Political manipulation through algorithms

Recent research by NetLab-UFRJ shows how much we still have to worry about

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It is no news that algorithms can be used as powerful weapons of propaganda and political manipulation[1]. Nor is it news that one of the greatest challenges faced by contemporary democracies is how to deal with disinformation[2]. What continues to be surprising, however, is the extent of the opacity surrounding the functioning of digital platforms and the difficulties in having their activities comply with electoral rules and with the fundamental premises of democracy.

Indeed, voters have no way of engaging in rational deliberation if they do not have access to the facts on the basis of which they can orient their choice. Therefore, if a healthy informational environment is a prerequisite for the proper functioning of democracies, the fears of, and the evidence of, attempts to manipulate voters are always a matter of concern, as I have already had occasion to analyze in previous texts, addressing, among others, the problem of synthetic content[3], of the use of the sycophantic side of

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1 https://www.jota.info/opiniao-e-analise/colunas/constituicao-empresa-e-mercado/eleicoes-e-algoritmo-a-democracia-corre-perigo

2 https://www.jota.info/opiniao-e-analise/colunas/constituicao-empresa-e-mercado/mercado-desinformacao-repercussoes-democracia ; https://www.jota.info/opiniao-e-analise/colunas/constituicao-empresa-e-mercado/o-negocio-das-fake-news-e-suas-repercussoes

3 https://www.jota.info/opiniao-e-analise/colunas/constituicao-empresa-e-mercado/regulacao-de-conteudos-em-plataformas-digitais

generative artificial intelligence for political purposes[4] and of political influencers created by artificial intelligence[5].

Although political manipulation through algorithms is not a new problem, with each election the impression is reinforced that the problem, far from being solved, is getting worse. In the current Brazilian elections, concerns are mounting with countless suspicions of undue interference, whether on the part of *big techs* or on the part of governments.

As mere examples, among many, there were widely reported in the press, on the basis of a story in *The Guardian*, accusations that the Trump administration was interfering in the Brazilian elections[6], including through the allocation of one million dollars to a project that challenges the conduct of the Federal Supreme Court, under the pretext of combating censorship[7]. In parallel, there are various accusations against Meta, on the argument that it would be favoring the engagement of candidate Flavio Bolsonaro to the detriment of Lula[8].

The scenario can be better outlined on the basis of three recent reports by NetLab, affiliated with UFRJ, which examined the conduct of the platforms TikTok, Kwai and Meta.

In the report "TikTok recommends candidates' content and contravenes electoral rules"[9], the researchers identified that the platform recommended videos from official campaign profiles, failing to comply with the electoral rule and with its own compliance plan. And, what is more serious, "TikTok's lack of transparency does not

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[4] https://www.jota.info/opiniao-e-analise/colunas/constituicao-empresa-e-mercado/o-lado-bajulador-da-ia-generativa-e-os-riscos-para-as-eleicoes

[5] https://www.jota.info/opiniao-e-analise/colunas/constituicao-empresa-e-mercado/influencers-politicos-criados-por-ia

[6] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/sep/24/trump-brazil-election-interference

[7] https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2026/10/01/governo-trump-destina-us-1-milhao-a-projeto-que-contesta-atuacao-do-stf-e-diz-combater-censura-no-brasil-diz-jornal.ghtml

[8] https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/campanha-de-lula-acusa-meta-de-tentar-interferir-nas-eleicoes/

[9] https://netlab.eco.ufrj.br/post/nota-t%C3%A9cnica-tiktok-recomenda-conte%C3%BAdos-de-candidatos-e-contraria-normas-eleitorais

make it possible to estimate the total number of accounts and candidacies affected by the recommendation system in the elections."

Hence the report's conclusion that "without the minimum transparency needed to observe and collect data from these systems on a larger scale, digital platforms remain black boxes." In other words, the problems identified may be only the "tip of the iceberg" in the face of countless others that cannot even be identified.

In the report "Kwai's advertising guidelines do not fully comply with the TSE's requirements"[10], the researchers demonstrated that "Kwai's policies refer to the TSE's rules, but present ambiguities, imprecise information, inconsistencies between translations and versions with basic drafting errors, showing that the platform does not meet the requirements of the Brazilian electoral rules. The lack of coherence extends to the application of the rules: the platform complies neither with the TSE's requirements nor with its own policies."

The absence of due transparency is a problem in itself, since it prevents verification that all advertisements of a political nature effectively comply with the rules laid down by the Electoral Courts. Hence the conclusion that "the results point to a lack of commitment on Kwai's part to the obligations established by the Brazilian Electoral Courts", as well as that "the findings suggest a façade governance, in which the formal adoption of policies and transparency mechanisms produces an appearance of adherence to regulatory requirements without this translating into their full implementation."

Finally, mention should be made of the report "Institutional distrust as a political strategy. Attacks on institutions and on electoral integrity in Meta's political advertising", which examined Meta's platforms[11].

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[10] https://netlab.eco.ufrj.br/post/nota-t%C3%A9cnica-kwai-n%C3%A3o-atende-%C3%A0s-exig%C3%AAncias-do-tse-para-publicidade-pol%C3%ADtico-eleitoral

[11] https://netlab.eco.ufrj.br/post/a-desconfian%C3%A7a-institucional-como-estrat%C3%A9gia-pol%C3%ADtica-ataques-%C3%A0s-institui%C3%A7%C3%B5es-e-%C3%A0-integridade-eleit

The research showed how candidates and other actors take advantage of microtargeting and boosting mechanisms in order to (i) promote distrust of the Federal Supreme Court, of the electronic voting machines and of the electoral process, (ii) make accusations of electoral fraud, (iii) advocate foreign intervention and (iv) in many cases convey implicit threats of violence.

Among the problems found are:

(i) **categorization failures**: since part of the advertisements is not even characterized as political in nature by Meta, this circumstance prevents access to reach and targeting data, which compromises compliance with the electoral transparency rules, hinders oversight and creates obstacles to gauging the reach and assessing the impacts of the advertisements. Hence the conclusion that "when Meta fails to categorize political and electoral advertisements, the data of these campaigns cease to be observable, compromising the oversight and the transparency of electoral advertising."

(ii) **publication of advertisements without the electoral propaganda label**: according to the report, "the finding evidences failures in Meta's moderation mechanisms, which allows irregular advertising to circulate, even in the face of the public commitments undertaken by the company before the TSE."

(iii) **participation of unauthorized advertisers**: although the TSE's rules restrict the boosting of electoral propaganda to candidacies, parties, federations and coalitions, various irregular advertisers were found – such as podcast pages, content creators and apocryphal pages linked to political movements – with candidate Flavio Bolsonaro being the main beneficiary of this content. Hence the conclusion that "the study identified governance failures at Meta that compromise the transparency and the oversight of political and electoral advertising, making it difficult to identify its funders and to

hold anyone accountable for content that breaches Brazilian electoral rules.”

(iv) **illicit paid content**: content that contravenes the electoral rules and questions the security of the voting machines and the integrity of the electoral process.

All these strategies lead, still according to NetLab, to the following results: (i) the production of distrust of institutions as a political and electoral strategy, (ii) ambiguous language in the advertisements so as to strain legal interpretation, (iii) discourses of moderate appearance in order to make radicalized content more palatable and (iv) narratives that question the legitimacy of the elections.

Most serious of all is that, far from being episodic occurrences, the problems found are systemic failures: “The persistence of these failures evidences that the company is not capable of ensuring adequate conditions of transparency and security for users”, since “the lack of transparency prevents systematic oversight, threatening the integrity of the electoral process” and prevents any gauging of the circulation of irregular content and of the dynamics of its dissemination.

As can be seen, the findings are already sufficiently worrying. Their greatest gravity, however, lies in what we are unable to know: the extent of the irregularities, the dimension of their effects and the effective capacity of the institutions to oversee and control them.

Once again, we face the risk that the destiny of Brazilian democracy may be decided by a private foreign algorithmic governance which, by reason of its obscurity, has been proving equally unknowable and uncontrollable.

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