REPORT

PORTUGAL

ONLINE DISINFORMATION DURING PORTUGAL'S 2019 ELECTIONS

DISINFORMATION
FACEBOOK & WHATSAPP

IN THIS REPORT WE ANALYSE THE CONTENTS OF A SELECTED GROUP OF DISINFORMATION PRONE FACEBOOK PAGES AND GROUPS DURING ONE MONTH PRIOR TO THE RECENT PORTUGUESE LEGISLATIVE ELECTION, ON THE 6TH OF OCTOBER.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the campaign to the 6 October 2019 Parliamentary elections in Portugal, a number of Facebook pages and public groups with significant reach spread political disinformation, mostly aimed at the incumbent government party *Partido Socialista* and a small party with an ecological platform. Monitoring 47 Facebook pages and 39 Facebook public groups in from 6 September to 5 October we found:

- 2/3 of the content published or shared in the monitored pages and groups during the electoral period was of a disinformative nature. We cannot judge if these pages had an impact on voters' decisions.

- Facebook **pages** were more active in spreading false news and narratives while public **groups** were more prolific in publishing and spreading that kind of content. Pages' disinformation content is more subtle and engaging, while in the groups we see more amateur and explicit disinformation.

- The 47 **Facebook pages** monitored for this report represent an overall fan base of 1,486 million users, some of wh om may follow two or more pages of this sample, and may be situated outside of Portugal. These pages published 6,530 posts that resulted in a total of 1,107,204 interactions (comprising likes, comments and shares).

- The 39 public **Facebook groups** monitored comprised 707,000 members. In the 30-day period, almost 45,000 posts were published in these 39 groups. They generated more than 2 million interactions.

- During this period, two Facebook pages – *Direita Política* and *Mário Gonçalves* – stood out as the most influential in spreading disinformative content. Among the public Facebook groups monitored, the group *Grupo de Apoio ao Juiz Carlos Alexandre* was by far the most influential.

- In the monitored pages, alternative media were the most common source of information, contrary to the groups, where established media were dominant. Even then, their news content was often subject to some form of interpretative manipulation converting its initial neutral formulation into a more partisan one.

- The most often used technique was the recycling of old news as actual news. The second most used technique were unfounded or unsubstanciated accusations, mostly directed to polititians or major corporate leaders.

- More than 90% of the posts flagged as disinformative were not so because of the content posts had disinformation characteristics that resulted from actions taken by users inside the Facebook platform[1].
- We also monitored 31 public WhatsApp groups that carried political content. No disinformation was detected in the approximately 30,000 monitored posts.

This research was conducted by MediaLab CIES-IUL, a research group inside ISCTE-IUL, with support from Democracy Reporting International and in collaboration with Diário de Notícias.

LEVEL 1: TRENDS AND NARRATIVES

FACEBOOK PAGES ACTIVITY

The 47 Facebook pages monitored for this report represent an overall fan base of 1,486 million users, some of whom may follow two or more pages on this sample, and may be situated outside of Portugal. During the 30-day period between September 6th and October 5th, these 47 pages published a total of 6,530 posts (an average of 139 posts per page) that resulted in a total of 1,107,204 interactions (comprising likes, comments and shares). That corresponds to an average of 23,588 interactions per page on this 30-day period.

There was no significant increase in posts between the pre-campaign period (from the 6th to the 20th September) and the official campaign period 15 days before election day. However, a significant increase in the interactions generated by those posts was identified closer to the election.

Image 1: statistics of the page set

From 06/09 to 05/10	Total interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Total posts
Average per page	23,568	6,494	1,663	10,702	139
TOTAL	1,107,704	526,538	78,163	503,003	6,530

From 06/09 to 20/09 - pre-electoral period	Total interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Total posts
Average per page	11,228	2,951	765	5,442	72
TOTAL	527,701	235,931	35,973	255,797	3,362

From 21/09 to 05/10 - electoral campaign	Total interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Total posts
Average per page	12,340	3,543	898	5,260	67
TOTAL	580,003	290,607	42,190	247,206	3,168

Below average	
Above average	

However, when we look at the daily evolution of interactions during the 30-day period we're monitoring, we can see not only a significant increase in the second half of that period (marked in shades of red) - corresponding to the official electoral campaign - but also a prominent spike on October 4th, corresponding to the episode in which a citizen confronted the portuguese prime minister (and electoral candidate), on the last day of the campaign, with accusations that were influenced by disinformation narratives, as we will see further on this report. This spike signals the effort placed by these pages on the exploit of this electoral episode and the high number of interaction it got from users.

Table 1 – Most active Facebook pages

	Account	Posts	Interactions
1	O País Do Mete NOJO	667	146,176
2	Mário Gonçalves	54	98,596
3	Direita Política	222	72,220
4	A culpa é do Passos	272	70,663
5	Lesados do Estado	156	67,039
6	Tugaleaks	549	63,148
7	Anonymous PORTUGAL	329	58,877
8	Movimento Zero	59	42,133
9	Viriato Lusitano	340	30,850
10	Burlados Do Continente	265	30,233

In the Facebook pages set of our analysis, *O País Do Mete NOJO* registered the most interactions during this one month period - just above 146 thousand - also with the most posts published: 667. *Mário Gonçalves*, *Direita Política* and *A culpa é do Passos* were the following pages regarding total interactions. However, we should notice that the page *Mário Gonçalves* achieves this high position in the ranking with only 54 posts published during this period, which means that the author or authors of this Facebook page exhibit expertise in producing posts with a high degree of engagement. The same could be said about the page *Movimento Zero*. Overall, this ranking of the 10 pages that had the most interactions during the election cycle represent 61,3% of all the interactions registered during this period by the 47 pages monitored.

Investigating the origin of the links that were most shared within this subset if 47 pages, we see that *Tuga.press* was the

of the responsability of agents outside Facebook, like incorrect facts in the website page linked in the post (extra-facebook).

most linked-to website during this period, followed by the *Mário Gonçalves* and *Direita Política* websites, again confirming these two as the most influential agents in the overall content circulating in the pages set groups. As for *Tuga.press*, it should be mentioned that this website is the most used source of links in these subset of pages because three pages link to it systematically and in an automated fashion: *Tuga.press*, *Tugaleaks* and *Anonymous Portugal*. Also of notice is the way the monitored Facebook pages mention and link to other pages in this monitor: from position 4 on, the most used sources of information for these pages are other pages in our "pool". This introduces a kind of self-referencing within what seems to be an information bubble.

Table 2 – Most used information sources (on pages)

	Origin	Interactions
1	*tuga.press*	83 172
2	*mariogoncalvesoficial.pt*	79 989
3	*direitapolitica.com*	77 758
4	Facebook - *O País Do Mete NOJO*	70 199
5	Facebook - *A culpa é do Passos*	62 569
6	Facebook - *Lesados do Estado*	56 941
7	Facebook - *Movimento Zero*	38 707
8	Facebook - *Burlados Do Continente*	27 907
9	Facebook - *O Gato Politico*	23 790
10	Facebook - *Mário Gonçalves*	21 538

We also used Watson[2] to identify the predominant themes on all the content that was published in these 47 pages during the 30-day period prior to the election. At the top, we can see judicial issues and two electoral figures - the PAN party and António Costa, current prime-minister -, both of them target of disinformation campaigns in these pages. José Sócrates, the socialist ex-prime-minister on trial for corruption is a frequent target of these pages publications, as an attempt to reflect on the public image of its successor, António Costa.

Table 3 –Themes with the most interactions (on pages)

	Theme	Interactions
1	Public prosecutors	39 228
2	PAN party	38 228
3	José Sócrates	29 462

4	António Costa	27 980
5	Economy	26 839
6	Europe	25 243
7	Democracy	24 558
8	Political party	23 573
9	United States	23 369
10	National Assembly	22 784

FACEBOOK GROUPS ACTIVITY

The total activity of a sample of 39 public Facebook groups was also monitored - comprising a total of 707 thousand members. In the 30-day period, a total of almost 45 thousand posts were published in these 39 groups, which means an average of 1153 posts per group (38 posts per day on each group, on average). During that period, those 45.000 posts generated more than 2 million interactions.

Comparatively to the 47 pages monitored, users in these groups published much more posts (45 thousand against 6,5 thousand) and generated almost double the interactions. Which could mean that, although they generate significantly less interactions per post, these 39 public groups may have had a larger influence on this 30-day election períod than the 47 pages monitored.

When we look separately at the two 15-day periods we used before, we conclude that - similarly to what happened in the pages - activity in the groups was more intense in the days closer to the election, both on quantity of posts published and on interactions generated by those posts.

Image 2: statistics of the group set

From 06/09 to 05/10	Total interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Total posts
Average per group	52,352	16,530	7,135	14,326	1,153
TOTAL	2,041,739	1,204,785	278,257	558,697	44,961

From 06/09 to 20/09 - pre-electoral period	Total interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Total posts
Average per group	25,680	8,047	3,313	7,020	532
TOTAL	1,001,504	598,489	129,218	273,787	20,761

From 21/09 to 05/10 - electoral campaign	Total interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Total posts
Average per group	26,673	8,484	3,822	7,305	621
TOTAL	1,040,235	606,286	149,039	284,910	24,200

	Below average
	Above average

Of the 39 public groups we are monitoring, *Portugal a Rir* and *Grupo de Apoio ao Juiz Carlso Alexandre* stand out, with over 7 thousand posts published and 874 and 716 interactions, respectively. The first is more miscellaneous, dedicated to comic and daily life content, but with a relevant percentage of political content. The second is a group "in support" of judge Carlos Alexandre who investigated and put on trial the former prime-minister José Sócrates on accounts of corruption and abuse of power. In this group political and economic corruption are the central theme.

These two groups - the first for its reach and the second for its dominant political content - were the ones in our sample that exerted most influence during the October election cycle, followed by *A Indignação e Revolta* and *Os Reformados do Facebook*. Also noticeable is the group in support of André Ventura - *Grupo de Apoio a André Ventura* - precisely one of the far-right politicians that were elected for the first time for the new parliament.

Table 4 – Most active groups on Facebook

	Account	Posts	Interactions
1	*PORTUGAL A RIR*	7,873	873,841
2	*GRUPO DE APOIO AO JUIZ CARLOS ALEXANDRE*	7,306	716,285
3	*A INDIGNAÇÃO E REVOLTA*	5,902	77,714
4	*OS REFORMADOS NO FACEBOOK*	1,052	61,926
5	*Açores Global*	2,333	55,835
6	*Grupo de Amigos de José Afonso*	506	30,800
7	*Grupo de Apoio a André Ventura*	1,960	27,548
8	*LARAPPIUS*	1,301	21,949
9	*Orgulho de ser bombeiro*	1,006	18,082
10	*Remexido*	1,060	16,176

As for most used sources of information within these 39 groups, we find several established media[3] outlets - like *Sic Notícias*, *Público*, *Expresso* or *Observador* - but also relevant "alternative" news outlets, like *Direita Política*, *Portugal Glorioso* or *Mário Gonçalves Oficial*. *Direita Política*, in particular, seems to have a significant presence in these 39 public groups, with over 65 thousand interactions generated by content pieces coming from its website.

Plus, as we shall see in the next chapter of this report, established media content is often spinned in these groups to assume a disinformative nature that is not contained in those sources.

Table 5 – Most used information sources (in groups)

	Origin	Interactions
1	direitapolitica.com	65,501
2	sicnoticias.pt	52,664
3	Público	46,103
4	expresso.pt	38,337
5	youtube.com	34,729
6	observador.pt	29,852
7	portugalglorioso.blogspot.com	29,675
8	tvi24.iol.pt	21,551
9	eco.sapo.pt	17,070
10	mariogoncalvesoficial.pt	16,316

As for the themes, and as we noted in the pages section, issues relating to the judicial processes - referring to the public prosecution office - are dominant. The party PAN and the incumbent prime-minister António Costa, both entering the election, are also high in this top 10.

Table 6 – Themes with the most interactions (on groups)

	Theme	Interactions
1	Public prosecuters	109 899
2	Minister	73 732
3	Democracy	53 837
4	European Union	49 316
5	PAN	44 411
6	Economy	39 304
7	Europe	38 155
8	António Costa	37 099
9	José Sócrates	36 152
10	United States	33 136

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[3] By "established media", MediaLab refers to all organisms registered in the portuguese media regulation authority.

MediaLab searched within search engines, open forums and public content of social networks for open What's App groups accessible via a public link that will always start with: "https://chat.whatsapp.com".

From this search, MediaLab identified around 1000 public WhatsApp links, of which only 121 were selected for further analysis. The remaining were either Brazilian or clearly apolitical. Data extraction tool Backup WhatsApp Chats was tested and anonymization of data guaranteed with a test group, created for this purpose.

Of the 121 remaining, 31 were joined on the 31st of August 2019 by an identified MediaLab profile, with a status linking to the project's goals and data protection policy (http://www.bit.ly/proj_desinformacao). The rest was not included due to inactivity or inexistence of political content. There was given a period of one week for group members to demonstrate possible disagreement with the presence of the MediaLab profile.
On the 8th of September content analysis began on a daily basis, with an average of 1000 messages a day spread among the 31 groups and was made until the 5th of October.

Although political discussions were registered, there was no identification of disinformative content. Due to the sensitive nature of possible privacy perceptions among WhatsApp group members, MediaLab decided not to storage or further analyse the data from these group discussions, by considering that the main goal of the project: identifying if there was disinformative content being shared in Portugal via WhatsApp, had been accomplished.

LEVEL 2 : DISINFORMATION CATEGORIES

Every week MediaLab extracted the sorted list for each set, with posts being ordered by number of total interactions. Because we only wanted to analyse the top 20 of political posts, a larger number had to be seen in order to achieve that value. In the pages, 96% of content was political, so only a total of 83 posts were analysed. In the groups, more non political content was shared, mostly parody, totalizing a number of 175 posts seen to achieve the 80 political ones.

Posts were analysed and fact checked based on content, context and visual and linguistic cues. From the pages set, 66,25% of content was labelled as potentially disinformative, of which 27,5% was clearly disinformative - incorrect - and 38,75% could disinform - inaccurate. In the groups set the results were very similar, with 63,75% of content labelled as potentially disinformative, 33,75% incorrect and 30% inaccurate. From the 180 posts analysed, 104 were red flagged, representing more that two thirds of content in both sets.

Image 3: 160 analysed posts by type of content
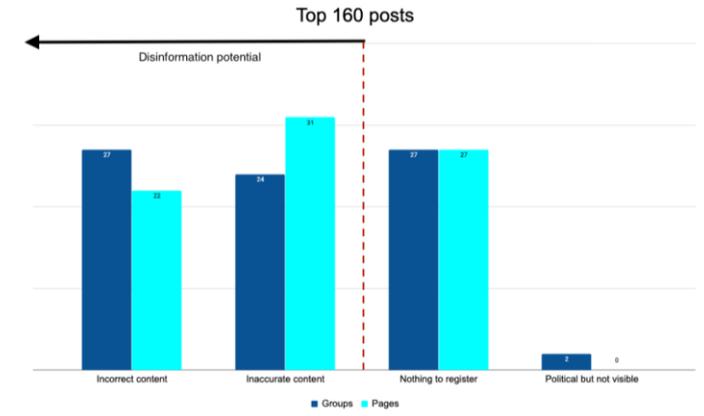
The main difference between them would be that pages are more contained, organized and self producing, and groups were more extreme, in a more disorganized pattern and sharing mostly third party content. In fact, apart from distinctions related to those specific issues both sets showed significant similarities.

Every week the main narratives would duplicate from one set to the other. If we look at prevailing themes in the 104 posts[4] labelled as potential disinformation, corruption and politicians are the main theme with 48% of posts with a relatively larger expression in the pages set[5]. Media and censorship with 12,5% of posts and the banking industry with 7,7% have similar presence in both. The main difference being refugees and immigration and big corporate interests, with a larger expression in the groups set[6], representing 6,7 and 7,7% of posts. Relevant to point out that these disinformative posts associated with immigration and refugees all contained xenophobic discourse.

Table 7 – Themes present in red flagged posts

Themes	Groups	Pages
Political corruption	21	29
Established media and internet censorship	7	6
Big companies	5	3
Banking	4	4
Refugees / Immigration	6	1
Social inequality	2	4
Environment	2	2
Criminality and deviant behaviour	2	2
Sports	0	2
LGBT+	1	0

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[4] 53 in the pages set and 51 in the groups set.
[5] 54,7% in the pages set and 41,2% in the groups set.

[6] Big corporations 5,7% in the pages set and 9,8% in the groups set. refugees and emigration 1,9% in the pages set comparing to 11,8% in the groups set.

Historical homage	1	0
TOTAL	51	53

Tags		Groups		Pages	
		Int	Ext	Int	Ext
Incorrect	Incorrect fact	8	8	7	9
	Incorrect title	0	6	0	3
	Incorrect facts to the current date	5	1	6	0
	Incorrect facts on publishing date	3	1	2	0
	Unfounded accusations	9	8	9	8
Inaccurate	Inaccurate facts	9	9	13	21
	Inaccurate title	0	13	0	6
	Inaccurate facts to the current date	2	3	3	0
	Inaccurate facts on publishing date	0	0	0	0
	Unsubstantiated accusations	15	12	28	11
Visually out of context	Manipulated image	0	4	1	3
	Image spin[9]	3	4	6	9
	Image out of context	1	3	0	0
Out of context content	Selective copy	5	4	2	5
	Out of context use of trustworthy sources	2	2	2	3
	Text of post leads to incorrect interpretation of linked content	11	0	3	0
	Out of context use of parody content	0	0	1	0
Out of context timing	Recycling	28	2	14	0
	Out of context timing	28	1	11	0

Regarding type of discourse and type of posts, pages tend to self promote their own content, very often recurring to what we labelled as "suggestion of interpretation". It differs from opinion in the sense that it is not clear to the user that it is a personal judgement and not a grounded statement. This type of discourse was the most common in both the pages and groups set. Pages had more prevalence of opinion statements or articles, and far less sheer factual narratives, resulting from the fact they almost did not share established media content.

Regarding disinformation categorization, the First Draft News typology[7] was far less heterogeneous in the pages, where only 3 of the 6 categories[8] were registered, with false context and manipulated content representing, in equal amounts, about 42%, and misleading content the remaining 58%. In the groups we found more audacity and variety, with 4% fabricated content, 20% manipulated content, 2% imposter content, 35% false context, 35% misleading content and 2% false connection.

Table 8 – Distribution of disinformation (according to First Draft system)

FDN system	Groups	Pages
Fabricated content - new content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.	2	0
Manipulated content - genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.	10	11
Imposter content - genuine sources are impersonated.	1	0
False Context - genuine content is shared with false contextual information.	18	11
Misleading content - misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual.	19	31
False connection - headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content.	1	0

The tagging system was not mutually exclusive. Pages and group sets had similar results regarding the weight of most tags. The two main differences were inaccuracy related tags, which were far more common among page posts and out of context timing and text of post leading to wrong interpretation of linked content, considerably more present in groups.

Table 9 – Distribution of disinformation (according tags system)

Tags were separated in order to distinguish tags from external links (EXT) from intra-facebook posts (INT). Intra-facebook tags relate to disinformative characteristics that result from actions taken inside the platform[10]. One of the major conclusions of this preliminary report is that of the 104 red flagged posts, only 8,65% had exclusive external link tags. The remaining 91,35% had intra-facebook labels.

LEVEL 3: DISINFORMATION DEBUNKING

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[7] https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79
[8] Parody /satire was not included
[9] When images match context and have not been changed, but are presented in a way that transmits a subliminar out of context message.

[10] Characteristics of disinformative posts were separated between those relating to the post itselft (intra-facebook) like, for example, out of context timing, and those of the responsability of agents outside Facebook, like incorrect facts in the website page linked in the post (extra-facebook).

During the 4 weeks of analysis several posts were taken by MediaLab's partner in this project, *Diário do Notícias* for journalistic investigation. Four articles stemmed from this research, that went further than the regular academic research, identifying content producers, linking them to political organizations and identifying some key figures that were sharing red flagged posts.

On the last campaign day, the 4th of October, portuguese Prime Minister António Costa was approached by a senior citizen that accused him of being on vacation during and in the immediate aftermath of Pedrogão Grande fire disaster, that led to the death of over 60 people, in June 2017. The prime minister became very upset with the accusation and the video of the altercation was immediately shared by all media outlets.

The false accusation claiming the prime minister was on vacation during the disaster had been recurrently identified by MediaLab in both sets, during and before the analysis period, and had already been debunked by official fact checking organism *Polígrafo*.

MediaLab extracted around 2000 posts from the group set with the keyword *férias* (vacations) going back up to the date of the fires in June 2017. Of these, hundreds of posts were identified on the subject, with 125 falsely claiming the Prime Minister was on vacation by the time of fires[11] and only 2 exposing the narrative as disinformative. These 125 posts resulted in 8957 interactions, among them 2462 shares.

If we look at the groups from our set with more posts pushing this narrative we have *Grupo de Apoio Juiz Carlos Alexandre* with 57, *A Indignação e Revolta* with 32, *Contra a Esquerda* with 14 and *Política para todos* with 6[12]. If we look at some of the original links that promote this story, *Direita Política* is the author of 17, *PSD Europa* of 11, *PS - Partido da Bancarrota* 7, *A culpa é do Passos* 5 and *Ética e Moral* also 5. All of these, except for *Direita Política* that is also a site, are Facebook pages.

If we insert the 125 posts in a timeline it becomes even more interesting, with a clear upspring of the false narrative in the summer of 2019 and the first consistent share of the narrative in november 2018, greatly promoted by a PSD Europa page post.

IMAGE 6 – Timeline of the development of this false story
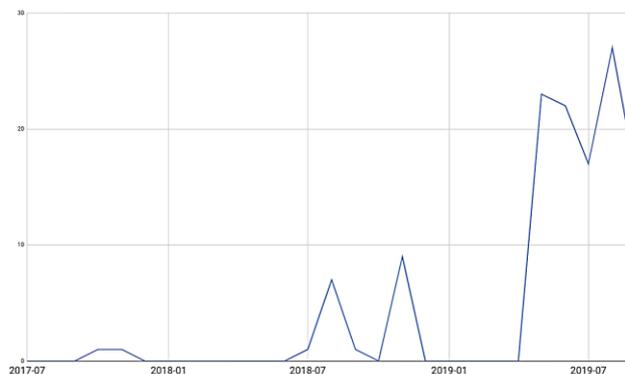
The official links of some of these content producers and active sharers to political parties, namely the main opposition party, were investigated and confirmed, although not yet published, by *Diário de Notícias* journalist Paulo Pena.

In this case, as in others, MediaLab and *Diário de Notícias* identified profiles that systematically and repeatedly share content from one specific page in several groups. The genuine reasons behind this unusual behaviour could not be confirmed.

The chosen example, due to its direct influence in the electoral campaign is demonstrative of how these false narratives on political candidates are more actively pushed in the period coming up to an election.

METHODOLOGY

IDENTIFYING PAGES / GROUPS TO MONITOR

As a starting point and supported by previous research[13], MediaLab identified CORRUPTION as the main theme being pushed in portuguese political discourse in social media. A syllabus was built around the theme "corruption" and a multivariate search was used in search engines and inside Facebook to identify portuguese groups and pages where content on corruption was being published. Search engines were included to minimize the effects of Facebook's suggestion algorithm and select a variety and politically heterogeneous set of pages and groups.

This first survey led to an extensive table of groups and pages, that were characterized according to three variables: number of followers or members (as a proxy for reach); number of political posts in the last 10 posts; number of posts in the last week. The triangulation of the three characteristics allowed us to filter the extensive list to the final set, excluding pages and groups with a low reach, limited political content and no recent activity. The result are the sets of 47 Facebook pages (pages

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[11] Only posts where this narrative was contained in the post's text or visible link title were considered. Comments or link text was not included, which would have made this value even higher.

[12] Política para Todos was also the group where the 2 posts exposing the false narrative showed up.
[13] Sondagens ICS-ISCTE. Available at: https://sondagens-ics-ul.iscte-iul.pt/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Sondagem-ICS_ISCTE_Setembro2019_parte1.pdf

set) and 39 Facebook public groups (groups set) that we have monitored for this analysis.

EXTRACTION AND SORTING OF DATA

Both sets were included as analysis lists in Crowdtangle. Crowdtangle is a social media tracking platform owned by Facebook that has privileged access to the social network's data while anonymizing user's data. It allowed for sorted extraction of all posts published in each set during the 4 weeks of analysis, ordering them by the number of total interactions (shares, comments, likes) associated with each post.

In the extraction table, data like time of publishing, links to external content (a media article) and the post's and link's text are also included. This allows for a number of interesting lines of research, some of them translated into the first stage of analysis.

FACT CHECKING, IDENTIFICATION AND CATEGORIZATION

Every week, from the list of publications sorted by number of interactions, the top 20 most viral political posts of each set were debunked, labelled and categorized, one by one, resulting in a final sample of 180 categorized posts. Non political posts[14] were not included in the analysis.

The fact checking process was made according to international standards of the International Fact Checking Network. The work process and findings for every post labelled as potential disinformation were shared and published at MediaLab's website for public consultation (http://bit.ly/MediaLabOutputs).

Every post was analysed according to its content, context and visual clues and labelled either as "nothing to register", "inaccurate" or "incorrect". This labelling process was a result of the combination of two characterization processes.

The first, was the categorization of posts according to Claire Wardle's First Draft News typology, in a closed and mutually exclusive encoding process. The second, that stemmed from a need to complement the first system, was a tagging method developed by MediaLab during the debunking process. The tags were directly associated with different disinformative characteristics identified in the posts. These were non-conflicting and did not consider intent as a variable, unlike the First Draft News typology. They distinguish between intra and outside Facebook content.

Type of post, discourse and main theme were also included in the categorization process, using Crowdtangle and MediaLab labels.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For this report we have monitored 47 Facebook pages and 39 Facebook public groups during the 30 days that preceded the October 6th legislative election in Portugal. Our aim was to try to assess if and to what extent disinformation content produced or distributed by and in those pages and groups could have a significant effect in the electoral process and in its results.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

In total, during the 30-day period that we monitored it, our sample of 47 pages published 6.500 posts, generating just over one million interactions, whereas our sample of 39 public groups published almost 45 thousand posts, with just above two million interactions in 30 days. The amount of information collected for this investigation allow us to draw some significant conclusions:

- In general, posts published by pages generate a greater number of interactions per post than those published in groups (170 interactions per post on pages and 45 on groups).

- There is a much larger quantity of posts published in groups than there is in pages, which means groups end up having a greater reach during the same time period.

- Much of the content published by the Pages we monitored display an high level of professional expertise, creating social media content that is highly conductive to the page fans and tend to generate higher rates of engagement.

- Groups, on the other hand, are populated by common citizens that publish their random political stances or comment and share on the political opinions of others.

- The political agenda is less directed but the reach is greater because much more posts are published in the groups.

- In a way, we could say that Facebook groups are the arena where disinformation narratives are formed and pages are agents trying to influence that process of forming disinformative narratives.

- In our sample of 47 pages, *Direita Política* and *Mário Gonçalves* stood out as particularly influential. Both have right-wing political agenda (covering themes like immigratiion, security and anti-establishment), and both frequently resort to disinformation tactics to do so. In the 104 disinformation posts debunked, *Direita Política* represented 15,7% and *Mário Gonçalves* 18,3%.

- In our groups set it was the *Grupo de Apoio ao Juíz Carlos Alexandre* that stood out from the rest as the most important for spreading political information during the election cycle. Inside this group, in particular, we noticed a significant influence of *Direita Política*, the most relevant source of content for the posts published or shared by group members.

- Some recongnisable political agents were also visibly active inside these 39 Facebook public groups. Besides the group *Grupo de Apoio a André Ventura* - one of the newly elected far right parliament members - the official pages of PSD Europa, Chega and PNR - Partido Nacional Renovador - also raised to prominence in feeding these groups.

- Mostly it was established media outlets that were used as sources for the content published and shared in the 39 groups we monitored. But the key aspect is that, in most of the pieces we labelled as disinformative, the credible news outlets used as sources were somehow spinned to serve the prior political convictions and stances of the individual publishing it.

- This kind of (sometimes amateur) spinning of media content to serve political ends is what we predominantly detected in the groups, in opposition to the more self-produced and professionally produced content spread by pages. In this sense page agents may prove easier to control or track. Facebook groups follow a quite different *modus operandi* and may prove more difficult to assess.

- As for the themes covered, they were not very different on pages or groups. The judicial issues relating to past or present corruption cases stand out in both samples.

- Also common in pages and groups is the presence of José Sócrates - former prime-minister on trial for corruption - and António Costa, his successor and candidate at the October 6th election.

- In facto, António Costa and his party a primary target for disinformation in these groups and pages.

- Also PAN - Pessoas, Animais, Natureza, a small party known by its ecological agenda, was a prominent target during the election period in result of its growth in electoral polls during this period.

- We also detected the presence of looming and recurring disinformative narratives inside these groups and pages that kept coming up even when already debunked as false. One example was the alleged vacation of the prime-minister during the great forest fires of 2017. A senior citizen confronted the prime-minister with the issue on the last day of campaign – with high visibility - when in fact that information had already been labbeled as false.

- In short, we cannot identify an external or domestic agent behind the identified disinformation. Disinformation production and distribution had an effect in spreading certain narratives that may have affected the result of the election in two ways: First by dramatizing the final stage of the campaign in order to mobilise a certain electorate. And, second, by opening space for anti-establishment parties, mostly on the far-right, that indeed ended up gaining a seat in the new parliament.

DEVELOPMENTS

During the current project, MediaLab witnessed first hand the importance of the cooperation with established media and the existence of regular outputs with major findings. Every week, MediaLab publishhed in its website and in Diário de Notícias which resulted in real time improvements, taken during the campaign period.

In the first week of campaign, the most viral post in the groups set was a xenophobic post claiming refugees earned far more social security support that senior citizens. The post's text was supported by a link to fact checking platform *Polígrafo*. In the linked article *Polígrafo* debunks this narrative as false. However, when sharing the content on Facebook, only part of the title appears, together with a photo of a group of established Syrian refugees, making it possible for the user sharing the content to use it for its opposite purpose. Because most people don't click on the link, this makes it possible for disinformation producers to spin these trustworthy sources into their own narrative.

Following reporting on this issue, *Polígrafo* decided to include the icon labelling the narrative as true or false in the photo itself, therefore preventing the misuse of their content. An editorial decision that promotes public interests over corporate profit, since the introduction of the icon in the image reduces the clickbait interest of the article.

On the first week of the project, the second most viral post in the pages and the eighth in the groups was on the supposed friendship between our former prime minister, currently on trial and the judge handling the case, including a poorly manipulated picture where they are hugging each other. The case was reported in weekly outputs, including *Diário de Notícias*. Three weeks later, as the same post resurfaced in the top 20 of the pages, Facebook added under the post the link on this narrative to one of their fact-checking platforms, Observador. So users that were seeing the post, would also see the link to the debunking of this false narrative. MediaLab

could not confirm if this change was an outcome of our reporting.

One of the distinctive aspects of this investigation resulted from the partnership established between MediaLab and Diário de Notícias, through investigative journalist Paulo Pena. Every week, the analysis of the top 20 of each set was shared with Diário de Notícias and the two or three most relevant posts selected. Their selection was based either on the threat of disinformation they presented or due to their direct connection in the elections campaign. This partnership, of course, allowed for further investigation and public reporting of most serious and pressing situations and stands as an example of fruitful cooperation between academia and news media. This would in deed be our first recommendation for the future.

As for other challenges, two intertwined issues arise. First, in the preparation for this project it strook us how much theoretical vs empirical work is done on disinformation. A lot is written, but not a lot of hands on approaches are made, which makes it difficult to find practical solutions to curb the ascending role of disinformation in these platforms.

The second is the current direction towards AI to identify disinformation. Even though it may play a role in a first stage, the current project made it even more clear how messages are altered in the small details and idiosyncrasies that would not be identified by a person that was not very familiar with the portuguese political reality, let alone a machine.

Disinformation producers are beginning to be aware of this since many of the narratives are built into these interpretation suggestions, with a careful choice of words or images, to pass the message without flagging any of Facebook's community guidelines. Money has to be spent by platforms to review the most viral posts manually by someone with deep knowledge of the context they are coming from.

It became clear while working on the posts on an individual basis, that a lot can be done by the platforms, in this case Facebook, before we even start considering content removal that may raise more complex ethical issues. The fact that, besides the unsubstantiated accusations, the second most common disinformation characteristic was out of context timing seems to have an easy solution: to include the original date of content in the sharing information and the algorithmic detection of out of date content.

The second level and third level of analysis, with the predominance of intra-facebook tags and the identification of the Prime Minister vacations false narrative as a Facebook pages product, empirically demonstrates the weight of the platform, and the central role it plays on the creation of these types of disinformation.

Plus, this tandem between Facebook pages that actively produce disinformation to foster certain political narratives and huge Facebook groups that spread and share those narratives may be prone to capture by those external forces

that we did not encounter in this election. The process by which Facebook pages and groups organically combine to produce and sustain certain (sometimes false) narratives in this study must raise concerns that that process may be used in future by political forces (external or internal) eager to have that influence over the political debate in Portugal.

However, we should not focus entirely on the responsibility of platforms. Another quite common characteristic is the decontextualization of trustworthy sources, due to their clickbait title or poor image/title choice. Established media is accountable in upholding the values they state to defend and have more responsible editorial decisions when writing an article, especially considering the final look it will have when shared in the different platforms, namely if the character reduction will not change the meaning of the title.

And finally we, as citizens, have the ultimate responsibility. If there is one thing the current project shows is that as much as pages, as semi-organized structures, can produce disinformation, quite a lot of it comes from common citizens, that will produce, share and interact with this false narratives as much, or more, than more structured entities.

Bearing in mind this reality, digital literacy becomes a must. One of the top viral posts was from a parody satire newspaper, claiming that a judge currently facing charges for corruption was going to trial his own case. Remarkably, the post was taken seriously by the majority of users that commented on the post, despite the fact that the original sharer (that had induced them in error with the comment he made to this link) stated the humorous origin of the content and the fact that this satire newspaper is well known.

Then again, and as an end point to this report, we come back to the need to develop more research on who are these people and why they produce, share and interact with this disinformative content. The main question being what drives them. Which leads to ask if digital literacy is the only area where some work needs to be done, or if there are more deep sociological issues that need to be addressed.

We cannot assess that some external or political identifiable agent had direct influence on the election result due to disinformation campaigns. But our investigation so far makes it possible to conclude that disinformation production and distribution had an effect in spreading certain narratives that may have affected the result of the election. In two ways. First by dramatizing the final stage of the campaign, which may have taken more people to the polls. And, second, by opening space for anti-establishment parties, mostly on the far-right, that indeed ended up gaining a seat in the new parliament.

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