian populations have ballooned in the last decade — growing by 90 percent in Irving (Gordon 2021) and by 53 percent in Tarrant County (Bahari 2022).

The Importance of Private Messaging Applications for Diaspora Communities

Much of this manipulative political messaging is conducted via private, encrypted messaging applications such as Telegram, WhatsApp and WeChat. The motivation for relying on these chat apps is pragmatic — they are immensely popular among diaspora communities (Riedl et al. 2022).

Political strategists are well aware that it is best to meet existing and future voters where they are, which translates into moving persuasion efforts to platforms popular among particular demographics. For instance, WhatsApp is the most popular chat app in India, and, therefore, among Indian diaspora communities. Similarly, Latino communities use WhatsApp and Telegram to stay in touch and exchange news with friends and family in their (new) home country and across borders (Trauthig and Woolley 2023). WeChat is the most popular Chinese instant messaging app (*The Economist* 2014). The app is popular both in China and among Chinese diaspora communities: it hosts more than 1.48 million active monthly users in the United States (Vuleta 2021).

In a 2022 survey of US diaspora communities, researchers found that WhatsApp is the second-most important medium for the spread of false information — behind “mainstream” social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on) but ahead of online news sites as well as radio and network television news (Riedl et al. 2022).

Private Messaging Apps and Unique Challenges Regarding Computational Propaganda

Compared to social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, WhatsApp and WeChat are more private spaces for communication due to their platform features, which are dominated by chats (one-to-one and group chats) and defined by varying levels of encryption. WhatsApp is end-to-end encrypted, meaning messages sent between users are unreadable by either the platform itself or any outsider (Glover et al. 2023). WeChat is transport encrypted — a type of encryption and hence rudimentary privacy — which allows the platform (but not third parties) to access messages. Networks of people have various opportunities to connect in group chats of up to 1,024 individuals on WhatsApp and 500 individuals on WeChat. In addition, WhatsApp offers “supra-chats” in the form of “WhatsApp communities” and WeChat hosts “official accounts” (OAs) — public WeChat profiles that allow users to share information publicly (ibid.). This feature is similar to Facebook pages, where profiles and posts are public and can attract followers to particular pages. The group chats can range from small family or friend groups to larger community or neighbourhood groups.

Political communication on these platforms can proliferate via broadcasting by OAs on WeChat and forwarding features on all messaging apps that offer easy sharing mechanisms between (group) chats, for instance. Specifically, OAs facilitate the viral spread of information as they allow a plethora of “verified” media outlets to disseminate news in a way similar to a newsfeed. Many news outlets based in Canada and the United States, which have significant Chinese populations, are home to OAs that disseminate local news (Shuang Li 2018). In interviews the research group at the University of Texas has undertaken with Chinese Americans in Houston, several of them mentioned that these OAs are important sources of news for them. Additionally, social media influencers and politically motivated groups have benefited from the ease of news sharing through OAs: for example, in 2016, a pro-Trump OA, “The Chinese Voice of America,” amassed more than 32,000 followers within months of its creation. With the help of OAs, these more hidden spaces of news consumption and political talk on WeChat, developed into outlets for propaganda and misleading content that can spread widely.

Correspondingly, on WhatsApp, messages can be shared through broadcast lists and forwarding that allows any message to be forwarded to multiple chats at once. Individuals forwarding news stories to their family and friends is common practice. A student from the Indian American community in Houston who was interviewed noted that her parents' extensive political news sharing on WhatsApp is driven by guilt for immigrating to the United States: "[My parents] forward things because they want to feel like they're doing something," she said. "Them trying to send these news articles is their way of trying to give back and help their community that they left." This points toward unique challenges when trying to counter false information sharing, as some diaspora community members are emotionally compelled to do so. Again, these dynamics are not to be attributed to individual community members who are more "prone" to sharing misleading information — instead the broader structural dynamics they are embedded in compel quicker sharing.

Although WhatsApp implemented limits to forwarding messages, interviewees emphasized that they still see plenty of false information — and often it is forwarded content. The issue is so extensive that Indian Americans use the term "WhatsApp degree" to describe tendencies to share false information from WhatsApp with confidence.

Finally, false political information on messaging apps often spreads in different languages. An article from a Canadian mainstream news site might be in English, but the accompanying text is in Hindi and misrepresents the original article. When such a message gets forwarded, people the researchers spoke to underlined that the focus is on the accompanying text in Hindi rather than the original article, and that false summary or talking point quickly takes on a life of its own. The takeaway here is that this accompanying text is often misrepresentative of the actual article. Forwarding a longer news story from an established US outlet with an accompanying text is used as a propaganda tactic to convey a different point than originally encapsulated in the article. Especially for community members that prefer reading in languages other than English, they might believe the distorted accompanying text without checking the original.

The More Intimate, the More Potentially Dangerous

In addition to the confident sharing of news items, the messages are usually forwarded between friends or family groups. This adds trust and (alleged) credibility to the messages — encapsulated in the concept of "relational organizing" that offers an explanation as to why messages and messengers on these platforms are given increased credibility (Gursky et al. 2022). Similarly, researchers have found that users have a tendency to avoid conflict when encountering false claims in private online spaces, such as WhatsApp groups. Political consultants have long found success with using relational organizing to promote political campaigns in which personal networks are harnessed with the intention of mobilizing a community (Levy 2020).

The topics and narratives that often dominate false and misleading information shared among diaspora communities in the United States on messaging apps fall into four main categories: sowing of confusion via translational ambiguities; leveraging falsehoods to redraw ideological fault lines; use of religion to sow doubt about candidates' views; and oversimplification of complex perspectives, policies and procedures to alter voting decisions (Trauthig and Woolley 2022a).

In other words, next to general topics that commonly include false information (related to, for example, voting machines and mail-in voting), political strategists craft their messaging for diaspora communities. For example, immigrants from countries under socialist, authoritarian regimes such as Cuba or who have lived through an event such as the Chinese Cultural Revolution are structurally set up to be reached more easily with false information claiming politicians want to turn the United States into a socialist state. With this, they are preying on pre-existing conditions, such as that folks from countries that have not recently had free and fair elections may already have a distrust of elections and authority.

Furthermore, the researchers repeatedly witnessed political topics infiltrating non-political community groups. Within Asian diaspora communities especially, messaging apps are often used as a tool to connect members to helpful local resources. For parents, these chats are often used to exchange information pertinent to their children's education, such as SAT preparation, college admissions, tutoring services and so on. According to the interviewees, these chats are designed to connect individuals

with like-minded concerns related to their children's well-being. Conjointly, political matters infiltrate originally non-political community chats when parents view their children's well-being as being at stake. For instance, members of the Chinese American community in Houston told researchers that during the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the killing of George Floyd, biased and misleading articles regarding Black people who allegedly pursued violence against Asian people went viral in Chinese American parent WeChat groups. In those examples, misleading and hateful content was coming from domestic actors at first but, as the topic went viral, foreign actors — such as the Chinese Communist Party — exploited it and crafted similar messages commenting on the American situation from abroad (Glover and Dila 2022).

Finally, as an encrypted messaging app, WhatsApp is excluded from the content moderation regimes that define Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. On those sites, blatantly false content is regularly removed, but due to encryption, scrutiny of, for example, group chats by corporate content moderators is not an option. One measure WhatsApp introduced was the meta-data-based interventions limiting the forwarding of messages mentioned earlier. Independently of that, media organizations (Weffer 2020), non-governmental organizations and researchers have started “WhatsApp tip lines” (such as Factchequeado.com), where users can report problematic messages and are provided with fact-checked responses to their inquiries. In the United States, however, these tip lines receive comparatively little traction.

Many of the interviewees reported that they are hesitant to report misleading or hateful content they see on chat apps (Mimizuka and Trauthig 2022). This is largely because they receive this content from close friends and family in small group chats, and do not want to report family members or have a falling out over politics with close friends. Hand in hand with the reported hesitation to report false or misleading content on messaging apps goes the conviction that many diaspora community members consider messaging apps safe spaces for them to communicate. They note that structural dynamics — including linguistic and cultural barriers — lead them to consume content from alternate news sources rather than “mainstream” outlets. These relatively protected environments offer an alternative to what is considered the majority-dominated public discourse (or mainstream news). This underlines

the importance of community involvement in attempts to limit the spread of computational propaganda among diaspora communities in Western democracies such as Canada and the United States.

Recommendations

To effectively counter these challenges, two pillars — with the aim of adequately engaging wider segments of the population — need to be pursued and/or strengthened.

First, minorities should be included in the development of media literacy training. It is important that they are active contributors, not just addresses, in order to contribute a well-informed perspective on the actual challenges faced by different communities.

Media consumption differs slightly for every individual, but some trends define broader parts of the population, such as the importance of messaging apps for news consumption for diaspora community members. Consequently, for example, messaging apps should be included in media literacy training with diaspora community members, although they have less importance for many majority parts of the population. Ideally, literacy training for messaging apps would apply to all demographics but given the relatively low levels of WhatsApp use among other US demographics, the rationale to make these platforms a focus is less strong. The design of media literacy training and associated in-person and/or digital workshops, exercises and/or games should therefore include a plurality of voices.

Ensuring this process is successful is a mid- to long-term project, as it requires several stages of trust building between funders (especially state funders) and local communities. In addition, literacy programs struggle to reach people out of school. Facilitators, such as local community organizations or researchers, can help to initiate some of that trust building but should not be acting as gatekeepers, as that would reinforce existing structures of privilege (again). This is vital as singling out diaspora communities should not be viewed as an effort to “educate” some parts of the population. One could argue that diaspora communities are sometimes more vulnerable to populist rhetoric precisely *because* they demonstrate a higher degree of skepticism and a critical stance with regard to official news sources. In other words, marginalized communities are often well-placed to

apply critical thinking when consuming the media. In that vein, members of diaspora communities could leverage the sophistication of media interpretation that they may have, given long-standing exposure to manipulative media in some of their countries of origin (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022). Any policy recommendation intended to strictly reassert the legitimacy of official news sources fails to address the challenge of trust and inclusion. In the long term, we need to design digital literacy initiatives that promote an *inclusive* dialogue that can be truly interactive, so as to begin the process of (re)building public trust (Stier and Freedman 2022).

Second, minority populations and young people should be included in policy discussions — as a valued contributor, not a side note.

Democratic lawmakers should aim to understand the significance of messaging apps for diaspora communities. Overregulating a space just because it is less understood than other parts of social media can harm marginalized populations. In order to create more inclusive democracies, the laborious task of finding, hearing and understanding all voices should be a paradigm. Addressing this question is an ongoing task for political systems, many of which are defined by histories of exclusion or marginalization, including Canada and the United States. Journalists and policy makers should carry these insights into discussions about public trust and move away from top-down models that derive from the points of view of people in power. Legislative discussions about regulating the tech sector and content moderation should include representatives from minority groups so that their experiences and opinions inform these discussions.

Finally, there are lessons that can be learned from many years of designing programming on preventing and countering violent extremism — namely, that singling out certain communities as target communities is detrimental to the overall aim; that top-down models are often badly informed and implemented inadequately but bottom-up models need some standards; and, finally, that many people can be swayed by conspiracy theories, for example, which reinforces the call to reflect critically on any programming to ensure that prejudices do not make their way into counterprogramming.

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