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We Need Art Interventions!
Art's potential to tackle fake news on social media
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Since the early 2000s, social media have become central communication platforms worldwide. They opened up numerous possibilities for wider interactions, communities and movement building and gave voice to many otherwise unheard individuals. One example is the #MeToo movement which has rapidly grown on social media, with numerous women exposing sexual harassment stories and demanding meaningful consequences for perpetrators. Thus, social media have arguably extended democratic processes.

Yet in parallel, social media offer easy-to-use tools which allow anyone to receive and spread information – as well as disinformation. In the last two decades, studies have found that disinformation and fake news are spread mostly via social media, namely on Facebook and Twitter (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). As a consequence, society is facing dangerous undemocratic tendencies because false information undermines a basic factor of democratic deliberation: facts. Public deliberation in the US and in other countries seems to have been shifting from presenting objective facts and discussing opinions to presenting 'alternative facts' and discussing feelings. This shift can arguably challenge policymaking when crucial debates deteriorate, not due to difference in ideology or opinions but due to false information brought to the table.

One advocating approach regards social media as providing 'merely a platform', claiming it is the users who should be accountable for their interaction with misinformation and its spread. I challenge this naïve approach, because users are led by the platform – it is designed to make the user interact in certain ways. Facebook, for example, is a money-maker – one of the biggest advertisement platforms on Earth. As such, its motivations are based on how to profit, how to grow and how to become and remain ubiquitous. With these ubiquitous information-spreading machines, fake news and misinformation become particularly challenging.

Since the mid-20th century more and more artists have been using media technologies as creative means to tackle socio-political issues. Combining technology, art and activism to produce art interventions in public, these works have been raising social awareness and promoting moral debates. As an early example, in the 1970s and 1980s artists like David Hall, Chris Burden or Stan Douglas bought airtime on broadcast television and intervened mostly during commercial spots with peculiar video works. Looking often like commercials, they aimed to criticize television as a popular medium delivering superficial or biased content and manipulating viewers toward consumerism and ignorance.

Later, in the 1990s, as technologies became more complicated, artists' actions became more sophisticated. Operating outside the museum and offering an alternative even to the art institution itself, artists became increasingly interested in using media technologies as they are used by corporations and power institutions. Mostly termed Tactical Media or Cultural Jamming, these art forms aimed to deconstruct systems of power. In that spirit, in his spoken word album Become the Media (2000), musician Jello Biafra declared: 'Don't hate the media, become the media!' I claim that many artists have the skills to deal with dangerous and complex technologies, and instead of 'hating' them they should use them. I claim that the complex problems which society faces due to the spread of fake news and misinformation can be effectively tackled by art interventions. As an example, in 2000 the Austrian-Swiss art duo Ubermorgen programmed a website named 'Vote Auction' on which users could allegedly buy and sell votes during the US election. Fearing the vote trade to be real, CNN broadcast a special program with a line of experts to discuss the act and its damage to democracy. In this way, the artists aimed to raise awareness to the issue of lobbying and its damage to the democratic voting process. In 2011 a different intervention named 'Newstweek' was created by artists Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev in cafés around Europe. They hacked the

café's WiFi and altered the content of news websites. The café customers who surfed those websites on their personal computers found peculiar headlines. The artists' aim was to raise awareness and materialize the problems of fake news and media bias.

'Don't hate the media, become the media!' (Jello Biafra 2000)

A more direct 'fake news' action took place in 2008, during the US-Iraq war. The art group Yes Men produced and distributed thousands of copies of a cloned New York Times newspaper filled with 'good news', while its front page stated 'Iraq War Ends'. The aim of the prank was not merely to criticise the US-Iraq war and GW Bush's former administration (e.g. potential US war crimes), but to simulate a reality of positive news where the government is being held accountable for its actions (Kedar 2019). An earlier 'fake news' intervention by the Yes Men started by fabricating a website of Dow Chemicals, a corporation which acquired Union Carbide, which was responsible for one of the worst industrial disasters in Bhopal, India, 1984. Mistaking the website to be the actual Dow website, a BBC researcher contacted Dow for a response to the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster. The Yes Men agreed and prepared to appear disguised as Dow's spokesperson. And so, 'Dow spokesperson' Jude Finisterra, acted by Jacques Servin, said on live television that 'Dow is now accepting full responsibility for the Bhopal disaster.' The announcement became headline news. It took about two hours to realize that this was a hoax, during which time Dow stocks fell by 4.24%. The action raised meaningful moral questions regarding corporate responsibility.

These art actions all aim to mislead the audience temporarily, so that the viewer believes it and then realizes that it is a hoax. When the deception is revealed, the viewer is led to think morally about the issue at stake, opening up a meaningful debate. Following Ian Reilly (2013), it is arguable that critique alone cannot be as effective as actions can. In other words, these courageous art interventions focus on doing instead of talking (Kedar 2019).

Summary

These examples demonstrate art as an activist technology-oriented form which can potentially or actually raise awareness of the problem of fake news. I claim that art can help repair the damaged status of facts and truth, and thus reconstruct the wounded democratic deliberation. These collaborative group artists use their creativity, intelligence, critical thinking, social responsibility and respect for facts and truth to create meaningful and bold interventions. Yet, these projects oftentimes lack financial and legal support. In addition to these needs, in the face of the growing danger to democracy, I call for artists to create further projects to tackle the spread of fake news.

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