

Social media manipulation rising globally, new report warns

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The manipulation of public opinion over social media platforms has emerged as a critical threat to public life. Around the world, government agencies and political parties are exploiting social media platforms to

spread junk news and disinformation, exercise censorship and control, and undermine trust in media, public institutions and science.

Now, a new report from the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) at Oxford University, has found that despite efforts to combat computational propaganda, the problem is growing at a large scale.

"The number of countries where formally organised [social media](#) manipulation occurs has greatly increased, from 28 to 48 countries globally," says Samantha Bradshaw, co-author of the report. "The majority of growth comes from [political parties](#) who spread disinformation and junk news around election periods. There are more political parties learning from the strategies deployed during Brexit and the US 2016 Presidential election: more campaigns are using bots, junk news, and disinformation to polarise and manipulate voters."

This is despite efforts by governments in many democracies introducing new legislation designed to combat fake news on the internet. "The problem with this is that these 'task forces' to combat fake news are being used as a new tool to legitimise censorship in authoritarian regimes," says Professor Phil Howard, co-author and lead researcher on the OII's Computational Propaganda project. "At best, these types of task forces are creating counter-narratives and building tools for citizen awareness and fact-checking."

Another challenge is the evolution of the mediums individuals use to share [news](#) and information. "There is evidence that disinformation campaigns are moving on to chat applications and alternative platforms," says Bradshaw. "This is becoming increasingly common in the Global South, where large public groups on chat applications are more popular."

Automated bot accounts still continue to be a well-used tactic. Online commentators and fake accounts are used to spread pro-party messages,

as well as being used to strategically share content or post using keywords to game algorithms and get certain content trending. They are also being used to report legitimate content and accounts on a mass scale, causing them to be taken down temporarily. "We suspect new innovation will continue to emerge as platforms and governments take legal and regulatory steps to curb this type of activity," says Howard.

Overall, the use of organised social [media](#) manipulation campaigns is a big business. "We estimate that tens of millions of dollars are spent on this type of activity," says Howard. "Some of the money may be spent on legitimate advertising on social media, but there is certainly a growing industry for fake accounts, online commentators, and political bots."

More information: comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/cybertroops2018/

Provided by University of Oxford

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