A joint C4DT - CyberPeace Institute - CTEI event

Manipulating elections in cyberspace: Are democracies in danger?

"Personally, I think the idea that fake news on Facebook - of which is a small amount of content - influenced the election in any way is a pretty crazy idea" - Mark Zuckerberg 2016

Date & Time: Tuesday 06/10, 15h-17h40

Location: Forum Rolex, EPFL (on-site presence by registration only. Please contact stephanie.milliquet@epfl.ch)

Live-streaming: https://youtu.be/PVbwfO-qri4

Target group: general public

Format:

Six 15-min talks, 1 hour panel discussion with Q&A. Live-streaming. The event will also be recorded

Description:

Increasingly, reports warn that state-sponsored actors use cyberspace and social media in particular to spread fake news/disinformation in order to sow distrust and create discord and polarized opinions among people on political issues during democratic elections. Adding to this, social media platforms' algorithms "add salt to the wound" by feeding their users posts, which are aligned with their opinion in order to increase their screen time. Moreover, these same disinformation campaigns are often used to conduct cyber attacks. How serious and how massive is the problem? What are its implications? And what can/should be done about it? Can malicious actors be held accountable?

During this conference, we will discuss not only the technological aspects of this phenomenon, but also the regulatory role executive and legislative branches of governments should play. Societal, economical and geopolitical implications will also be debated. More precisely, we will try to answer the following questions:

1. How massive is the phenomenon?
2. How does voter manipulation work technically? Can it be fixed by technology?
3. Who gains from it and for which motives? Commercial? Political? Geo-political? Other?
4. What role should platform policies and governance play?

5.   How to deal with the problem?

The event will be moderated by Prof. Matthias Finger, C4DT

Agenda:

> **15:00 – Introduction by Prof. Matthias Finger**

Part 1: 6 talks (15 min each)

1. *Introduction: examining real life examples of algorithm manipulation*

> **15:05 – Steve El-Sharawy, Head of Insights at EzyInsights**
> **Title of talk: Manipulating algorithms to influence people**
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> <u>Abstract:</u> *Many of the social platforms and online services employ algorithms to decide which content to serve to users. As a tool in a campaign of information warfare, algorithm manipulation at scale has the effect of controlling the information users are exposed to. In this introductory talk we will look at how algorithms are manipulated, examining real life examples from the 2016 US Presidential election and beyond.*

2. *Insights into the technology: examples of how it works*

> **15:20 – Dr. Rebekah Overdorf, Postdoctoral Research Associate, EPFL**
> **Title of talk: Disinformation and election interference in Kyrgyzstan**
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> **15:35 – Ashish Jaiman, Director Of Technology Operations, Microsoft**
> **Title of talk: Deepfakes and its impact on Democracy**
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> <u>Abstract:</u> *Deepfakes are synthetic media (fake) generated using the Artificial Intelligence technique of deep (deep) learning. Advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and cloud computing have made rapid and easy development in the sophistication of audio, video, and image manipulation techniques. The intent is to deceive the viewer or reader into believing that the media's subject is truthful. Sometimes this is harmless, as in entertainment and movies; in other cases, the intent is more insidious: as another tool for cybercriminals to defraud, damage reputation, limit the agency of an individual, and a way for nation-states to influence elections and disrupt democracy.*
> *Deepfake can affect the voters and the candidate. Deepfake of a political candidate can sabotage their image and reputation and alter the course of an election. Using deepfakes and synthetic media may have a profound impact on the polls' outcome. Deepfake can be used to dismiss an unpleasant truth by a political leader as fake news.*

3. *What role should platform policies and governance play*

> **15:50 – Prof. Michael Kende, The Graduate Institute Geneva**
> **Title of talk: Current governance situation**
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> <u>Abstract:</u> *Laws such as Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act in the US have enabled intermediary platforms to remove or block content while shielding them from liability for what remains, with only the obligation to take down what is illegal. The result is that their content is guided by the terms and conditions of the platform, and platforms' ability to implement their policies given the volume of content they receive. Section 230 and laws like it are under threat, but it is not clear what could take their place.*

4. *Taking a step back: how to close the accountability gap*

16:05 – Stéphane Duguin, CEO, CyberPeace Institute
Title: From Infodemic to cyberattacks : how to close the accountability gap

Abstract: The convergence between conflicts escalation and irresponsible behavior online is impacting communities, offline and online. In cyberspace, attacks are occurring more frequently, often facilitated by disinformation campaigns, and are inflicting greater damage on critical civilian infrastructures such as electoral systems, access to food, water, energy, healthcare, digital identity, finance. In this context, the CyberPeace Institute focuses on holding all actors accountable for their role and responsibilities in cyberspace, including state-actors. This is essential to ensure human security, dignity and equity in digital ecosystems.

5. *How to deal with the problem: recommendations from the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age*

16:20 – Declan O'Brien, Programme Coordinator, Kofi Annan Foundation
Title of talk: Recommendations from the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age

Part 2: Panel discussion moderated by Matthias Finger

16:35 – Panel discussion with Q&A
Panelists: Prof. Karl Aberer (EPFL), Stéphane Duguin (CyberPeace Institute), Steve El-Sharawy (EzyInsights), Ashish Jaiman (Microsoft), Prof. Michael Kende (The Graduate Institute Geneva), Declan O'Brien (Kofi Annan Foundation).

17:35 – Wrap-up

17:40 – End of conference

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Keywords:

Dis-/misinformation, voter profiling and micro-targeted ads, algorithms, trolls and bots repeating fake news, news-feed algorithms, filter bubbles and polarization, fact checkers, deepfake videos, today's social media content-creators versus traditional tabloids & sensationalistic news outlets, EU's Code of Practice on disinformation, controversial article 230 of the Communications Decency Act, responsibilities of social media platforms with regards to content, accountability gap, etc.