# EMPOWERING VOTERS AND FOSTERING HEALTHY POLITICAL DISCOURSE: DISCURSIVE LEGITIMATION BY DIGITAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN THE CONTEXT OF ELECTIONS

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## Introduction

The role of digital media platforms as societal actors has been increasingly brought to the fore in recent years. While it has been acknowledged that social media allows for democratizing of communication and supports civic processes (e.g., Dutton, 2009; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), we have also grown to understand how they foster communication not motivated by liberal and democratic norms. Following the revelations by large-scale whistleblower accounts or document leaks, concerns about the platform industry's conduct have been voiced out by the media, citizens, NGOs, and finally by governments as well. This growing distrust towards the big technology companies is known publicly as 'the techlash' (Economist, 2018).

The public concerns are also backed up by academic research. Critical scholarship has pointed out platforms' role in amplifying extreme content and misinformation (e.g., Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021), spreading false information (e.g., Vicario et al., 2016), and allowing for manipulation of political processes and communication (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Dommett, 2021). From a more systemic perspective, scholars have sought to understand the socio-economic relations behind platforms and to ways in which their business structure incentivizes certain types of communicative behavior (e.g., Van Dijck, et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2015). In particular, existing research addresses

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how social media platforms, through their design choices, user incentives, and moderation choices, intervene in public political communication. Platforms have been argued to affect the practices of voters and politicians (Thorson et al., 2021; Miller & Vaccari, 2020; Nelimarkka et al., 2020; Freelon, 2017), and to contribute to more individualized, visual, and negative forms of communication (Enli & Moe, 2013; Gerbaudo et al., 2023).

Following the increasing public scrutiny of harmful activities and information operations taking place on digital platforms, the platforms have begun defending their actions by showing that they address the problems stated and engage in self-regulation. As Moss and Ford (2020) note, platforms' willingness to self-regulate beyond their legal requirements counts as a valid, if perhaps limited mechanism for accountability. Yet, as pointed out by Bossetta (2020), platforms typically change their structures and design only as a response to public scandals (see also Ananny & Gillespie, 2018). In addition, platforms engage in public communication about their activities. Platform companies eagerly communicate that they generate social good, yet they are commercial companies motivated by private, economic interests (van Dijck et al., 2018; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009).

To investigate the actions and communication of the platform industry we turn to studies of organizational and discursive legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to the social acceptance of an organization and its operations. According to the classic definition of Suchman (1995), legitimacy refers to the general perception or assumption that an organization's actions are desirable, correct, or appropriate in a particular socially constructed system of norms, values, or beliefs. Lack of legitimacy typically forces the organization to react and modify their actions (Tost, 2011; Meyer & Scott, 1983). Therefore, organizations typically engage in discursive processes of legitimation, that is, processes of meaning-making where their actions and positions in society are constructed to generate a sense of legitimacy (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Vaara et al., 2006). Discursive legitimation thus refers to a process of socially constructing a desirable social reality and positioning the organization in it (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

This study focuses on the discursive strategies adopted by the platforms over time to publicize and justify their actions related to elections and political communication on their services. We ask, how do platform companies articulate elections as a context through which they discursively construct their role and legitimacy as actors in society?

**Data and methodology**

Our data includes corporate blog entries from 10 major platform companies (Google, Youtube, Meta, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, Microsoft, Amazon, Apple, LinkedIn). We use a large scraped dataset of corporate blogs (N=27,616, years 2006-2022), filtered with an automated dictionary-based method to identify entries related to elections (n=413). We analyze these texts as strategic, discursive justification and legitimation (Suchman, 1995; Van Leeuwen, 2007) amidst the calls for platform accountability in safeguarding election integrity. We used corpus linguistic tools and textual data visualizations (Tableau & Voyant Tools, Sinclair & Rockwell 2023) combined with a qualitative analysis

of legitimation strategies and discursive positioning to identify the different discursive categories of legitimation (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

**Findings**

Our findings show a shift from an opportunity-focused discourse that promotes participation, digital democracy, and politician-citizen interaction to a more defensive discourse stressing companies' responsible attitude to elections, as evidenced by their transparency efforts, advertising control, fact-checking initiatives, and strategic partnerships. We identified three distinct phases in the development of the discourses. First phase is the *era of participatory digital democracy*. The blog posts are ripe with opportunity-focused discourse promoting political livestreams and opportunities to interact with the candidates, giving tribute to participatory online culture. This phase is particularly dominated by YouTube, which is why YouTube creators are given a prominent role along with citizens and politicians. Discursive legitimation is based on moral evaluation: the discourses highlight the value of user participation.

The second phase of *crisis mode and newspeak* begins from the 2017 Cambridge Anaytica scandal, which led to a more defensive discourse stressing companies' responsible attitude and the implemented remedies, including transparency efforts, advertising control, fact-checking initiatives, and strategic partnerships with fact-checkers. The legitimizing discourses emphasized means, goals, and effects, thus building on instrumental legitimation by establishing the value of their counteractions. The effectiveness was further backed up with numerical argumentation. During this phase, an "election integrity newspeak" emerges: words such as "malicious content", "harmful misinformation", "coordinated inauthentic behavior" and "healthy discourse" enter the corporate vocabulary of the platforms (see Figure 1). By creating this terminology the platforms, interestingly, become major drivers in propagating the narrative of false information.

The final third phase is the *era of platform agency and information defense*. The discourses still highlight malicious actors but increasingly depict the platforms as proactive players and emphasize their collaboration networks. Focus is on justifying and underlining the recently found agency of the platforms in society. Novel actions are stronger interventions to political talk: they include highlighting and amplifying desired content and also bans on political advertising by some platforms (Twitter, TikTok). The discursive legitimation relies on naturalizing theoretical rationalization which normalizes platform power in an affirmative tone: "this is how things are".

Overall, our findings highlight how election-related scandals emerge as a critical event, a culmination point for platform responsibility discourses. In these discourses, the platforms conveniently utilize the typical empowering discourse and language of social media that highlights cultures and participation (see van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). This kind of dominant social media discourse fits well with the topic of politics and ideals of representative democracy. Explored over time, our findings demonstrate an institutionalization of discourses within the platform industry and highlight their reactive response strategies from feature development (Bossetta, 2020) to corporate legitimation strategies. Instrumental legitimation and discursive positioning the platform companies

engage in aims to equip them with expert authority and presents them as socially indispensable actors in society.
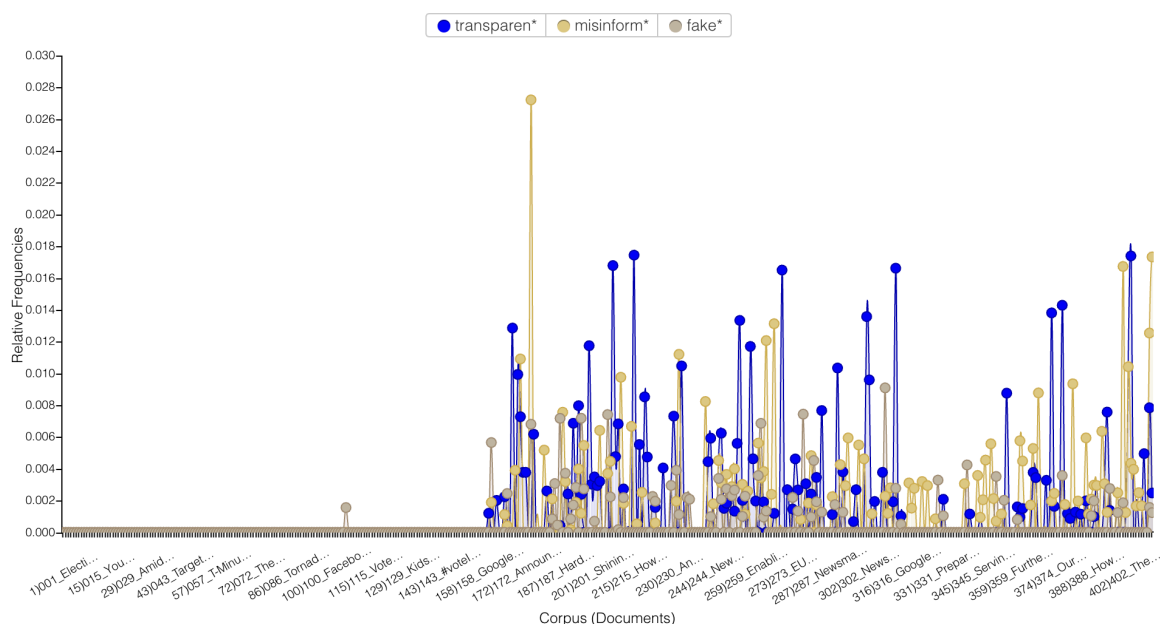


Figure 1. Relative frequencies of transparen*, misinform* and fake* in the corpus.

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