



LUND UNIVERSITY

Scandalous Design

How Social Media Platforms' Responses to Scandal Impacts Campaigns and Elections

Bossetta, Michael

Published in:
Social Media + Society

DOI:
[10.1177/2056305120924777](https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120924777)

2020

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Bossetta, M. (2020). Scandalous Design: How Social Media Platforms' Responses to Scandal Impacts Campaigns and Elections. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120924777>

Total number of authors:
1

Creative Commons License:
CC BY-NC

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>


Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Scandalous Design: How Social Media Platforms' Responses to Scandal Impacts Campaigns and Elections

Social Media + Society
April-June 2020: 1–4
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/2056305120924777
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms


Michael Bossetta 

Abstract

Given the role of social media in the modern election, scholars should not only study how platforms function *for* political actors; we should also study how platforms function *as* political actors. This essay therefore introduces the concept of scandalous design, which refers to programmatic changes in how social media operate in response to scandal. On the one hand, scandals can encourage changes in the architectural design of social media as products—that is, how platform providers introduce or manipulate features to mitigate the consequences of scandal. On the other, the concept of scandalous design recognizes the agency of these platforms as companies, who alter their organizational protocols in pursuit of furthering their business interests and generating goodwill with governments. The essay's main argument is that deconstructing platforms' responses to scandal can provide an empirical glimpse into how social media companies position themselves as political actors. I break down scandalous design into four typological groups: the introduction and manipulation of platform features, and changes to platforms' analog and digital protocols. The typology is buttressed by recent empirical examples from elections in the United States, European Union, India, Brazil, and China. Without cognizance of how platforms' operation—both digitally as products and politically as actors—evolves in response to scandal, scholars risk overlooking a key mechanism that contextualizes social media's role in contemporary elections.

Keywords

ad archives, Facebook, Google, WhatsApp, disinformation

Introduction

No two elections are the same, especially when it comes to social media research. Between electoral cycles, droves of social media developers engage in the endless pursuit of code optimization and feature experimentation. The current business practice of “continuous deployment” (Savor et al., 2016), whereby social media companies launch hundreds of software updates on a daily basis, engenders a dynamicity in social media platforms that outpaces the speed of academic research. The Facebook of today is not the Facebook of yesterday, and scholars have largely missed the opportunity to archive platform changes and conceptualize their implications for politics.

However, the recent slew of scandals starring social media companies offers an opportunity to correct this oversight. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, revelations of state-sponsored disinformation, and livestreamed terrorist attacks have provoked changes in the products and operational protocols of social media companies. These changes run the gambit of introducing new features, tweaking old ones, and instating

new policies aimed at assuaging the ire of potential government regulators. A decade ago, Gillespie (2010) argued that social media companies discursively present themselves as “platforms” to pursue profits and gain advantageous legal positions. If social media providers strategically position themselves through discourse, wouldn't they also encode this strategy into their products through design?

The answer is yes, and deconstructing platforms' responses to scandal provides an empirical glimpse into how social media companies position themselves as political actors, particularly during elections. Moreover, when studying social media and elections, scholars should be cognizant that platforms' responses to scandal have direct implications for how political actors campaign. Therefore in this essay, I introduce the concept of *scandalous design* to

Lund University, Sweden

Corresponding Author:

Michael Bossetta, Lund University, Finngatan 1, 223 62, Lund, Sweden.
Email: michael.bossetta@gmail.com



encourage scholarly reflection on how platform responses to scandal bear influence on political campaigning and elections research.

A Typology of Scandalous Design

Scandalous design refers to programmatic changes in how social media operate, both as digital platforms and as corporate entities, in response to scandal. On the one hand, scandals can encourage changes in the architectural design of social media as *products*—that is, how platform providers introduce or manipulate features to mitigate the consequences of scandal. On the other hand, the concept of scandalous design recognizes the agency of these platforms as *companies*, who alter their organizational protocols in pursuit of furthering their business interests and generating goodwill with governments. In the following, I break down scandalous design into four typological groups: the (1) introduction and (2) manipulation of platform features, and changes to platforms' (3) analog and (4) digital protocols.

The first two categories concern changes to platforms' digital architectures (Bossetta, 2018), which can be reprogrammed in ways that influence the user experience. As noted by Bucher and Helmond (2018, p. 246), the social media "user" encapsulates a broader class of actors than just the average citizen. Researchers, too, are end-users of social media, and how platforms are coded and designed is intimately intertwined with our capacity to study them. Look no further than the outsized role of Twitter research in electoral studies, which is direct result of API accessibility rather than the relevance of the platform itself.

The latter two categories, meanwhile, relate to platforms' internal policy changes when responding to scandal. Changes to analog (i.e., "offline") protocols comprise platform responses at the organizational level, such as shifting internal resources and hiring new public policy staff to better confront regulators. Changes in digital protocols, meanwhile, refer to when platforms enact rules regarding the functioning of their services, such as removing bots and fake accounts, requiring new forms of identity verification to run political ads, or cracking down on hate speech. In the following, I'll deconstruct each aspect of scandalous design, buttressed by empirical examples from recent elections in the United States, European Union (EU), India, Brazil, and China.

Introduction of New Features

For social media companies, one method of responding to scandal is the introduction of new features aimed at quelling concerns about the continuation of scandalous activity. Here, features can refer to granular level buttons, such as the "Trust Indicators" appended to news articles on Facebook, Twitter, and Google Search in response to concerns about disinformation (see "The Trust Project," n.d.).

However, the most prominent industry-wide example of new features impacting campaigns and elections is the introduction of political ad archives. These searchable databases of political advertisements, such as Facebook's Ad Library and Google's Transparency Report, are similarly a direct response to state-sponsored disinformation as well as growing public concerns about differential partisan messaging through microtargeting.

While these databases offer a glimpse into the strategy and funding sources of online advertisements, scholars have rightly critiqued their architectures as providing insufficient levels of transparency (Leerssen et al., 2019). Chief among the flaws of existing ad archives is their keyword search requirement: a deliberate design choice that prevents users from accessing aggregate-level data. By requiring researchers to search for specific keywords, social media companies can make claims of providing full transparency, but they only do so partially in practice. Thus, the information that platforms decide to include—and more importantly, exclude—in their ad archives can be viewed as strategic positioning through design.

Deficiencies notwithstanding, the introduction of ad archives is already impacting political campaigns, as well as how we study them. In a recent episode of the Social Media and Politics podcast, I interviewed Adam Meldrum—a founding and managing partner at AdVictory, a Republican digital ad service—about the impact of ad archives on campaigning in the 2018 U.S. midterms. Meldrum mentioned that the Facebook Ad Library provides a new marketplace for services focused on candidate opposition research ("digital competitive" in marketer parlance), and he described how the Ad Library provides the opportunity to try and reverse-engineer opponents' ad targeting strategies:

One thing we tried to do last cycle really rudimentarily as the [Facebook Ad Library] got launched was, you could look at what your opponents were doing and you could see that they spent a little bit of money on this [ad], a little bit of money on this one, and you could kind of tell it was a testing period. And now all of a sudden the usage of this [ad] really spiked in impressions . . . So you can look at that and say 'Oh, okay, why do they think that's working for them?' and maybe glean some insight into their strategy that way. (Bossetta, 2019).

While such opposition research tactics have long been deployed for television, digital ad archives provide an instantaneous glimpse into campaigns' online targeting strategy. Researchers can tap into these archives through web browsers or, increasingly, through application program interfaces (APIs). Such access to political advertising data opens up a sorely needed avenue of elections research, but scholars should not be complacent with studying only Facebook ads. Studies of political advertisements need to be benchmarked to other forms of digital campaigning, either through rigorous cross-platform research or comparisons between paid and organic social media content.

Manipulation of Existing Features

Apart from introducing entirely new features, social media companies can respond to scandal by manipulating the functionality of their platforms' existing features. A prime example of this strategy is WhatsApp's implementation of message forwarding limits ahead of the 2019 Indian election. By decreasing the number of contacts to whom a user can forward a message (from 256 contacts down to 5), the platform aimed to decrease the spread of disinformation that was widely considered to be rampant during the 2018 Brazilian election (Tardáguila et al., 2018). While WhatsApp's official reason for this design tweak is to promote privacy and intimacy on the platform, the changes came in direct response to the spread of doctored videos that incited lynch mob executions of Indian civilians (Goel et al., 2018). WhatsApp forwarding limits certainly help limit the spread of disinformation, but the electoral implication is that grassroots organizations in countries with high rates of WhatsApp adoption—such as India and Brazil—may be restricted in their ability to leverage the platform for digital organizing.

There are numerous other examples of platforms manipulating their features in attempts to tackle scandals: Facebook's deranking of publisher content in News Feed to promote "meaningful interactions" over clickbait; Google's adjustment of its autocomplete feature to remove anti-Semitic content; and Pinterest's manipulation of its search function to promote positive messages about vaccination. The bulk of these initiatives aim to detoxify citizens' online information environments, but they also galvanize free speech activists and contribute to the politicization of tech regulation as a campaign issue. Platforms lobby considerably against the latter through organizations such as the Computer and Communication Industry Association (CCIA), and the manipulation of platform features should be seen as part of that broader lobbying effort at the level of platform design.

Analog Protocols

Whereas the introduction and manipulation of platform features reflect changes to the digital architectures of platforms, social media companies can also respond to scandal by making changes to the design of their organizational structure. I refer to these organizational responses to scandal as analog protocols, since they constitute offline changes in response to online phenomena. Social media companies primarily make changes to their organization through hiring practices, and researchers could learn much more about the strategic positioning of these companies through the systematic analysis of their job postings. Facebook, for example, has touted the expansion of its human content moderators, who have quadrupled in number from 7,500 to 30,000 since 2016 (Silver, 2018). While these moderators constitute low-skilled contract labor, companies also pursue ex-government hires to bring policy expertise in house. The most prominent

example of this strategy is Facebook's co-option of Nick Clegg 6 months before the 2019 European Parliament elections. Before joining Facebook, Clegg was a Member of the European Parliament and former party leader of the pro-EU Liberal Democrats in the United Kingdom, and his hire was clearly a strategic maneuver to strengthen Facebook's connections with Brussels. Nearly all tech companies engage in revolving door hires, but high-level moves directly ahead of elections reveal how platforms position themselves as political actors through organizational redesign.

Digital Protocols

The fourth component of scandalous design refers to platforms' policy changes that impact the rules of engagement for their services. By this, I mean the implementation of new procedures that are largely aimed at self-governance through automation. These digital protocols, such as Twitter's crackdown on bots and hate speech in response to disinformation and violent extremism (Roth & Harvey, 2018), do not change the front-end features available to users. Rather, these technical protocols operate on the back-end to detect and remove objectionable content. However, what platforms designate as objectionable further reflects political positioning through design.

YouTube, for example, introduced a policy in 2018 to label videos from channels funded by national governments. The platform's decision to extend this protocol into China amid the Hong Kong protests, as well as to remove coordinated anti-protestor campaigns (Huntley, 2019), can be seen as a direct, internal policy action in support of free speech and assembly. By the same token, decisions about what *not* to remove can also signal a political stance. Recent examples include Facebook's decision to allow an altered video of Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to remain on the platform, as well as taking a firm line (at the time of writing) on not removing political ads that disseminate blatantly false information. Platforms' decisions about what speech to allow—and not allow—on their services is undoubtedly political and often policed through the design of automated systems that are guided by digital protocols.

Conclusion

As the examples above illustrate, social media companies can respond to scandal by changing the design of their platforms, as well as the design of their organizations and policies. Collectively, I refer to these changes as scandalous design. My aim in writing this essay is to encourage scholarly reflection on the relationship between political context and platform evolution, which has recently been driven by scandals relating to elections in several of the world's largest democracies: the United States, EU, India, and Brazil. Without cognizance of how platforms' operation—both digitally as products and politically as actors—evolves in response to scandal,

scholars risk overlooking a key mechanism that contextualizes social media's role in contemporary elections.

By focusing our attention on platforms' strategic design choices in response to political scandals, the scholarly community can better understand how platforms position themselves politically as actors in the democratic process. Given the outsized role that platforms play in the modern election, we should not only study how platforms function *for* political actors in their campaigning; we should also study how platforms function *as* political actors in their own right.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Michael Bossetta  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8611-5487>

References

- Bossetta, M. (2018). The digital architectures of social media: Comparing political campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 US election. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(2), 471–496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018763307>
- Bossetta, M. (Producer). (2019, March 10). *Political campaigning with chatbots, streaming devices, and social media, with Adam Meldrum* [Podcast]. Social Media & Politics. <https://social-mediaandpolitics.org/political-campaigning-adam-meldrum-advictory/>
- Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2018). The affordances of social media platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social media* (pp. 223–253). SAGE.
- Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of "platforms." *New Media & Society*, 12(3), 347–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738>
- Goel, V., Raj, S., & Ravichandran, P. (2018, July 18). How WhatsApp leads mobs to murder in India. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/07/18/technology/whatsapp-india-killings.html?smid=tw-share&utm_campaign=Revue%20newsletter&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_source=The%20Interface
- Huntley, S. (2019, August 22). *Maintaining the integrity of our platforms* [Blog post]. <https://www.blog.google/outreach-initiatives/public-policy/maintaining-integrity-our-platforms/>
- Leerssen, P., Ausloos, J., Zarouali, B., Helberger, N., & de Vreese, C. H. (2019). Platform ad archives: Promises and pitfalls. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1421>
- Roth, Y., & Harvey, D. (2018, June 26). *How Twitter is fighting spam and malicious automation* [Blog post]. https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/company/2018/how-twitter-is-fighting-spam-and-malicious-automation.html
- Savor, T., Douglas, M., Gentili, M., Williams, L., Beck, K., & Stumm, M. (2016, May 14–22). *Continuous deployment at Facebook and OANDA* [Conference session]. 38th International Conference on Software Engineering Companion, Austin, TX, United States. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2889160.2889223>
- Silver, E. (2018, July 26). *Hard questions: Who reviews objectionable content on Facebook—And is the company doing enough to support them?* [Blog post]. <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/07/hard-questions-content-reviewers/>
- Tardáguila, C., Benevenuto, F., & Ortellado, P. (2018, October 17). Fake news is poisoning Brazilian politics. WhatsApp can stop it. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/opinion/brazil-election-fake-news-whatsapp.html>
- The Trust Project. (n.d.). <https://thetrustproject.org/>

Author Biography

Michael Bossetta (PhD, University of Copenhagen) is a postdoctoral researcher at Lund University. His research interests revolve around the intersection of social media and political campaigning, political participation, and cybersecurity.