

對話世界頂尖學者

社交媒體上的運算宣傳：對民主的挑戰與機會

Computational Propaganda on Social Media: The Challenges and Opportunities for Democracy

Discussants: Dr. Philip N. Howard and Yu-Chung Cheng¹

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Time: November 9, 2019



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Abstract

Professor Howard discusses how computational propaganda on social media platforms impacts democracy. He also pointed out the challenges and opportunities in this research field. He suggests that young scholars can enter the field by collaborating with data scientists and to conduct research on one social platform in the beginning. With respect to the

1. Yu-Chung Cheng (鄭宇君) is Associate Professor at the Department of Journalism, College of Communication, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan. Her email: yuchungc@nccu.edu.tw.

accountability of social media platforms, he suggests that they should publicly release all types of advertising posts to the Ad library², so that the public and citizen groups can analyze through data transparency in order to supervise and hold governments, political parties, and social media platforms accountable.

2. For example, the Ad Library of Facebook is a searchable database of ads about social issues, elections or politics.

Introduction of Dr. Philip N. Howard

Philip N. Howard is the Director of the Oxford Internet Institution (OII). He is a professor of sociology, information, and international affairs. His research focuses on the impact of digital media on political life around the world and examines how new communication technologies are used in both civic engagement and social control in countries around the world. His projects include studies of digital activism, information access, and modern governance in both democracies and authoritarian regimes.

He is the author of eight books and over 100 academic articles, book chapters, conference papers, and commentary essays on information technology, international affairs and public life. His research spans several disciplines, and he is among a small number of scholars who have won awards from all three major academic associations for his work in political science, sociology, and communication.

YC: Yu-Chung Cheng

PH: Philip N. Howard

YC : Since the Arab Spring in 2011, social media has significantly lowered the threshold for information production and delivery. Social media were once regarded as the best tool to promote public participation and democracy. However, in recent years, we have seen social media become the platform of disinformation dissemination. The spread of disinformation has affected the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum and even became a political tool used by authoritarian states to suppress the free speech and to manipulate the public opinion.

I have read your latest research report about global disinformation order. Organised social media manipulation, or the so-called computational propaganda, were reported in at least 60 countries around the world, so I would like to ask you some questions related to this topic. Your early research concerned the Internet and policy. On what occasion, did you start to research

computational propaganda? In what context, did you start this research topic?

PH : Around 2010, I started studying how politicians were communicating over social media, Twitter for the most part. And I wrote an opinion piece, an op-ed commentary arguing that politicians should promise not to use social media to manipulate with automation and nobody read this argument. And then a few years later when I moved to Budapest, I found that it was quite an active strategy for political communication with my Hungarian friend. So I proposed a very large project at that time. Most of the misinformation in Hungary was coming from one political party and the Russian government. So the proposal was to study how Russia and China use misinformation to target voters during election time. There was the original proposal. Since then, there have been many countries who do it now. So we had to expand the range of things we study.

YC : **Your latest report analyzing the complicated computational propaganda in democratic countries and the authoritarian countries. They have different kinds of manipulation in their countries. In the face of such a situation, how should the democratic countries work together to prevent the expansion of disinformation and reduce its damage to the democratic political system?**

PH : I think one of the solutions is to build out the capacity of civic groups to use big data. I have to use to play with the good data right now. The best data on politics and public life is all in Silicon Valley. It's all with Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Apple. Some of that data should be with the libraries and with the researchers and the doctors. I think it may take legislation to create that flow of data. Right now, it's only the private companies and some of the militaries can access these data. But most of it I think more of it is to the public in private companies.

YC : **But how about the GDPR? Because Facebook and Twitter avoid violations of the GDPR, they prefer not to release these data to civics. For example, Facebook just shut down the API in September, so that many individual developers for civil groups cannot get any data. How do you think about it?**

PH : Yes, it affected us, too. I think that if you gave most citizens choice about whether to give their data to researchers at the hospital and most of them would say yes. They may not say for the social scientists, but I think they would say it for their political parties or health researchers. They already give the data to Facebook and Google those companies make money about it.

YC : **Major social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook also have important roles in computational propaganda. For example, Facebook and Twitter have adopted completely different policies on political advertisements recently. Political ads are completely un-reviewed on Facebook, while they are completely banned on Twitter. Facebook in Taiwan just announced that they do not review political advertisements, but their treatment is aligned to transparency. In this month Facebook asks all politicians in Taiwan for election needed to disclose how much advisement on each posting and total advertisement budget. They just do the transparency policy about political advertisements. So, what is your opinion on the strategies the social media platforms took?**

PH : I think the platforms need to provide an archive of all ads, not just political ads. The reason is that most of the platforms leave it up to you that advertiser to say, “Oh my ad is political and you may check and not all ad buyers do this.” There are many kinds of ads that are political but not declared. It used to be that we expected all ads, including television, radio, to go into an archive. I think we could do this now. So that’s the first thing I’ve suggested.

The second thing is that’s not just the platforms. It’s also the political parties. They should be archiving the ads that they want to purchase. Because of the political ads when you upload it to Facebook it gets tested. Facebook uses A/B tests to know which ads that don’t do very well disappear and which ads they do very well get so enormously. But Facebook doesn’t tell us which of these is going far and right now they may only reveal things about the major ads. So the minor ads we haven’t seen that may just do a fraction of the reach of users. They don’t disclose. So I think the

parties need to create their own archives and give this to the public. Then, the firms need to have their advertising archives for themselves.

YC : **You think every kind of ads should need an archive on Facebook. Do you think Twitter should do the same thing?**

PH : I don't think you should ban political advertising. I think political advertising is valuable. In some many countries, there are not enough people who are interested in voting or think about politics. Advertising gets helps draw them in. So I don't think we should ban political advertising. If you ban all advertising now, people who have the office have the advantage to compete.

YC : **The next question concerns research methods. In your latest report, you adopted three methods, including qualitative content analysis of relevant news, secondary literature reviews and consultations with local experts. However, in practice, when conducting a case study in one country, identifying the exact sources of disinformation is very difficult. It is also nearly impossible to identify the motivation behind the posting of any given piece of disinformation, whether it is financially-driven or out of emotional response. Is there a way to effectively collect empirical data and evaluate the social and political impacts of disinformation diffusion? Can you share your experiences in dealing with such methodological issues with us?**

PH : Well, I think the answer is that you need to be multi-method and you need to mix the method. So if the large scope of data reveals some problematic ads, then you need the qualitative researchers. They have not referred to go in to find people who make the ads and ask them some questions, and then find the brokers and spend time with them. I think it's false to say that quantitative work is harder than qualitative. Because getting earning the trust of some people in any way that qualitative researchers do is harder, earning the trust of people so that you can learn these things is important and very hard work.

YC : **In your report, you mentioned junk news. In Taiwan, there's a lot of junk**

news but they don't think so. I think it's difficult to identify junk news. Some are content farms that there are no named on the articles and no publisher's information. I think they can nearly be seen as disinformation. But some online news, they just copy and paste some information online, but they don't think they're junk news. How do you identify these online news websites as junk news?

PH : I think it is to look at the nature of the content and the professional organization. If the story is full of conspiracy for sensational or exaggerated or extremists or if it's really a commentary essay or if it's an opinion essay, but it's pretending to be news product, then in our mind, that's what makes junk news.

There are other metrics if they don't publish the owner, the name of the owner and they don't have a policy for fact-checking. You know these things, if they don't have standards, or if they don't publish corrections. There's a bunch of things. In most countries, there is a professional association of journalists that has some statements of ethics. If they don't employ the people who believe in the ethics then they're not professionals. I think in most countries it's the same. You have to report the facts and stay faithful and truthful. You editor can't change the story after you file it. You have to protect your sources, but if this something is controversial you need two or three sources, not the same source.

YC : **In case that many messages on social media result from computational propaganda, can we still learn the “real” public opinions and attitudes through the big-data approach toward social media? Since computational propaganda is inevitable, can social media still be the public sphere for civic participation and democratic dialogues?**

PH : The first one is difficult. I think in traditional statistics you take a scoop of data and then you apply weights so that it's I wonder if with big data. I don't know how you do this. But I wonder if you could weight big data skill. So if you take a big scoop of big data and you have categories that map onto survey data and you already know

what the population weights should be then maybe you can make that adjustment. I've never done it, but I think that's how you know.

YC : But before the election, the candidates will try to make their names become hot topics on social media, and they may hire the PR companies or some cyber troops and try to influence the online public opinion. Due to computational propaganda, can we believe the result of big data analysis on social media?

PH : I think if you can explain how you got the data and if it's the usual scientific things and you can explain how you are gonna fit the known parameters, you've applied some weights to it appropriately. I think if you could get there. It might depend on the insight.

YC : However, do you think social media can be still a public sphere?

PH : Yes, because I don't think we can ever take social media away. There's no way to take Facebook back or take Line away. You can't do this. The most you can do is to put the civics back into social media and that probably means more use of social media not less or more sophisticated use of social media that allows you to figure out what the public good is.

YC : Could you think another new social media instead of Facebook in the future?

PH : I think that's too far ahead. Facebook has such an advantage. On the other hand, there's lots of change in social media. I think that you know the real. Instead of a rival to Facebook creating something new. I would say that if Facebook merges with Samsung or Huawei the hardware manufacturer. I think that would create a significant new beast. That would be different. I am not saying this is happening. I'm just imagining what I don't think it would be Facebook transforming. I don't think it would be a Facebook rival. I think it would be a significant mixing of Hardware with Facebook.

YC : At present, the research in computational propaganda and information warfare has a strong interdisciplinary flavour, which combines various research fields such as politics, communication, information technology, psychology, etc. In

practice, how did you take up such a cross-disciplinary approach? What is your advice for a beginner researcher in stepping into this field?

PH : I think one of the tricks is to try to find a partner to work together. I think if you're a social scientist and you just hire a computer scientist for your postdoc, this won't be as productive as finding a computer scientist to work with. Because the computer scientist doesn't always understand the social questions and they haven't read the theories so I don't know any of the historical scholarships behind. And the social scientist needs to learn a lot to catch up on the technology and the design questions. So I would say that if you're brilliant and you could do both in your beginner then step in the field. Otherwise in practice. I think you need good partnerships. Another advice for beginners is to try and start a small or a particular platform. It can be very difficult to study the whole social media but studying one platform well to look for particular dynamics can be a good way to start.

YC : **Because governments care about this issue too. How do you think about the relationship between the researcher such as you and the governments?**

PH : Well, I think with any funder the relationship should be friendly but also without strings. So if the government is providing research funding as wonderful, but they don't get to choose the researchers for the shape, the right methodology says it was the same with the industry same as long as it should be no strings. From the academic freedom is protected him. It makes the whole thing get science trustworthy. So that you're not making fake science.

I think a good relationship between governments and researchers depends on what you know, the government is largely democratic and you trust their policymakers then you want to teach them to make a good policy. The worst thing would be for them to make bad policy. If it's an authoritarian government and you think they're going to take what you learned to do more bad thing. Then try not to have this relationship.

YC : **Can I have the last question. I'm just wondering that when the researchers are**

collecting data, clean data, do the paper and publish takes a long time. And the thing is when the paper is published when the public and everyone knows that bad people are doing like fake news. But I think is we are always chasing so we cannot expect or we don't know what will happen. We just know the history. What can we do as academics?

PH : I think there are several ways to be to make sure the research has impact early and one of which is to get to know other professional journalists. So that if you find something that isn't ready to be a full article, you can give it to the journalists and they will run and you have to give up some control over this. But then it has an impact as a story. Or you can release some you know, some people in our team do white papers. You do a temporary thing hasn't gone through peer review. It hasn't gone through a blind peer review. It had peer review from within the team. That's often called a white paper or working paper. That can be a way to get your findings out. I agree it takes even real-time fast social science still take several months. But it doesn't need to take years.

Selected Works

Books

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