Challenges for Social Media: Misinformation, Free Speech, Civic Engagement, and Data Regulations

Nic DePaula
University at Albany, SUNY, USA.
ndepaula@albany.edu

Kaja J. Fietkiewicz
Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany.
kaja.fietkiewicz@hhu.de

Thomas J. Froehlich
Kent State University, USA.
tfroehli@kent.edu

A.J. Million
University of Michigan's iSchool, USA.
millioaj@umich.edu

Isabelle Dorsch
Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany.
isabelle.dorsch@hhu.de

Aylin Ilhan
Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany.
aylin.ilhan@hhu.de

ABSTRACT

Social media has arguably brought one of the greatest changes to Internet communication since the invention of the Web but challenges as well. Apart from helping people to have access and to exchange information, social media has also been used to spread misinformation, hate speech, and the user-generated data is adopted for targeted commercial and political advertising based on personal profiles. Moreover, the most popular applications available are owned by a small number of companies who may have an undue influence on how civic engagement takes place on their platforms. In this panel, four panelists will discuss the following: *misinformation and the role of pseudo-cognitive authorities*; *hate speech and Germany's Network Enforcement Act (NetzGD)*; *civic engagement and market capture by social media companies*; and finally, *personal data processing and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)*. We intend to raise interesting questions helping to understand these issues, and to find solutions for the beneficial use of information technologies as well as to scope out all its advantages.

KEYWORDS

Civic Engagement, Hate Speech, Misinformation, Social Media, GDPR

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media has become an integral part of many areas in our lives – from the communication between friends, to the organizing of social gatherings, protests and even the decision-making of government officials. The way these technologies have developed, however, have also brought many challenges, which highlight their ethical, legal and political characteristics. One of the main challenges of social media is the proliferation of misinformation or "fake news." According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 213), fake news "are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers." On social media, "consumers cannot spotlessly infer accuracy" (p. 214) of the news and this may help explain why fake news and misinformation quickly spread. In this panel presentation, Thomas J. Froehlich discusses the problem of online misinformation and in particular the issue of "pseudo-cognitive-authorities." He raises questions regarding the role of such authorities and how disinformation may be facilitated on social media.

Another challenge of social media concerns hate speech. Perry and Olsson (2009) stress that with the Internet, hate groups get a new platform where they can distribute their messages and form their communities. Mondal, Silva, and Benevenuto define hate speech "as an offensive post, motivated, on whole or in a part, by the writer's bias against an aspect of a group of people" (2017, p. 87); and Facebook defines it as "content that attacks people based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability or disease" (Facebook, n.d.). As simple as the definitions may seem – it is not easy to control hate speech and to support and protect free speech, especially since national laws are so different (Akdeniz, 2006; Alam, Raina, & Siddiqui, 2016). In this panel presentation, Kaja J. Fietkiewicz raises the issue of hate speech and discusses the Network Enforcement Act that was passed in Germany in January 2018. She reviews the debate on how this legislative act may perform in addressing the hate speech dilemma.

One of the main benefits of the Internet and social media for political purposes is their uses in civic engagement activities. Civic engagement is central to democratic politics and it can be defined in many ways. For example, Putnam (2001) defines civic engagement as connections to community and social life, and Norris (2001) conceives of civic engagement as intrinsically related to politics. Vitak et al. (2011, p. 108) noted that Facebook and its possibilities "offer affordable (i.e., free) opportunities to develop civic engagement skills with little to no additional time costs for users of Facebook, while simultaneously having

access to a potentially large enough ''public'' to develop civic skills." But what happens when Facebook is the only game in town? In this panel presentation, A.J. Million discusses the problem of social media market capture and the consequences for non-profits involved in civic engagement.

Social media clearly offer a number of benefits to society. These tools allow companies to advertise their products, and political groups to reach their constituencies. They also lead to mass social phenomena, such as protests and opinion changes, which can have overall positive benefits to societies. Moreover, these tools are generally open for individuals to exchange information that they may prefer, and sometimes not prefer, to see and potentially discuss. But how are personal data of individuals—generated by social media and online activity more broadly—processed by the companies that are given and become owners of the data? In this panel presentation, Nic DePaula raises the issue of targeted advertising, psychological profiles and how the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union is supposed to address the issue of personal data processing and the rights of the data subject.

PANEL STRUCTURE

The panel is structured as follows. First, the chair will introduce the panel speakers and give an overview of the discussed topics, including the main concerns and definitions of the research area as well as the outcomes of an informetric analysis on the topic. Following this, each panelist will answer the main question regarding her or his research. The addressed questions concern the challenges and risks related to social media use in the context of fake news, hate speech, manipulation and surveillance. The panel will be concluded with a discussion round. The panel should last 1.5 hours.

Aylin Ilhan and Isabelle Dorsch will introduce the speakers, present a short informetric analysis, and moderate the panel.

Isabelle Dorsch is research associate and Ph.D candidate at the Department of Information Science, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (Germany). She is a lecturer in social media and knowledge representation as well as mentor for student research projects. Besides social media (with special focus on user behavior on Instagram), her research interests include, but are not limited to informetrics (especially scientometrics).

Aylin Ilhan is research associate and Ph.D candidate at the Department of Information Science, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (Germany). She is a lecturer in social media, scientific writing as well as mentor for student research projects. Her research interests include, but are not limited to social media (user behavior), activity trackers (e.g., acceptance, impact, motivation, information and user behavior) and smart cities.

Fake news, its rapid dissemination and its relation to pseudo-cognitive-authorities, by Thomas J. Froehlich

Given the rise of disinformation and misinformation, particularly in terms of fake news or doxing, with a large segment of the population not only embracing but also perpetuating this content, questions need to be raised about false or pseudo- cognitive authorities in the disinformation marketplace. What are pseudo-cognitive-authorities? What are their characteristics and venues? How do they foster and spread fake news through social media and cable news? Recent studies (e.g., Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018) suggest that lies spread faster online than the truth and that the right-wing is more prone to uncritically embrace and spread fake news. Combining these threads leads to the question: What are the grounds, psychological and otherwise, to account for the speed and dissemination of fake news and the role(s) that pseudo-cognitive-authorities for creating and abetting the spread of such disinformation?

Thomas J. Froehlich, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus, School of Information, Kent State University (27 years). The majority of his publications are concerned with ethical considerations in the information professions, evolving in part from his philosophy background (Ph.D., Duquesne University). Dr. Froehlich currently teaches a course on the Age of Disinformation and has taught in the areas of information science, ethics, online searching, knowledge management and user interface design. He has provided workshops, trainings, seminars or presentations in 26 countries.

The boundary between hate and free speech—What are the risks of the German Network Enforcement Act? by Kaja J. Fietkiewicz

Free speech is one of the fundamental democratic rights. Especially today with the enormous popularity of social media the ordinary user can address a much broader audience than before. As in real life, social media channels are not exclusively used for "friendly" and positive content, but also for hate speech, mobbing or defamation. In the last few years the amount of hate speech spread via social media increased, making the so-called "incitement of the masses" or "incitement to hatred" get more and more attention by the law enforcement. One of the problems was the reluctance of platforms like Facebook to (immediately) delete such content after it was reported by users. To counteract the spreading of hate speech as well as "fake news" on social networks, the German legislature issued the "Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz" (NetzGD), the Network Enforcement Act, which

came into force on January 1st, 2018. Since then, there is an ongoing debate whether this is an adequate tool against hate speech or rather a new form of censorship based on denunciation by social media users and "enforced" by the social media giants.

Dr. Kaja J. Fietkiewicz is post-doctoral research associate at the Department of Information Science, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (Germany). She is a lecturer in information law and statistics as well as mentor for student research projects. Her research interests include smart city development (with focus on e-government), information law (with focus on competition law and data privacy), as well as social media, especially social live streaming services.

Civic engagement and social media use by nonprofit organizations—Does market capture pose a threat to grassroots democratic activity? by A.J. Million

Civic engagement is central to democratic governance. Engagement can take many forms, and examples range from fundraising for nonprofit organizations to registering voters in poorly represented communities. As a consequence, more engaged communities tend to possess lower rates of crime, poverty, and unemployment, and have better health and education than their less engaged counterparts. Since the 1970's, evidence suggests that civic engagement in Western democracies is declining or changing. To remedy this issue, one solution is for nonprofits to leverage social media to engage with citizens online. There are roughly 1.5 million nonprofits in the U.S. However, based on initial data from a study of 23 nonprofits in Chicago, IL, Facebook appears to have "captured" the nonprofit social media market. Already, Facebook is the most used social media tool in the world, and market capture often hurts consumers. This raises the question if social media market capture poses a threat to grassroots democratic activity, given the key role that nonprofits play in sustaining it.

Dr. A.J. Million is a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Michigan School of Information. His research pertains to the creation and administration of public and nonprofit information resources. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Missouri, where his dissertation examined bureaucratic organization and innovation in U.S. state department of transportation websites.

Personal data processing and targeted advertising—Does the General Data Protection Regulation go far enough? by Nic DePaula

In an interview on March 27, 2018, Apple CEO Tim Cook, said that: "we could make a ton of money … if our customer was our product. We've elected not to do that." (Sherter, 2018). Why not? Is there an ethical problem with using personal data for targeted advertising? What about creating psychological profiles for political advertising? Or is the ethical problem one of having (or not) consent from users? Although in the U.S. and in Canada no major regulations have been created to address problems with the processing of personal data by businesses—including those that came to light from the Cambridge Analytica scandal—the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has come into effect in the European Union of as May 2018 to provide some relief for those concerned. How does it achieve this? In this panel presentation, I identify issues with the processing of personal data carried out by social media and Internet companies more broadly. I then review some principles of the GDPR and its stipulated "rights of the data subject." Lastly, I raise questions regarding the necessity and sufficiency of the GDPR within its own as well as other legal contexts.

Nic DePaula is a PhD candidate in the department of Information Science at the University at Albany, State University of New York. His research interests are in data science, text mining and political communication. Previously, Mr. DePaula has worked with geographic information technologies and information security. His work has appeared in various journals, including Government Information Quarterly, Social Science Computer Review and First Monday.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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