

Examining the Patterns of Algorithmic Amplification in the Context of Political Astroturfing

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Abstract: The present study examines the patterns of algorithmic amplification on social media space to deceive public opinions and preferences, known as political astroturfing—a process practiced by political parties, non-state actors and interest groups that fake grassroots support for and against a particular cause, in reality, a strategically orchestrated action. This study employs a single case study design within a fully qualitative research framework, conducting a fully manual thematic analysis of primary and secondary sources available in the public domain to understand the tactics used by camouflaged groups to disseminate manufactured content that circumvents digital infrastructure requirements and operates on behalf of hidden sponsors. This study identified a case from the Philippine presidential election, 2016, a digital campaign linked with Duterte in which a sponsored network of troll accounts disguised as genuine social media influences intruded on Facebook's public interaction and engagement metrics to manufacture the advent of simulated grassroots support. The case was selected for its rare documented evidence and scholarship to seek clarity on the process and practice of astroturfing through algorithmic amplification. The data synthesis presented three interlinking themes: manufactured reality through strategically arranged account networks, synchronized sharing to amplify the message for greater reach, and governance gaps arising from the hegemony of digital platforms. Finally, the paper argues that algorithmic amplification aids political astroturfing in the context of reaching out to the target groups with a manufactured message. The study concludes with areas of future research.

Keywords: Algorithmic Amplification, Political Astroturfing, Social Media, Manufactured Reality, Synchronized Sharing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

➤ Background and Problem Statement

The Social media ecosystem works on the principle of strategically designed ranking and recommendations norms with respect to content management. The algorithms decide upon the selection and amplification to engage the larger audience through multiple clicks, shares and replies- fact is that the actual engagement is far from the reality and lacks authenticity in communication. This eases the route for Political astroturfing. The communication here lacks rationality and rests upon the manufactured campaigns involving an orchestrated network groups with actors disguised as the genuine accounts perform coo-ordinated actions that appear independent. The result of this creates an impression among the social media users buy a specific content considering its reach, likes and shares with the platform's own ranking system prioritizing the same among the audience who never desired for such a content. Ultimately social media user accounts are flooded with such algorithmically amplified messages. A largely developed scholarship on two prominent research models: computational propaganda and coordinated inauthentic

behavior, and technical strategy of algorithmic ecosystems. Computation propaganda has identified astroturfing tactics and technical strategies of algorithmic ecosystems explored on ranking systems that amplify the communication. With the absence of less qualitative, case specific scholarship to discover the practice of political astroturfing and tactics deployed to meddle with algorithmic ecosystems for amplification, the paper addresses this gap.

➤ Research Questions

The study is guided by three research questions:

- RQ1: What strategies do political astroturfing operations use to meddle with social media ecosystems with focus on algorithmic amplification?
- RQ2: How does coordinated inauthentic syndicate run to manipulate algorithmic system for larger reach?
- RQ3: What governance and social media platform-design gaps allow these dynamic forces to continue despite public documentation and regulations?

➤ *Significance of the Study*

The study underscores the importance of interface between amplification strategies and astroturfing process. This unlocks core knowledge domain relevant for platform management, election ethics and media studies. With a strong theoretical relevance of currency on computational propaganda, it's very clear not to isolate the platform algorithm feature from the network ecosystems and regard it as a constituent part of deceptive activity. Through an analysis of a solid single case, this paper aims to present an assessment of strategies deployed rather a holistic framework of manipulative ecosystems.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

➤ *Algorithmic Amplification: Conceptual Foundations*

User engagement is the key ploy that the target groups aim at on digital space. Algorithmic amplification aids visibility of the content over the rest based on platform ecosystem to make it viral for a mass reach. However, Wolley and Howard (2016) place this in the context of computational propaganda in which the public opinions are manipulated by deploying the automated systems, algorithms and amplification over social media. Gorwa and Guilbeault (2018) made a significant observation on the absence of theory-based backing on diversified automated accounts, or bots in policy discourses, and recommend a typology to study the differing functions of the bots ruling out to regard automation as the sole threat. This distinction is very crucial in amplification studies to understand the strategic means of automated and semi-automated interaction with ranking systems, from simple repost to planned accounts that mimic the genuine posts. Overall, the literature makes a conceptual argument that amplification systems prioritize the content with most likes, shares and user-engagement and not the hidden agenda behind the message. This agnostic nature of algorithmic systems facilitates astroturfing syndicate to manipulate public sentiments and amplify the manufactured content. The whole of digital ecosystem works on the principle of user engagement with a specific post irrespective of the accounts whether genuine or imitated make no difference for the ranking metrics to ascend the content to the must watch list.

➤ *Political Astroturfing: Definitions and Typologies*

Astroturfing is a common practice to dupe the audience by hiding the actual sponsor of the content to create an impression of wider grassroots support. Keller, Schoch, Stier, and Yang (2019) systematically identified how the political astroturfing accounts on Twitter through a coordinated network simulate genuine, mobilized support for political favor. Marwick (2017) and Lewis, writing for Data & Society, made a significant observation with regards to manipulative tactics deployed media to divert the journalist's and platform users' attention through a manufactured hashtag campaign to trend their target content. Bradshaw and Howard's (2019) global stock of systematized social media manipulation accounted for deployment of cyber consortia by both state and non-state political actors to shape public opinion, with a strategic mix of human - central and automated digital accounts.

Overall, the literature doesn't regard astroturfing as a remote action rather a coordinated effort, but it works on the algorithmic dimension for user engagement at the level of platform policy response against the mechanism.

➤ *The Juncture: How Amplification Systems Aid Astroturfing*

A very minute factor helps to find out the intersection of the two directly found in few studies. Kollanyi, Howard, and Woolley's (2016) analyzed bot activity during the 2016 U.S. election in which automated accounts contributed towards a major share in influencing the audience through a political hashtag content to higher up the consumption for greater reach and engagement. Bastos and Mercea's (2017) study on Brexit botnet observed a similar pattern where small group of automated accounts attracted maximum viewership for an extremely biased politically inclined message at the time when organic engagement had just started. This was a part of referendum campaign- the astroturfing groups strategize to bypass the very network systems to manipulate the algorithmic ranking mechanism.

➤ *Gaps in Existing Literature*

This study identified three major gaps. First, the literature is much about quantitative bot-detection patterns of coordinated behavior without qualitative analysis of the operational tactics behind such patterns. Second, the case identified for the study on astroturfing campaign isolate amplification as mere outcome and not as an orchestrated activity by the campaign groups to target the masses. Third, there are comparatively few studies that dive deep-in to understand the design, structure of network ecosystems, tactics of coordination, algorithmic reality and platform response. This study through a single case, manually analyzed qualitative design intend to address the gaps observed above.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology that follows a single, exploratory-explanatory case study design in the tradition described by Yin, who argues that the case study method is well suited to research questions of the form 'how' and 'why,' particularly when the phenomenon under investigation is embedded in a real-world context that cannot be meaningfully separated from that context. Case studies are particularly effective in elucidating mechanisms such as coordination and influence. That's because astroturfing is sneaky, so quantitative tools might not catch it. We employed purposeful sampling to pick examples that were different from each other and would show us a good picture of the overall group. Consequently, a single case was selected purposively rather than randomly, following the logic of information-oriented case selection: cases are chosen for what they can reveal about the phenomenon, not for statistical representativeness.

➤ *Data Collection and Analysis*

Information was gathered from peer-reviewed studies, investigative, social media analysis, and policy documents. Analysis followed a manual thematic analysis, adapted for

document-based sources through close readings. Ethical considerations prioritized public-domain material to alleviate privacy issues. Limitations encompass source biases and difficulties in establishing causation, alleviated through cross-verification. Future research may integrate quantitative data, such as engagement rates, to enable a more thorough assessment.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

➤ *Case Study: The 2016 Philippine Presidential Election Digital Campaign*

In the context of algorithmic amplification, the Philippines serve as a solid source at global level to study how Facebook has operated over past decade as a sole medium for free information for Filipino users at a zero-rating mode. This contributes to greater user engagement that eases the path for the hidden sponsors to capture public preferences for political reasons. The Facebook's hegemony over content distribution and consumption served as a primary forum for political discourse during the 2016 presidential elections where users interacted, shared and reposted their views altering the very structure of ranking ecosystem. History remembers Rodrigo Duterte's presidential campaign as a classic example of massive investment into social media ecosystems outnumbering the opposition efforts through a numerous astroturfing tactics, including deployment of coordinated digital workforce from multiple accounts rather than from the single official campaign account. A detailed interview in Ong and Cabañes' (2020) field-based qualitative study with digital campaign planners, paid troll account operatives, fan-page admins stand out as a detailed independent investigation of how the entire network ecosystem operations was orchestrated. A shocking revelation from the campaign's social media manager, Nic Gabunada validated the Ong and Cabañes' findings who on-the-record admitted to have coordinated the operation through amalgamation of multiple accounts in support of the campaign.

• *Theme 1: Manufactured Reality Through Strategically Arranged Account Networks*

The first theme originated from the manual analysis exposed the modus operandi behind the amplification success through an orchestrated network of accounts that parted the message source from its organic distribution system. The content was planted by the hidden sponsor groups, but created an impression among the social media users as an authentic communication message from official accounts without an iota of doubt on its legitimacy and centrally coordinated behavior. This finding directly supports RQ1: The basic ploy in amplification process is not solely the technical exploitation of the ranking algorithm, but an organization's strategic approach to promote credibility and autonomy that might ascend the users' engagement ratio with a target content, which the amplification system by default add synergy to the same.

• *Theme 2: Synchronized Sharing to Amplify the Message for Greater Reach*

This theme directly answers RQ2, is that the orchestrated network activity performed as an authentic operator of anonymously shared engaging content. The ranking ecosystem works on the algorithms that solely considers the content reach, engagement and reposts that travel along authentic official accounts, real-name fan pages, genuine influencers without considering the origin of the source planted by the target group. The main intent is to target the critics like the journalists, because the ranking system solely considers the engagement ratio and ignores the authentication factor of the source origin and modus operandi of the hidden amplification operators.

• *Theme 3: Governance Gaps and Single Platform Hegemony*

The third theme address the RQ3, express concerns over the single platform hegemony over the government's digital ecosystems in terms of governance, size, operation and reach. For the majority Filipino users, Facebook was most sought-after digital media considering its attractive zero-rating feature that attracted massive audience to consume free information. The campaign-based political groups made use of Facebook platform monopoly to amplify the planted messages with absolutely zero or less competition to fact check the same. The documented evidence clearly indicates the blind spot in the platform detection system that was specifically designed to stop the automated bots and not the paid groups behind such operations. So, any content from a masked account operated by the paid groups would bypass the platform automation markers.

V. SYNTHESIS & CONCLUSION

The above three themes validate this paper's core argument: algorithmic amplification aids political astroturfing. The gist of the study emphasizes the platform detection gap in spotting the centrally coordinated inauthentic behavior of the masked actors, where the technology platform is manipulated through manufactured engagement, emotional capture, multiple layered posts and shares. This paper exposed the partnership between algorithmic amplification and political astroturfing through a fully qualitative, manually analyzed single case study of the paid, tiered social media network associated with Duterte's 2016 Philippine presidential campaign. The analysis identified three interwoven strategies — Manufactured reality through strategically arranged account networks, synchronized sharing to amplify the message for greater reach, and governance gaps linked to single-platform dominance— that together allowed a centrally coordinated operation to generate an image of devolved, organic public sentiment and to have that pushed in by the platform's own ranking ecosystem. Both amplification and astroturfing are a collective arrangement that often appears to be a defense and exploit kind of mechanism. Astroturfing campaigns are strategically crafted considering the platform design and amplification system framework to plant their manufactured messages. Given the single-case, document-based design of

this study, these findings should be understood as analytically generalizable propositions for further testing, rather than as claims about the prevalence of these tactics across the broader population of astroturfing campaigns. Future research comprising qualitative multiple cases, cross-case synthesis and comparison spanning different platforms, regimes, countries, and sponsor types, etc.

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