

9-2-2020

## Behind Social Media: A World of Manipulation and Control

Spencer J. Keenan

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### Recommended Citation

Keenan, Spencer J., "Behind Social Media: A World of Manipulation and Control" (2020). *Pop Culture Intersections*. 48.

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Spencer Keenan

Pop Culture Intersections

9/2/2020

### **Behind Social Media: A World of Manipulation and Control**

“Because to take away a man's freedom of choice, even his freedom to make the wrong choice, is to manipulate him as though he were a puppet and not a person.”

— Madeleine L'Engle

The marketing world as we know it today has, believe it or not, evolved from actions that predate humankind. For example, a bird doing an elaborate dance in hopes of wooing a potential mate, has evolved into a massive billboard on the side of the road displaying a cheap fast food restaurant at the next exit, and a radio station blaring the next big home improvement for a low price of \$89.99 in between songs. You get the idea. Well, today, advertising is seemingly everywhere and has evolved to a point where it is no longer set out for the masses to see, it is becoming more selective. I invite you to think about the last time you were on social media and saw an advertisement. Take a moment and think about the content of that advertisement and if it was something that was conveniently appearing after a conversation or simple Google search. Was it a pair of shoes that you were eyeing the other day and have been continuously thinking about getting?

More and more of these advertisements are flooding into our lives through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. All of these popular platforms are able to house these “convenient” ads for users to view due to the rapidly growing data-driven world we all are a part of today, whether we like it or not. Not only are people receiving ads for goods such as clothing and little gadgets, but institutions, governments, and corporations alike are also using our collected data to push their own agendas. Just like the pair of shoes that popped up in your Instagram feed, political ads are also appearing. Ads such as oil campaigns and presidential candidates are emerging in hopes of swaying users to react a certain way, the way in which your data says you are susceptible to. Not only are the classic banner advertisements being used, but other forms such as social bots get in touch with groups or single users and push them to act in a specific manner. One might ask how is this happening? Well, I am here to look further into that question and hopefully come to conclusions on a few of the questions that may be surrounding this topic.

**Argument:**

Taking a step further, I will be arguing that big players, mainly governments and large corporations, use user data, targeted advertising, and selective speech to manipulate users of popular social media platforms. They do this in order to achieve their agendas goals at the expense of the people. These goals may range from selling a certain good or service to swaying a certain percentage of voters to cast their ballots one way or another. Regardless of the outcome,

people are being taken advantage of, with most not even knowing it. Users must look past the media in front of them to see their information being gathered and exploited and aim to change the relationship between these manipulative strategies and their targets. The online world needs to open its eyes to understand the industry that has evolved from social media and how it has been turned into a means of manipulation. Popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are prime examples and I will be looking further into them throughout the following analysis. In my article, I will be looking at key events that have been subject to mass amounts of media manipulation, the forms and goals relating to how the manipulation occurs, and is put into effect, and finally what can and will be done to prevent further harm to the communities on social media platforms. With more and more information being spread and actions being taken, social media has a chance to become restored and offer what it had initially intended to be, platforms for finding community.

In the next stages of this article, I will present background information and analysis based on the following points. As mentioned before, I will be examining the role of manipulative media usage in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and 2016 Brexit along with their roles in using Cambridge Analytica. Following that, I will be discussing the goals behind user interactions with advertisements and the usage of bots. These sections are especially important as we must understand how users are being taken advantage of. In the case of manipulation through popular social media platforms, it looks as if the fight against targeted advertising is starting to ramp up as more and more people are becoming educated on the topic, which is great to see. Education alone will not be enough to defeat the problem at hand, so people must look to taking action to prevent further harm.

## **Key Information:**

In order to help illustrate and prove my claims of the growing industry surrounding media manipulation, it is vital to understand the vocabulary that is commonly used within this topic, recognise my analytical approach, and to cover a great deal of background to help contextualize and understand the conversation at hand.

Throughout the following article, I will be using a few terms that I want to make sure you understand if you do not already. The following definitions stem from those in the Oxford English Dictionary. The first is “disinformation” which is typically understood as false information that is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media. An example of this would be a newspaper article claiming that drinking Windex would prevent the contraction of COVID-19, also implying that it is safe to consume.

Next up is “deep fake” which is a relatively new term describing the use of software to create a synthetic image or video of someone to help spread fake or twisted information. Similar to the last two and one that is probably familiar to most is “fake news”, also known as junk news, pseudo-news, alternative facts or hoax news, is a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media or online social media. One instance of both deep fake and fake news could be a video of Donald Trump expressing a strong love

towards Hillary Clinton. This video would look and sound exactly like Trump, but would be completely fictional.

Another interesting one is “bots” or “social bots”, these are programs that practically imitate human behavior in any way that they are programmed, this may include actions such as spamming hate speech or spreading false information about a political figure on a twitter feed. Bots typically find online communities and spread a plethora of information, whether it is an advertisement for new shoes or disinformation on a presidential candidate.

I will also be talking about Cambridge Analytica, founded in 2013 by Alastair MacWillson and led by Alexander Nix. Cambridge Analytica was a data analytics consulting company that specialized in the analysis and use of data on primarily Facebook to aid in political campaigns. In recent years, the company has been heavily scrutinized for their involvement in the 2016 U.S. elections and 2016 Brexit, eventually leading to its doors closing on May 1st, 2018.

Lastly, I would like to cover “manipulate”, I am sure you know what this term means, but I would like to emphasize its importance to this topic by giving its full definition. “To control or influence (a person or situation) cleverly, unfairly, or unscrupulously.” In the context of this article, manipulation is the main problem behind the target advertising and usage of bots. It is the goal and hopes of those employing these tactics to control the outcome of specific situations from as little as purchasing an item to voting a specific way.

## **Background:**

I will be approaching this topic by looking at statistics and studies that are focused on advertisements and bot usage on popular social media platforms. By using this data to analyze my topic, I hope to find different perspectives, understand and present leading theories, and primarily show how much more there is going on than the general public really knows. After all, to understand how the user data is being used, it only makes sense to also use data to understand how these companies and governments “weaponize” it.

In the ever-evolving world today, personal data is becoming more and more important to our everyday lives. Currently, our user data is one of the most valuable and important commodities humans have access to, so why not understand it more? Those a part of the vast online community should be more aware of how much of their data is being collected and used by companies and governments. In the context of my topic, I find that using data from social media platforms to understand how our user data is used, is both logical and the most effective way to understand the problem at hand. Given that there is documentation on pretty much anything and everything now, I have no reason to believe that there will be a lack of information to draw from.

First off, I will discuss an article by Ronald J. Deibert, “The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths about Social Media”. In this article, he covers three main ideas, one of which is particularly interesting, he presents the idea of surveillance capitalism. He defines surveillance capitalism as being “Consumers get services (mostly free of charge) while industries monitor users' behavior in order to tailor advertisements to them” (Deibert, 2019). He goes into

depth describing how corporations and governments use the knowledge gained to produce and target advertisements or political jargon towards users that fit the selected demographic. Two prime examples of these targeted ads Deibert includes are from 2016 Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The platforms that collect the user data store the information in databases that are then sold off to whoever can afford it, for example, the 2016 Trump Presidential campaign. Social media platforms are able to figure out interests, habits, likes, dislikes, wants, etc. They collect this raw data and then bundle it together for sale. Once the data is obtained, marketing teams analyze and create targeted advertisements, almost like a pharmacist filling a personalized prescription. It is almost a cyclical journey, the use of these social media platforms giving the data to companies to interpret and build an ad, just so the user can see that ad on the very platform that sold their data in the first place. The idea that social media, which once started off as a platform for social connections and communication, has held that same course is shown to be very, very wrong. Diebert explains that these platforms on a surface level offer its user base with a sense of community and communication that has always been offered. When one looks deeper into the company's usage of these platforms and the user data they provide, there is much more to be found and understood.

Building off of Deiberts ideas, I'd like to talk about the usage of user data to manipulate and actually influence the outcomes of key events. As I mentioned before, the two main events are the 2016 Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. One of the most important ties between these two events is that the company Cambridge Analytica was involved. As I previously stated, Cambridge Analytica is a firm that specializes in the analysis and use of data



in political campaigns. Now in the case of the outcomes of Brexit and the U.S. elections, it doesn't take much to see where the relationship is.

One article that touches on the 2016 elections and Brexit is, "Social media and fake news in the post-truth era: The manipulation of politics in the election process", by Turgay Yerlikaya. His article and claims focus on how platforms such as Twitter and Facebook spread fake news and manipulate voters' preferences during election times. The use of data has been widely used to predict and plan the course of action for parties to win their respective elections or votes, but in 2016 everything changed. Cambridge Analytica used the data collected in ways that were able to sway small percentages of the population causing a large impact on the masses and the eventual ideal outcome for their employers. As raw data was collected, it was categorized and morphed into a database where Cambridge Analytica was able to then figure out the demographic that would be the easiest to sway and be the most susceptible to their targeted ads. Once the target demographic was identified, the ads started flowing and more data was being collected to create the perfect ad with the highest potential of achieving its goals. The use of social media platforms was the new medium for manipulative political advertising, and it undoubtedly worked. With the revolutionized ads and political strategies in play, Turgay even goes as far as saying that social media has harmed or even destroyed democracy in our present day. Cambridge Analytica is an early example of one of the firms that has utilized these methods, and definitely not the last.

Cambridge Analytica was able to perform in the manner it did due to changes within Facebook, Cambridge's main platform for manipulation. Facebook had changed their community governance methods from users to algorithms generating a lack of trust which in return paved the

way for the spread of disinformation (Apuzzo & Satariano, 2019). Furthermore, “Its advertising algorithms were harnessed to segment users into belief communities that could be micro-targeted with materials that amplified their intimate political preferences” (Walker et al., 2019). Cambridge Analytica was not only abusing user data under the new governance methods, but they also had broken Facebook’s terms of service (Rosenberg, 2018). Looking at both companies, it is hard to blame one without blaming the other. Facebook changing its interface allowed for groups and firms such as Cambridge Analytica to act in the way they did. Even when they were technically breaking the given terms of service, Facebook could have been more aware of the problem at hand.

The damage dealt by the disinformation and fake news campaigns through targeted advertising has since been revealed and led users to take a variety of actions in regards to using Facebook. In an article done for the PEW Research Center, it was found that around 54% of Facebook users have changed their privacy settings and 42% refrained from using the platform for several weeks or more after learning about the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Perrin, 2018). This study shows that people are indeed aware of problems occurring in relation to user data and privacy, but one must understand that the problem runs much further than just Facebook and Cambridge Analytica.

To further understand the manipulation on popular social media platforms, I look to Twitter as it has a plethora of “social bots” that carry out precise manipulative actions. These bots are often responsible for spreading disinformation, fake news, and sharing links to deep fakes. In an article by Massimo Stella, Emilio Ferrara, and Manlio De Domenico, they study the impact social bots on Twitter had during the Catalan Referendum. For some brief context, the

Catalan Referendum was an independence referendum in 2017 for Catalonia to become independent of Spain. In their study, they monitored the discussions surrounding the Catalan Referendum from September 22, 2017, to October 3, 2017. During this time they found that “bots generated specific content with negative connotation that targeted the most influential individuals among the group of Independentists (i.e., Catalan independence supporters)” and found that nearly one out of three users in the discussions happened to be a bot (Stella et al., 2018). Luckily, bots do not have a statistically significant bias towards liberal or conservative views as found in a PEW study (Wojcik et al., 2018). Even with an almost equal amount of political influence from either side, there is still a goal to manipulate and sway target audiences taking away each user's free thought.

Similarly to bots, in order to understand how companies and governments are able to manipulate their audience, it is important to know how the manipulative advertising works. Whenever a user interacts with an advertisement, data is being collected. This data is primarily in the form of impressions and clicks. Impressions are when a user visits a webpage that has, for example, a banner advertisement on the side of the page. As long as there is no interaction, this would count as an impression. Now, a click would be when the user interacts with the advertisement. Due to data being collected on both impressions and clicks, companies are able to analyze the users actions and start to target those who fit the sought after profile (Zhang & Mao, 2016). From here on, the analysis of user data stems from what type of ads are interacted with, and what actions are then taken after the initial interaction, such as a purchase. All of the actions of the user are continuously collected, analyzed, and then used to grow the user profile for

further precise targeting. Once targets are selected, they can start to receive disinformation and fake news since they are deemed susceptible.

Moving on, we now look to the future and what may be in store for platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In a recent Pew study focused on “the future of free speech, trolls, anonymity and fake news online”, through various surveys the researchers found general conclusions about the public thoughts. One conclusion drawn stated: “Some said the flame wars and strategic manipulation of the zeitgeist might just be getting started if technological and human solutions are not put in place to bolster diverse civil discourse” (Rainie et al., 2020). This stance was likely derived from the roughly 39% of respondents that believe the “online future will be “more shaped” by negative activities” (Rainie et al., 2020). The minority of the study (19%) held views that online communities will become “less shaped” by harassment” (Rainie et al., 2020). The researchers interpreted written responses from their surveys and found that, “A number of respondents predicted online reputation systems and much better security and moderation solutions will become near ubiquitous in the future, making it increasingly difficult for “bad actors” to act out disruptively. Some expressed concerns that such systems – especially those that remove the ability to participate anonymously online – will result in an altered power dynamic between government/state-level actors, the elites and “regular” citizens” (Rainie et al., 2020). In response to their surveys results, experts were also asked their opinion on the future of these online communities. They claim that the governing body of these social platforms will be faced with a very challenging task to help create a healthier environment for their users. They maintain that “the real-time exchange of information and sharing of diverse ideologies over the next decade, as millions more people around the world become connected for the first time and

among the billions already online are many who compete in an arms race of sorts to hack and subvert corrective systems” (Rainie et al., 2020). It is important to also understand that with the online world still very new and rapidly evolving, one can only guess as to where its future lies, even with an expert's opinion.

### **Analysis:**

The 2016 presidential election, 2016 Brexit, and their use of Cambridge analytica is only a small part of the bigger problem at hand. Yes, these were key events that were influenced by a new type of strategy, but this strategy is one that strips individuals of their privacy and leaves them susceptible to manipulation. Which is exactly what Cambridge Analytica did for its clients while still in business, especially in 2016. Surveillance Capitalism, as Diebert argued in his article, is one of the basis that allows for the manipulation of users to occur. The sale and usage of user data has become an industry like no other and has continued to make governments and businesses reach their desired goals, whether it is an election or to sell a new product. With key events such as elections having the possibility of being influenced by a new wave of media manipulation, the unjust strategies have become an even bigger risk as the accessibility of user data becomes more prevalent. As more users join online communities, they are signing themselves up for more than the social media experience, they are effectively walking into a world with a lack of privacy and a plethora of carefully planned persuasion.

Social media bots have started to become much more prevalent than ever before and seem to be in higher numbers than we think. Although bots are on most social media platforms today, their presence on Twitter is especially notable. These bots are programmed to have their presence represent human characteristics in order to gain trust. Their uses range from spreading simple advertisements to actually taking part in conversations among specific groups. One study suggests that “Among popular news and current event websites, 66% of tweeted links are made by suspected bots – identical to the overall average. The share of bot-created tweeted links is even higher among certain kinds of news sites. For example, an estimated 89% of tweeted links to popular aggregation sites that compile stories from around the web are posted by bots” (Wojcik et al., 2018). Going off of this, the study also indicates that the 500 most active bot accounts are responsible for 22% of the link to news and media accounts whereas on the top 500 human accounts are responsible for 6% (Wojcik et al., 2018). This goes to show that not only are the bots spreading the majority of information, but their increasingly active presence can have more influence than their human counterparts. Due to bots having such a large role and impact on Twitter and platforms alike, there is a shift of knowledge that comes from a majority that may not be as trustworthy.

Similar to the social bots, the advertisements that are being used today have evolved to encompass the rising trends of data usage and user preferences. Collecting data pools from users impressions and clicks have now allowed companies, like Cambridge Analytica, to hone in on the most efficient strategies possible. The ability for a company to build a user profile and then target the user is exploiting information that should be safeguarded in the first place. In previous times, ads were made for the general population with hopes of reaching as many people as

possible. Now with that same goal in mind, companies and governments are able to create “personalized” ads to again reach as many people as possible and be incredibly more effective in doing so.

Looking back to the actual studies and statistics gathered, I believe that there is a general lack of collective public knowledge surrounding personal data usage and an unfortunate lack of governance on what is legal and not when it comes to user data and manipulation. If there were to be more awareness in the online communities impacted, there would undoubtedly be more accountability for the governments and companies that employ the manipulative content. People will be able to take back their autonomy and allow for a community of truly unique thinking rather than planted thoughts.

As our society continues to realise the potential of the online world, we need to make sure that we also stay in tune with its uses. Users need to become more aware of their actions and the data that they create as they use the web. As in the survey study done by PEW, the research showed that the majority of people thought that the overall good of the online climate would continue to decline. This thinking needs to be changed and met with a crowd that will invoke change. The task at hand will definitely not be easy as those who employ the manipulative tactics are also those that have the majority of the power. With more awareness and activism to combat the advertising and data abuse, the online communities can hopefully start to change in a new and improved way.

**Closing Remarks:**

In conclusion, government groups and corporations employ tactics of utilizing user data, targeted advertising, and speech to manipulate users of popular social media platforms. These organizations use unjust and immoral strategies in hopes of gaining profits and power at the cost of the general public's autonomy and privacy. They will continue to do this in order to achieve their goals at the rest of the community's expense. Whether it is selling a certain good or service or convincing voters to support one candidate over another. The world needs to open its eyes to understand the industry that has evolved from social media and how it has been misused. With more and more information being spread and actions being taken, social media has a chance to become restored and offer what it had initially intended to be.

I hope that through my research I am able to educate my readers on how important it is to be knowledgeable about how data is used and how susceptible all social media users are to being manipulated. By creating more awareness around this topic, I will hopefully aid in the prevention of further manipulation in elections and pivotal events. I also hope that this analysis helps spark new ideas and concerns to further understand the gathering and usage of our social media data. All in all, this article is just one piece of the seemingly never ending puzzle that we must continue to solve.

Thank you for taking the time to read through my critical research surrounding the current social media conundrum at hand. The next time you are on any platform of social media, I implore you to think about how your data is being used and what is really behind each of your interactions.



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