

Anti-Science Mythbusting: Crowdsourced Intelligence, Process Democracy and Activism during the Times of Covid 19

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Abstract: Covid 19 has been disrupting normal livelihoods and businesses, for people who have a day job life has been difficult. However, crimes, scams, and misinformation have been rampant and criminals carrying these businesses have been reaping profits. Alt Right Grifters are the new misinformation psychological warfare specialists, and they have been notorious for derailing movements. QAnon has been rampant on social media and has been blamed for the massive spikes of Covid 19 infections across the United States and the West. In this new pandemic pandemonium traditional activism and organization is under threat as public assembly and large-scale events will get difficult to organize. Online activism can get reduced to small information bubbles and the information would not be able to reach its intended audience. To innovate and keep the format of activism interesting we are exploring an online activism gaming platform built using workadventu.re to organize in Cyberspace, share information to curb misinformation, and help activists stay sharp during the pandemic. In this paper we will present the game interface and two case studies of myth-busting achieved via this form of activism, the first one being debunking the UFO phenomenon and the second one thwarting Alt Right grifter narratives to protect activists and prevent the spread of misinformation.

Practical Implications: This methodology of research can be applied to stop the spread of misinformation in the post truth era. This methodology can be used to quickly evaluate the veracity of any news or information using multiple sources with high reliability.

Keywords: Crowdsourcing; Game Design; Gamification; Fact Checking; Journalism; Peer Reviewed Research; Psychological Warfare

1. Introduction

Covid 19 has been hard on people who hold day jobs; their life schedules have been affected. People who volunteer for various social causes have not been able to be engaged with activism. Public gatherings and large-scale events will be challenging to organize in the coming days, hence online activism remains the only viable way to go forward with. A 16-bit game interface was prototyped using workadventu.re following the principles of process democracy and crowdsourced intelligence and Human-Centered Design. This online game was used by the members of ProjectPM to organize & communicate their findings on various topics online along with a few groups on Signal.

In the next few sections, we will look at how techniques of crowdsourced intelligence, process democracy was used in these projects for myth-busting with two specific case studies, namely UFO myth-busting and stopping alt right grifters.



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2. Methodology

2.1. Crowdsourced Intelligence

Gathering of verified data using a large network of volunteers is called crowdsourced intelligence (Buecheler, Sieg, Fuchslin, & Pfeifer 2010), due to the large size and qualifications of the group it gets easier to share information across social media, and collaborate with researchers with expertise of both ends of the spectrum. This form of massive information sharing has been applied to conserve coral reefs (Santos-Fernandez et al. 2021) using open-sourced data from divers worldwide, solve mysteries and detect new space objects in astronomy Elasmr (2016) . This methodology has also been applied in activism to share stories and events from various media, scientific literature, and gather opinions via interactions on social media platforms. Our research team has applied these methodologies to combat grifter malfeasance & misinformation.

2.2. Process Democracy

Process democracy is a methodology of organizing where several people decide to join a community regardless of their nationality and by their own volition to research, ideate, explore a particular area of investigation. This method helps create large to small groups to ideate and explore ideas, concepts, and methods to tackle problems, offer solutions, conduct research on several topics (Tynes & Peters 2018) . This method is also helpful in tracking grifters, tracking and debunking misinformation.

2.3. Game Design

Most of the users were activists, researchers, and journalists with the old school anonymous movement and hence many of them were hardcore gamers and were big fans of the Habbo hotel gaming interface (Asenbaum 2018) . Since the pandemic prevented live meetings and since social media based online collaboration can become mundane, we decided to build a 16-bit gaming interface using the Workadventure platform for participants to register, access, collaborate, meet and research with a worldwide collective. The users could program Jitsi chatrooms, meeting spots, information zones, information dump sites on a 16-bit gaming interface map. This helped collaboration and crowdsourcing of intelligence by people across the globe.

2.4. Narrative

There is an in-game narrative for the players to make the whole experience interesting and engaging, the players work for an intelligence agency named the Commonsense Intelligence Agency or CIA for short, the narrative declares that this in game the CIA has no affiliation to the actual CIA or Central Intelligence Agency to avoid legal trouble. The player then assumes a character and moves around the game world looking for information and collaborating with other players across the world in topics of their interests.

2.5. Research Tools

We used data gathered from reputed news media organizations, peer reviewed journals, online research reports from other activists to gather data and used an internal expert-based review to verify the veracity of the data.

3. Findings

3.1. Debunking the UFO Movement

The UFO Movement mainly has new age spiritual followers and followers from Alt Right networks. The whole movement believes the ‘ancient aliens’ conspiracy theory (Turner & Turner 2021) which goes along the lines that aliens have been guiding humanity since the dawn of civilization and have passed advanced knowledge to humans and they secretly live among us to this date. Despite the leading scientific and archaeological evidence pointing out that we have not had any extra-terrestrial visitors, this conspiracy theory has a large attraction of followers. One of the so-called proofs of ETs existing is the set of videos released to the public by USAF and US Navy claiming to be a UFO sighting Radford (2017) . These sightings have been debunked several times in the past, we decided to do the same for a few more recent phenomena. One such famous phenomenon is the tic-tac like UFO sighted by the crew of the USS Nimitz Sheaffer (2019) . Busting the UFO myth was highly important as the other major conspiracy theory QAnon relied heavily on this myth.

Within a few minutes of posting this in the platform a few participants pointed out the obvious shape similarities between tic-tacs and zeppelins. The criss-cross flight movements were identified as a form of magnetic levitation and locomotion. This phenomenon has been demonstrated by DARPA (DARPA, 2014) and MIT Media lab (Lee, Post, & Ishii 2011) on a smaller scale. The shell of the aircraft could have been made using a superconducting material. At low temperatures such materials would exhibit quantum locking thus it is used in magnetic levitation (Ono, Koga, & Ohtsuki 2002). The frosty white color and the bubbles in the sea surface could be caused by liquid nitrogen. The rapid ascent and descent movements of the craft point out to similar tech behind zeppelins. The seawater would be an excellent source of hydrogen which is used in zeppelins. Magnetic slingshot or ionic propulsion can be the reason for the extra thrust factor. Overall, it was just known technology applied in a different manner, which to people unaware of its working would be highly akin to magic. The below infographic explains the technology behind it and a detailed report has been compiled on the wiki of the collective. We also debunked a couple of more UFO phenomenon, the triangle shaped UFOs spotted recently were debunked as lens artifacts Today (2021) due to glares, a video purporting to be of a UFO in London (Sun 2021) just turned to be a fighter jet performing stunts. Several famous celebrities and the alt right have endorsed the ancient alien's conspiracy industry. Merchandise like alternate medicine supplements, essential oils, crystals and other fringe therapies associated with the new age spirituality movements can be purchased from their websites. The UFO movement and its associated alien fandom community needs more scrutiny from regulatory authorities and independent pharmacy and healthcare watchdogs. These communities are guilty of medical malpractice, healthcare fraud and abuse. The craze of the phenomenon spread by them is akin to psychosis. The movement is centered around the anti-science phenomenon, and it also has a large following from other anti-science movements like the anti-vaccine, anti GMO, anti-allopathy, anti-psychiatry movements. The Trump presidency got these movements to the forefront by giving them a voice. If these movements get its reigns on public policy and regulatory agencies it would a disaster of epic proportions.

3.2. Alt-Right Grifting

The term grifting has been used to describe the behavior of several alt-right activists who have been profiting heavily this pandemic, be it through pandering of fake cures of Covid 19 or occupation of large amounts of airtime and screen time views on major media outlets including social media. There are also other alt right activists posing as centrists and carrying forward a Pied Piper scheme to infiltrate organizations, workforce, movements and derail them. They have also passed off fake news as actual events in order to frame activists from the centre and left end of the political spectrum. Their attacks on several corporations who are involved in manufacturing lifesaving products like vaccines and Covid 19 treatments during this pandemic resulted in loss of stock value. Pfizer was at the receiving end of such attacks where several Alt Right activists posing as whistleblowers have caused damage to the reputation of organizations. Dr Robert Malone, an Alt Right anti vaccine activist posing as a whistleblower had spread a lot of lies on the efficacy of mRNA vaccines (Bella 2022) . Andy Ngo an Alt Right figure and a sympathizer of terrorist groups like the Proud Boys and QAnon has worked actively to target and derail activism (Ngo 2018) . Andy Ngo has close ties to other Covid 19 disinformation specialists like Brett Weinstein and his partner is a very prominent anti Vaccine activist. Andy Ngo's lawyer Harmeet Dhillon has used her influence as a lawyer to derail several Covid 19 safety plans including vaccine mandates (Roche 2021) . She is also a QAnon enabler and is the lawyer of the Alt Right activist James O Keefe (Cranz 2021) .

In the group notifying information about an incident or statement by alt Right has a quick response, the participants work quickly to gather evidence to debunk statements and prove that the alt-right grifters are just falsely accusing people and activists by falsely spreading misinformation about them.

4. Analysis of the Method of Investigative Research

Crowdsourcing and process democracy are highly efficient as it is a meritocracy and people collaborate quickly on problem statements and arrive at research conclusions accordingly. In this format of information sharing and cross collaboration, results are extremely fast, reliable, and cost effective. This method of activism ensures that complex problems can be solved quickly, and the message can be disseminated to thwart the spread of misinformation.

A worldwide collaborative team can work on multiple topics and solve multiple issues at the same time, this would ensure everyone in the group have sufficient activities and this would also ensure experts from various fields can consult with each other and solve problems. This method would also ensure the results are completely unbiased.

Since the participants are joining this group with their volition and they do not claim to carry out this work on behalf of a nation state or a regional territory. They also have a sense of belonging which makes them.

5. Next Steps

The next steps involve developing the game further to include narratives to ensure investigative researchers take interest in specific topics. We will also be trying to present the information in a much more interesting manner like videos, interactive ebooks and many more to increase the engagement with the end user.

The next steps involve releasing the game to a larger audience and teach them essential skills of protecting their privacy and cryptography. This can be achieved by releasing the game on mobile platforms like iOS and Android. There can also be a platform created to thwart the spread of cults and cult phenomenon where people can inform their scientific analysis of the methods of various cults without fear of any repercussions.

6. Novelty

Using crowdsourced information in a game interface to check the veracity of various information is highly unique, fast & helps tackling misinformation & identifying scammers with ease.

7. Conclusions

Crowdsourcing and Process democracy on online tools are the future for the of investigative journalism and activism. Given the current state of the pandemic where in person meetings are not possible it would be sensible for online activism to continue in this format and to make this more engaging we believe a game interface which would be highly engaging for the end user would ensure they are highly enthusiastic about activism.

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