

Department of Sociology

Seminar

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The Electoral Dimension of Disinformation: Studying Political Astroturfing on Twitter

Date : 19 October 2018 (Friday)

Time: 12:30 pm – 2:00 pm

Venue: Rm. 1045, 10/F., Academic and Administration Bldg,
15 Baptist University Road, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon

Abstract

Political astroturfing – a centrally coordinated disinformation campaign on social media in which participants pretend to be ordinary citizens acting independently – has the potential to influence electoral outcomes and other forms of political behavior. But without a “ground truth”, i.e. knowledge about the identity of the participating accounts, most previous attempts to evaluate their scope and effectiveness have been limited to examining automated accounts, i.e. social bots. In this paper, we use such information to study the South Korean secret service’s (NIS) disinformation campaign on Twitter during the presidential election in 2012. Features that best distinguish these accounts from regular users are not the account characteristics often used in the bot literature, but patterns of coordinating messages. We argue that the latter patterns are inherent to any propaganda campaign, and are much harder to disguise. because of the principal-agent problems that emerge in such campaigns. We use these coordination patterns to detect an additional 1000 accounts that have a high probability of being part of the NIS campaign. When calculating established Twitter influence metrics for verified and suspect NIS accounts, we find that the online impact of the secret service’s campaign appears to have been limited, however.

Bio

Franziska Barbara Keller has studied Political Science and Social Network Analysis at New York University (2015) and is now, after a PostDoc at Columbia University, Assistant Professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Division of Social Science. She has co-authored a textbook on Social Network Analysis with SAGE, and contributed a chapter on Social Network Analysis and political elites in the Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites. Her research on patronage networks among Chinese political elites has appeared in the Journal of East Asian Studies, and she is currently expanding her research to other authoritarian and semi-democratic countries. More recently, she has taken an interest in the manipulation of social media by authoritarian governments and other powerful political actors.

***** ALL ARE WELCOME *****

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