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Fake News, Bots, and Influencers: The Impact of Social Media on Romania's 2024 Elections

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Abstract

In recent years, disinformation and manipulating public opinion have reached alarming levels in Romania. It has grown exponentially since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and has further escalated due to the war in Russia. However, what happened following the Romanian presidential elections in 2024 is unprecedented in the country's history. The Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) annulled the first round of elections because the electoral process was flawed. The pro-Russian candidate, Călin Georgescu, secured a considerable number of votes due to a complex strategy of information manipulation. Declassified documents from the Supreme Council of National Defense (CSAT) revealed the direct involvement of state entities in financing and promoting the electoral campaign using social media platforms and paid influencers. The campaign heavily relied on spreading misinformation, targeting vulnerable population segments, and fostering deep divisions within Romanian society. This study analyses the mechanisms of manipulation and its impact on public opinion. This research utilizes qualitative methodology through content analysis and thematic analysis. The findings of this research could be valuable for policymakers, media organizations, and educators seeking to understand and combat disinformation.

Keywords: disinformation, Romanian presidential elections 2024, social media manipulation, electoral influence, bots

1 Introduction

In today's media environment, social networks are an essential communication tool in electoral campaigns, where a third of the global population uses social media platforms and young people spend, on average, more than 4 hours on the internet (Osina, 2019). These have radically transformed how candidates and political parties deliver messages to voters and significantly influence election outcomes. Political parties have been forced to devise communication strategies tailored to social networks (Broersma & Graham, 2012). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok allow politicians to directly reach a wide audience, promote their messages, and mobilize supporters quickly and efficiently. Moreover, in the current political context, influencers also play an important role through their followers can convey politicians' message to a growing number of people, namely voters (Ding et al., 2023).

However, the use of social networks in election campaigns is not without controversy, as they can also be used to spread misinformation, manipulate public opinion, and polarize society.

Social media manipulation in election campaigns has been intensively studied globally, but their impact has been evident in the context of Romania and, in particular, the 2024 presidential elections.

In December 2024, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the presidential elections due to significant irregularities (Kirby & Thorpe, 2024). This was an unprecedented decision, prompted by evidence of vote rigging through social media, illegal campaign financing on TikTok, and cyber-attacks orchestrated by external forces, including suspected Russian interference. In a society characterized by an ever-changing media ecosystem and exponential growth in digital information consumption, social networks have become both a primary channel of information and a space where electoral strategies have been profoundly influenced by algorithms, viral interactions, and sophisticated digital campaigns (Ilie & Vilcu, 2024). In this context, it becomes imperative to

understand not only the benefits of using these platforms in the democratic process but also the associated risks, such as amplifying populist discourses, creating ideological echo chambers, and exploiting users' vulnerabilities through advanced manipulation techniques.

This research aims to analyze the impact of social networks on the electoral campaign for the Romanian presidential elections 2024. The study provides detailed insight into how social networks have influenced public opinion and electoral results.

Through this analysis, we aim to develop a theoretical framework that will provide valuable insights for policymakers, regulators, media organizations, and educators concerned with enhancing the integrity of electoral processes in the digital age. Our study makes an essential contribution to understanding how emerging technologies are shaping the electoral landscape and suggests courses of action for the responsible use of social networks in the future of democratic processes.

2 Literature review

2.1 The Role of Social Media in Electoral Communication

Social networks have become central to electoral communication strategies, significantly influencing the dynamics of democratic processes. For several years, politicians have intensively used them to convey messages to the electorate (Bruns & Moon, 2018).

Political parties use social media platforms as strategic tools to influence electoral outcomes to their advantage. By analyzing demographic and behavioral data, they can target personalized messages to specific segments of voters, sometimes resorting to misleading or false information to shape perceptions and gain electoral support. This practice raises ethical concerns and emphasizes the need for appropriate regulation to ensure the integrity of democratic processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

A fundamental issue analyzed in the literature is the ability of social networks to facilitate candidates' direct access to the electorate, eliminating the intermediation of traditional media. This allows for greater personalization of political messages, using microtargeting techniques to reach specific population segments (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

The literature also emphasizes the role of social platform algorithms in promoting electoral content. Recent research shows that these mechanisms can amplify political polarization, favoring the distribution of content that generates high engagement, including false or distorted information (Tucker et al., 2018). This trend poses significant challenges to the integrity of electoral processes, as has happened in Romania.

2.2 The Case of the 2024 Romanian Elections

The 2024 Romanian presidential elections were significant in the national political landscape, highlighting notable shifts in electoral dynamics and voter preferences. In addition, the elections were annulled by the Constitutional Court after consulting some declassified documents (Presidential Administration, 2024), which indicated that one of the candidates qualified for the second round had violated electoral law.

A notable aspect of these elections was the surprising rise of the independent nationalist candidate Călin Georgescu, who won a relative majority in the first round. His campaign was marked by the intensive use of social media platforms such as TikTok (Goury-Laffont, 2024) to attract segments of the electorate disillusioned with traditional politics, including young people, rural voters, and conspiracy theorists.

The 2024 election campaign was dominated by debates on corruption, the role of Christianity in public life, and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Georgescu promoted a nationalist platform, criticizing the ruling coalition for corruption and advocating for an increased role for Christianity in public life, neutrality towards the conflict in Ukraine, and criticizing NATO or the European Union.

3 Methodology

This research utilizes qualitative methodology through content analysis and thematic analysis to investigate the impact of social media on the 2024 Romanian presidential elections. It focuses on the manipulation and electoral influence mechanisms and examines Romanian media articles and official Romanian documents.

Data sources include (a) national and international media articles and (b) documents of Romanian institutions, such as Ministry of Internal Affairs reports, Foreign Intelligence Service reports, and Romanian Intelligence Service analyses.

The results are relevant for policymakers and journalists, contributing to developing effective mechanisms to protect democratic processes against digital disinformation.

4 Results

In the context of the presidential election campaign in Romania, we have detected the use of advanced digital strategies to influence the electorate's perception and behavior. These techniques include micro-targeted political messaging, astroturfing campaigns, and speech shaping through viral challenges (Grădinaru, 2024). These practices, already used internationally, have also been documented in Romania, emphasizing the transformation of the digital space into an essential tool of electoral competition.

Micro-targeted political messages

In the articles that appeared in the media, based on the analysis of communication specialists, it was found that one of the methods used in the electoral campaign was the use of micro-targeted messages. This method is commonly used in commercial campaigns to create messages tailored to specific demographic groups to stimulate purchasing certain products. It has also been applied in the political sphere, and in the case of the 2024 elections in Romania, personalized political messages were delivered that considered users' individual preferences. For example, anti-system messages tailored for different groups in the diaspora or messages with religious themes personalized. This is confirmed by the Ministry of Interior's report, which has been declassified and refers to the campaign's supporters. Thus, some of the supporters of the campaign involved in promoting the messages "are exponents of right-wing extremist, criminal and religious cult milieus" (Presidential Administration, 2024). Such a strategy based on micro-targeted political messaging was used by Cambridge Analytica during the Brexit referendum in June 2016 (Simchon et al., 2024).

Astroturfing

Astroturfing is a strategy for manipulating public opinion by artificially creating the impression of mass popular support for a particular idea, cause, or person (Zerback et al., 2020). It is achieved through coordinated social media posts, bots, fake accounts, or paid influencers to amplify a message and make it seem organic. Astroturfing is commonly used in political campaigns, marketing, and propaganda, influencing public perception and the perceived validity of opinions or trends. Users frequently exposed to such messages perceive the support as organic, which increases the credibility of a candidate or political position and can influence voting decisions. The analysis of communication specialists (Grădinaru, 2024) is confirmed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs report, declassified by the Presidential Administration. According to this report, about 100 influencers, totaling more than 8 million followers, "were subjected to manipulation regarding the identity of the promoted candidate" (Presidential Administration, 2024). Moreover, data in the report indicates that about 130 TikTok accounts disseminated videos using the hashtags "#equilibriumandverticality, #presidential2024, #therightleaderforme". In addition, the report prepared by the Romanian Intelligence Service reveals that 25,000 accounts on TikTok were associated with Călin Georgescu's campaign, which became very active before the first round of the presidential election. Also, the Romanian Intelligence Service report indicates that these accounts had unique IP addresses, and this denotes that this is a mode of "operation designed to make it difficult to identify the extent of the network, based on the use of a common infrastructure, an aspect characteristic of botnets" (Presidential Administration, 2024).

Issue framing

Issue framing through viral challenges is intended to create trends related to key campaign topics. TikTok's algorithm amplifies this type of participatory content, such as hashtags, turning them into an effective method of influencing public discourse. By incorporating political messages into viral trends, campaigns can shape public perceptions of important topics without appearing explicitly political.

This virtualization has manifested itself in accumulating a significant number of new followers, increased views on older content, and frequent appearances on podcasts and online shows in alternative media.

A key factor in this digital expansion is the large volume of "Călin Georgescu" tags inserted in comments on posts about the November 24 presidential election, including posts by other candidates. The TikTok algorithm reacted to this trend by automatically suggesting Georgescu's name in the search bar of the comments section of a viral post by Elena Lasconi, suggesting a process of algorithmic amplification of the candidate's visibility.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories

According to an investigation conducted by Context.ro, Călin Georgescu and his team of influencers have been promoting various disinformation and conspiracy theories on TikTok. The analysis identified almost 200 accounts containing his name and distributing such content. About 40% of the analyzed posts contain unsubstantiated claims (Stanoiu, 2024) as well:

These narratives were massively distributed on the platform, contributing to Georgescu's increasing popularity.

Narrative	Description
Manipulating education	School was invented to "disconnect" people from their families.

Origin of Latin	Latin was derived from Romanian, not the other way around.
Control of the global occult	Buying products like McDonald's or Coca-Cola contributes to the "global occult".
Conflict in Ukraine	Ukraine is a tool of the West to destroy the Kremlin's rule and take over Russia's riches.

In response to the growing disinformation crisis, Romanian authorities launched official investigations into the use of TikTok as a tool for electoral manipulation. The Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI) issued warnings about potential foreign interference, while the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) ultimately annulled the first round of elections due to the widespread digital irregularities detected.

This sophisticated use of social media manipulation mirrors previous disinformation campaigns observed in other elections worldwide, including the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and Brexit referendum, where similar strategies were employed to shape public opinion (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

5 Conclusions and Discussion

The results of this research highlight the significant impact of misinformation and manipulation through social media on the 2024 Romanian presidential elections. The phenomenon analyzed underlines the democratic system's vulnerabilities to coordinated campaigns of influence, with major implications for the integrity of the electoral process.

One of the most important aspects of this electoral campaign was the use of micro-targeting techniques of political messages, astroturfing and speech shaping through viral challenges. These strategies enabled influencing public perceptions by tailoring content to target demographic segments. For example, anti-system messages were targeted to the diaspora and religious themes to the elderly.

The impact of the use of these methods is confirmed by the Romanian authorities' declassified documents, which show that more than 100 influencers with over 8 million followers were involved in the election campaign, along with a vast network of fake accounts and bots that artificially boosted support for a specific candidate. This suggests widespread manipulation of public opinion and raises questions about the transparency and fairness of the elections.

Another key finding is the role of social network algorithms in promoting electoral content. The automated recommendations of platforms such as TikTok have contributed to the excessive visibility of some political messages, encouraging their viralization without proper verification of the veracity of the information. This highlights a systemic problem with social platforms, which, by the way, they are designed, can facilitate large-scale electoral manipulation.

In terms of countermeasures taken by the Romanian authorities, the study highlights both the progress made and the shortcomings. Although the annulment of the first round of elections by the Constitutional Court was an unprecedented decision, it highlighted the need for stricter regulations on campaign financing and the use of social networks for electoral purposes.

This research emphasizes the importance of media education and the development of critical thinking among social network users. Awareness of how information is disseminated and the recognition of manipulative techniques can help to mitigate the impact of disinformation on democratic processes.

In conclusion, the 2024 presidential elections in Romania were a clear example of how social networks can be used as tools of electoral influence. In the future, it is essential that authorities, social platforms and civil society work together to ensure a democratic framework that is protected from the harmful influences of digital disinformation.

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