Review 3 of "Information Trolls vs Democracy: An examination of disinformation content delivered during the 2019 Canadian Federal Election"

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Vote: Publish pending minor changes

[For votes to count, referees must reasonably explain why they voted as they did. Thus, please explain your vote. If you voted to publish pending minor changes, specify each change, why it is needed, and, possibly, how it should/could be done.]

The paper is well organized, documented and argued, and makes a strong case for criminalizing disinformation used to manipulate the results of a federal Canadian election. The content analysis of the strategies of the disinformation-misinformation campaign of *The Bufffalo Chronicle* is an excellent tutorial for a lesson in media literacy.

Despite the insightful introductory material on echo chambers, the social construction of "reality," information trolls, information warfare, and moral entrepreneurs, the weakness of the paper lies in its undertreatment of the predisposition of disinformation-misinformation adherents in their willingness not only to accept disinformation but also to seek it actively and to avoid information contrary to their beliefs and biases. In the United States, in addition to social media sites, we have right and alt-right cable media authorities (e.g., *Fox News*, OANN, Newsmax) that only control a propaganda narrative through inflamed grievances or trigger topics (often if not created by them, exaggerated and distorted them), they also actively promote the rejection of any authorities other than themselves. Their audiences have been fed and have accepted sources (their cognitive authorities) that support their cognitive biases (most significantly, confirmation bias), but this disinformation adherents engage in disconfirmation bias, spending an inordinate amount of time rationalizing the rejection of the information of other authorities that run contrary to their beliefs as fake news producers (Mooney, 2011). They are willing not only to be deceived but to be self-deceived, individually, socially and collectively. (Dings, 2017; Froehlich, 2019; Froehlich, 2020). Their cyber-ghetto or echo chamber is so large one could claim that they exist in a disinformation ecology, in a "closed propaganda feedback loop" (Benkler et al., 2018), where authorities of all sorts (media, political, religious, conspiratorial), groups and individuals feed and confirm each other's self-deception. In the United States, this filter bubble is evidenced by "conservatives" and alt-right media (whose values have muddled their way toward fascism), not to mention the added contributions of foreign actors, conspiracy theories, QAnon, et al. They have convinced 75% of Republicans and 40% of all voters that the presidential election was

stolen from Trump. Even after the January 6th insurrection, a Newsweek poll published January 18, 2021, 75% of Republicans thought President Joseph Biden did not win the election legitimately (<https://www.newsweek.com/republicans-joe-biden-won-election-legitimately-poll-1562343>). While I realize that the case of the United States is not the same as Canada, one of the unfortunate exports of the United States is the dissemination of some of its worst ideas – e.g., capitalism without a conscience, successful disinformation campaign strategies, overt racism (or white supremacy) or the polarization of partisan politics.

Fox News (primarily before and during the Trump presidency – but also echoed on OANN (One America News Network) and Newsmax)) exists as a significant component of a disinformation-misinformation ecology composed of like-minded peers, friends, associates, religious leaders, politicians, and pundits who foster, nurture or reinforce one's grievances. Their authority holds sway over millions of American households. To keep their audiences addicted to their grievances, conservative and alt-right media constantly create and promote culture wars through narratives, memes and tropes, often using what the paper calls trigger topics. For example, declaring the January 6 insurrection as a tourist visit of patriots to the Capitol or asserting that COVID-19 is/was a hoax or that vaccination is an evil plot against individual rights, that critical race theory is an outrage against true patriotic American history, etc. People who get their news from outlets other than Fox generally said, even as early as March 2020, that Trump was not responding to the COVID-19 pandemic well, but 63% of *Fox News* viewers said that Trump was doing an "excellent job" responding to the outbreak (Gramlich, 2020). After the election, such media as *Fox News* and OANN had to retract their views briefly that Trump had won the election, based on a lawsuit from Dominion Voting Systems (who manufacture voting machines) for making unfounded assertions about their accuracy. Still, that retraction has been buried under a morass of lies, distortions, misinformation and disinformation that followed. *Fox News* has now lodged a suit for dismissal of the lawsuit (under the guise of the authentic reporting and interpreting events). It is clear that Fox News (and like-minded alt-right media) are pseudo-authorities, who mimic true authorities like the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* in that it pretends to be objective, trustworthy, and have expertise, but one that lacks a legitimate foundation (e.g., they don't follow the principles of good journalism as expressed by such entities as the American Press Association (see: <https://americanpressassociation.com/principles-of-journalism/>), and their pundits are hacks of the alt-right agenda for profit and political power (Stelter, 2020; Smith, 2019). Still it is a major force in American politics. According to a 2019 Pew Research

poll, around four-in-ten Americans trust *Fox News*. Nearly the same share distrust it. Republicans [(2/3) and Republican-leaning independents (65%)] trust Fox News more than any other outlet (Gramlich, 2020). Those numbers have not changed much to the current day, and the divisiveness of the political scene has continued to escalate.

It would set an excellent example for federal election disinformation campaigns in elections to be litigated, prosecuted, and hopefully won. Still, I am not sure (given the analysis above) that it will stop much of the information-misinformation-disinformation wars. Such litigation would most likely be rejected in the United States (under the guise of protection of free speech). Even in terms of social media, conservatives are more likely to be seduced by right-wing click-bait (Ingraham, 2019) and follow down the algorithmically-driven rabbit hole from one site with outrageous content to a more outrageous one as this paper realizes. When perusing YouTube videos for a particular content, such as a specific conspiracy theory, the algorithm that drives YouTube suggests more provocative videos to view, which in turn suggest more provocative videos to view, and so on (the rabbit hole) leading one researcher, Zeynep Tufekci, to declare YouTube to be "one of the most radicalizing instruments of the 21st century" (Tufekci, 2018). As long as it fosters profits, it is unlikely that these algorithms will change.

In this Canadian case, it is much more difficult to isolate who the real actors are, especially since they appear to be outside the geographical jurisdiction of Canada. In general, that is why the problem is wily for any country – much of the content is extramural, from sources on the internet outside the country in which the effects take place. An equally important strategy is to force internet service providers to regulate their content. Being private companies, they are under no obligation to respect so-called free speech (despite what Mark Zuckerberg thinks (Romm, 2019)). Robert Reich (2019) also recommends that we challenge the virtual monopolies of such companies as Facebook, Twitter, and Google. We also need to resurrect something like the US FCC Fairness Doctrine (FCC Fairness Doctrine, 2019) but applied to all media channels. This doctrine was introduced in 1949 and required broadcast license holders to present both sides of issues of public importance in a manner that was honest, equitable and balanced. It was eliminated in 1987. The year after, conservatives, like Rush Limbaugh, started conservative radio programs, propagating the myth of the persecution of the conservative perspective (despite their dominance in media, they argue the same nonsense (one of their trigger stories)). If such a doctrine were reintroduced and reinforced, it might curtail some of the disinformation pollution in the public sphere.

Despite these concerns, the paper contains excellent ideas and research and should be published, including the content analysis approach illustration of how to do media literacy.

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[Please put additional info below, as/if you see fit.]

The following edits are suggested (these are the ones I caught):

(1) Disinformation, like misinformation, can later be recognize as false, but the propensity for harm caused by the dissemination of disinformation before it is deciphered as false can be significant.

Change to:

Disinformation, like misinformation, can later be *recognized* as false, but the propensity for harm caused by the dissemination of disinformation before it is deciphered as false can be significant.

(2) Content analysis is beneficial for this study as it enables to researcher to identify intentions, focus, or communication trends within the content data provided by individuals, groups, or institutions.

Should be:

Content analysis is beneficial for this study as it enables to *the* researcher to identify intentions, focus, or communication trends within the content data provided by individuals, groups, or institutions.

(3) The foundational topics discussed tend to be centred around issues that are often sensitive or emotionable.

Change to:

The foundational topics discussed tend to be centred around issues that are often sensitive or *emotional*.

(4) The article further includes a suggestion related to deep-seeded corruption within the Liberal government through implying that the two men have long been working together to develop political schemes to get themselves ahead.

The article further includes a suggestion related to *deep-seated* corruption within the Liberal government through implying that the two men have long been working together to develop political schemes to get themselves ahead.

(5) The common theme that appears within the articles which are based on the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples are that they take the experiences and concerns of Indigenous communities and then further relate that information to a broader political message.

Change to:

The common theme that appears within the articles which are based on the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples *is* that they take the experiences and concerns of Indigenous communities and then further relate that information to a broader political message.

(6) Through forcing the reader's attention towards a separate issue where the message is politically motivated, a desired conclusion is manipulated.

Change to:

Through forcing the reader's attention towards a separate issue where the message is politically motivated, *the* desired conclusion is manipulated.