

Social Media and Narratives

Alan Kirman

EHESS Paris and NAEC Programme

How different narratives emerge and co-exist

- The fact that very different narratives persist is evidence that there are self-reinforcing groups who believe in them and communicate their beliefs to like-minded individuals. This has always been the case but the emergence of social media has reinforced this phenomenon.

The spreading of misinformation online

Michela Del Vicario, Alessandro Bessi, Fabiana Zollo, Fabio
Petroni, Antonio Scala, Guido Caldarelli, H. Eugene Stanley and Walter
Quattrociocchi

PNAS January 19, 2016.

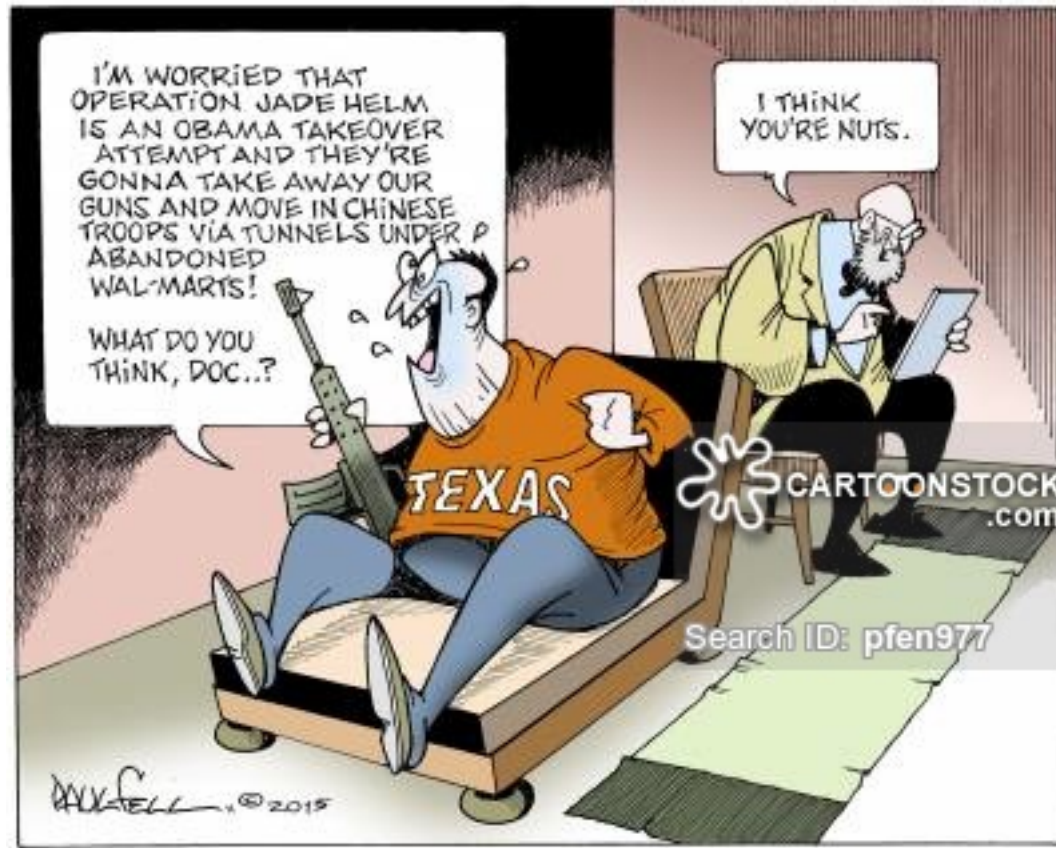
The Influence of Social Media

- The massive diffusion of sociotechnical systems and microblogging platforms on the World Wide Web (WWW) creates a direct path from producers to consumers of content, i.e., allows disintermediation, and changes the way users become informed, debate, and form their opinions .
- This disintermediated environment can foster confusion about causation, and thus encourage speculation, rumors, and mistrust.
- In 2011 a blogger claimed that global warming was a fraud designed to diminish liberty and weaken democracy.
- Misinformation about the Ebola epidemic has caused confusion among healthcare workers.
- Jade Helm 15, a simple military exercise, was perceived on the Internet as the beginning of a new civil war in the United States.
- Recent works have shown that increasing the exposure of users to unsubstantiated rumors increases their tendency to be credulous.

The conclusions of the network analysis

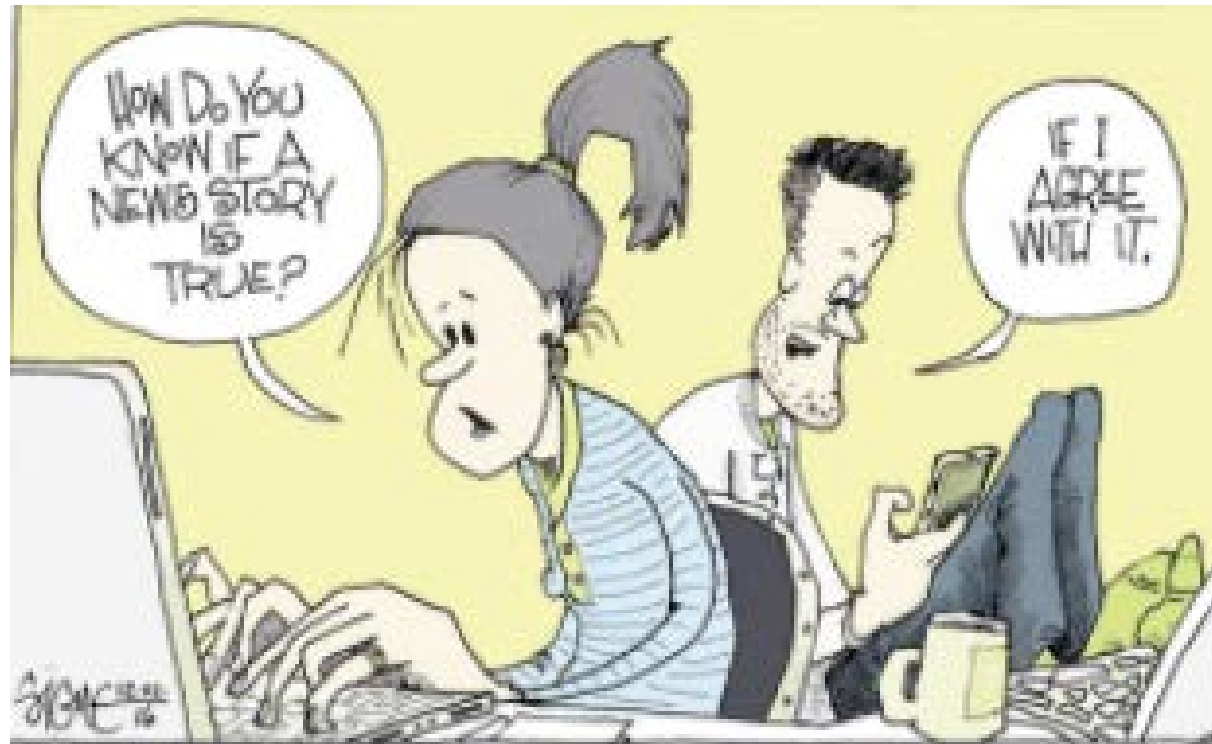
- « Our findings show that users mostly tend to select and share content related to a specific narrative and to ignore the rest. In particular, we show that social homogeneity is the primary driver of content diffusion, and one frequent result is the formation of homogeneous, polarized clusters.
- Most of the times the information is taken by a friend having the same profile (polarization)—i.e., belonging to the same echo chamber ».

Jade Helm 15



- Governor Abbott announced that he was going to ask the Texas State Guard to monitor Operation **Jade Helm** from start to finish. "It is important that Texans know their safety, constitutional rights, private property rights and civil liberties will not be infringed upon," **Abbott ...**

Confirmatory Bias



Echo Chambers

« Selective exposure to content is the primary driver of content diffusion and generates the formation of homogeneous clusters, i.e., “echo chambers.” Indeed, homogeneity appears to be the primary driver for the diffusion of contents and each echo chamber has its own cascade dynamics. »

The role of artificial Intelligence

- Google searches amplify the extreme elements of the subjects viewed. This means orienting individuals towards more and more extreme narratives.
- Is this a result of some plot to encourage this?
- No it is simply the response of the algorithm to achieve the objective it has been given. This is to maximise the time people spend connected and searching. This is because each minute spent exposes people to the advertisements that are Google's source of revenue.
- Unfortunately the algorithm learns that people can be kept on line by giving them more and more extreme content.

This reinforces two of NAEC's messages

1. Self organisation: the system evolves in this way as a result of the way it is set up, not because of any malevolent intentions.
 - 2, Unintended Consequences. Uber Sydney and Paris.
- As McAfee and Brynjolfsson emphasise in their book: *Machine Platform Crowd*, at some point a human has to make sure that what is being produced does not violate common sense.

Influencers and Artificial Agents

« What the issue of Russian influence on elections has most definitely raised is doubt. Doubt as to what social metrics mean, what people are sharing and re-tweeting, doubt as to how many people who have large followings and audiences are for real, and are sharing such content for the stated purpose. In the case of Twitter, for example, the increased focus has lead to several investigations of [huge bot networks](#) – some numbering in the [hundreds of thousands](#) – and has [sparked Twitter into action](#). »

Social Media Today, march 14th 2018

Interference and Social Media

Most Americans are understandably shocked by what they view as an unprecedented attack on our political system. But intelligence veterans, and scholars who have studied covert operations, have a different, and quite revealing, view.

New York Times

WE TOO!



A Little History

- “If you ask an intelligence officer, did the Russians break the rules or do something bizarre, the answer is no, not at all,” said Steven L. Hall, who retired in 2015 after 30 years at the C.I.A., where he was the chief of Russian operations. The United States “absolutely” has carried out such election influence operations historically, he said, “and I hope we keep doing it.”
- Loch K. Johnson, [the dean of American intelligence scholars](#), who began his career in the 1970s investigating the C.I.A. as a staff member of the Senate’s Church Committee, says Russia’s 2016 operation was simply the cyber-age version of standard United States practice for decades, whenever American officials were worried about a foreign vote.
- “We’ve been doing this kind of thing since the C.I.A. was created in 1947,” said Mr. Johnson, now at the University of Georgia. “We’ve used posters, pamphlets, mailers, banners — you name it. We’ve planted false information in foreign newspapers. We’ve used what the British call ‘King George’s cavalry’: suitcases of cash.”

Belief in the Narrative

- All of the people just quoted believe however, that the practices just cited were justified whereas the Russian interference was unacceptable.
- We accept in Western Europe censorship of some content of social media, incitement to hate to religious discrimination, etc, but would fiercely resist political censorship.
- When is it acceptable to restrict content? Different countries different criteria?

Who controls the social media?



Presentation at the NAEC Seminar on Social Media March 19th
2018

Facebook

- In September 2016 Facebook removed a post by a Norwegian journalist that included the famous photo of a little Vietnamese girl burned by napalm.
- [Facebook](#) briefly removed a post by a Norwegian journalist and [then reinstated](#) one of the most powerful images to emerge from war—a 1972 photograph of a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl—after initially saying the image violates the company’s policies on displaying nudity. A [censorship battle](#) ensued.
- Espen Egil Hansen, the editor-in-chief of Norway’s *Aftenposten*, slammed Mark Zuckerberg for a perceived abuse of power, calling the CEO of Facebook “the world’s most powerful editor.” A little later Facebook recognized its iconic status but said “it’s difficult to create a distinction between allowing a photograph of a nude child in one instance and not others.”

Influencers and artificial agents.

- *“Marketers are flocking to businesses like Dovetale, prompted by revelations of people buying fake followers and fraudulent engagement on social media sites. Some of these fake accounts, in an attempt to seem legitimate, use personal information from real people without their knowledge. That’s provoked concern among brands and their agencies, which often rely on metrics like the number of followers an account has when hiring people on YouTube and Instagram to promote their products. These social media stars can often fetch thousands of dollars for one post promoting a product.”*
- *New York Times*

Conclusion

- The Social Media world is yet another example of a complex system with multiple feedbacks which produce unintended consequences and where the mechanisms by which certain narratives come to dominate are only just beginning to be understood.
- Yet, the way in which humans use and modify their use of these platforms will mean that we will never have a simple general model of these phenomena and that our analysis will have to be constantly adapting to human ingenuity.

PROPAGANDA

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