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SOCIAL NETWORKS AND POLITICAL MARKETING BETWEEN MANIPULATION AND CENSORSHIP

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Abstract: The Internet era announced at the end of the 1990s outlined enormous social changes. Manuel Castells argued that these changes would transform the way we communicate. The growth of the network reached a turning point with the appearance of smartphones in 2007. Since 2000, political campaigns saw the web as a new platform to promote candidates through political marketing. In 2007-2008, the Obama Campaign, with a skillful microtargeting strategy, along with other strategies, managed to position the candidate and win. The milestone of this successful campaign forced many candidates to consider the digital marketing strategy indispensable. For the presidential campaign in which Trump won, the role of the Cambridge Analytica company was much discussed, which with the support of Facebook, obtained the information of millions of users. The subsequent impeachment process against President Trump raised the issue of the involvement of Russian hackers through campaigns in favor of the Republican. Both phenomena generated an intense debate about the role of social media in the manipulation of the electorate and the need for regulation of the networks.

Keywords: Political campaigns, political marketing, social media, framing and priming.

IN THE ERA OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

The Internet era announced at the end of the 1990s outlined enormous social changes. Manuel Castells argued that these changes would transform the way we communicate. Castells' prediction dimly anticipated what would happen with the Internet and social networks and the relationship that a large sector of the population would develop with their consumption. With the development of the Internet, two major perceptions quickly formed around its potential. The first is where the "cyber-optimists" are located, since for them the web opened the realm of freedom by enabling a large number of users to participate in debates and the exchange of information.

From another angle, the "cyber-critics" of the way the web has evolved are identified, especially the transformation that large companies are registering in the economy and its impact on vast areas of life ranging from the labor market to what is called surveillance capitalism (ZUBOFF, 2021). The central purpose of this work is to describe, discuss and analyze the impact of political marketing on the web and its probable and necessary regulation.

Firstly, and regarding the emergence of social networks, Facebook being one of the most prominent. Adam Kucharsky mentions that "just as the financial industry had become excited about new mortgage products in the 1990s, social media was seen as something that would change politics forever. But, like opinions on those financial products, it was an attitude that would not last" (KUCHARSKI, 2021, p. 247). This "flood of digital technology on society," warns William Davies, "makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish what "concerns the mind and what concerns the body."

> In the murky space between mind and body, between war and peace, there are nervous states: individuals and governments that live in a constant and heightened state of alert and that rely increasingly on feeling than on reality (DAVIES, 2019, p. 15).

How can we separate these altered states from the flood of the internet into our lives? The current era is totally different from others because individuals are over-informed. Exposed like no other era in the history of humanity to the torrent of information that runs through platforms and social networks. For some platforms like Google, this phenomenon represents that the company:

It would direct its own (and ever-growing) cache of behavioral data, as well as its computing power and know-how, toward a single goal and a single task: matching ads to searches. A new rhetoric began to take hold to legitimize this unprecedented maneuver. If advertising was to be introduced at all, then it had to be "relevant" to users. Ads would no longer be tied to keywords used in a search query, but would be "targeted" to each individual in particular. Seizing this holy grail of advertising would provide relevant ads for users and valuable visibility for advertisers (ZUBOFFf, 2020, p. 83).

The extraction of browsing data from specific searches, with the initial argument that this action responded to the platform's concern of processing information to improve services, actually opened the door to microtargeting, that is, to the personalization of advertising. This digital footprint is unique since each user reflects in their navigation through the various sites on the web a trace that allows the platforms to get an idea of the consumer's personality and from this typology to program and offer products, services, site pages, all through micro segmentation.

Our relationship with devices, whether smartphones, tablets or personal computers, indicates that we dedicate more and more time to them, whether for work or leisure activities. Last year 2020, sui generis due to the COVID pandemic, which meant long periods of confinement in homes, increased the time spent on the Internet, to an average of 7 hours a day. The number of social media users has also increased to a community of 4.2 billion users and an average consumption of 2 and a half hours a day. Of the 5 most used platforms, 4 are owned by Facebook (Facebook, Youtube, Instagram and WhatsApp), that is, by Mark Zuckerberg (WE ARE SOCIAL, 2021).

"This Google is the superpower that imposes its own values and pursues its own ends, putting them before (and overriding) the social contracts that do bind others" (ZUBOFF, 2020, p. 91).

FROM MARKETING TO MICROTARGETING

In this section we focus on the discussion of the impact of marketing through the main platforms: Google/ Apple/ Facebook/ Amazon/ Microsoft (GAFAM from now on) using various microtargeting strategies. Since 2000, political campaigns have seen the web as a new platform to promote candidates through political marketing. The growth of the network reached a turning point with the appearance of smartphones in 2007. Media consumption with the software developed to process browsing data meant that:

> Google's invention revealed that the company had acquired new capabilities of inference and deduction of the thoughts, feelings, intentions and interests of individuals and groups thanks to an automated architecture that functions as a one-way mirror and **acts independently** of whether the monitored individual or group knows and consents to it or not, thus enabling privileged secret access to behavioral data (ZUBOFF 2020, p. 90).

Among the various changes that we will mention in this regard and that are specifically related to what is being discussed here is the transformation of segmentation in campaigns. In 2007-2008, the Obama Campaign, with the incorporation of former platform executives with a skillful microtargeting strategy, managed, along with other strategies, to position the candidate and win. The milestone of this successful campaign forced many candidates to consider the digital marketing strategy to be very indispensable.

The participation of former Google platform officials in the Obama campaign also meant the arrival of the algorithm as the great decider in microsegmentation. Today, the development of what is called cyberpolitics is considered a milestone in campaigns, the latter understood as the set of political actions carried out through the various platforms. Algorithms are understood as the set of

instructions used to program a system that will enable data processing (a user's browsing preferences) to carry out tasks or activities, in this case profiling sites that are considered to be of interest to the user. This is how filters are created, says Eli Parisier, based on your identity (of course, according to Google or Facebook).

> Most personalized filters are based on a three-stage model. First, you find out who people are and what they like, then you provide them with the content and services that are most appropriate for them, and finally, you refine the feature to hit the nail on the head. Your identity shapes your media. There is only one flaw in this logic: media also shapes identity, and therefore these services may end up creating a good match between you and your media by changing… you. (PARISIER, 2017, p. 115.)

BIG DATA: FROM CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA TO RUSSIA-GATE

During the 2016 presidential campaign, in which Trump won, there was much discussion about the role of Cambridge Analytica, which, with the support of Facebook, obtained information on 50 million users. This information was used in the campaign strategies of the Republican candidate's team. Jorge Aguilera points out that Steve Bannon, who was vice president of Cambridge Analytica, processed the information he obtained from Facebook through a:

> Bannon methodology developed through Cambridge Analytica (which) consists of obtaining data from social media users about their emotional ratings (Liking, disliking, likes, topics of interest) in order to create a psychological profile of individuals in a society and, with algorithms, manipulate them emotionally. From this, they cause hatred, anxiety, anger and after which they channel these emotions through micro-segmentation of messages, with this the person acts in reality based on information

with which they were manipulated from social networks (AGUILERA, 2021, pp. 296-297).

Bannon later became Trump's campaign manager. It is believed that the campaign had also conducted countless focus groups, which allowed it to identify the lines of what would later become the "anti-system" narrative. The campaign's framework was built like this. It must be remembered that "broad frameworks and inclusive accounts tend to favor rational decisions" (KAHNEMAN, 2020, p. 484). For Lakoff, the framework reminds us of a metaphor, "framing has to do with choosing the language that fits your worldview. But it's not just about language. Ideas come first. And language conveys those ideas, it evokes those ideas" (LAKOFF, 2007, p. 7). What better way to find out which words the electorate will identify with than to do prior research. Thus, with the anti-system narrative obtained through Facebook and focus groups, the citizens who would be the Republican candidate's support base would be found. Angry citizens, expressing it on the "walls" of their profiles, upset by the massive bankruptcies during the 2008-2009 crisis.

The loss of jobs, their homes and the constant transfer of production plants to other countries, to save payrolls and environmental controls, found in candidate Trump a figure who, through high-sounding speeches, attracted more and more citizens who considered themselves abandoned by the political system. The Republican candidate would play the role of the righteous politician against the traditional politicians of the country's capital, those who abandoned the citizens of half the country, at least.

The subsequent impeachment process on President Trump led to a debate on the participation of external actors (Russian hackers) through promotional campaigns in favor of the Republican. Both phenomena

(Cambridge Analytica-Russia/gate) generated an intense debate on the role of social networks in the manipulation of the electorate in favor of a certain candidate. The Cambridge Analytica case has many facets.

> The advertising industry was helping to normalize Cambridge Analytica for years. It is unclear whether that will change, even after a global scandal. In its year-old press release, the firm openly stated that it had managed to "**identify persuadable voters, uncover the issues that would drive their voting decisions**," and that it had "targeted undecided female Democratic voters after building models of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton support in ten swing states." To its peers, Cambridge Analytica was operating in broad daylight (THE INTERCEPT, 2018).

Perhaps since the participation of former Google officials and their successful campaign, through cyberpolitical strategies, something became clear: political campaigns, at least the large-scale ones - presidential and Congressional - would never be the same again. For the political parties, this was established, but also for Silicon Valley.

The buoyant sector of the digital economy - GAFAM - became aware of the muscle it used to support the Democratic president to reach the presidency, either through the strategies mobilized or through economic support. Power is to be exercised, and that is what GAFAM would do from now on. It is Robert Hannigan, former director of British Intelligence until January 2017 in an interview with the BBC who warns:

> That Facebook is a "possible" threat to democracy if "it is not controlled and regulated. But these big companies, especially where there are monopolies, cannot reform themselves. It will have to come from outside," he said. Politicians have realised that Facebook can be as powerful as governments (ECONOMÍA Digital, 2018).

RUSSIA-GATE

It is believed that unusual movements or "digital intrusions" as they were called by the National Security Agency (NSA) and the FBI were recorded since the summer of 2015. By 2016, Wikileaks and DC Leaks were identified as the sources of disclosure of emails obtained from the Democratic National Committee that were obtained by Russian hackers. "Information about Russian meddling caused deep concern in Obama's National Security Council. Over time, the information improved and became more convincing" (WOODWARD, 2018, p. 55).

> In the fall, intelligence reports showed that Moscow – like almost everyone else – believed Clinton was likely to win. Russian President Vladimir Putin's influence campaign shifted strategy to undermine her upcoming presidency. Clapper and Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson were the quickest to alert the public about Russian interference. At 3:00 p.m. on Friday, October 7, they issued a joint statement officially accusing Russia of trying to interfere in the U.S. election, though they did not name Putin publicly (WOODWARD, 2018, p. 56).

Russian intervention in the US elections has been established as an unlikely thesis to discuss. Perhaps it is actually up to international experts to decode the meaning of the intervention of hackers from one country in the electoral processes of another.

This dynamic is becoming more and more recurrent because social networks make it possible. The truth is that perhaps the most questionable aspect of this intervention is the fact itself, that is, the intervention in the sovereignty of a country seeking to influence the debates and tilt the result towards a certain candidate, affecting the adversary.

Adam Kucharski acknowledges that there was a lot of Russian marketing on networks like Facebook circulating that year, as well as

many other contents. "American users saw around a billion pieces of content on that same platform. For every Russian comment that an individual was exposed to, on average, they were also exposed to another ninety thousand pieces of content" (KUCHARSKI, 2020, pp. 248-249). He goes on to say that Trump actually got the most support from the media: "It has been calculated that in the first year of his campaign Trump got the equivalent of 2 billion dollars of free coverage from the media. In just 6 days, the New York Times included as many front-page stories about Hillary Clinton's emails as about all other political matters combined in the sixty-nine days prior to the election" (IDEM). Perhaps that was actually the Russian intervention in the process, providing the information from the Democratic candidate's unencrypted emails to sites like Wikileaks, which in turn spread it to various media outlets. The controversial information they contained irreparably damaged the campaign.

Another sentence about the role of hackers and successful campaigns in manipulation is Brexit. Kuckarski himself argues that there is little evidence that the process was manipulated by Russia. However, in this case as in previous ones, the "successful" emancipatory role of social networks has been established, perhaps through intense marketing campaigns in the media such as the press and television. I cite, for example, the so-called Arab Spring carried out between 2010-2012, in which apparently there were smart-mob strategies, that is, protests called through smartphones, an unlikely event if we think of the low internet coverage in the countries where these mobilizations were recorded – Syria, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Added to this, there is digital illiteracy. Castells himself (2012, p. 66) points out that this is what happened, that the population fed up with the excesses of the dictators of the region, at the head of political power, organized themselves through social networks, especially Facebook. These theses, which are very popular, especially among the "cyber-optimists" we described above, have become almost a verdict. The truth of the matter is that there is no empirical evidence to support these arguments, which are incredible and improbable in countries with so much poverty and backwardness, the very causes of the malaise.

COMMUNICATION AND MANIPULATION STRATEGIES ON NETWORKS

A) THE ALGORITHM AND MANIPULATION

Political marketing finds a new space for diffusion in social networks. We do not necessarily believe that the possibilities of influence of digital marketing are reinvented and overestimated, but we must avoid endorsing the theoretical assumptions of studies from the interwar period of the 20th century (the theory of the bullet or the hypodermic needle) that postulated the total manipulation of the Internet user and the total effectiveness of marketing. Obviously, we cannot deny that manipulation phenomena are recorded, which are achieved precisely by a combination of various communication strategies aimed at this. We will discuss exactly this in the following lines. Let us start from the scenario in which Google decided to appropriate the information of the users.

> In 2016, 89% of the revenue of its parent company, Alphabet, came from Google's targeted advertising programs. 89 The scale of the commodity flows is reflected in Google's dominance of the internet, where it processes an average of more than forty thousand queries every second: more than 3.5 billion searches daily and 1.2 trillion worldwide throughout 2017 (ZUBOFF, 2020, p. 103).

The numbers are impressive, the platform has accumulated a power rarely seen in the history of the media. Now, let's focus on the strategies. In the review of the debate on digital marketing, Samantha Bradshaw, from the Internet Institute of Oxford, identifies "cyber troops", understood as "government or political party actors in charge of manipulating public opinion online". To achieve their objective, they resort to various strategies:

a) The participation of bots to amplify hate speech;

b) Dissemination of manipulated content (fake news and post-truth);

c) Illegal data collection;

d) Microtargeting;

e) Armies of trolls aimed at intimidating dissidents/political opponents or online journalists (BRADSHAW, 2019, p. 1).

Each of these 5 strategies pointed out by Samantha Bradshaw generates a broad debate; they are, today, the necessary coordinates to address the debate on the digital dimension of marketing and its impact on public opinion. Regarding the third strategy, that of illegal data collection, which is carried out in an identified manner by the company Google, and others from GAFAM, Shoshana Zuboff points out that "the predictions about our behaviors are Google's products and the company sells them to its real clients, but not to us. We are the means used to serve the purposes of others" (ZUBOFF, 2021, p. 134). In this regard, Robert Hannigan, who was director of British intelligence until January 2017, said in an interview for the Today program, on the British public channel BBC that "Facebook's main objective is to squeeze every drop of profit it can get from its users' data" (DIGITAL ECONOMY, 2018). The members of GAFAM have accumulated so much economic and political power that perhaps it is time to ask ourselves if it is still pertinent to speak of a "free market" – given its evident monopolistic presence – or to ask if it is still possible to speak of political freedoms, the very essence of contemporary liberal democracy.

Or perhaps it is time to recognize that we are today facing a clear Cyber-Leviathan, which marks the Silicon Valley – where the main technology companies are based – as the new locus of power.

We know that absolutely all of our activity on the web generates what Zuboff herself calls "behavioral surplus," which serves various purposes. Among them, they serve for personalized commercial campaigns, but also to "bring us" political information according to the profile that GAFAM companies have of us. Through the filters and the bubble or loop that forms around us, there is an evident bias:

The filter bubble doesn't just reflect your identity, it also shows what possibilities you have. Students studying at some of the most prestigious American universities see job advertisements that might interest them that students at public schools don't even realize exist. The personal news feed of professional scientists might include articles about competitions that novices would never hear about. By showing **some possibilities and blocking others, the filter bubble plays a role in your decisions**. And in turn, it shapes who you become (PARISIER, 2017, p. 116).

The bubble around us exposes us to certain campaigns, including political marketing, to fulfill "the ends of others," to paraphrase Zuboff. Of the GAFAM companies, Facebook is the most exposed to the activity of cyber troops. The explanation may be its size, warns Samantha Bradshaw, followed by Instagram and YouTube (2019, p. 2).

B) OPINIOL LEADER

Political marketing strategies through opinion leaders are very common. Marketing campaigns are mobilized by account profiles with perhaps few followers, the objective is that some journalist or opinion leader replicates the information. If that happens, the strategy will have fulfilled its objective. Bots, such as fake accounts with programs that imitate human behavior, are widely used in various campaigns. Among the main reasons, is that they are very cheap. Kuckarski points out that "massive amplification by politicians or journalists is essentially free" (KUCHARSKI, 2020, p. 253).

In a recent study, NATO identifies that:

> "Social media manipulation is the new frontier for antagonists seeking to influence elections, polarize public opinion and divert legitimate political discussions," says the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** in the introduction to its recently published study on how digital platforms are failing in the war against manipulation and false content (ECONOMÍA Digital, 2019, p.3).

Opinion leaders, recognized on the Internet as bloggers and influencers, in the United States tend to become professionalized, explains Germán Espino, "many become campaign consultants for politicians, interest groups, government agencies, and even traditional media" (ESPINO, 2019, 119). He cites as an example the case of Stephen Banon himself, whom he identifies as an ideologue of white supremacist groups, who directed the Breitbart News website.

Type of accounts identified on the networks	Definition
Bots	1) Contraction of Robot. Automation programmed to imitate human behaviors.
Trolls	2) Originally a prankster, now a hate-monger (*hater*).
Cyborgs	3) They combine automation with human curation.
Pirated or stolen	4) Cybertroops use them strategically to spread pro-government marketing or censor freedom of expression. They revoke access to the activity of the same from the owner of the same.

TABLE 1. Types of social media accounts

Sources: 1, 3 and 4: BRADSHAW, 2019, p. 11.
2. KUCHARSKI, 2020, p. 212.

The management of the enormous flows of information generated by the platforms is only possible through the development of sophisticated algorithms. However, the bias that is intended to be avoided, in theory, by reducing human interaction is repeated. However, one of the most discussed cases has been recorded in recent months, and is that identified by programmer Joy Buolamwini, a programmer at the MIT Media Lab. Using facial recognition programs in her research, she noticed that she was not identified because she was dark-skinned. The same has occurred in programs designed to support the administration of justice, for example, which reveal racism, sexism and discrimination of various kinds. A concern that is aggravated by the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) programs in the most diverse areas of daily life. Thus, as a whole, the network user is persecuted by bots, trolls, cyborgs and pirates, so that, among other campaigns, they yield to the purposes of political marketing.

C) FRAMING/PRIMING

Part of the discussion around social networks and the communication strategies they develop revolves around the use of news produced by traditional media such as newspapers. They take advantage of the research and news they produce through short notes in which, using framing strategies, they summarize and headline their notes on the subject, aware that the user saturated with information will in many cases replicate the information with their contacts without having read the content of the same. We consider that in fact a combination of framing and priming is recorded. It is not our purpose to discuss the differences between one and another theoretical formulation. We mentioned framing lines above. We will say regarding priming that it postulates the idea that it will activate a reaction that whoever is exposed to the stimulus of the same will activate unconsciously. Like any theoretical proposal, it receives many criticisms. Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu notes that "the agenda theory posits that the selection of news determines the public perception of the importance of the issue and, indirectly, through priming, the evaluation of political leaders" (2015, p. 427). However, we believe that this proposal is particularly widely used in political marketing campaigns. Kahneman says in this regard that:

> Primed ideas have some capacity to prime other ideas, although more weakly. Activation spreads like ripples in a pond through a small part of the extensive network of associated ideas. Mapping these ripples is now one of the most exciting pursuits of psychological research (KAHNEMAN, 2020, p. 75).

Cognitive sciences, which have, among others, strengthened this interpretation of communicative phenomena, have developed many experiments to support the usefulness and potential of this theory. Perhaps among the most notable is the one carried out by a group of researchers from the University of California, led by Alan Fowler, a well-known co-author of the study: ``**Connected: The power of social networks** `` and with the most diverse disciplinary training, they had the support of the Facebook platform. On November 2, 2010, in the middle of the election day, they showed users of the platform, estimated at 61 million people, receiving the message "I have already voted" and they were shown the photo of 6 of their friends who showed that they had already pressed the button at that moment. There was a second control group of around 600 thousand people chosen at random, but who did not receive any message, that is, there was no priming. I want to point out that Fowler's study (BOND et al, 2012) does not explain it from this theory, although we consider that it was the one used due to the effects it achieved. With the enormous database (enviable for any researcher) they have estimated that the pure message without the stimulus (without priming) mobilized about 60 thousand voters. And they calculate that the version with friends (with priming) increased it to 280 thousand more voters. In total, they will mobilize 340 thousand voters who probably did not consider voting that day. Just thinking that in the United States there has just been a vote to elect president, very close in some districts last November 2020.

Or in Mexico 2006, an election for president, very controversial in its results, was decided by about 250 thousand votes, 0.56% difference in votes, shows the potential of this type of priming strategies is not insignificant. Fowler calls it the contagion effect, in essence the postulates and obviously the results are the same.

3. THE PENDING AGENDA: IS IT STILL POSSIBLE TO REGULATE GAFAM?

A third purpose is to present a brief overview of the proposals for regulation of social media activity in various parts of the world (European Union, Australia and in Latin America: Mexico).

Among the first initiatives are the development of sites called fact-checkers. Aimed at detecting fake news and post-truth,

Year	Type of initiative
2014 to 2018	44 online fact-checking initiatives
2019	Facebook creates a network of 25 fact-checking companies in 14 countries.
2019	Fact Chek Explorer/ Google

TABLE 2. Types of regulation on GAFAM

Source: BADILLO, 2019, pp. 80.

One of the latest episodes on the networks was the pulse between the powerful muscle of the main North American companies GAFAM, against the then North American president, which led to the latter's "digital silence" on the occasion of the presidential election in the U.S. in November 2020. The issue has barely generated debate in the last 5 years, since the election in November 2017.

The appearance of Cambridge Analytica in 2016 put the spotlight on the need to observe the activities of these new companies.

On the pending agenda is the regulation of GAFAM. Within the work we have noted the warnings of national security experts, on the need to put limits on the platforms that have accumulated enormous economic and political power. In his study, Angel Badillo (2019, p. 26) shows us a compilation of the initiatives developed by ten member countries of the European Union in a period that goes just from 2017 to 2019 (see Table 1, p. 26).

A BRIEF CONCLUSION

We believe that if there is one thing that all the activity aimed at manipulating public opinion on social media shares, it is an anti-liberal narrative, since their actions from various angles are framed as a threat to democracy itself at a global level (they censor, are anti-pluralistic and anti-liberal), and thus open the door to different versions of authoritarian regimes (Cf. DEMOCRACY Report 2020).

We insist that the power accumulated, especially after 2020, which, among other circumstances, the COVID pandemic strongly boosted both Internet consumption, to an average of 7 hours a day, and about 2.5 of them on social networks. In addition, the confinements strongly boosted electronic commerce, supporting GAFAM companies, in addition to streaming platforms. The consolidation of a digital economy is not accompanied by the maintenance of political freedoms.

Constant political marketing campaigns, openly or covertly, whether through fake news, post-truth or micro-segmentation with framing or priming strategies, plague us as users every day, not only during election periods. We believe that this can lead to citizens becoming fatigued with political debate. Perhaps this is what its promoters are seeking, to increase political disaffection. The only thing that is certain is that we are facing enormous challenges in the face of the Cyber-Leviathan.

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