CHAVISM INFORMATION WAR STRATEGIES ON TWITTER

OBSERVATORY OF DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA IN LATIN AMERICA

SEPTEMBER 2018
SUMMARY

This study analyzed relational data of the communities associated with topics trending during May 2018 on Twitter Venezuela. For the study, data from 31 trending topics were recorded and analyzed to explore their networks’ structure, delimit the active communities, and identify their influencer nodes.

After data interpretation, three strategies used by the Venezuelan government on Twitter during the study period were identified as the following: 1) coordination of official and automated accounts to assure reaching the daily trending topics; 2) promotion of distracting hashtags accompanied by emotional, scandalous, misleading, offensive, and/or false messages through cyborg and bot accounts; 3) hijacking of opposition hashtags to distort their messages and interfere in the conversations of the various opposition communities.

The combined deployment of the three strategies constitutes a systematic violation of Venezuelan Internet users’ right to participate in public affairs. Furthermore, these strategies contributed to the violation of the right to free expression and association, access to information, and participation in public affairs debates, which are fundamental to a free, open, and human rights-oriented Internet.
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Government-sponsored misinformation and automated propaganda, as well as cyber harassment and the criminalization of online discourse\(^1\), have been present in the Venezuelan political environment since 2009. In fact, the Venezuelan government pioneered the use of bots to create opinion trends on Twitter (2010) and to harass opponents with verbal attacks (2009). Hacking of political opponents’ accounts was a very common occurrence in 2011 and 2012, when Chavism activists publicly claimed responsibility \(^2\) for “patriotic hacking”\(^3\) actions. Disinformation campaigns and falsifying news have also been constant features of Venezuelan political communication since 2012\(^4\).

Because the government currently controls, directly or indirectly, almost all mainstream media outlets, most Venezuelans (around 70% of the population according to opinion surveys from 2017) rely on social media and mobile messaging applications to obtain information on political issues\(^5\). Therefore, shaping the circulation of information online is increasingly important to achieve political objectives.

The elections on May 20, 2018, occurred in a context in which the main political opposition parties were barred from participating, with a considerable number of political leaders in exile, imprisoned, or legally unable to run. These elections offered a rare opportunity to systematically document information disorders promoted by an authoritarian government.

This study identifies and analyzes trending topics on Twitter corresponding to Venezuela in May 2018—when the spurious presidential elections were held. Twitter is a battleground in which the Venezuelan government attempt to influence public opinion.

\(^1\) Details of cases of criminalization of online discourse and other violations of the rights of users can be found in the Freedom on the Net reports, 2011-2017. See https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017 /Venezuela

\(^2\) In September 2011, members of a pro-government group called N33 announced via Twitter and confirmed through the political TV program "La Hojilla" (broadcasted by the State-run channel, Venezolana de Televisión) that they had hacked the Twitter and email accounts of journalists and opposition activists.

\(^3\) Actions taken by individuals against those they consider threats to their own state’s national interests, often sponsored by governments (Cf. Deibert, Ron, and Rafal Rohozinski. "Cyber wars." Index on Censorship 39.1 (2010): 79-90).


INTERFERING IN THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS USING THE INTERNET

The universality of the Internet encompasses four principles (the R-O-A-M principles), which have been and must continue to be fundamental for the Internet’s development. The Internet’s universality emphasizes the importance of harmonizing the development of the use of the Internet and human rights. A free and open Internet is one in which the human rights established in international agreements are respected and one that allows people to enjoy such rights and exercise them fully. This notion includes the full range of interrelationships between human rights and the Internet, such as the freedoms of expression and association, access to information, and the right to participate in the discussion of public affairs.

In this study, we found evidence of obstacles impeding the diversity of online expression as well as undue interference in political opposition discourse and the online organization of civil society in Venezuela. These obstacles and interference were generated through the deployment of three permanent political campaign strategies, which we will analyze below.

STRATEGY 1: HASHTAG #PATRIA (#HOMELAND)

Between May 1 and 20 (the day of the elections), the government’s first strategy was to appear in Twitter’s trending topics (TT) list every day to monopolize the Twitter agenda. The government promoted 33 campaign hashtags using 4,957 official accounts, even though Venezuelan laws ban the participation of state and government agencies in electoral campaigns.

*The participation of state entities in electoral campaigns violates article 67 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela; articles 13 and 70 of the Anti-Corruption Law; article 75, points 11 and 13 of the Organic Law on Electoral Processes; and article 14, points 1, 11, and 14 of the Regulation of the Organic Law of Electoral Processes, all of which expressly forbid electoral propaganda using public resources.*

The Twitter campaign for the reelection of President Nicolas Maduro was coordinated by the Ministry of Popular Power for Communication and Information (MIPPCI; @Mippcivzla). As part of the government propaganda, coordinated efforts were made to be part of the TT list on a daily basis. Every night, the government’s hashtag that was to be included in the TTs the next day was announced through the official account @Mippcivzla, as well as through Telegram channels to which government officials must subscribe. To promote May 2018 campaign hashtags, over 63,000 accounts were active. An estimated 500,000 automated accounts or bots were used for campaign propaganda dissemination.
#PetroJuventudYFuturo (#PetroYouthAndFuture) is an example of a typical trending topic of the Maduro campaign. This hashtag was generated by @minturvenezuela, the Ministry of Tourism’s account, and @Mippcvzla promoted it as the May 5 hashtag. @CarnetDLaPatria was the account showing the greatest betweenness centrality on the #PetroJuventudYFuturo network. It connected the various clusters while generating tweets that received more retweets (RTs) throughout the entire network, which involved 7,464 accounts that tweeted the hashtag 12,470 times. Eight percent of tweets with this hashtag came from accounts associated with @tuiteros_vzla (a community of pro-government activists). The Local Supply and Production Committees @CLAPoficial is another account that heavily influenced this
network’s coordination. The participation of the official accounts of different ministries, state-owned companies, and senior government officials is also observed in the graph. It is also important to note the activity of the Strategic Integral Defense Regions (“REDIs” in Spanish), part of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces (“FANB” in Spanish), and the Comprehensive Defense Operational Zone (“ZODIs” in Spanish).

Throughout the government campaign, the user with the greatest centrality was the official account of the Carnet de la Patria (@CarnetDLaPatria), which played a role as an intermediary in the propagation of the hashtags promoted by the MIPPCI as TTs. During May, @CarnetDLaPatria tweeted around 100 messages calling to vote for the Bolivarian Revolution. From this account, several of the campaign’s most viral tweets (considering the number of RTs) were generated.

The Carnet de la Patria (Homeland ID Card) is an identification card that was introduced by the Venezuelan government in 2017. The card provides access to users’ personal data in a government database, and, through Quick Response (QR) codes, it connects cardholders to digital platforms for social welfare programs and services. The card has been used as identification in preparatory drills for elections. During the last three official electoral processes (local, regional, and presidential elections), the government party used the Homeland Card in its electoral mobilization activities.

This account’s content implicitly established a connection between electoral mobilization and the use of the Homeland ID Card. Through its tweets during the campaign, @CarnetDLaPatria reminded cardholders to pass through a Tricolor Point on voting day and scan their card’s QR code.
“Tricolor Points” refers to kiosks of the pro-Chavism electoral machinery, located in the vicinity of the official polling sites. Voters were required to pass through the Tricolor Points to activate the QR codes of their Homeland Card and confirm they voted. It was implied that failure to do so may jeopardize access to food.

The @patria_ve account operated in a similar manner. This account links to the official platform (PATRIA) through which Venezuelans can apply for the Venezuelan government’s new social welfare programs (https://www.patria.org.ve/login). The #VenezuelaEsDemocracia (#VenezuelaIsDemocracy) hashtag was generated from this account and was a TT on May 19, the eve of election day.

veQR is the application connecting the People’s Power with President Nicolas Maduro’s social protection programs through the Carnet de la Patria.

vePatria allows direct mobile phone access to https://www.patria.org.ve through an environment that guarantees its correct operation. The PATRIA platform is part of the Homeland ID Card’s protection system.

veMonedero is the application that connects with Monedero Patria. In its initial version, it allows cardholders to check their balance and review payment operations. It will gradually incorporate new functions.
Mobile Wallet allows the Homeland ID to be used as a form of payment through the QR code. It facilitates fast, easy, and secure access to goods and services to all the people.

@ClapOficial, the Local Committees for Supply and Production account, was also active in the campaign. From the @ClapOficial account, the use of the hashtag #VotaSiQuieresPatria (#VotelfYouWantHomeland) was emphasized. Implicit in @ClapOficial's campaign storyline was that obtaining food distributed by CLAP was tied to voting for the continuity of the Bolivarian Revolution. CLAP communicators were also active in the dissemination of @ClapOficial messages.

CLAP communicators are people who receive training to spread pro-government messages, particularly messages promoting the Homeland ID Card and the distribution of food via CLAP. They are also assigned the task of retweeting tweets from official government accounts and posting links to yellow news sites.

Complementing the efforts to be included in the TTs, the Tuiteros Patriotas (Patriotic Tweeters) community (@tuiteros_vzla) was also created. Tuiteros Patriotas had more than 38,000 followers at the time of the campaign. This community has its own data-gathering platform, which runs through the web platform www.tuiteros.org.ve, and uses the hashtag #TuiterosPorLaAlegriaYLaPaz (#TweetersForJoyAndPeace). Through their Twitter account,
the community leaders provided instructions about generating tweets with the day’s hashtag. Likewise, Tuiteros Patriotas subscribers received the daily hashtag instructions via the Telegram channel of the community (https://t.me/tuiteros_vzla). In addition, the subscription could be activated via an SMS short code. During the campaign, Tuiteros Patriotas activists who used the day’s hashtag were entered into a daily raffle whose prize could reach the amount of a month’s minimum wage (US$2 to US$3 according to the exchange rate in the black market).

Apparently, most patriotic tweeters and CLAP communicators were not officially hired by the government to tweet nor were on its payroll, but they were motivated by incentives such as raffles and special government bonds. However, many patriotic tweeters seem to have links to different ministries, including those for education, health, food, culture, tourism, housing, and women. That is, they were government officials, but tweeting was not their primary function in the government and so served as "digital warrior" volunteers.
A "patriotic tweeter" asks the Carnet de la Patria account for help obtaining a smart phone so as to continue supporting the Bolivarian Revolution in the digital battle.
STRATEGY 2: AUTOMATED DISTRACTION

The second Chavism strategy on Twitter was a somewhat more sophisticated mode of manipulation of the communication space. This strategy involved introducing distractions to overshadow the real debate of civil society on Twitter. We have termed it “automated distraction.” During the study period, hashtags were generated on topics outside the political
agenda, topics on which the opposition had divergent positions, and/or hashtags with absurd positions.

One of the May TTs consistent with this strategy was #ConMiBancoNoTeMetas (#DoNotMeddleWithMyBank). The hashtag #ConMiBancoNoTeMetas had been used sporadically since 2010, without having obtained the virality that would allow it to become a TT. On May 4, @elcapitansur tweeted with the hashtag #Conmibanconotemetas that was quickly retweeted 1,054 times. The hashtag alluded to the potential state seizure of one of the country’s largest privately-owned financial institutions, BANESCO, but the text outrageously exaggerated a statement from the Organization of American States that was unrelated to the potential intervention.”

@elcapitansur often publishes false information and disinformation memes. It also has a YouTube channel with satirical content, as well as an Instagram account with anti-Chavism memes. Its tweets reflect positions of extreme opposition, pro-military invasion, and pro-violent action. This account posts incendiary messages, often makes homophobic comments, features religious images, and follows many pornographic accounts. Approximately 4,000 of its 10,000 followers have characteristics suggesting they are bot accounts.
The viral tweet of @elcapitansur with the hashtag #Conmibanconotemetas received RTs from #EquipoTAC associates, bot accounts, and accounts associated with Tuiteros Patriotas, as well as paid RTs by the RinfoNews service. Some opposition supporters also used the hashtag, helping it become a TT. However, the hashtag was ignored by the main opposition parties and their activists.
@RinfoNews is a service that charges US$3 per month for retweeting. The description in their Twitter account indicated that they were located in Miami, but most of their geolocated tweets came from Mexico. @RinfoNews retweeted the hashtag #ConMiBancoNoTeMetas posted by @elcapitansur, @TorresAren, @Templari0ResisT [member of #TeamHDP #LaListaJustin [another extremist community that was very active in 2017]] and @EquipoTAC. It was not possible to locate a website for the company, and by August 2018, @RinfoNews had changed its name to @RinfoMundi.

#ConMiBancoNoTeMetas can be considered a distraction TT. @elcapitansur has the greatest betweenness centrality on this hashtag network, connecting the various clusters and generating the most RTs throughout the entire network, which comprises 9,038 accounts that posted 17,680 tweets with the #ConMiBancoNoTeMetas hashtag. Seven percent of tweets with this hashtag came from accounts associated with the Patriot Tweeters community, although the @tuiteros_vzla account did not participate directly. @EquipoTAC is another community that showed heavy influence with this TT. The graph also shows the participation of a series of accounts that share the characteristic of attacking both the government and the democratic opposition, such as @TorresAren, @Templari0ResisT, @VENE00080, and @TITORODRIGUEZZ. The @soldadoDfranela account that became famous after the attempted drone attack on Saturday, August 4, 2018, was also an active participant in this network.

The set of profiles identified as part of the distraction strategy (as well as the infiltration strategy examined below) share the following characteristics. They are multiplatform profiles...
(Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube), anonymous, exhibit cyborg behavior (patterns of tweets and RTs that are similar to those exhibited by automated accounts but with characteristics that suggest a real user), spread political memes, post links to scandalous news (false or authentic), use emotion-provoking images, and parody both oppositional and Chavist political leaders.

#EquipoTAC (Anti Castro-Communist Tweeters) is a community dominated by cyborgs that use an anti-Chavism extremist tone and an antagonistic discourse towards opposition parties. The members of this community are coordinated through the account @EquipoTAC

The evidence suggests that a set of distraction accounts were created and the spread of “false positives” or fake news was encouraged by the government, with the objective of contaminating the Twitter news space. Evidence gathered from this study analyzing Twitter connections and activity related to Venezuela’s 2018 elections matches with a leaked document from the Ministry of the Interior and Justice, “Ejército de Trolls de la Revolución Bolivariana” (“The Bolivarian Revolution’s Troll Army”), containing information on the government’s Twitter strategy.

7 The document “Ejército de Trolls de la Revolución Bolivariana” is available on the IPYS Venezuela website: https://ipysvenezuela.org/alerta/gobierno-incentiva-la-vigilancia-redes-sociales-la-difusion-news -fathers/
The Troll Army is divided into five squads: Pro-Government, Opponents, Neutrals, Distraction, and Fake News. In the study, Pro-Government, (False) Opponents, Fake News, and Distraction trolls were identified. Fake News and Distraction trolls utilize the strategy of distraction, while the (False) Opponents utilize the strategy of interference and infiltration. The Pro-Government trolls (Tuiteros Patriotas and CLAP communicators) support the spread of official campaigns.

STRATEGY 3: INTERFERENCE AND INFILTRATION OF OPPOSITION NETWORKS

The third Chavism strategy on Twitter concerns the hijacking of democratic opposition’s hashtags and interference in their conversations. In the sample of TTs analyzed in this study, we repeatedly observed a pattern of interference in the opposition’s discourse on Twitter.

Specifically, we observed that once a hashtag of the democratic opposition started to become a TT, a member of #EquipoTAC would use said hashtag in a tweet with a divergent idea. That tweet was quickly viralized by bots associated with #EquipoTAC, overshadowing opposition parties’ and leaders’ tweets.

The difference in language, tone, and values in tweet content from the opposition’s official accounts compared to that from the cyborg accounts is striking. While the opposition accounts denounce social problems, call for dialogue with citizens, and emphasize the struggle for freedom, the tweets from extremist cyborg accounts are characterized by profanity, insults to victims and government officials, and false news. It is relevant to note that public opinion studies have found that the type of discourse used by extremist accounts is rejected by most of the democratic opposition’s base and has a demobilizing effect.
This third strategy was not limited to discursive interference. It also aimed to infiltrate the structure of the network. The cyborg accounts identified in this study are directly connected to official Chavism accounts, and they establish links with activists abroad opposed to Chavism in Venezuela. On the other hand, they do not maintain links with official opposition accounts. In their actions, they try to isolate the opposition groups that have tactical differences with opposition leaders, favoring fragmentation and obstruction to unity.
In the graph of the TT #ContraElFraudeProtestoEl16 (#AgainstFraudProtestThe16), same-colored nodes correspond to a high percentage of shared followers/followed accounts (a phenomenon that commonly occurs among militants of the same party). They are closer to the extent that their content is similar. The lines between the nodes reflect mentions or RTs. The graph shows that the identified extremist "opposition" cyborg accounts (in purple) share content (keywords, links) and followers with Chavism accounts (those belonging to real self-identified Chavism activists) and with legitimate extremist opposition accounts (many based on Miami, in green). These cyborg accounts also appear to have a relationship with supporters of newly elected Colombian president, Ivan Duque. Conversely, they do not have many elements in common with the institutional democratic opposition (parties Voluntad Popular and Primero Justicia, as well as the coalition Frente Amplio).

The interference and infiltration strategies targeted the most polarized communities among the different opposition communities. The accounts of false extremist opponents infiltrated into these communities. These accounts interacted with real people from those communities to generate credibility, and once their influence had been established, they could introduce new points of view and amplify the division with incendiary messages.

CLOSING REMARKS

This study gathered evidence and analyzed how, during the runup to the 2018 elections, the Venezuelan government impeded the diversity of online expression and unduly interfered with the political opposition’s discourse and the online organization of civil society.
Three strategies used by the Venezuelan government on Twitter during the study period were identified as the following: 1) coordination of official and automated accounts to assure reaching the daily trending topics; 2) promotion of distracting hashtags accompanied by emotional, scandalous, misleading, offensive, and/or false messages through cyborg and bot accounts; 3) hijacking of opposition hashtags to distort their messages and interfere in the conversations of the various opposition communities. In the report presented here, only some exemplary cases are discussed to achieve conciseness, but the same patterns were observed in the other cases analyzed. The combined deployment of the three identified strategies constitutes a systematic violation of Venezuelan social media users’ right to participate in the country’s public affairs.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This study analyzed relational data of the communities connected to topics that were trending during May 2018 on Twitter Venezuela (see list of hashtags). The data-gathering through the Twitter API was done by Trendinalia (https://www.trendinalia.com/). Using the NodeXL software, an exploratory analysis of the graph metrics of corresponding networks was done, including the detection of influencers using centrality metrics and the delimitation of clusters using the Clauset-Newman-Moore algorithm. Further analysis was performed using Gephi software to more precisely identify the communities using the modularity algorithm, in random mode with resolution 1.0. Likewise, the most influential users were identified using the measures of betweenness centrality, vector centrality, page rank, and authority. Network graphs illustrating the report were generated in Gephi, using the algorithm Atlas2 Force.

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**RECOMMENDED READINGS**

**ON PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION**

**IN SPANISH**


**IN ENGLISH**


**ON THE POLITICAL REGIME IN VENEZUELA**

**IN SPANISH**


**IN ENGLISH**

ON INTERNET CONTROLS IN VENEZUELA

IN SPANISH

IN ENGLISH

CREDITS

Data Collection: Trendinalia (https://www.trendinalia.com/).

Data Analysis & Visualizations: Iria Puyosa.