

# The Changing Face of Computational Propaganda

AI, Encryption, Geofencing & the Manipulation of Public Opinion

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# Today's Talk

1) Two brief stories

2) What's next for computational propaganda?  
Insight from current UT CME research projects

3) Further reading



# India



## WhatsApp

## BJP

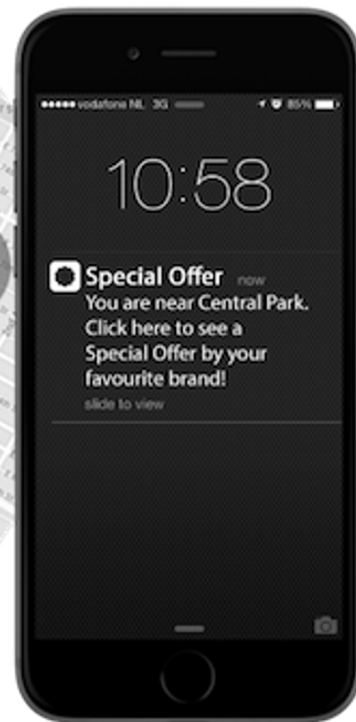
## 'IT Cells'



# USA



## Geo-location Rallies Church



The power of...

**Data + Propaganda + Computation**

# Analyzing Disinfo & Propaganda

**Content + Reception + Intent**





# Encrypted-Propaganda Project



- 1) 50+ interviews and digital fieldwork w/ groups leveraging encrypted messaging applications and other messaging tools (P2P, private messaging, etc.) for political manipulation in Brazil, India, Mexico, and USA.
- 2) Content analysis of media reports.
- 3) Construction of exhaustive comparative dataset: case list examining cases in which chat apps were used to spread propaganda and disinformation in these three countries.
- 4) Open source intelligence work including digital forensics of memes and viral content.

# Cursory Findings

- 1) Increasingly complex tactics for top-down political manipulation over closed messaging systems in India, Mexico, and USA.
- 2) There are feedback loops between closed networks and politicians on mainstream platforms — namely Twitter.
- 3) “Relational organizing” is inherent to the manipulative power of these platform





# TECH STREAM

*Tomorrow's tech policy conversations today*

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## Encrypted messaging apps are the future of propaganda

May 1, 2020 | [Samuel Woolley](#)



# GEOPROPAGANDA

The use of location data by campaigns, super PACs, lobbyists, and other political groups to influence political discussions and decisions



# Geo-Propaganda Project



- 1) 30+ interviews and digital fieldwork w/ campaigns, firms, and orgs leveraging data from geo-location (geo-fencing, blue tooth beacons, wifi, other cell data) in order to send targeted political messaging during 2020 US Election.
- 2) Content analysis of media reports.
- 3) Construction of exhaustive comparative dataset: case list examining cases in which geolocation has been used by political campaigns and political contractors to communicate w/ voters in 2020 US contest.
- 4) Policy analysis of geo-propaganda in the US.

## Early Data Point One:

“We’ll work with a company, we’ll give them an address, they’ll draw a perimeter around an area and then they can backdate that information anywhere between 6 months to, depends on how many years for an organization. But we say you know ‘I want everyone at 1600 Pennsylvania avenue between December 31 and January 1 of 2019 to 2020, and they will actually pull all the mobile device ids...unique to your personal cell phone...and then we can upload that list into Facebook or into other ad platforms to target them directly. Or use that mobile device id to feed it to one of our data partners who can then pull data insights for users who were in that venue.”

–Lamorak, Political Strategist

## Early Data Point Two:

“Practically, in American politics, you know, if you poll people they say it bothers them when people use their data, but do you see anybody complaining when they see an ad for something they really wanted, you know? Nobody cares (laughs). I mean, what percentage of people use ad blockers, it’s tiny.”

–Enide, Digital Strategist, on  
delivering cell ads via geolocation

## Early Data Point Three:

“So right now, we are building a campaign where we are actually recruiting front-line workers, who are content creators and social influencers to tell their personal stories. And then we have subsets of micro-influencers who are sharing their personal interactions and experiences with those front-line workers. And think of those as concentric rings...but it shows you the specificity with which you can create powerful, emotional, personal, and often local narratives to respond to or program ahead of what you’re seeing on the horizon in terms of harmful narratives coming out of the white house and other places”.

–Kay, Digital Strategist, on  
leveraging local influencer networks



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## COVID-19 Isn't the Only Threat to Privacy

In U.S. Politics, Surveillance Was the Norm Long Before the Pandemic

By [Katie Joseff and Samuel Woolley](#) May 22, 2020



# Further Reading

## **-available now-**

- 1) *The Reality Game* (PublicAffairs, 1/2020)
- 2) *Demand for Deceit* (NED, 1/2020)
- 3) *Amplify the Party, Suppress the Opposition* (Georgetown Law Tech Review, 5/2020)

## **-forthcoming-**

- 4) *Manufacturing Consensus* (Yale, 2021)
- 5) *Bots* (Polity, 2021)





Samuel Woolley

the  
Reality  
Game

How the Next  
Wave of Technology Will  
Break the Truth

# Thank you!

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