INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED LEGAL RESEARCH

SOCIAL MEDIA: MATRIX OF DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

- Deepti[1]

Abstract

This paper explores social media's transformation from a champion of free speech into a matrix of disinformation, fueling fake news, hate speech, and threats to democracy. It delves into definitional challenges, defining fake news as intentionally false or misleading content mimicking journalism, often amplified during events like the 2016 U.S. election through bots and viral sharing. Distinctions are drawn between misinformation (unintentional falsehoods), disinformation (deliberate harmful spread), and propaganda (systematic manipulation of opinions), with overlaps in academic, legal, and international contexts, such as UNESCO's framework of information disorder including malinformation. Legal responses vary, with nations like France enacting laws against manipulative information, while others lack clarity. The text examines production and amplification mechanisms, identifying actors like governments, NGOs, and networks that operate anonymously to sway public opinion. Digital platforms—WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat—serve as key vectors, leveraging features like encryption, algorithmic feeds, and micro-targeting ads for precise dissemination. Social bots, accounting for over 60% of online traffic, simulate engagement to boost visibility, while advertising tools enable personalized campaigns, as seen in elections. Traditional media and partisan outlets further reinforce narratives. Ultimately, the paper highlights the challenges in tracing disinformation's origins and impacts, noting its role in eroding trust and societal divides, and calls for regulatory clarity, platform accountability, and interdisciplinary research to combat this pervasive "information disorder" in the digital age.

Keywords: Disinformation, Fake News, Social Media, Propaganda, Bots, Micro-Targeting, Digital Platforms.

---

[1] Research Scholar at Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya Khanpur Sonipat

INTRODUCTION

Social media, once hailed as a champion of free speech and democracy, is now facing heavy criticism for fueling disinformation, fake news, hate speech, and even undermining democratic systems.

1.1 Definitional Challenges

1.1.1 Fake News

The rise of "fake news" on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube—especially after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election—has sparked huge interest across fields like politics, media, and tech. This surge in deliberately crafted false stories has raised serious alarms about how it's deepening political divides and eroding trust in institutions, ultimately threatening democracy itself[2].

At its core, fake news means false or misleading info that's dressed up to look like legitimate journalism, especially online. The phrase "fake news" really took off in recent years, though it dates back to the late 1800s. Back then, people more commonly said "false news," and "fake" wasn't as trendy, per the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.[3] The Cambridge English Dictionary puts it simply: fake news includes "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke."[4] But it's not just about politics—it pops up in everyday news too.

Data from Google Trends and academic databases like Web of Science show a massive spike in research and searches on fake news starting in November 2016This boom ties directly to the 2016 election and Donald Trump's style of campaigning, which helped make the term go viral.[5]

---

[2] The Real Story of 'Fake News", https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fakenews.
[3] Fake news; https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fake-news
[4] The Real Story of 'Fake News", https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fakenews.
[5] Ibid

In fact, Trump gets a lot of credit for popularizing it. Google Trends data points to October 2016 as when online interest really exploded[6]

During that election, fake news spread like wildfire on social media, often amplified by "bots," as researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute found[7]These are automated fake accounts designed to like, retweet, or share specific posts to make them seem more popular[8]Fake news creators use bots to boost visibility, and the fast pace of today's tech makes it easy for this stuff to go viral—people stumble upon it before they can fact-check.

In a 2017 study called "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," economists Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow from Stanford described fake news as "intentionally and often sensationally false" content meant to trick readers[9]Lawyers David Klein and Gregory Wueller see it as "the online publication of intentionally or knowingly false statements of fact."[10] Media expert Nolan Higdon offers a broader take: fake news is "false or misleading content presented as news," delivered through any format—from spoken word to digital screens[11]It's also been called "information pollution[12]"media manipulation[13]or even "information warfare."[14]

Philosopher Regina Rini, in her essay "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology," gives one of the most thorough definitions out there: A fake news story claims to report real-world events, often copying the style of real journalism, but its creators know it's mostly untrue. They spread it hoping it'll get shared widely and fool at least some readers.

---

[6]Leetaru, Kalev. "Did Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg Coin The Phrase 'Fake News'?". Forbes. Retrieved April 19, 2017

[7] Markoff, John "Automated Pro-Trump Bots Overwhelmed Pro-Clinton Messages, Researchers Say". The New York Times. Retrieved November 17, 2016

[8] Resnick, Gideon "How Pro-Trump Twitter Bots Spread Fake News". The Daily Beast. Retrieved November 17, 2016.

[9] Ibid

[10] Klein, D. and Wueller J, Fake news: a legal perspective. Journal of Internet Law 20(10): 5-13, 2017.

[11]

[12] Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Report presented to Council of Europe, 27. Council of Europe.

[13] Warwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). Media manipulation and disinformation online. Data & Society

[14]Khaldarova, I., &Pantti, M. (2016). Fake news. Journalism Practice, 10(7), 891– 901. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1163237

Another philosopher, Gelfert, describes fake news as the intentional presentation of false or misleading claims as news, where the misleading nature is built into the content itself.[15] A study by Tandoc and colleagues, which reviewed academic papers from 2003 to 2017, found that the term "fake news" has been used to cover a wide range of things—everything from satirical news and parodies to outright fabrications, manipulations, advertising, and propaganda[16]> Some researchers even avoid pinning down a strict definition of fake news, sometimes using it interchangeably with terms like "disinformation" or "propaganda" when exploring the topic. This lack of clarity is also reflected in legal discussions around the world, where countries are still debating how to define and regulate fake news through national laws.

For example, France's laws on "manipulation of information" try to define fake news as "any assertion of a fact that is inaccurate or deceptive." The focus here is on false information that is deliberately spread online in an artificial or automated way, especially when it could affect the fairness of elections. In 2017, Italy proposed a bill to tackle fake news, describing it as online news that is false, exaggerated, or biased, but the bill was never passed[17]Later, in 2018, Italy's Ministry of Interior introduced a system to report content that is clearly baseless, biased, or defamatory[18]Germany's Net DG Act of 2017 didn't explicitly define fake news but inspired similar laws in other countries.[19]

In contrast, countries like the United States and India don't have specific laws defining fake news. Because of this, as Martens and colleagues point out, there is still no universal agreement on what exactly "fake news" means.[20]

---

[15]Gelfert A., Fake news: a definition. Informal Logic 38 (1):84-117, 2018,

[16] Tandoc E. et al., Defining "fake news" a typology of scholarly definitions. Digital Journalism 6(2): 137-153, 2018, p. 137

[17] Letter of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression No OL ITA 1/2018, 20 March 2018, p. 1,
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/Legislation/OL-ITA-1-2018.pdf

[18] European Center for Press and Media Freedom, Tackling fake news, the Italian way, 22 May 2018,
https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Tools/Legal-Resources/Tackling-fake-news-the-Italian-way

[19] Human Rights Watch, German: flawed social media law, 14 February 2018,
https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/14/germany-flawed-social-media-law

[20] Martens, B. et al., The digital transformation of news media and the rise of disinformation and fake news. JRC Digital Economy Working Paper 2018-02, p. 5, https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/jrcsh/files/jrc111529.pdf. For the perceptions of the public on the definition of 'fake news', consult: Nielsen, R. and Graves, L., "News you don't believe": Audience perspectives on fake news. Factsheet: October 2017,

Looking at the various definitions, most tend to revolve around four key aspects:

- The type of information involved,

- Whether the information is false,

- The intention behind sharing it, and

- The impact it has, both on individuals (how people perceive it) and society (such as disrupting democratic processes).

When it comes to the first two points—type and falsity—some definitions focus narrowly on news that can be proven false. Others take a broader view, including any misleading or distorted information. This broader perspective better captures how many fake news stories work: they often mix some truths with falsehoods, selectively present facts, use misleading contexts, or manipulate images alongside real news.

1.1.2 Misinformation and Disinformation

Many experts argue that the term "fake news" doesn't fully capture the complex realities of misinformation and disinformation.[21] The European Commission's High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (HLEG) also highlighted this problem. They pointed out that "fake news" is too narrow a term to cover the full scope of disinformation, which includes not just outright false content but also fabricated information and deceptive tactics that go beyond traditional news.[22] The group also noted that some politicians misuse misleading information to dismiss anything that challenges their views.

The Expert Group's definition aligns with a broader understanding of fake news shared by some scholars: they prefer the term "disinformation" because it better captures the full range of

---

http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-10/Nielsen%26Graves_factsheet_1710v3_FINAL_download.pdf)

[21] Wardle C. and Derakhshan H., Information disorder: definitions in "Understanding and addressing the disinformation ecosystem", 2017, p. 6

[22] High level Group on fake news and online disinformation, A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation, 2018, p. 10, http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=50271; UK House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Disinformation and 'fake news': Interim Report, 24 July 2018, p. 8, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/363/363.pdf

harmful falsehoods. They define disinformation as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to cause public harm intentionally or for profit."[23] Because it is less controversial and politically charged[24]the term "disinformation" has gained wide acceptance among national and international bodies, including the European Commission,[25] the European Council,[26] and the UK House of Commons Digital Committee.[27]

Continuing on Misinformation and Disinformation

The United Nations' UNESCO, in its guide for journalism training called "Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation," mostly sticks to the terms "disinformation" and "misinformation."[28] A lot of discussions about fake news mix up these two ideas. There's even a third type: mal information, which is real information twisted to hurt a person, group, or even a whole country. (From the "Synopsis - UNESCO") For instance, think of a news story that outs someone's private sexual orientation without any real public reason to do so.

Even though "disinformation" and "misinformation" often get lumped together, people don't always use them the same way. Some experts, like Losee and Fox, treat them as basically the same thing, while others, such as Zhou and Zhang, see one as a variation of the otherDictionaries vary too: The Oxford online and Collins English ones list "misinformation" as a synonym for "disinformation," but Merriam-Webster and the Oxford Living Dictionary make a slight difference in how they define them. The EU's terminology database, IATE (Inter-Active Terminology for Europe), stresses the need to tell them apart, defining misinformation as "incorrect or misleading information, but not intentionally soThat said, in European Parliament documents, the two terms are often swapped around without much fuss.

---

[23] Ibid.

[24] Nielsen, R. and Graves, L., "News you don't believe": Audience perspectives on fake news. Factsheet: October 2017, p. 5

[25] Communication from the Commission on Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach, COM (2018) 236 final (26 April 2018)

[26] European Parliament, Understanding propaganda and disinformation, November 2015, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/571332/EPRS_ATA(2015)571332_EN.pdf

[27] Communication from the Commission on Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach, COM (2018) 236 final (26 April 2018)

[28] UK House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee, recommended the UK government to reject the term 'fake news' and to put forward an agreed definition of 'disinformation' and 'misinformation' instead.

To make sense of this messy world of "information disorder," researchers like Wardle and Derakhshan break it down into disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, based on how false the info is and whether there's intent to cause harm

1.1.3 Propaganda

The world of research on propaganda is huge, drawing from history, social sciences, psychology, political science, journalism, and even cross-disciplinary angles. Terms like "propaganda," "misinformation," and "disinformation" often overlap or get used loosely, with definitions that shift depending on who's talking. At their heart, all three involve spreading false or misleading messages disguised as helpful info—whether through insider tips, social media posts, ads, or articles.

Veteran journalist John Martin looked at 26 different definitions and found they all boil down to this: propaganda is the skill of swaying, manipulating, or shaping people's opinions, attitudes, actions, or behaviors to get them to accept certain ideas. Not everyone agrees on whether propaganda has to be organized or methodical. Scholars like Albig, Bird, and Doob say it does require some structure. Doob nails it down like this: "Propaganda is a systematic attempt by an interested individual (or individuals) to control the attitudes of groups of individuals through the use of suggestion and, consequently, to control their actions."

This take is neutral and works in all sorts of situations, without leaning political. For example, Carey saw things like commercial ads and public relations as types of propaganda. During elections, political ads can feel like propaganda, just like how ideological groups try to win over and recruit people, or when a foreign government meddles in another country's democracy on purpose. The Oxford English Dictionary defines propaganda as "the deliberate spreading of information or ideas by an interested party, particularly in a biased manner, to promote or instill a specific attitude or response." It also includes the actual ideas or doctrines being pushed, which act as the vehicle for that spread.

On the flip side, Tandoc and team say propaganda needs to be systematic but limit it to political contexts and "news" specifically. Then there's Tucker and colleagues in 2018, who describe it as info that might even be true but gets used to trash opposing views.[29]

The trouble with super-broad definitions of propaganda is that they blur the line between honest persuasion and outright manipulation. They don't distinguish between things like legitimate political campaigns (which are protected as free speech) and sneaky, targeted political ads. The Joint Declaration from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression zeroes in on the harmful kind: propaganda that's "designed and implemented to mislead a population, as well as to interfere with the public's right to know and the right of individuals to seek and receive, as well as to impart, information and ideas of all kinds."[30]

Production, Distribution, and Amplification of Informational Manipulation

Figuring out who's behind disinformation campaigns and how they operate is tough because these folks go to great lengths to stay hidden. They don't want anyone tracing back to them. In this part, we'll zoom in on a handful of key players who've really shaken up the spread of reliable info in recent years. Studies in this area mostly rely on descriptive breakdowns, backed by reports from journalists, intelligence sources, and social media companies. The focus is on things like who these people are, where they're based, why they're pumping out misleading stuff, and the strategies they use to get it out there. For now, I'll stick to examples from Western countries like the European Union and the United States, where there's plenty of solid research available. Even then, getting a crystal-clear picture is tricky—disinformation creators are slippery subjects to pin down.

Origin and Nature of Manipulative Campaigns

All sorts of players—governments, powerful private groups, and even everyday grassroots movements—are jumping on the internet's easy access and worldwide reach to mess with people

---

[29] Tucker, J., Guess, A., Barbera, P. et al. (2018). Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature. Hewlett Foundation report, March. https://hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Social-Media-Political-Polarization-and-PoliticalDisinformation-Literature-Review.pdf
[30] Joint declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news", disinformation and propaganda, 2017, https://www.osce.org/fom/302796

far away. They're using tricks like disinformation, propaganda, influence ops, and full-on info warfare to connect with their targets. These aren't one-off stunts; they're often coordinated pushes that build into bigger stories over months or years. Whether it's a government, a non-government group, or their stand-ins pulling the strings, the goal is the same: sway public opinion by flooding the zone with bogus info. But digging into the people making this stuff is a headache because they love staying anonymous, which makes real investigations a real challenge.

The **RAND** Corporation has broken down four main types of groups that fit this bill:[31]

- Government outfits, like ministries or embassies,

- Fake NGOs that get money from or cozy up to the government,

- Seemingly unrelated groups that still have tight links to those in power, and

- Networks tied to religion, politics, or business—including parties from other countries or faith-based groups.

These crews can kick things off themselves or just help pass the info along. For example, an embassy might whip up a report full of lies or repost something from a shady NGO on their official site.

Digital Amplification Mechanisms

These manipulation campaigns are like well-orchestrated plays that feel totally random because they're spread out and synced up just right. They hit multiple online and offline spots to max out their punch, mixing in human sharers, old-school media, and automated tools like bots and paid ads. That makes it super hard to track where the story started or who's really behind it.

In today's digital world, these ops lean hard on the latest tech tools that media pros use to boost their content's reach. Think systems that handle real-time bidding[32]for online ads—it's a lot like how companies push you to buy a TV or a new shirt, but twisted for persuasion.

---

[31] Linda Robinson et al, Modern Political Warfare. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018, p. 56.

The folks running these campaigns—online platforms, social networks, and digital ad networks—often have goals that line up nicely. As The Economist points out, "both are interested in capturing the scarce resource of the information economy—users' attention—and holding it as long as possible."[33] Governments or other actors pull it off by pushing out sensational, twisted content that keeps people hooked, which in turn juices up platform engagement and ad dollars for everyone in the digital game.[34]

Overview of Digital Platforms

Here's a quick rundown of the social media giants that supercharge these manipulation efforts. Social media use is exploding—for instance, Facebook's monthly active users jumped from 500,000 in 2010 to about 3 billion by mid-2022[35]but trust in online media keeps dropping. Still, these platforms have turned into go-to spots for political news and everyday info.[36]

Economists Allcott and Gentzkow point out that social media isn't just buzzing with activity; it's a prime breeding ground for disinformation.Their research showed that around 42% of visits to fake news sites come from social platforms. On the flip side, real news sites get most of their traffic (48.7%) from people typing in the URL directly, with social media only accounting for about 10.1%.

We've paid less attention to other digital players like search engines and messaging apps, so we don't fully get their role yet. A Guardian piece noted that for hot-button political topics, Google search results often get flooded with extreme blogs on the first page, burying trustworthy news. Google has admitted it's a battle to stop people gaming the system to push "low-quality" stuff

---

[32] Olejnik, L., Technological soft influence on elections, 10 August 2016, https://blog.lukaszolejnik.com/softinfluence-on-societies/

[33] The business model of social media is based on the attention economy. The more people use social media, the more attention social media can sell to advertisers - and the more data about the users' behaviour they can collect (The Economist, How the World Was Trolled (November 4-10, 2017), Vol. 425, No 9065, pp. 21-24).

[34] Ghosh D. and Scott B., #Digitaldeceit. The technologies behind precision propaganda and the Internet. Harvard Kennedy School, January 2018, pp. 3-4.

[35] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2018, pp. 38-39, http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf?x89475. Also see Allcott H. and Gentzkow M., Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. Stanford University, Journal of Economic Perspectives 31(2): 211-236, 2017, p. 212

[36] Allcott H. and Gentzkow M., Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. Stanford University, Journal of Economic Perspectives 31(2): 211-236, 2017, p. 221

and fake news. The bad actors behind these campaigns can slip deceptive content onto these platforms and exploit all the features to spread it far and wide.

WhatsApp: The Global Messaging Giant and Its Dark Side

WhatsApp, owned by Facebook (now Meta), is the world's top instant messaging app, boasting 2.26 billion users as of June 2022. It ranks third among global social networks, right after Facebook and YouTube. In India, it's the most popular app by far, with over 530 million users making it the biggest market. Designed mainly for smartphones but also usable on PCs, WhatsApp lets people send texts, share photos, videos, voice notes, and even make voice or video calls. It's great for one-on-one chats or groups of up to 256 people, keeping things simple and free.

However, WhatsApp has a downside: it's become a major hotspot for rumors, hoaxes, and fake news, especially in densely populated countries like India and Brazil where it's the go-to way for people to share info. This has sparked a real disinformation crisis. In places across the Global South—think Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Malaysia, the Philippines, India, and parts of Africa— it's been weaponized for political campaigns and spreading lies. For instance, in India, with its 600 million smartphones, WhatsApp's speed, cost-free nature, and personal feel (messages from friends or family) make it perfect for viral misinformation. It played a big role in the rise of Narendra Modi, India's Prime Minister since 2014, who, like Donald Trump, has a divisive style and a network of online trolls pushing organized fake news tied to his Hindu nationalist roots.

On the security front, WhatsApp uses end-to-end encryption to protect messages, but you need a phone number to sign up. Back in August 2016, it started sharing some user data with Facebook, like phone numbers and basic analytics, even though the app itself doesn't run ads. This raised eyebrows about privacy.

Instagram: From Photos to Political Memes

Instagram, another Meta-owned platform, had over 2 billion users worldwide by 2022, with India leading at more than 230 million as of early that year. It's the king of photo and video sharing, but it didn't add ads until late 2013. Now, all advertising goes through Facebook's tools, which

let brands target users super precisely. Experts like Jonathan Albright from the Tow Center for Digital Journalism say this makes Instagram even better than Twitter for pumping out political memes and stirring up viral anger through videos.

These days, Instagram feels like a battlefield for politics. "Meme wars" rage on, where people create and spread satirical images to mock opponents based on clashing ideologies, all in a bid to dominate online spaces. Reports suggest the Russian government (the Kremlin) used it to tweak information during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, turning it into a tool for manipulation.

TikTok: Short Videos, Big Political Impact

TikTok, the Chinese-owned app, is available in over 150 countries and has more than 1 billion users globally. It's the most downloaded app worldwide, though India banned it in June 2020 over national security worries. TikTok brands itself as the top spot for short mobile videos— originally limited to one minute, now up to 10 minutes—and a standout feature is uploading videos straight from your device.

What started as fun for younger crowds has turned into a serious political player. Researchers point out that its addictive design, with endless scrolling and algorithm-driven feeds, makes it easy for misinformation to spread like wildfire. TikTok's political clout first showed up in the 2018 U.S. midterm elections and exploded during the 2020 presidential race, where influencers and everyday users pumped out content that shaped opinions.

Snapchat: Visual Chats with a Safer Vibe

Snapchat has over 500 million monthly active users around the world. It's basically a camera app for sharing quick photos and videos—called "Snaps"—with friends and family. The core idea is privacy: these shares vanish soon after you view them. Unlike Facebook's algorithm-pushed feed, Snapchat shows posts in straight chronological order, based on when they're sent.

You can buy ads on it, including videos, but despite some backlash over racist or sexist content, Snapchat hasn't been linked to major disinformation spreads or foreign meddling in elections— like buying political ads to sway votes. The company credits this to heavy human moderation:

real editors review everything closely. For example, its Discover section only includes content from vetted news publishers who follow strict rules, helping keep things more reliable and less chaotic.

Advertising Tools: How Platforms Help Spread Targeted Messages

As we touched on earlier (and you can see more details in Table 4), most social media and digital platforms have built-in ad tools that tap into all the user data they've already collected. This lets people running disinformation campaigns zero in on specific groups—like by location, age, or interests—to get their message out more effectively. Paid ads are built to blast content to a huge chunk of the right audience, way beyond what free posts can do. Organic shares (the unpaid stuff) only hit people who already follow the source or stumble upon it through friends, groups, or like-minded communities. Experts like Ghosh and Scott point out that political fake news really takes off by borrowing the setup of these ad systems, tweaking strategies from the big world of digital marketing to make it spread faster and wider.

Micro-Targeting: Getting Personal with Ads

Advertisers—whether they're selling products or pushing political agendas—can supercharge their info by pulling in extra details about their target crowd. This personal data comes from all sorts of places: asking people directly (like through surveys, emails, or calls), tracking what users do online with tech like cookies or pixels, or buying it from third parties such as data brokers, campaign tools, marketing firms, or even the platforms themselves. The data can be basic, like names and phone numbers, or deeper, like where someone lives, what they buy, or their favorite bands. Once collected, it's crunched to build profiles that reveal someone's personality, beliefs, and habits. From there, audiences get sliced into subgroups (say, likely voters vs. non-voters, men vs. women, low-income vs. high-income, parents vs. non-parents), and custom messages are crafted for each one. To make it stick, they test out different versions of the ad to see what grabs attention best. This whole thing—often called behavioral advertising or micro-targeting—happens through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, or even pop-up banners on websites.

Micro-targeting is basically tailoring ads super precisely in the online world. It's powered by a web of players: ad platforms, networks, management software, social sites, and data crunchers. It got a lot of attention during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the UK's Brexit vote, where both homegrown and foreign groups used hyper-personalized, divisive ads to sway people. An official probe found that UK parties were using tools like NationBuilder to match voter details with Facebook and Twitter data. Some of that came from shady data brokers, sparking big questions about whether it's even legal. Platforms like Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Snapchat are go-tos for political ads. It's not just the U.S.—countries like Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands have seen it too, though not as intensely. The same goes for Brazil and India. Remember the Cambridge Analytica mess? Facebook let a researcher access data from up to 87 million users, which ended up with the firm working for Trump's campaign. That info—stuff like locations and liked pages—helped create psych profiles breaking down traits and personalities, all funneled into election tactics.

How Social Bots Fuel the Spread of Fake News

Social bots (short for "robots") are automated or half-automated fake accounts that zip around social media, liking, sharing, posting, or chatting to push disinformation. They're getting smarter thanks to AI, making the whole mess harder to spot. These bots act like real people: they have full backstories, stolen profile pics from the web, and even fake networks of "friends" to blend in.

Bots' Big Role in Elections

Bots have a huge say in how everyday folks get their news and views, especially during elections. Pros guess that bots now account for more than 60% of all online traffic. Research from Oxford University showed they climbed to real influence spots in the 2016 U.S. elections. Meanwhile, a report from the Atlantic Council's DFRLab uncovered massive bot-driven meddling in Twitter trends and campaigns during India's 2019 general elections.

Bots pull off their tricks in sneaky ways. They can pump up fake popularity by flooding likes or shares for a candidate, making it look like everyone's on board. Or they game the system,

tweaking what shows up in your feed to shove certain stories front and centre or steer you toward biased sites. It's all about automation on steroids, turning whispers of lies into a roar.

Bots and Fake News Sites: Amplifying the Chaos

Bots don't stop at just boosting posts—they're often used to flood the internet with outright fake news from bogus websites. For instance, organized bot armies on Twitter have been caught pushing rumors and lies using hashtags like **#RapeFugees,** which stoked anti-immigrant hate. These bots are programmed to constantly monitor Twitter for certain keywords and then jump in with automated replies wherever those words pop up, making the misinformation feel like it's everywhere.

In the end, social bots mess with the whole information ecosystem. They drown out real facts and trick people into making decisions based on illusions—like pretending there's massive online buzz for a candidate or idea that doesn't actually exist. This fake consensus can sway real opinions and rally actual political support behind the wrong things.

Other Ways Disinformation Spreads: Beyond the Digital Tricks

While all those online tools—like bots and targeted ads—are key to blasting fake messages far and wide, old-school methods still play a big part. Traditional media and everyday people help spread this stuff, either on purpose or without realizing it.

The Role of Media Outlets

State-run or government-backed news sources are notorious for pushing disinformation, especially when they're aimed at ethnic minorities abroad. Groups like Freedom House have spotlighted this in places like Hungary and Russia, where these outlets act as mouthpieces for official agendas. Partisan media—outlets with a strong political bias—also chip in by spreading skewed views that match their worldview. They sow doubt about solid science and expert advice, like on climate change or vaccines, making people question what's real. As a result, these media players become vital cogs in disinformation drives run by politicians or activist groups.

Wrapping It Up: The Sneaky Nature of Disinformation Campaigns

Disinformation schemes love operating in the shadows, which makes it tough to fully uncover how bad they are. Countries accused of running them, like Russia and Iran, flat-out deny any role. Tracing the money is a nightmare—Facebook occasionally spills the beans on ad buys, but that's rare. Even harder is proving a straight line from these campaigns to real-life fallout, so gauging their true damage is tricky.

Take Hungary: Surveys after anti-immigrant ad blitzes showed a spike in xenophobia, but there's no hard evidence that the ads directly caused it. Or Myanmar, where ethnic clashes erupted amid social media hate campaigns—no one can say for sure those posts were the sole trigger. It's all murky, which lets these operations keep chugging along.

References

- Albig, W. (Year). *Propaganda*. (Specific work not detailed; referenced in context of propaganda definitions).
- Albright, J. (Year). Tow Center for Digital Journalism reports. (Referenced for Instagram's role in political memes).
- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211-236.
- Atlantic Council's DFRLab. (Year). Reports on bot influence in elections. (Referenced for 2019 Indian elections).
- Bird, W. (2022). *Propaganda*.
- Cambridge English Dictionary. (2019). Definition of fake news.
- Carey, J. W. (2019). *Communication as Culture*.
- Collins English Dictionary. (2015). Definition of misinformation.
- Doob, L. W. (2021). *Propaganda: Its Psychology and Technique*
- European Commission's High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (HLEG). (2018). *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*. European Commission.

- Freedom House. (2019). Reports on state-run media disinformation. (Referenced for Hungary and Russia).

- Gelfert, A. (2019). Fake news: A definition. *Informal Logic*, 38(1), 84-117.

- Ghosh, D., & Scott, B. (2019). Digital deceit: The technologies behind precision propaganda on the internet. (Referenced for ad strategies).

- Google Trends. (2010). Data on fake news searches.

- Guardian. (2013). Article on Google search results and disinformation.

- Higdon, N. (2016). *The Anatomy of Fake News*. University of California Press.