Participatory Propaganda:

The Engagement of Audiences in the Spread of Persuasive Communications

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Abstract

Existing research on aspects of propaganda in a digital age tend to focus on isolated techniques or phenomena, such as fake news, trolls, memes, or botnets. Providing invaluable insight on the evolving human-technology interaction in creating new formats of persuasive messaging, these studies lend to an enriched understanding of modern propaganda methods. At the same time, the true effects and magnitude of successful influencing of large audiences in the digital age can only be understood if target audiences are perceived not only as ‘objects’ of influence, but as ‘subjects’ of persuasive communications as well. Drawing from vast available research, as well as original social network and content analyses conducted during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, this paper presents a new, qualitatively enhanced, model of modern propaganda – “participatory propaganda” - and discusses its effects on modern democratic societies.

Keywords: propaganda, Facebook, social network analysis, content analysis, politics
Participatory Propaganda: The Engagement of Audiences in the Spread of Persuasive Communications

Rapidly evolving information communications technologies (ICTs) have drastically altered the ways individuals engage in the public information domain, including news ways of becoming subjected to external influencing. By merging together tech-enabled formats of persuasive content, automated dissemination capabilities and targeted audience engagement in content propagation, a savvy propagandist can acquire enhanced means of swaying opinions around the world. By obfuscating the origins of such propagandistic content through audience participation via the internet and social networks the propagandist can also increase its receptivity and influence effects. Tactics encouraging and enabling target audiences to not just spread, but also create and adapt propaganda messages, appear to be more effective means of mass persuasion given that people tend to find recommendations from their personal social network more credible than others (Nielson, 2015). Such subtle mass persuasion, through and by means of personal networks, is problematic in liberal democracies founded on the premise that freedom of choice by citizens on political matters is expected to inform public decision-making and power structures (Lippman, 1922; Irwin, 1919, Marlin 2011).

This paper is broken out into three sections. In the first, an extensive multidisciplinary literature review aggregates individual studies published recently that analyze the known digital, behavioural and psychological tactics available to propagandists aiming to engage target audiences online. Extensive research conducted by various scholars over recent years on new ICT tools, social networks, influence tactics and their manifested effects on consumers of online
information, and in particular on their political choices, has been instrumental in acquiring the first appreciation for the scale, complexity and social repercussions of modern persuasive communications. In the second section, the paper draws on original research conducted during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections to analyze how Trump supporters applied these tactics to engage Facebook followers in the promotion of persuasive content, thus encouraging them to become propagandists themselves. In the conclusion, the research results are placed into the broad context of the emerging information environment providing some observations on possible repercussions for citizens’ political engagement and arguing that further work and modelling of digital propaganda is required to better understand the risks to liberal democracy associated with using such techniques.

**Literature Review**

**Modern Propaganda and the Evolution of its Participatory Model**

Propaganda is a much-contested term. This difficulty in defining propaganda, stems in part from its complicated relationship with liberal democracies, given that public opinion is expected to influence political decision-making and the act of manipulating it calls into question the agency of voters, or even the democratic system itself. As John S. Dryzek explains there is a long history in political theory "from Plato to Habermas which equates rhetoric with emotive manipulation of the way points are made, propaganda and demagoguery at an extreme, thus meriting only banishment from the realm of rational communication." (2000, 52) Such concerns were not assuaged by early pioneers in the field of public relations either, who fearing how easily public opinion could be swayed saw domestic propaganda as an acceptable tool for the management of popular views. (Dewey, 1925; Bernays, 1928; Lasswell, 1934; Lippmann, 1922). At the same time, propaganda began to acquire a pejorative connotation as it was “associated
mainly with totalitarian regimes and war efforts” and “was perceived as a threat to liberal democracies.” (Ross, 2002, 17). In turn, similar activities aimed at influencing domestic public opinion became known by other terms such as public affairs or public relations (Moloney, 2006), and those aimed at persuading external audiences as public diplomacy or information operations (Garrison, 1999).

Traditionally, propaganda has been described as the use of persuasive information to manipulate a target audience into a behaviour desired by the propagandist. (Bernays, 1928; Lasswell, 1948; Ellul, 1965; Marlin, 2013; Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015). In this top-down communications model, the sender-receiver roles were typically static with the propagandist (government, corporate, military, political) issuing persuasive messaging aimed at achieving a specific outcome among the target audience (general public). This classic understanding of propaganda, however, must be adapted in a Digital Age. With the internet and social media, the traditional separation between ‘the propagandist’ and ‘target audience’ is rapidly blurring with the latter beginning to play a more significant role in spreading propagandistic content and influencing others through personal networks – and this is much more dangerous, as people are more likely to believe those familiar to them (Garrett & Weeks, 2013) or those they view as influential (Turcotte et al, 2015).

While neither deliberately manipulative messaging, nor proselytization are new techniques in the time-honoured tradition of winning hearts and minds, the speed and scale at which audiences can be swayed and co-opted into spreading persuasive content have significantly increased thanks to the internet. Likewise, as people are increasingly plugged in and dependent on ICTs, the reach of propaganda – particularly if it resonates with a target audience – can become all-encompassing and difficult to escape.
In this context, to understand the emerging phenomena in persuasive communications, a new concept is suggested – participatory propaganda – building on Jowett & O’Donnell’s definition of propaganda: Participatory propaganda is the deliberate, and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour of a target audience while seeking to co-opt its members to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications, to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.

Participatory propaganda moves beyond a traditional, unidirectional “one-to-many” form of communication, to a “one-to-many-to-many more” form where each ‘target’ of influence (an individual or group which is the object of persuasion) can in theory become the new ‘originator’ (subject) of content production and distribution, spreading persuasive messaging to others in a ‘snowball’ effect. The original propaganda message triggers, reinforces, or exacerbates pre-existing sentiments associated with the message in a way that prompts the consumer to actively engage in its propagation through available social networks, both on and off-line. Even if modified through the consumer’s own interpretation, the core message remains intact, and sometimes could even acquire a ‘new life’ (e.g. a new wave of content dissemination). At the same time, online monitoring tools enable the original propagandist to follow and assess the spread of their messaging, adapting strategies in a constant feedback loop and inserting additional content, as and if required.

Participatory propaganda offers the ability to truly dominate the information space through volume of messaging, delivered through a mix of real people and automated accounts, effectively making it difficult to discern where fake ends and authenticity begins.

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1 The original definition of propaganda by Jowett & O’Donnell reads “Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.” See, Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015 page 7
Studying modern political campaigns with their increasing reliance on social networks demonstrates the case in point. While a modern political campaign continues to fit the traditional model of propaganda, as defined by Jowett and O’Donnell, namely the “deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions” (e.g. popular opinions of Trump supporters) such that it “directs behaviour to achieve a response” (e.g. support for Trump in the form of online participation and voting) furthering “the desired intent of the propagandist” (e.g. the Trump campaign), it increasingly acquires the characteristics of a participatory propaganda model. Based on numerous and recently published academic studies, as well as our own analysis of the U.S. presidential campaign by Donald J. Trump, six digital tactics for engaging a target audience online to draw them into active dissemination of persuasive messaging were identified. The order selected for the presentation of these tactics is important as it corresponds to the order of steps a propagandist would take to develop and disseminate the original persuasive messaging:

1. **Hyper-Targeted Audience Analysis**

In the emerging field of behavioural advertising, marketers collect information about what people do online to position extremely targeted ads in front of users (Matthew, 2017). Trackers that facilitate the collection of this information were found in 114 websites supporting Trump (Albright, 2016a). This tracking information can be used to segment target audiences based on psychographics (Psychometric Centre, 2017), which can be extremely accurate at assessing how a user thinks and what might provoke them into action (Cohen, 2017). Social networks allow you to apply this knowledge to targeted ad placement (Solon, 2017), which the Trump campaign did (Nix, 2016). Such highly targeted audience analysis also facilitates the creation of provocative content and the identification of online echo chambers.
2. Provocative Content

At least three types of content aimed at provoking a response among target audiences were used by Trump supporters: fake news, memes, and data leaks.

**Fake News.** Facebook defined fake news as “articles that purport to be factual, but which contain intentional misstatements of fact with the intention to arouse passions, attract viewership, or deceive.” (Weedon et al, 2017). Since lies spread faster online than the truth (Silverman, 2015), fake news has become a global problem (Connolly et al, 2016). Conspiracy theories, often a feature of fake news, reduce complex issues to “binary opposition, simplifying - and misrepresenting - the political space,” (Moore, 2015, 9) and a person’s degree of partisanship is linked to their likelihood of believing conspiracy theories or fake news (Frankovic, 2016).

Governments and non-state actors alike are spreading disinformation online (Weedon et al, 2017), including Trump, who spread fake news during the campaign (Maheshwari, 2017). When such content was shared by known and trusted opinion leaders on Facebook, they tended to influence audience perspectives (Turcotte et al, 2015), and indeed, stories favouring Trump were shared nearly four times more than those supporting Clinton (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

**Memes.** Memes are often humorous phrases, images or videos that are copied or adapted with slight variations and then shared online (Blackmore, 2000). During the 2016 election, Facebook groups sprang up dedicated to sharing “dank memes” (Hsu, 2016) and a controversial Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur funded a “meme factory” to support Trump (Hern, 2016). So-called “meme battalions” created visual content that “relentlessly drew attention to the tawdriest and most sensational accusations against Clinton, forcing mainstream media outlets to address topics – like conspiracy theories about Clinton’s health – that they would otherwise ignore.” (Schreckender, 2017)
Memes reduce the public policy debate to shallow sound bites and ridicule stripped of contextualized understanding of available political choices (McClure, 2016). This contributes to ‘media endarkenment’ reducing complex political issues to simplified entertainment and misinformation (Lazitski, 2014).

**Leaks** have long played a role in American political propaganda (Castronovo, 2014). According to the Oxford Dictionary, a leak is the “intentional disclosure of secret information” (2017). During the 2016 election, Clinton was dogged by several leaks, which could have been one factor affecting her standing in public opinion polls (Enten, 2016). These included the hacking of her Chief of Staff John Podesta’s emails (Frank, 2016), the leaking of comments she made about Bernie Sanders supporters (Democracy Now, 2016) and the continued FBI investigations around the private email server Clinton used while serving as Secretary of State (exposed through a hack) hampered her campaign (Williams, 2016).

Provocative content aims to elicit an emotional response among a target audience, provoking them into participating in a propaganda campaign. This can be an effective method of target audience engagement, particularly if the content is fed through existing channels where an audience already receives information, such as an online echo chamber.

3. **Echo Chambers**

Drawing from the insights gained in hyper-targeted content analysis, a propagandist can identify online echo chambers with specific audiences who can now be targeted with provocative content to which they are most likely to react. An online echo chamber is a digital space where content reflecting a specific point of view reverberates, exposing those within it to only that one prevailing perspective. Digital technologies enable the quick creation of echo chambers or filter bubbles (Breitenbach, 2017), in part through algorithms that sort information, (Bakshy et al,
2015) but more so by the choices individuals make about content consumption (Bessi et al, 2016; Grömping, 2014). Once inside an echo chamber, a user is fed content fitting pre-existing views and preferences, such as political party affiliation (Wall Street Journal, 2016).

Echo chambers identified during the 2016 election were strengthened by a growing animosity between political camps, (Thompson, 2016) as well as a lack of media trusted by both Republicans and Democrats (Pew, 2016a), and thus information exchange was hindered across party lines (Mitchell et al 2016). Moreover “political echo chambers not only isolate one from opposing views, but also help to create incubation chambers for blatantly false (but highly salient and politicized) fake news stories.” (Pennycook et al 2017)

Echo chambers supporting Trump shared fakes news during the election (Dreyfus, 2017; BBC, 2016), with some hyper-partisan right-wing Facebook communities feeding followers 38% fake content (Silverman et al, 2016).

4. Manipulating Feed & Search Algorithms

Provocative content is then given a boost by manipulating important online algorithms. Internet giants, such as Facebook (Facebook, 2017) and Google (Google, 2017), use algorithms to provide users with content they think is wanted (Facebook 2017). Search returns have been found to sway voter decisions (Epstein & Robertson, 2015) and algorithms enable echo chamber development (Algorithm Auditing Research Group, 2016; Barret, 2016).

Algorithms also had a role in the 2016 elections. Fake news supporting Trump trended on Facebook through algorithms (Lee, 2016). Google search autocompletes and returns favoured Trump, spreading false information with a far-right bias (Solon & Levin, 2016).

Google Search algorithms can be gamed in at least two ways:
Hyperlinking & Seeding of Content: Posting content, such as fake news, on multiple websites and linking back and forth between sources helps boost content in Google search returns (Moz, 2107), and if nothing else, can bury opposing information from appearing in the first pages of returns. Indeed, in one study using hyperlink network analysis pro-Trump websites were found to be choking out mainstream media (Albright, 2016b).

Botnets & Automated Posting: Lobby groups (Monbiot, 2011), governments (The Intercept, 2015), and businesses (Kabin, 2013), are among the many who are using astroturfing and bots to distort the information space for strategic purposes. Posting fake comments and reviews aims to harness the cognitive bias of “social proof” (Ambled & Bui, 2014). Botnets (and heavily automated posting) can manipulate algorithms. Twitter bots gamed Google’s algorithm for displaying “real time news” into promoting disinformation during a 2010 senate election in Massachusetts (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2010).

During the 2016 election, pro-Trump Twitter Bots dominated discussion about the U.S. election 5 to 1 over pro-Clinton messaging, and “strategically colonized pro-Clinton hashtags,” according to Oxford Internet Institute research (Kollanyi & Howard, 2016). Bots also accounted for nearly one-fifth of online discussion about the election (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016), negatively affecting political discourse by drowning opposing views. This domination in online discourse helps explain Trump’s success in Google search rankings.

5. Encouraging Followers to Action

Once inside echo chambers followers can be encouraged, through posts and email distribution lists (Albright, 2016a; Plouffe, 2010), to participate in the spread of propaganda, including: sharing messages; co-opting or borrowing influencer accounts to share content
or encouraging trolling (Cheng et al, 2017; Buckels et al, 2014) to stifle debate.

To many, Trump is a troll (Silver, 2015; Offman, 2016; Lapowsky & Marshall, 2017) but he was also supported by a legion of online trolls during the election (Marantz, 2016), spreading disinformation (Kang, 2016; Gallucci, 2016) and attacking Clinton supporters online (Chmielewski, 2016). Some online communities, such as the United States Freedom Army (who believes the left is engaging the right in a civil war) offered its members a monthly directive on actions to take on Twitter, and elsewhere in the spread of their content and support for Trump (Lotan, 2016).

6. Using Traditional Media

Media play a critical role in furthering political agendas (Wodak, 2013; Engel & Wodak, 2009; Engel & Wodak, 2012); after all, “the media are a key element in the construction of public understanding.” (Philo, 2008, 539) Rates of politician media coverage correlate to popular support levels (Vliegenthart et al, 2012) and Trump was consistently mentioned more on television, online, and social media (Wanless, 2016). By the start of the primary election campaign in early 2016, Trump had been enjoying “more nightly news coverage than the entire Democratic field combined.” (Borchers, 2015) Media coverage can be earned in at least three ways:

Trending Online. Simply trending online can lead to media coverage. Indeed, a Google news search for the exact terms “Trending on Twitter” on 27 April 2017 returned 371,000 results – with 14,000 published within that past week. (Of course, as noted above, bots and automated posting can be used to distort what trends).
Stage a Scandal. Media savvy populist politicians are particularly adept at this. Through a “right-wing populist perpetuum mobile” (Wodak, 2013), populists stage scandals to gain media attention, provoking opposition to attack, then distorting ensuing debate to position themselves as victims not tolerated by a biased system. Such scandals can usually be interpreted in multiple ways. Trump used this technique when retweeting a campaign supporter’s image post. In the picture, adapted from Clinton’s campaign material, the Trump supporter had added a symbol similar to the Star of David. Opponents decried the use of the symbol as anti-Semitic (Jacobson, 2016). The Trump campaign claimed the liberal media had misinterpreted a Sherriff’s star and was biased against him (Trump, 2016).

Commune with the news. Media, politicians and online communities have a deeply interconnected relationship. The Colombia Journalism Review identified a “right wing media network anchored around Breitbart” in analysing more than 1.25 million stories posted online from 1 April 2015 to 8 November 2016. This “distinct and insulated media system” used social media to spread a “hyper-partisan perspective”, but also “strongly influenced the broader media agenda, in particular coverage of Hillary Clinton.” (Benkler et al, 2016).

As these studies demonstrate, many of these techniques when combined together could be used to encourage followers and co-opt audiences into active participation, becoming propagandists for a cause and thus deliberately working to persuade their own personal networks too. To evaluate the extent of their application during the U.S. presidential elections an original study of Facebook pro-Trump pages was conducted to assess how audiences might have been engaged in the creation and distribution of persuasive political messaging.
Modelling Participatory Propaganda

Methodology & Data

The study includes social network and content analyses undertaken on 17 Facebook pages, using data related to a month-long period leading up to the 2017 election (7 October to 7 November 2016). These pages included three that supported Trump during the election, as well as seven conservative-leaning and seven liberal-leaning media outlets. The digital tactics outlined in the previous section were used as a frame for investigation.

Social network analysis has shown to be an effective method to study online group dynamics, information diffusion processes, and political polarisation in social media (Gruzd & Roy, 2014; Gruzd & Tsyganova, 2015). Facebook pages and groups have been analysed to identify echo chambers (Grömping, 2014; Bakshy et al, 2014; Del Vicario et al, 2016). And content analysis has been used to assess right-wing populist rhetoric in media (Bos et al, 2010, 2011, Sheets et al, 2015).

Facebook was selected for this research as 79% of American adults who use the internet also use this social network (Pew, 2016b), making it the most popular and thus representative social media for studying politics in the U.S.

The data collection process was executed using the publicly available Facebook Graph API with the help of online application - Netvizz (Rieder, 2013). Only publicly available data was used. The data, in the form of communication networks among Facebook users, was analysed using Social Network Analysis (SNA) (Scott, 1988, 2011). Network visualisations were created using the open-source social network analysis software, Gephi (Bastion et al, 2009).

The pages analysed are as follows:

Table 1
Facebook Pages Analysed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trump Supporters</th>
<th>Right-Leaning Media</th>
<th>Left-Leaning Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens for Trump</td>
<td>Breitbart</td>
<td>CBS News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle Rising</td>
<td>The Glenn Beck Program</td>
<td>CNN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wake Up &amp; Reclaim America</td>
<td>Fox News</td>
<td>MSNBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Infowars</td>
<td>NPR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Sean Hannity Show</td>
<td>The New York Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Drudge Report</td>
<td>PBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Blaze</td>
<td>The Washington Post</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three pro-Trump pages were chosen as a sampling of those supporting his candidacy, with one showing its open support through the name (*Citizens for Trump*), another having been found spreading fake news (Silverman et al., 2016) supporting Trump (*Eagle Rising*), and a third standing out as a node in initial, exploratory network analysis (*Wake Up & Reclaim America*).

Drawing from a Pew Research Centre survey on Political Polarization and Media Habits (Mitchell et al., 2016), seven media outlets trusted consistently by respondents who self-identified as liberal or conservative were selected. One substitute was made on the Conservative-leaning side, which was *Infowars*, given the role it played in the election (Finnegan, 2016). Media pages were used to assess how pro-Trump pages were engaging with news outlets.

The following publicly available data for all of these pages was collected using Netvizz:

**Facebook page like networks.**

Beginning with an initial “seed” page, all of the other Facebook pages liked by the seed are collected in a directed network of pages, meaning the data shows which page likes which. Using an analytical tool called Gephi, these networks can be visualised. The data in this pull also included information regarding page categories, follower numbers, and rates of engagement.
Facebook page posts.

All of the posts made by these pages during the month leading up to the election (7 October to 7 November 2016) were also collected, including information regarding the type of post, engagement rates and embedded links.

This Facebook page data was then analysed to answer the following questions:

- Did pro-Trump Facebook pages share provocative content such as fake news, memes, and data leaks?
- Did pro-Trump Facebook pages constitute an echo chamber?
- Was content shared on pro-Trump Facebook pages posted across multiple websites? And how was this content reflected in Google Search returns?
- Were followers of pro-Trump Facebook pages encouraged to action?
- How did pro-Trump Facebook pages engage with media outlets?

Findings

Did pro-Trump Facebook pages share provocative content such as fake news, memes, and data leaks?

The short answer is yes.

Fake News. The links shared to the three Trump supporting Facebook pages reviewed for this study were mostly non-mainstream media. On average, link posts comprised 53.22% of updates made by the pro-Trump pages. Eagle Rising shared more links than the other two (83.25% of posts), with nearly half of those links (45.4%) pointing to the page’s own website eaglerising.com, which contains coverage speculating on connections between Clinton, terrorists
and Nazis, for example, and the Clinton campaign’s alleged use of psychological warfare (which in turn points back to another site shared by these pages called ipatriot.com). 3

After Breitbart, the most shared domain to Citizens for Trump was gatewaypundit.com, a blog that has posted many questionable articles on Hillary Clinton, including that she secretly called for Trump’s assassination, had suffered a brain seizure, and that she had a gum and immune disorder. During the period between 7 October to 7 November 2016, Citizens for Trump shared 13 Gateway Pundit articles, accounting for 4.32% of all link posts, including one speculating on Clinton’s health that enjoyed 319 shares on Facebook. Wake Up & Reclaim America also shared 14 Gateway Pundit articles, including a post suggesting Clinton was involved in having Supreme Court Justice Scalia assassinated.

Memes. Following initial content analysis of photo posts to the pages analysed, and drawing from a similar study of Breitbart posts (Renner, 2017), memes were counted by the total number of photo posts made by the pro-Trump pages. Memes account for a considerable number of posts on community Facebook pages such as Wake Up & Reclaim America. In analysis of 1330 posts made by Wake Up & Reclaim America in the month leading up to the 8 November 2016 election, nearly half were image posts. Nearly two-thirds of those photo posts were shared by the page administrator from other Facebook user posts, pages or groups, such as Liberal

3 See: http://eaglerising.com/36390/how-the-clinton-campaign-is-using-psychological-warfare/
7 See: https://www.facebook.com/563896500417731/posts/771473306326715
8 See: https://www.facebook.com/380251501985837/posts/1372925612718416
Wackadoodles, indicating spread through a wider community. Memes were also shared by Eagle Rising (14.79%) and Citizens for Trump (26.62%)

Table 2

*Post Type by Pro-Trump Facebook Pages*

![Graph showing post type distribution for Wake up & Reclaim America, Eagle Rising, and Citizens for Trump.]

**Data Leaks.** Hacks and leaks were certainly discussed online. All of the pro-Trump pages assessed made mention of “Wikileaks”, a non-profit that aims to “open governments”, which in that time frame had shared more of the leaked Podesta emails to its website. Of the three Facebook pages analysed that supported Trump, 65 posts mentioned “Wikileaks” during the month leading up to the 8 November election, accounting on average for 2.75% of all posts made during that period. Both the conservative- and liberal-leaning media outlets analysed made mention of “Wikileaks” in this timeframe too: the seven right-leaning pages mentioned

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9 See: https://wikileaks.org
“Wikileaks” 131 times accounting for 2.72% of all posts made on average, whereas the left-leaning pages referenced it 47 times, or in just 0.46% of all posts.

**Did pro-Trump Facebook pages constitute an echo chamber?**

Yes, the three pro-Trump pages were part of a like-minded community, which shared similar content.

A manual categorization of pages based on names and content reveals that the three pro-Trump page like networks are decidedly part of right-leaning echo chambers. Nearly all (94.1%) of the *Citizens for Trump* network are right-leaning, pro-Trump pages, while 82.7% of those within the *Eagle Rising* network are. As the *Wake Up & Reclaim America* page contained over 5,000 pages, a sampling of 1,000 pages were manually categorized, representing 18.8% of the total. While 67.8% of these were right-leaning pro-Trump pages, most other pages covered topics reflected in Trump’s campaign rhetoric, such as pro-Christian, anti-Muslim, pro-military, pro-police, anti-immigration, and pro-life views. If these topics are combined, the rate of pages within the *Wake Up & Reclaim America* network that reflect views shared by Trump supporters is 95.7%. Given that only two pages were found to express counter views – across all three page networks – it is safe to say these networks comprise a filter bubble of sorts.

As noted earlier, the three pro-Trump Facebook pages shared more alternative media sources than mainstream links in the month leading up to the 2016 election. Of those links shared to the pro-Trump pages and pointing to the conservative- and liberal-leaning pages also analysed, most were from either *Fox* or *Breitbart*. The page *Eagle Rising* shared none of the 14 media pages analysed, and the 1143 links posted between 7 October and 7 November 2016 pointed to just 14 websites, including eaglerising.com
Was content shared on pro-Trump Facebook pages posted across multiple websites? And how was this content reflected in Google Search returns?

Drawing from posts shared to the three pro-Trump pages in the lead up to the election, a simple Google search of article titles sheds some light on how such networks function. In one example, *Eagle Rising* shared an article from the blog the blacksphere.net entitled “Hillary Clinton: Calls Blacks Professional Never Do Wells”. This post garnered 157 shares on Facebook.

A Google search using the article’s title as exact terms, returns the original post, as well as several nearly exact reprints on other sites, with some linking back to *The Blacksphere* article. A search for *The Blacksphere* url returns 734 results, including posts from rightwingnews.com, teapartytribune.com, and thegatewaypundit.com. Some of these links are posted by other users in comment sections and online forums, and Sharescount\(^\text{10}\) suggests the URL was shared 12.5K times across social networks. The article was also picked up by online trend aggregators like Trendolizer,\(^\text{11}\) indicating the efforts to spread this content had some impact. Indeed, absent on the first page of another search return (made in a separate web browser logged into a different Google account) for the key words “Is Hillary Clinton a racist?” are any posts refuting the idea she might be (See Annex A).\(^\text{12}\)

Were followers of pro-Trump Facebook pages encouraged to action?

The three pro-Trump pages all encouraged their audiences to participate. *Citizens for Trump* and *Eagle Rising*, however, were arguably more successful than *Wake Up & Reclaim America*, as demonstrated through the average rates of follower shares on Facebook posts.

All three pages encouraged followers to vote for Trump.

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\(^{10}\) See: https://sharescount.com/

\(^{11}\) See: http://bit.ly/2q9RYHs

\(^{12}\) This experiment was then repeated in a different country, on another internet service provider, on a new computer with similar results
Citizens for Trump and Eagle Rising, however, also asked followers to share and spread messages, which might account for the higher percentage rate of shares on their posts.

Table 3

Average Shares on Posts by Page

![Bar chart showing average shares on posts by page]

 depending on one’s own filter bubble, the size of pro-Trump networks might come as a surprise. To some media pundits, Trump rode to the White House on a wave of fringe support (Coppins, 2015) – but that would be a mistake, as analysis of the pro-Trump Facebook Page Like networks shows.

Each of the pro-Trump pages Facebook Page Like networks were added to one visualisation using Gephi, which amounted to a total of 5416 nodes with 100,208 edges between them. To put that into perspective, similar data pulls were made on two media page groups. The three pro-Trump pages had 16.3 times more nodes and 55.86 times more edges than the liberal-leaning media group, and 6.45 times more nodes and 55.86 times more edges than the conservative-leaning media group.
Looking at the three pro-Trump pages separately, each network contains a considerable percentage of pages that have self-categorized on Facebook as “Community”, but also “Public Figure”, “Politician” and some form of “News/Media” (See Tables 3, 4, and 5).

Tables 4, 5, and 6

*Facebook Page Categories Selected by Pages within Pro-Trump Page-Like Network*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook Page Categories Selected by Pages within Pro-Trump Page-Like Network</th>
<th>Citizens For Trump</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Personality</td>
<td>2.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Organization</td>
<td>2.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause</td>
<td>2.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Profit Organization</td>
<td>3.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media/News Company</td>
<td>3.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Organization</td>
<td>7.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News/Media Website</td>
<td>7.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>9.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Figure</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>25.88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The pro-Trump network was then analysed using Gephi (Figure 1). This included running the ForceAtlas2, a force-directed layout to transform the network into a map. Additional statistical analysis was conducted, using Modularity, which helps identify the various...
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communities within a network, marked in the data visualization below by colours. The pro-
Trump network wasn’t just bigger in comparison; it was also more closely integrated between
pages with an Average Weighted Degree of 18.502 compared to that of the conservative-leaning
media group at 9.01 or the liberal-leaning at 5.404 (the higher the number, the greater the
average number of edges that touch a node in the network).

Figure 1. Three Pro-Trump Facebook Page Like networks analysed using Gephi
Pages liking each other demonstrate a possible channel for the spread of information. To investigate further, Netvizz was used to pull all posts made by each page from 7 October to 7 November 2016, a month before the election. These posts were analysed using Excel to count the mentions of specific terms (such as Clinton, Trump, and Wikileaks), how many posts were shared from other accounts, and what web domains were shared to the page, for example. The same investigative process was then applied to analysing the two media page groups.

Around one third of the posts made by Wake Up & Reclaim America (34.1%) and Citizens for Trump (28.7%) were shares from other Facebook accounts or pages, indicating community-like behaviour on these two pages.

Table 7

*Number of Posts Shared from Other Facebook Pages or Accounts*
Some pages such as *Occupy Libtards*\(^\text{13}\) enjoyed repeated shares to *Wake Up & Reclaim America*, including *The Deplorables*.\(^\text{14}\) This Facebook group has 472,297 Members (as of 18 April 2017) and takes its name from a comment made by Hillary Clinton during the election about Trump supporters.

These pro-Trump pages are not operating in isolation. Of note as bigger nodes in the pro-Trump Facebook Page Like network visualisation are *Fox News*, *Sean Hannity*, *The Blaze*, and

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\(^{13}\) See: https://www.facebook.com/Occupy-Libtards-5-670970859684203/

\(^{14}\) See: https://www.facebook.com/groups/309472556081534/
Glenn Beck (see the darker orange community in the upper left of the network) – not to mention the NRA Institute for Legislative Action and The Heritage Foundation (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Zoomed in screenshot of pro-Trump Facebook Page Like network using Gephi

Beyond the official political campaign Facebook pages, hundreds if not thousands of other pages pumped content supporting Trump to sympathetic users of that social network. Indeed, within the Wake Up & Reclaim America Facebook Page Like network, 207 page names contain the word “Trump” – many more that are pro-Trump do not, making them much more difficult to track. Together these Facebook pages support each other with reciprocal Page Likes and sharing of posts, while also mobilizing users to not just spread the message but also support Trump. In so doing, these online communities are also tapping into bigger organisations, such as media outlets, lobby groups, and think tanks – hinting at a much more systemic participatory propaganda effort.
How did pro-Trump Facebook pages engage with media outlets?

The pro-Trump Facebook Pages certainly followed right-leaning media outlets, as can be identified in the Page Like networks visualised above and featuring *Fox News* and *Sean Hannity*, among others.

The liberal-leaning media group, visualised in Figure 4, comprised seven almost entirely independent communities. The visualisation below uses Gephi’s stronger gravity function to keep the communities closer together for ease of viewing; however, they are not linked so closely in reality. What’s more, the Facebook pages tend to be grouped into ‘ego networks’, meaning any given media outlet tends to only like pages related to that network, such as its own TV shows or journalists.
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Figure 4. Left-leaning media Facebook Page Like networks using Gephi and stronger gravity to make the visualization easier to read

The conservative-leaning media group is quite different (Figure 5). The massive Infowars community dominates the visualisation, represented here below by the large yellow section, running into the Alex Jones network in blue, which comes with it. While nodes connect the Infowars monolith to Fox, the key connector page is Judge Andrew Napolitano. This is interesting in itself, as in past analysis of media Facebook Page Like networks, Fox stood out
from outlets such as BBC for its connecting to personalities, both their own journalists as well as U.S. politicians, suggesting that some media outlets aren’t just covering the news, but engaging directly with the subjects making the news (Wanless, 2015). This form of engagement could be considered alarming, if the notion of impartial news is accepted as crucial to a functioning democracy.

Figure 5. Right-leaning media Facebook Page Like networks using Gephi and stronger gravity to make the visualization easier to read
When these two media groups are combined with the pro-Trump network (Figure 6), the liberal-leaning outlets become islands unto themselves almost entirely disconnected (the blue communities at the bottom left), while the conservative-leaning media are absorbed into the overall community, and as noted above, in some cases becoming influential nodes.

*Figure 6. All Facebook Page Like networks combined using Gephi*
In short, the conservative-leaning media network is more of an ecosystem that stretches beyond news outlet borders, blending into each other and pages beyond just media and journalists, into communities.

**Pro-Trump Pages in a Participatory Propaganda Model**

While the analysis presented above is based on a very limited number of pages, the degree of engagement and inter-connectivity, both inside the network and with supportive media, demonstrate the existence of a systematic and coordinated attempt to influence the U.S. voters to support the Trump campaign. All but one of the tactics identified in the participatory propaganda model were used by Trump supporters to achieve this goal, including sharing provocative content (fake news, memes and data leaks), feeding such content into an echo chamber, reposting the same content, encouraging followers to do the same, and connecting with media and larger organisations supportive of Trump. The only element missing was hyper-targeted audience analysis, as this activity is typically conducted through in-house research during a campaign and is not traceable through open sources. However, Cambridge Analytica has openly claimed to have used such tactics for the Trump campaign. (Nix, 2016)

**Conclusion: Participatory Propaganda in Liberal Democracies**

As demonstrated in this paper, the organized deployment of various emerging technological and manipulative techniques in a digital era facilitates the emergence of an interactive form of engagement online where followers (target audience) are drawn into participating in the creation and spread of persuasive messaging. The example of the Trump 2016 presidential election campaign was used to demonstrate how these new tactics were deployed in combination with traditional media coverage to draw a considerable online following. This
follower engagement constitutes a qualitatively more enhanced form of propaganda that is much more ‘invasive’ in nature – not to mention potentially very dangerous for liberal democracies.

As internet penetration rates in democratic countries surpasses 80% (as in Canada (CIRA, 2016), U.K. (U.K. Office for National Statistics, 2016) and the U.S. (Pew, 2017)), with many others in tow, nearly half of those populations finished high school before the web was even invented. As of 2015, 21% of American survey respondents indicated they were online “almost constantly” (Perrin, 2015), and by the end of the first quarter in 2016, the average American was consuming 10:39 hours (Nielsen, 2016) of media across devices each day. Unlike radio and television before it, the internet has people constantly connected to information. Americans are at the vanguard of these changes – and as such are among the most vulnerable populations to information warfare, be it in the form of participatory propaganda, social engineering or cyber-attacks.

With such levels of exposure to a constant barrage of information, the ability of any one individual to discern its veracity or relevancy in a broader context of daily life is constantly challenged. Furthermore, the effects of continuous online exposure on individual mental health or how such activities shape perceptions are still too poorly understood, and as such, are not yet part of mainstream knowledge or incorporated into national education curriculums at the level required to cope. The negative and long-lasting repercussions of such limited understanding are perhaps nowhere as serious as in national politics.

In 2014, the World Economic Forum listed “the spread of misinformation online” as one of the top 10 trends facing the world (WEF, 2014). By 2016, Reporters Without Borders declared

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15 Similar models of participatory propaganda have been identified through subsequent research on the 2017 U.K. general election (https://lageneralista.com/anti-establishment-blues-2017-u-k-election/) and Canadian political Facebook pages (https://lageneralista.com/polarising-politics-in-canada-a-facebook-study/)
that we “have reached the age of post-truth, propaganda, and suppression of freedoms – especially in democracies” (2016). As demonstrated above, modern propagandists have a considerable arsenal of methods at their disposal to manipulate populations, influence their opinions or engage them in active propagation of the desired content that go well beyond the creation and distribution of ‘fake news’ alone. What perhaps stands out most in this participatory propaganda model is its perpetuation. Through the use of online communities such participatory propaganda campaigns run as long as the cause driving it matters to its members – or rather, those administering such groups are able to produce content that engages and provokes followers. Finding ways to identify and measure engagement within these networks should be a priority for those studying liberal democracies.
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is hillary clinton a racist

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