Funded by the European Union
NextGenerationEU

SUMMIT
SOFIA UNIVERSITY MARKING MOMENTUM FOR INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL TRANSFER

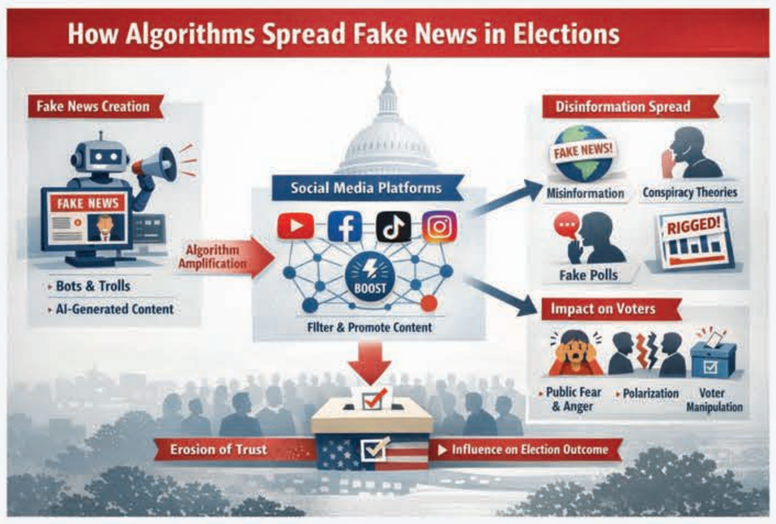
SOFIA UNIVERSITY -
MARKING MOMENTUM
FOR INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL TRANSFER

National Recovery and Resilience Plan
OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

Project No. 70-123-200 / 12.02.2024
BRAND AUTHENTICITY: MODERN ASPECTS, EFFECTS OF THE CONCEPT ON CONSUMER DEMAND AND BRAND INTERACTIONS
Activity 3.4. Scientific research with potential for innovation and knowledge/intellectual property transfer

Head of the research group
Assoc. Prof. Kalin Kalinov, PhD
Members of the group:
Assoc. Prof. Svetlana Stankova, PhD
Asst. Prof. Yordan Karapenchev, PhD
Alexander Kalinov, PhD
Petya Georgieva
Yana Vasileva
Dalia Mirancheva

THE ALGORITHMS – HIDDEN POLITICAL WEAPON DURING THE 2024 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



INTRODUCTION

During elections social networks play an important role in shaping public opinion. While they offer opportunities for the widespread dissemination of political information, they also pose serious risks of misinformation and manipulation of the voters. Fake news on social networks often gains widespread acceptance before it can be challenged by experts, due to the speed and scale of dissemination on the one hand, and the individual user's biased distinction between true and false on the other. During elections, fake news on social networks can influence both the behaviour of voters and candidates for political office and the political debate.

The proposed study focuses on fake news during the campaign for the 2024 US presidential election, which spread through automated social networks, sowing doubt and becoming an attack on forms of sociality, undermining the public's ability to make informed choices. The methods of data processing and interpretation applied here include detailed information search, documentation, empirical evidence extraction, monitoring, comparative analysis of the data obtained, synthesis and consolidation.

The main thesis of the study postulates that social networks, powered by algorithms and automated bots, create a favourable environment for spreading misinformation that discredits political opponents, polarises voters and becomes a key driver in the dynamic system of political communication.

PROJECT GUIDELINES

In the information-intensive modern society and the globalized world, digital platforms and social networks have become central arenas for political communication, shaping public opinion and influencing democratic processes in unprecedented ways. The decline in trust in traditional public institutions, including government and mainstream media, has contributed to an increasing reliance on alternative information sources, particularly social networks, where content is often mediated by opaque algorithmic systems. As a result, the dynamics of communication are shifting from institutional authority toward decentralized, user-driven and algorithmically curated environments, where emotional engagement frequently outweighs factual accuracy. This transformation creates fertile ground for the rapid dissemination of misinformation, which can influence not only public attitudes but also political behaviour and electoral outcomes.

These developments call for a reconceptualization of communication processes, moving beyond traditional models toward a framework that integrates algorithmic mediation, network effects, and the role of automated actors such as bots and AI-generated content. Numerous studies emphasize the growing importance of understanding how algorithmic amplification and engagement-driven logic shape visibility and credibility in digital spaces.

The team of project No. 70-123-200/12.02.2024 – "BRAND AUTHENTICITY: MODERN ASPECTS, EFFECTS OF THE CONCEPT ON CONSUMER DEMAND AND BRAND INTERACTIONS" began its theoretical exploration in February 2024, initially focusing on brand communication in digital environments. As the project progressed, its scope expanded to include the broader implications of algorithmic positioning, not only in commercial contexts but also in political communication. This shift enabled the integration of insights from the present study on fake news and automated social networks during the 2024 US presidential election. By combining theoretical analysis with empirical observations, the project seeks to better understand how algorithm-driven communication influences perceptions, behaviours, and decision-making processes. The team's ongoing efforts are directed toward refining the theoretical framework and extending empirical research in order to provide deeper insights into the mechanisms and societal consequences of algorithmically mediated communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the role of fake news as a political communication tool during the 2024 United States presidential election, with a specific focus on the final phase of the campaign. The research adopts a qualitative approach, combining elements of content analysis and comparative analysis to explore the characteristics, themes, and potential impact of misinformation disseminated through social networks.

The empirical corpus consists of 49 posts identified as fake news, collected over a one-week period (29 October – 4 November 2024), corresponding to the most intensive stage of the electoral campaign. The posts were selected using the keywords "election", "Trump", and "Harris", and were drawn from major social media platforms. To ensure relevance and visibility, only content with a minimum of 1,000 impressions was included in the sample.

All selected posts were verified as false or misleading through cross-referencing with established fact-checking organizations. Each unit of analysis was examined in terms of thematic focus, narrative strategy, emotional appeal, and engagement dynamics. The analytical framework is informed by Robert Shiller's concept of "contagious narratives," which conceptualizes information spread in a manner analogous to epidemiological processes. This perspective allows for the interpretation of engagement metrics as indicators of the diffusion and influence of misinformation. The study further employs comparative analysis to identify patterns across platforms and categories of fake news, including electoral manipulation, corruption, violence, and moral accusations. While the limited sample size and timeframe constrain the generalizability of the findings, the methodology provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which algorithmically amplified content shapes political discourse.

RESULTS

The analysis demonstrates that fake news during the final week of the 2024 US presidential campaign functioned as a strategic communication tool aimed at shaping public perceptions, intensifying political polarization, and undermining trust in democratic processes. The examined content reveals recurring thematic patterns, emotional framing, and platform-specific dynamics that collectively contributed to the amplification of misinformation.

Four dominant categories of fake news were identified. The first and most prevalent involves claims related to electoral manipulation, including allegations of vote tampering, falsified ballots, and misleading information about voting procedures. These narratives directly target the legitimacy of the electoral process and are particularly effective in generating distrust and uncertainty among voters. The second category consists of accusations of corruption, abuse of power, and policies encouraging illegal immigration, primarily directed at delegitimizing political opponents by portraying them as morally compromised or politically dangerous. The third category includes claims related to violence, fascism, and racism. Such content often relies on visual manipulation or AI-generated media, intensifying its persuasive power through emotional shock and symbolic associations. The fourth category focuses on accusations of sexual misconduct and immoral behaviour, which provoke strong emotional reactions and contribute to the personalization of political conflict. Across all categories, the dominant communication strategy is the deliberate activation of emotions such as fear, anger, and outrage, rather than rational evaluation of information. The findings also highlight the central role of platform dynamics in the dissemination of fake news. Among the analysed platforms, X (formerly Twitter) accounts for the largest share of misinformation, followed by Threads, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Content on X demonstrates the highest levels of engagement, frequently reaching hundreds of thousands of users through reposts, comments, and likes. TikTok, while hosting fewer posts, shows significant reach through highly viral video content, often exceeding one million views.

A key observation is that algorithmic amplification operates independently of the nature of user reactions. Both supportive and critical interactions increase visibility, contributing to a self-reinforcing cycle of dissemination. This dynamic aligns with the "firehose of falsehood" model, where repetition, speed, and volume are prioritized over credibility. As a result, misinformation spreads rapidly across networks of like-minded users, reinforcing existing biases and limiting exposure to alternative perspectives. The results further indicate asymmetry in the targeting of political actors. Fake news concerning Kamala Harris predominantly focuses on incompetence, corruption, and immigration policies, while misinformation about Donald Trump emphasizes themes of fascism, violence, and moral deviance. This differentiation suggests strategic tailoring of narratives to exploit audience sensitivities and ideological divisions. Overall, the findings confirm that fake news in the observed period was not random but systematically structured and amplified through algorithm-driven platforms. It contributes to a fragmented information environment in which emotional engagement replaces factual verification, thereby reshaping political discourse and influencing public attitudes in the context of electoral competition.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that fake news disseminated through automated social networks plays a significant role in shaping contemporary political communication. The findings indicate that misinformation is not merely a by-product of digital interaction, but a structured and strategically deployed tool that exploits the logic of algorithmic amplification and user engagement. In the context of the 2024 US presidential campaign, fake news contributed to the intensification of political polarization, the erosion of trust in democratic institutions, and the transformation of public debate into an emotionally driven and fragmented communication environment.

A key conclusion is that the effectiveness of fake news lies not only in its content but in the mechanisms of its dissemination. Algorithms prioritize visibility based on engagement rather than accuracy, allowing emotionally charged and polarizing messages to reach wider audiences regardless of their veracity. As a result, users become both consumers and amplifiers of misinformation, participating, often unintentionally, in its rapid circulation. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which repeated exposure generates familiarity, and familiarity increases perceived credibility.

The study also highlights that fake news narratives are not random but tailored to resonate with existing beliefs, fears, and ideological divisions. By targeting specific vulnerabilities within different audience groups, misinformation strengthens echo chambers and limits exposure to alternative viewpoints. In this way, social networks contribute to the fragmentation of the public sphere, replacing shared frameworks of truth with multiple competing narratives.

At the same time, the research acknowledges important limitations. The relatively small sample size and short observation period do not allow for definitive conclusions regarding the direct impact of fake news on electoral outcomes. Moreover, the complexity of voter behaviour makes it difficult to isolate the influence of misinformation from other political, social, and economic factors. Nevertheless, the identified patterns provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of algorithmically mediated communication.

Ultimately, the study suggests that the challenges posed by fake news cannot be addressed solely through technological solutions or regulatory interventions. While fact-checking mechanisms and platform policies play an important role, they remain insufficient in an environment driven by speed, scale, and emotional engagement. Addressing misinformation requires a more comprehensive approach that includes strengthening media literacy, fostering critical thinking, and encouraging active civic participation.

In conclusion, automated social networks are redefining the conditions under which political communication takes place. By amplifying emotionally charged content and enabling the rapid spread of misinformation, they reshape how citizens perceive reality, evaluate political actors, and make decisions. Understanding these processes is essential for preserving the integrity of democratic systems and for developing more resilient forms of public communication in the digital age.

CONTACTS:
Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication
str. Moskovska No. 49, Sofia 1000, Bulgaria

Phone: +359 89 78 18 203
E-mail: kkalinov@uni-sofia.bg

Contract BG-RRP-2.004-0008 for the financing of project "Sofia University - Marking Momentum for Innovation and Technological Transfer" under pillar 2 "Establishing a network of research higher education institutions in Bulgaria", component "Innovative Bulgaria" from National Recovery and Resilience Plan part of the program to accelerate economic recovery and transformation through science and innovation