

Automated Propaganda as Platform Imperative? The Case of Instant Articles

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The essay investigates automated propaganda driven by the monetization imperative of platforms through the case of Instant Articles (IA), a news monetization program offered by Facebook (now Meta) from 2015 to 2023. IA offered news publishers a way to create mobile-friendly and fast-loading versions of their articles by publishing their content directly with Facebook. Despite initial success with buy-ins from major news outlets, IA was eventually shut down following the 2021 MIT Tech Review reporting on how informal actors across the developing world, most notably Vietnam and Cambodia, were profiting off the IA program by scraping and plagiarizing low quality and sensationalist online content, particularly misinformation about the Myanmar military coup. By situating automated propaganda outside of the perspectives of organized crime and coordinated state operations and instead within the larger context of economic informality and social disparities, this paper argues that researchers should pay more attention to information disorder at the systems level.

I. Propaganda as Media: Contours of a Modern Concept

Despite exceedingly negative connotations in contemporary Anglo-American discourse,¹ scholars of propaganda have long noted how it could be understood as

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¹ Steven Lee Myers & Sheera Frenkel, *How Russian Propaganda Is Reaching Beyond English Speakers*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 9, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/09/business/russia-propaganda-spanish-social-media.html>; Mara Hvistendahl, et al., *A Global Web of Chinese Propaganda Leads to a U.S. Tech Mogul*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 5, 2023, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/05/world/europe/neville-roy-singham-china-propaganda.html>.

an instrument for organizing chaos in the technological society.² This view conceptualizes propaganda as the mechanism through which ideas are disseminated on a large scale—a style of communication that facilitates a distinct type of goal-oriented discourse centered around inducing a course of action through partisan and emotional appeals.³ Propaganda need not be false or insincere:⁴ governments and other social entities can issue propaganda that is not misleading or false, and civic rhetoric can be understood as a kind of propaganda that can be used to “repair flawed ideologies, potentially restoring the possibility of self-knowledge and democratic deliberation.”⁵ In recent years, attempts have been made towards studying computational propaganda, defined narrowly as the “use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks.”⁶ Within this research agenda, the focus is on bad faith manipulation of automated systems to sabotage democratic ideals.

As a persisting social practice, propaganda involves systematic efforts to communicate beliefs, doctrines, and ideologies to a mass audience, the notion of which undermines the individual as a complex agent. Much of the critical commentary around propaganda is motivated by this uneasy formulation of the individual as merely part of a crowd, even though mass communication is also integral to the formulation of social identities. As a Latin term, *propaganda* was used strictly to refer to the reproduction of plants and animals until the 16th century when it took on a religious frame of reference with Pope Gregory XII’s establishment of a commission *de propaganda fide* to spread Catholic doctrines in non-Christian lands.⁷ The first use of propaganda in English around 1718 also followed the same religious frame of reference until the middle of the 19th century, when it took on political meanings.⁸ Negative connotations of the word intensified around 1920s in association with the First World War and Protestant distrust of Catholicism; however, these negative connotations lessened during the Second World War alongside increasing acceptance of commercial advertising as part of American culture during the interwar years.⁹ Periodic scholarly interest in

² See EDWARD BERNAYS, *PROPAGANDA* (1928); JACQUES ELLUL, *PROPAGANDA: THE FORMATION OF MEN’S ATTITUDES* (1973); WALTER LIPPMANN, *THE PHANTOM PUBLIC* (1925).

³ Douglas Walton, *What is Propaganda, and What Exactly is Wrong with it?*, 11 *PUB. AFF. Q.* 383, 396 (1997).

⁴ JASON STANLEY, *HOW PROPAGANDA WORKS* (2015).

⁵ *Id.* at 5.

⁶ SAMUEL C. WOODLEY & PHILIP N. HOWARD, *COMPUTATIONAL PROPAGANDA: POLITICAL PARTIES, POLITICIANS, AND POLITICAL MANIPULATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA 4* (2018).

⁷ Erwin W. Fellows, *‘Propaganda:’ History of a Word*, 34 *AM. SPEECH* 182, 182 (1989).

⁸ *Id.* at 188.

⁹ *Id.* at 185.

propaganda seems to follow a pattern that matches onto the political significance of whatever underlying cause is being promoted, especially in the context of English-language literature.

As a communicative practice, propaganda has always been intimately tied with the media systems through and with which it operates: from “Rosie the Riveter” wartime posters on the walls of Westinghouse Electric (and subsequently on the cover of Smithsonian magazine and US first-class mail stamps) to the voice of “Hanoi Hannah” on Radio Hanoi trying to frighten and shame American soldiers into leaving their posts; from John F. Kennedy's televised inaugural address (in which he implored his fellow Americans to ask not what America can do for them, but what they can do for their country) to Donald Trump tweeting about winning the 2020 election. Technology has always been central to our understanding of media systems, and media is now a domain where the political, cultural, and social implications of a new mode of automation – that of automated decision-making – are especially visible. This paper approaches propaganda as an inherently media-dependent phenomenon – whose contested definition is in many ways, a reflection of anxieties around emergent forms of communication – and explores how these historical anxieties materialize alongside automated communication.

II. The Rise of Automated Media and Automated Propaganda

From the steam presses of the early 19th century onwards, automation has been a transformative feature of the news and media industry.¹⁰ The latest phase of media automation is driven by recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI), which further escalates the functioning of automated systems and processes that are already a common feature of the news and media environment. This current phase is characterized by a striking feature: machines are now intimately involved in making decisions about how our news and media are created, distributed and received.¹¹ From automated search to automated recommendations, and from automated content generation to automated pricing of media products and

¹⁰ Dang Nguyen, James Meese, Jean Burgess, Julian Thomas, Louisa Bartolo, Nicholas Carah, Dominique Carlon, Jeffrey Chan, Sam Kiminmonth, Amanda Lawrence, Ramon Lobato, Ariadna Matamoros Fernandez, Silvia Ximena Montana-Nino, Lucinda Nelson, Jing Qian, Aaron Snoswell, Damiano Spina, Arjun Srinivas, Nicolas Suzor, Avantik Tamta, Patrik Wikstrom, & Joanna Williams, *AI and Automated Decision-Making in News and Media: Key technologies and emerging challenges* (Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Focus Area Reports 01, 2023).

¹¹ *Id.*

automated advertising allotment, media automation as a multi-dimensional process of transformation is reconfiguring not only media infrastructures, systems of production and distribution, and the broader platform economy, but also our everyday experiences of media. Experience with propaganda in such an environment cannot be understood in separation from these dynamic processes. Searches might feature, even briefly, results that could be understood as propaganda; dynamic recommender systems might suggest propagandistic content; large language models (LLM) could be fine-tuned to mass-produce propaganda; and automated mechanisms of the media economy could further obfuscate the propagation of, and incentives for, this content.

At the heart of the current landscape of automated media lies the figure of the platform. As a central concept in current debates about automated media, the platform takes on computational, political, figurative, and infrastructural meanings.¹² As platforms take on infrastructural qualities through the programmability made possible by application programming interfaces (APIs) and decentralized data extraction, scholars have argued that platformization is a process akin to industrialization or electrification.¹³ Automation is baked into the functioning of major platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Amazon, Netflix, or Spotify. These platforms deploy various automated technologies to monetize their services across various business models, including advertising, subscription, and e-commerce transactions.

III. Automated Propaganda as Platform Imperative? The Case of Instant Articles

The defunct Instant Articles program—a news monetization scheme offered by Facebook from 2015 to 2023—shows how propaganda as a persisting social phenomenon must be understood in relation to the wider media ecosystems that enable it.

¹² See Tarleton Gillespie, *The Politics of 'Platforms'*, 12(3) *NEW MEDIA & SOC'Y* 347, 347–64 (2010).

¹³ Jean-Christophe Plantin, Carl Lagoze, & Christian Sandvig, *Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook*, 20(1) *NEW MEDIA & SOC'Y* 293, 293–310 (2018); Thomas Poell, David Niebog & José van Dijck, *Platformisation*, 8 *INTERNET POL'Y REV.* 1, 1–13 (2019).

A.A Brief Timeline of Instant Articles (2015-2023)

Launched in 2015, Instant Articles (IA) was a news monetization program by Facebook/Meta which offered news publishers a way to create mobile-friendly and fast-loading versions of their articles by publishing their content directly within the Facebook platform. When a user clicks on an IA link, the content is loaded almost instantly within the Facebook mobile app, overcoming the typical delays associated with external web pages. Positioning this feature as a way to improve user experience while providing an option for news publishers to generate revenue through the integration of Facebook Audience Network ads, branded content, and direct-sold ads, Facebook also collaborated with various content management systems (CMS) such as WordPress, Drupal, and Joomla to develop plugins or features specifically tailored for IAs. These integrations allow publishers to format and publish articles on Facebook without the need for extensive manual coding while keeping branding requirements consistent across platforms.

Initially, only a handful of publishers were invited to participate in the project, including The New York Times, BuzzFeed, National Geographic, The Atlantic, NBC News, The Guardian, BBC News, Bild (the German tabloid), and Spiegel Online.¹⁴ In 2016, Facebook opened up IA to publishers of all sizes globally in a bid to scale the program.¹⁵ Publishers who wanted to join the IA program were subject to a vetting process in which an eligibility check (against the nature of the content, adherence to community standards, and compliance with Facebook's policies) was performed alongside a domain verification; this process was done both automatically and manually. In 2017, Facebook added support for direct-sold ads within IA, where publishers were given the option to manage and negotiate ad deals directly without relying solely on Facebook Audience Network (FAN). FAN enables Facebook to display automatically selected ads from external advertisers within IA articles and allows the platform to earn 30% of the revenue. But by February 2018, Columbia Journalism Review reported that more than half of IA

¹⁴ Vinu Goel & Ravi Somaiya, *Facebook Begins Testing Instant Articles From News Publishers*, N.Y. TIMES, May 13, 2015, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/13/technology/facebook-media-venture-to-include-nbc-buzzfeed-and-new-york-times.html>.

¹⁵ Frederic Lardinois, *Facebook's Instant Articles is Now Open to All Publishers*, TECHCRUNCH, Apr. 12, 2016, at <https://techcrunch.com/2016/04/12/facebooks-instant-articles-is-now-open-to-all-publishers/>.

partners appeared to have abandoned the program.¹⁶ This is despite Facebook's own reporting of paying out \$1.5 billion to publishers and app developers through FAN in the same year.¹⁷

In late 2021, the MIT Technology Review reported on how informal actors across the developing world, most notably Vietnam and Cambodia, were profiting off the IA program by scraping and plagiarizing low quality and sensationalistic online content. By posting plagiarized articles and registering them with the IA program and earning advertising revenue from FAN, these informal actors were able to receive a pay-out from Facebook.¹⁸ The same reporting found an estimated 2,000 clickbait pages being run out of Vietnam and Cambodia in 15 different languages and successfully monetizing IA. These groups were found to be propagating misinformation about the Myanmar military coup in 2021, posting footage of purportedly live videos of what was happening on the ground, but were actually old footage of the crisis. The reporting noted that it was never clear whether the political propaganda associated with the coup came primarily from political or financially motivated actors, but concluded that “the sheer volume of fake news and clickbait acted like fuel on the flames of already dangerously high ethnic and religious tensions.”¹⁹ In late 2022, Meta announced that it would end support for IA and by April 2023, IA was no longer available on Facebook. The eventual demise of IA is emblematic of the tension that arises out of the formal affordances imposed by platforms in order to monetize – and the informal market that inevitably emerges from and around this formal structure. That this particular instance of platform monetization ultimately failed gives us an opportunity to parse this tension by analyzing the different ways in which the formal and the informal interact and enact automated propaganda.

¹⁶ Pete Brown, *More than Half of Facebook Instant Articles Partners May Have Abandoned It*, COLUM. JOURN. REV., Feb. 2, 2018, at https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/are-facebook-instant-articles-worth-it.php.

¹⁷ Karen Hao, *How Facebook and Google fund global misinformation*, MIT TECH. REV., Nov. 20, 2021, at <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/11/20/1039076/facebook-google-disinformation-clickbait/>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

B. Seeing Like a Platform: Automated Propaganda as Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior

That the actors behind misinformation about the Myanmar coup were based in Cambodia and Vietnam, according to findings from the MIT Technology Review, raised more questions than it answered. Despite geographical proximity to Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia have had little formal involvement in Burmese domestic politics; the Burmese language is also linguistically unrelated to Khmer and Vietnamese and is not widely spoken in either country. This sociocultural context proved to be insignificant in the automated environment, as the automatic scraping of click-worthy content could be done irrespective of language and from any geographical location. That the MIT Technology Review investigations discovered a cottage industry around the IA program in Vietnam and Cambodia should be understood as the latest expression of a much longer history of economic informality in which economic activities happening outside formal governmental (and more recently, platform) regulatory frameworks are essential to the livelihood of many, if not the majority, of these emerging economies.

While bespoke investigations provide us with granular and rich accounts of how particular instances of economic informality unfold, they diverge significantly from how informal activities are understood from a systems perspective. Facebook's Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) unit, established in May 2019, represents the platform's key public-facing effort to detect and combat networks of accounts engaging in coordinated and deceptive behavior to influence users.²⁰ Taking a platform behavioral approach to addressing what is often referred to as propaganda in news media reporting, the CIB defines inauthentic behavior as "an effort to mislead people or Facebook about the popularity of content, the purpose of a community (i.e. Groups, Pages, Events), or the identity of the people behind it ... every IB enforcement is based on behavior, rather than the content posted."²¹ Building their solutions around the concept of authentic behavior—whose articulation is centered around the idea that an individual account behavioral log should map uniquely onto the behaviors of a single individual user—Facebook further classified IB into identity-based deception (where fake accounts do not match the identity of a real-world person) and inauthentic distribution (in which

²⁰ See *Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior*, META NEWSROOM, at <https://about.fb.com/news/tag/coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/> (last visited June 4, 2024).

²¹ FACEBOOK, INAUTHENTIC BEHAVIOR REPORT 2 (Oct. 2020).

inauthenticity occurs in the distribution system of the platform to mislead people about the popularity of a piece of content).²²

The financial motivation for engaging in inauthentic distribution is clear: because advertising revenue is modulated through metrics such as clicks, views, and other engagement metrics such as reacts and comments, the appearance of popularity translates directly into advertising money for the actors behind the inauthentic behavior and the platform, who receive a cut of the revenue. Because platforms have a business duty to ensure that the engagement that brings in revenue is authentic—that is, carrying true potential to be converted into purchasing behavior which generates revenue for advertisers—their concern with automated propaganda at scale lies not so much in the nature of the content, but in the type of platform behavior that belies this phenomenon, which can be detected and addressed automatically and manually.

As such, there exists a gap between what, on the one hand, investigative journalism and the general public (that relies on popular reporting about platform information disorders) understand to be the problem with platform monetization and, on the other hand, what the platforms themselves understand it to be. Concepts such as propaganda are not useful to platforms because they cannot be scaled: one person’s propaganda is another person’s persuasive advocacy. That the increasingly blurry line between the two has come to be articulated in terms of “inauthentic behavior” is indicative of how, at the systems level, automated propaganda is but a symptom of the underlying piecemeal automated processes that allow platforms to be what they are computationally: as something from which to build, innovate, and sell.²³ Curbing these negative symptoms at the systems level means making changes and tweaks to platform design so that inauthentic behavior campaigns are harder to carry out and therefore cease to be sustainable business models while also addressing symptomatic expressions in their full contextual nuances as they arise. Closing the gap between how automated propaganda is viewed at a systems level from the platform perspective and how it is understood as a socio-political phenomenon will help move the discourse forward in a much more meaningful way.

²² *Id.* at 2-3

²³ Gillespie, *supra* note 12.

C. Seeing Like an Agent of Inauthenticity: Automated Propaganda as an Expression of the Monetization Imperative

Systems built around technical operationalizations of authenticity also, by their own parameters, create opportunities for enactments of inauthenticity. In this context, agents of inauthenticity develop tactical knowledge about how authenticity dynamically becomes translated into automated protocols and processes so that they can be exploited, usually for financial gains. In the case of IAs, inauthenticity occurring along the distribution system exploits points of friction that emerge as result of different automated technologies coming into interaction with each other—a kind of generative friction that should be understood not as mere inconvenience or as a system bug, but as productive and enabling of how large and complex automated systems operate.

As friction becomes how subsystems come together, it also comes to be the mechanism with which informality proliferates within formalized systems.²⁴ Informality and formality have a long history of coexisting and co-depending as intertwined and interacting in media industries; formal and informal economies are connected by exchanges of personnel, ideas, content, and capital as highly contingent interactions.²⁵ Informality can be typical rather than exceptional, as it reflects the broader political economy, technological development, and regulatory environment in which media industries and systems operate. Because of the increasing interdependencies between formality and informality in dynamic automated systems, unpredictable outcomes also become more likely in these contexts. Automated propaganda as an unpredictable and unintended expression of the monetization imperative is emblematic of a more fundamental shift in our communication environment, where automated communication is increasingly difficult to discern from purposeful human communication. Reworking mass communication era concepts such as propaganda to make sense of this shift is useful to the extent that the stakes of automated communication on public opinion and political events could be quickly communicated. However, the baggage of such a theoretical exercise is that we risk muddling what is distinct and different about information disorders within automated media systems.

²⁴ Dang Nguyen, *Small Automation: Thinking Through the Textures of Automated Systems*, in DE GRUYTER HANDBOOK OF AUTOMATED FUTURES (V. Fors, M. Berg and M. Brodersen eds., forthcoming 2024).

²⁵ See RAMON LOBATO & JULIAN THOMAS, *THE INFORMAL MEDIA ECONOMY* (2015).

Agents of inauthenticity—informal actors with low capital and relative system invisibility—latch onto structural informalities within formal systems and manipulate them to their advantage. Platforms as we understand them cannot exist without these points of friction as structural informality. The parasitic nature of inauthentic behavior within automated systems where informal actors learn to tactically work alongside rather than against the capricious technical rules that enable their activities means that these automated systems constantly rely on user feedback to tweak their design in an ongoing feedback loop. The accomplishments of inauthentic behaviors are contingent outcomes of a serial calibration of learning and adaptation, imagination and materialization, interference, and assimilation.²⁶ That the IA program ended up being shelved by Facebook might not be fully attributable to the proliferation of the inauthentic behavior it enabled, given the dynamic nature of the platform’s advertising ecosystem. The trajectory of the IA scheme, however, is illustrative of how automated media systems have transformed the way we must come to understand phenomena such as propaganda, whose workings can no longer be sufficiently understood in separation from the media processes that underpin them.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has examined automated propaganda from a systems perspective, situating the propagation of problematic media content firstly within the automated systems that encapsulate them and subsequently within the larger context of economic informality and global social disparities. In the gap between how platforms understand automated propaganda to be (as “coordinated inauthentic behaviors”) and how automated propaganda is understood in public discourse (as pervasive manipulation of public opinion to serve the interests of the entity producing or spreading the information) lies the problem of scale. In large and complex systems, small changes can be made to the design of automated processes to have large effects, and the ultimate goal is to automate procedures and processes so that they can be applied to and replicated across contexts with the same outcomes. While we urgently need in-depth investigations into how information disorders unfold on the ground at the contextual level, it is also time we moved beyond examining isolated instances of automated propaganda and orient our collective efforts around understanding how automated communication is being shaped by the broader political economy, technological development, and regulatory environment in which media industries and systems operate.

²⁶ *Id.*