

US election meddling in the age of the Internet

How Google, Facebook and Twitter are manipulating the Mexican presidential elections—Part 1

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This is the first part in a two-part series

In recent months, Google, Facebook and Twitter have signed agreements with the Mexican National Electoral Institute (INE), the organization charged with carrying out elections in Mexico, in what amounts to a massive campaign to manipulate the outcome of the July 1 general elections in the world's tenth most populous country.

The announcement comes as “left” candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador (popularly known as AMLO) has maintained a double-digit lead in recent polls. López Obrador would have an almost 80 percent chance of winning the presidency if the election were held today, according to a survey by Spanish newspaper *El País*.

In contrast, former finance minister José Antonio Meade Kuribreña—the preferred candidate of the bankers and the military and a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—ranks third in the polls and was only given a 5 percent chance of winning the election. With their unchecked powers to demote and blacklist critical websites, these platforms are working to hide and falsify the right-wing record of Meade, who is widely hated for his key role in privatizing the country's oil and hiking the price of gasoline by 20 percent.

Though López Obrador has run a right-wing campaign aimed at proving himself a “responsible” capitalist politician to the Mexican and American ruling classes, the deals between INE and powerful Internet corporations with close ties to American imperialism show that the US government is taking no chances and is mobilizing against López Obrador, claiming his campaign is being bolstered by Russia.

INE signs agreements with Google, Facebook and Twitter

On February 5, INE announced a Memorandum of Cooperation with Facebook under the guise of combating “fake news” and helping “inform the electorate.”

The public version of the deal included transmitting the presidential debates, sending users reminders to vote, adding a feature on the platform with information about the elections and candidates, and informing users of where and when to vote.

However, the confidential components of the deal between Facebook and INE, which were almost immediately leaked by the newspaper *El Universal*, reveal the true nature of the agreement. The deal agreed to in private makes no mention of the elements that were in the version that had been sanitized for the public.

Instead, it highlights three components that will be used to tamper with the election. First, INE will provide Facebook with “real-time data” on election night from the Program for Preliminary Electoral Results (PREP). Second, INE will provide Facebook with “a physical space in its office where Facebook can perform election-related activities.” Lastly, Facebook agreed to conduct a forum for journalists on “how elections are organized and held in Mexico.”

After significant public backlash, INE waited two months before releasing another agreement, this time with Twitter. The public agreement between INE and Twitter released on March 25 states that Twitter will share “verified” content, including via a “bot that will share through Twitter key electoral information.”

Two days later, the INE publicly unveiled a deal with Google. In the most extensive agreement of the three, Google is set to share “useful information” about the election through its search engine, to direct voters to their polling place via Google Maps, to “remind” voters about important electoral dates, to transmit the presidential debates via YouTube, and to “report” preliminary results the day of the election through the PREP.

The companies' abilities to use algorithms to censor search results and reduce the impact of posts is ripe for electoral manipulation. Facebook already announced plans to reduce “political” posts from newsfeeds—what prevents Facebook and INE from reducing the frequency of posts that are friendlier to López Obrador or critical of the PRI and National Action Party (PAN) candidates? What prevents Facebook, at the behest of the US or Mexican ruling class, from ensuring that poorer and younger Facebook demographics—those most likely to vote for López Obrador—see less political news in the run-up to election day?

Which users will receive reminders and be directed to the polls? Google Maps could “glitch” or “accidentally” send López Obrador voters incorrect polling locations, distances, travel times, all of which would dampen participation in areas that may be supportive of López Obrador but might be less likely to vote—such as young voters and poorer workers. Moreover, the recently approved Internal Security Law will provide an avenue to deploy the military to specific areas to intimidate voters and suppress protests.

When will preliminary results be released, and how will this data be used by the Facebook “office” at the INE? As results start trickling in, the INE could feed tampered PREP results that Facebook, Google and Twitter could report uncritically, which could be used to make sure that López Obrador is never shown to have a major lead. This would give the PRI and the US military-intelligence apparatus enough time to calculate just how many votes they will need to tip the scales in favor of Meade Kuribreña.

After the elections, how will critical reporting of the “official results” be covered by the corporate news? The technology giants can use their algorithms to make sure that coverage of demonstrations and protests is more difficult to find on social media, while reports of tally sheets or vote counts collected by representatives of Morena or eyewitnesses that contradict the governments’ claims can quickly be labeled as “fake news” by “Russian agents” that are looking to “sow divisions” in Mexico.

Inconsistencies between the PREP results and ballot counts were reported during the 2006 and 2012 presidential elections, both of which were lost by López Obrador, as well as during the defeat of his political party, the Movement for National Regeneration (Morena), in last year’s gubernatorial race for the State of Mexico. If formal complaints are submitted, INE and the prosecutor’s office for electoral crimes (FEPADE) can be counted on to undercut any serious investigations.

Who is behind the INE-Facebook-Google-Twitter deals?

All indications are that the deals were organized by US imperialism.

The Google and Twitter deals were announced shortly after leading representatives of these corporations gathered in Mexico City at a conference co-hosted by INE and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a CIA front organization headed by former secretary of state Madeleine Albright.

At the conference, titled “Improving Electoral Conversation: Alternatives to Combat Disinformation,” Google, Facebook and Twitter representatives met with corporate media executives, academics and NDI and INE officials to “share international learning on disinformation and effective approaches for countering disinformation.” While transcripts of the closed-door discussions were not provided, the NDI website highlights the meeting’s antidemocratic premise by featuring a quote from the Mexican electoral official Adriana Favela, who stated, “One thing is freedom of expression ... and another thing is to create false news.”

This is the modern equivalent of former national security adviser Henry Kissinger’s 1970 statement that the US must prevent the election of Salvador Allende in Chile: “I don’t see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist because of the irresponsibility of its own people.”

Facebook’s strategic partner manager for news in the northern Latin America region, Luis de Uriarte, told the meeting that the US government, the media corporations and INE “all aspire to the same thing” and that “the issue of false news is a problem that we have to solve together.”

The NDI praised INE for “taking concrete steps to work with the media and technology platforms to ensure accurate information about the elections process reaches voters” because “Russia may already be gearing up to launch a campaign of ‘subversion, disinformation and propaganda’ in an effort to sway the Mexican election.”

The NDI warned that “non-state actors,” i.e., protesters and oppositional movements, also employ “coordinated campaigns aimed at injecting divisive and controversial narratives into the online conversations. These campaigns exploit points of tension within communities and societies ...” In other words, according to the NDI, INE and the social media companies, discussion of divisive or controversial issues like mass poverty and widespread gang violence and police impunity are not appropriate for the upcoming elections. The NDI notes that it “agreed to facilitate further communication and collaboration.”

Speaking at the Atlantic Council last June, Albright announced that NDI was leading “a global, long-term response” to “Russian disinformation,” linking “government, civil society and technology firms.” The NDI organized “Digital Disinformation Forum,” which took place before the

Atlantic Council meeting and was billed as an “invitation-only event that includes thought leaders from tech firms, political institutions, academia, media, the democracy community and philanthropic organizations for an off-the-record discussion on how to collectively address the global challenge of digital disinformation.”

While INE and the NDI are professing themselves as defenders of “information integrity,” they have been exposed as being nothing of the sort. In the aftermath of the 2006 Mexican presidential elections, WikiLeaks released internal memos of the Stratfor think tank, which works closely with the US military-intelligence apparatus, that exposed the complicity of the Mexican Federal Electoral Institute (IFE)—the INE’s predecessor—in committing electoral fraud: “There was a clear and flagrant intervention of president Vicente Fox in the election process, using the regime apparatus against AMLO’s candidacy.” The memo lists the presence of a “media war” and “IFE cooptation.”

The INE deals come after the latest National Defense Strategy document from the Pentagon presents Latin America as one of the arenas for “great power competition.” The document says the US plan will “require the seamless integration of multiple elements of national power—diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement and military.” The US military-intelligence apparatus is integrating the largest technology and Internet companies as a key component in its drive to tighten the US stranglehold over Latin America in preparation for a new imperialist carve-up of the world.

Silicon Valley’s alliance with the military-intelligence apparatus

Google, Twitter and Facebook’s efforts to influence the Mexican elections are just one piece of its alliance with the military and intelligence agencies, which are now being ever more closely integrated to advance the predatory aims of US foreign policy in Latin America and across the world.

In his testimony to Congress in April, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg declared that Facebook would work to prevent “disinformation” in “important elections in India, in Brazil, in Mexico, in Pakistan, and in Hungary.”

Significantly, INE’s agreement with Google was negotiated directly with their US headquarters and signed by Philip Schindler—the company’s chief business officer, overseer of Google’s “country strategies” and, according to *Fortune* magazine, an influential manager of their artificial-intelligence applications. On March 20, Schindler was charged with introducing the company’s “News Initiative” to shift “even more towards authoritative sources in the context of breaking news,” including during elections.

Two weeks prior to the launch of Google’s “News Initiative,” Facebook, Twitter and Google announced their participation in a project known as #Verificado2018 (#Verified2018). Under the guise of fighting against “Russian meddling” in the Mexican elections, #Verificado2018 aims to bring together major national and international media outlets to unilaterally dictate what would be considered “verified information,” seeking to present oppositional news sources as “fake news.”

This campaign is being spearheaded by *Animal Político*, an ostensibly “independent” news site which received a large share of its income last year from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundation, both of which are closely tied to the US intelligence agencies.

In April of this year, users in Mexico complained that using Google’s search engine to look up the names of candidates Andres Manuel López Obrador (Morena), Ricardo Anaya (Party for National Action), and Margarita Zavala (Independent) produced a prominent advertisement of

the Meade 2018 website. A spokesperson of the Meade campaign acknowledged that, since Meade Kuribreña was the least searched of the four main candidates, his campaign had secured the services of the advertisement tool Google Adwords to show the PRI candidate's information even when a user was searching for another candidate's information.

One can only image the hysterical headlines that would be spattered across the Western corporate media, claiming Putin's involvement, if López Obrador was found to be seeking to deceive users on any Internet platform by paying for such ads.

Silicon Valley's involvement in the Mexican elections represents the integration of the technology firms ever more firmly into instruments of political repression.

About 58 percent of the population in the country visits social networks, including 96 percent of "Millennials." The Mexican ruling class and US imperialism abhor the threat posed to bourgeois rule by mass online access to news outlets and organizational tools that circumvent the press and institutions they control.

Last April, Google introduced new search algorithms that have reduced traffic to left-wing, antiwar, and progressive websites by up to 75 percent, hitting the *World Socialist Web Site* the hardest. Since then, Google, Facebook and Twitter have employed tens of thousands of former military, police and intelligence officials to monitor and censor their users and to train their artificial intelligence systems to manipulate what users see and don't see on a previously unimaginable scale.

As the founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, warned in a statement sent to the WSWs in January: "Undetectable mass social influence powered by artificial intelligence is an existential threat to humanity. The phenomena differs in traditional attempts to shape cultural and political phenomena by operating at scale, speed and increasingly at a subtlety that eclipses human capacities."

To be continued



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