THE
CARTER CENTER

Analysis of the Botnets that Operated in Honduras During the Primary and General Elections of 2021

Introduction

The Carter Center analyzed social media in Honduras during the 2021 electoral process, focusing on the period around the primaries in March and the general election in November. The purpose was to assess the political debate on social networks during the elections, the extent of disinformation and how it spread, and the role played by Honduran politicians.

Throughout 2021, The Carter Center studied the Honduran political and technological environment to answer these questions and find out what turned this country into one of the major landscapes for the manipulation of public opinion on social media in Latin America. This manipulation took place in three ways:

- The violation of the rules on the use of electoral campaign propaganda
- The pollution of the political debate through disinformation
- The use of *bots[1]* to distort political debate

The use of bots has been notable in Honduran social networks and is the focus of analysis in this Carter Center report on the role of social media in the context of the 2021 Honduran electoral process.

To assess how these bot networks (botnets) work, interviews were conducted with some of the most relevant political and media stakeholders in Honduran society. In the period covering the two main electoral events of 2021 — the primary elections in March and the general election in November — The Carter Center collected more than 3 million Twitter posts to facilitate detection of bot networks and analyze their behavior patterns.

This analysis facilitates a better understanding of what is happening in elections in Honduras, and possibly more broadly in Latin America. This report presents findings on the use of bots by Honduran political parties, the spread of false and misleading media content to manipulate public opinion, and techniques to artificially boost candidates.

While it is not possible to determine the extent to which such efforts affect voter behavior, the use of fake accounts to manipulate the will of voters undermines the credibility of elections and casts doubt upon the legitimacy of election outcomes.

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1   Bots are computer programs that operate autonomously or in a coordinated manner to disseminate messages on social networks. Thanks to their speed and processing capacity, they can be used to manipulate public opinion, whether by debasing the dialogue with insults and accusations or by undermining the reputation of some candidates and singing the praises of others.

Botnets for the promotion of campaign hashtags

The most used hashtags in the 2021 Honduras general election were monopolized by the botnets of the three main campaigning parties: Freedom and Refoundation (*Libertad y Refundación* – LIBRE), the National Party of Honduras (*Partido Nacional de Honduras* – PNH), and the Liberal Party of Honduras (*Partido Liberal de Honduras* – PLH). These political forces covertly promoted some political campaign slogans and spread attack messages of varying severity toward other parties and candidates.

During the March 2021 primary elections, The Carter Center found that the main actors in that campaign also used bots to disseminate disinformation messages. What is most surprising is that candidates of different — and even antagonistic — political parties shared these networks, as is the case of the PNH, LIBRE, and the Party Salvador of Honduras (*Partido Salvador de Honduras* – PSH) founded by Salvador Nasralla.
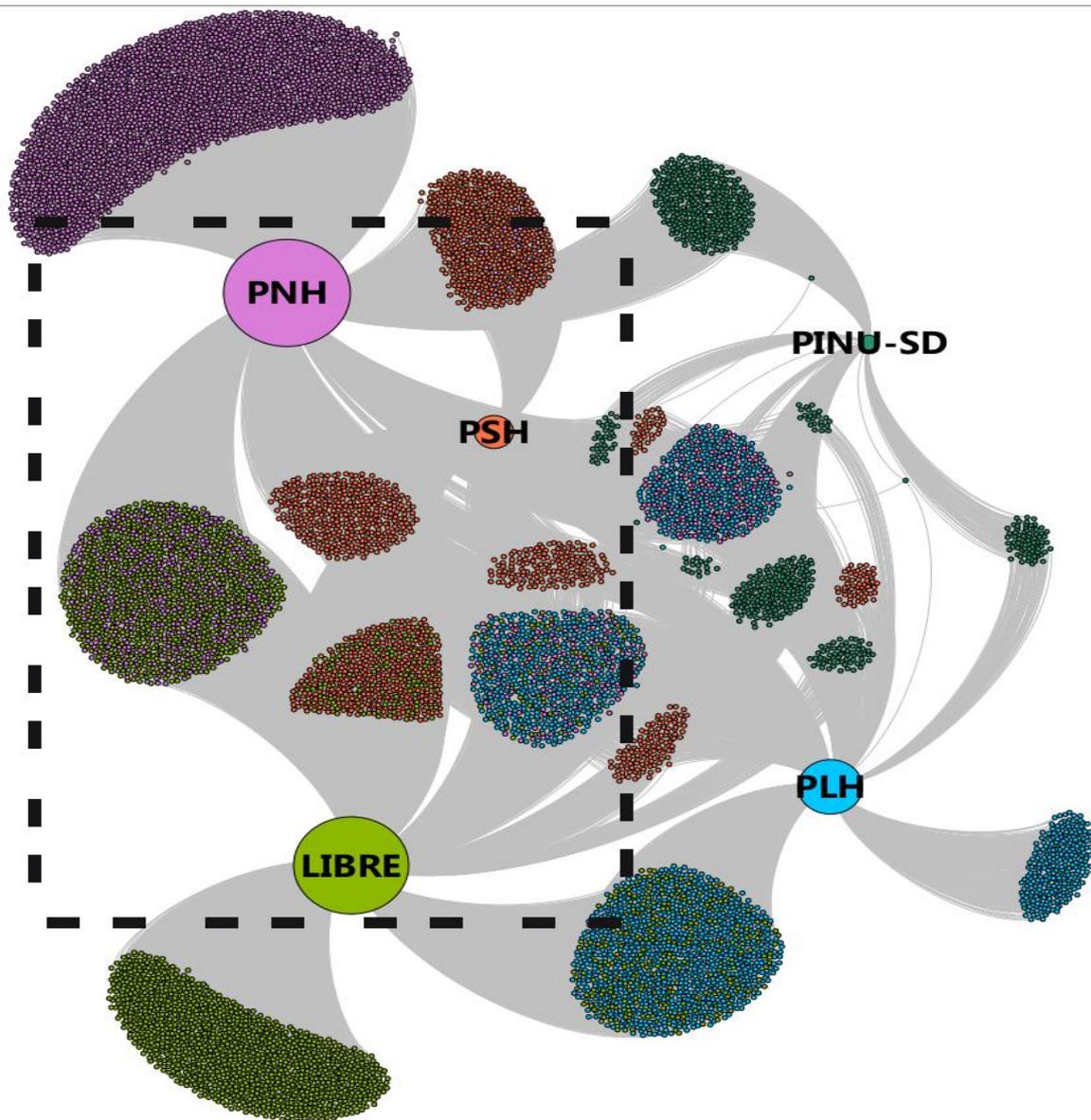
Graph showing the relationships among the candidates' followers that were recognized as bots during the March 2021 primaries. The dotted area groups those bots that were shared by the three rival parties of Hernández, Zelaya and Nasralla.

The cybersecurity company Nisos[2], based in Virginia (USA), reported the existence of 317 accounts that during eight days of October 2021 spread false information to dissuade Hondurans from voting for Xiomara Castro and encouraged them to abstain. These messages anticipated an alleged political alliance of the candidate with the PLH candidate, Yani Rosenthal, while warning of the risks of corruption and money laundering associated with this operation. Twitter suspended those accounts in early November, just a few weeks before the vote.

After a first analysis of the interactions made by bots during the electoral campaign, The Carter Center confirmed that the hashtags *#sevan* and *#novolverán* were widely used by the two main parties in the race: LIBRE and PNH, respectively. Furthermore, some of the most aggressive tags, such as *#depuremoselcongreso*, *#sivasconyanisosnarco*, *#fuerajoh*, or *#jodidosporyani,* were disseminated by LIBRE's supporters. At the same time, the universal basic income (IBU) of 1,500 lempiras proposed by Yani Rosenthal's PLH was also the object of significant boosting and discrediting campaigns on Twitter. The hashtags *#ibu* and *#con1500lempiras* were the most promoted by Rosenthal's bots.
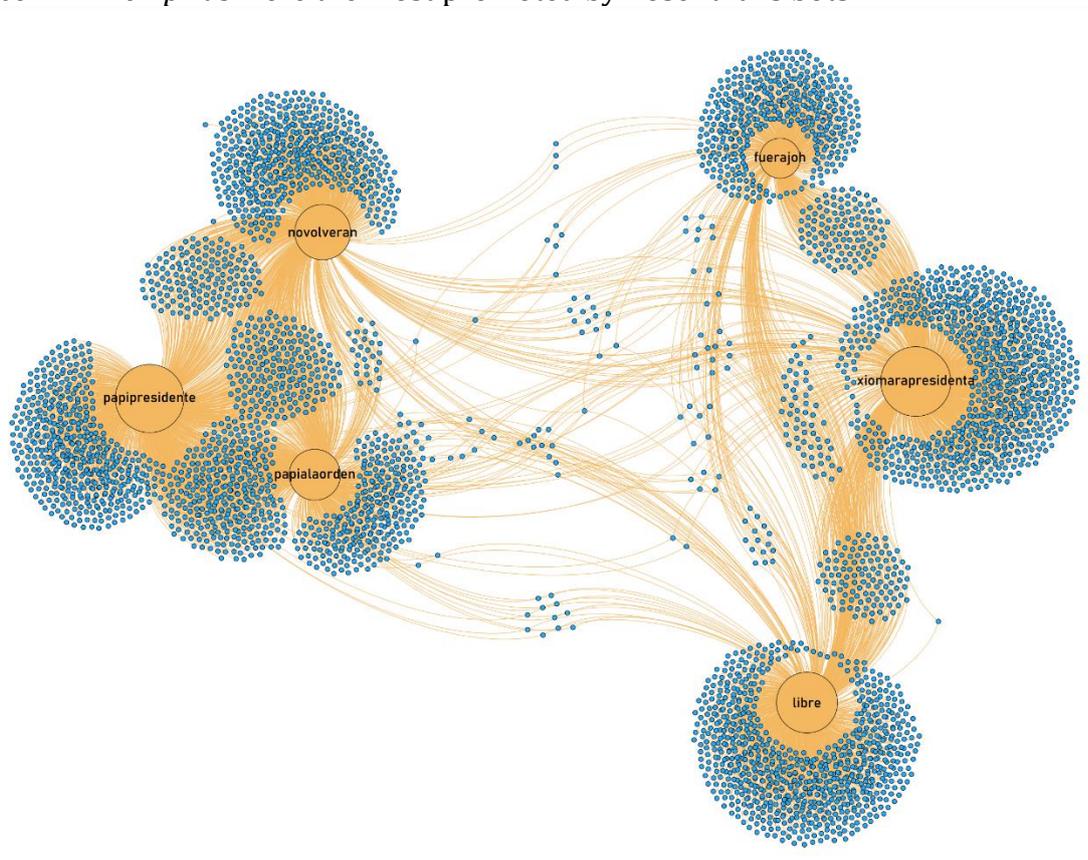
Graph showing the tags promoted by the botnets of the three main parties contesting the general election.

2   *Time*. Honduras Shows How Fake News Is Changing Latin American Elections
     https://time.com/6116979/honduras-political-disinformation-facebook-twitter/

False and Misleading Content

The use of false and misleading partisan media content, produced by dubious media outlets that provide a veneer of credibility to the content, is found regularly in social media campaigns. In the Honduran 2021 election campaign, based on the volume of content identified, false and misleading media seemed to disproportionately favor the PNH during the primaries and LIBRE during the general election. After the removal of Twitter bots that disseminated hoaxes in favor of the PNH, the latter part of the campaign was practically monopolized by false and misleading media content favorable to Xiomara Castro's LIBRE party.

A cluster of media websites disseminating false and misleading content identified by The Carter Center during the November 2021 general elections shared the following characteristics:

- Their editorial lines demonstrated accentuated bias against Partido Nacional and Partido Liberal candidates but neutrality or direct favorability to LIBRE candidates.

- The articles appeared sporadically, without following a more standard scheme of consistent publication that characterizes professional media practice.

- The publications shared many news items, all of them unsigned (i.e., without clear authorship). While it is not uncommon for professional outlets to publish unsigned wire agency content, none of these articles could be found outside this network, suggesting that this unsigned content originated from these websites.

- The registrations for these internet domains were hidden and do not reveal ownership information. The only data that appears is the supposed country of origin: SV (El Salvador)[3].

- All of these publications are hosted under the same IPv4 address (the four-digit code that identifies the resources connected to the internet), suggesting they are hosted and served from one location.

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[3] This data is not always verified by the registrar and could be false.

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Biased news, unsigned and with hardly any data to support what the headlines claim.

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[4] Micro-enterprises receive enthusiastically the new administration of Xiomara Castro

[5] Tito Asfura could be Juan Orlando Hernandez's third mandate

[6] In the context of the International Day against Corruption, the CNA emphasizes that Honduras must begin a new era.

[7] CNA, in the context of the International Day against Corruption: It is the moment to start a new era.

Publication of the same content under different headers, supposedly independent of each other.

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[8] In the context of the International Day against Corruption, the CNA emphasizes that Honduras must begin a new era.

[9] CNA, in the context of the International Day against Corruption: It is the moment to start a new era.

[10] Honduras will have to decide about its future between honesty and corruption

[11] Hondurans will decide about their future between honesty and corruption

Artificial increase in follower base

In the two weeks prior to the general election, and through the week after the election, the Twitter profile of LIBRE candidate and then President-elect Xiomara Castro experienced a significant increase in the number of followers — up 65% from the previous month.

Images of Xiomara Castro's Twitter profile taken by Wayback Machine, an online web archiving service, at the interval of just one month: Nov. 1, 2021, and Dec. 1, 2021. Dates and numbers of followers are circled.

Image taken Dec. 12, 2021. The number of followers, much higher than one month earlier, is circled.
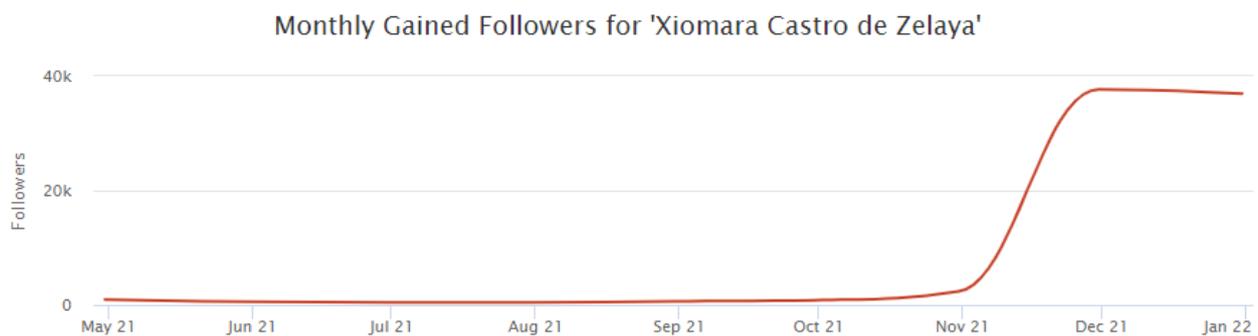
The chart shows the exponential increase in new followers gained by Xiomara Castro's Twitter account in November through the election. Data and visualization provided by SocialBlade online analytical tool.

An analysis conducted by The Carter Center from a sample of the 70,000 followers of the @xiomaracastroz account revealed that nearly half of these profiles were likely bots (22,903 [32%]) or accounts that may be real, but never posted since being created (10,988 [16%]). Among accounts that were not found to be bots and have posted at least one message, 12.2% were either created during the campaign period or were created previously but have no followers (8,544). In addition, 9.4% of the accounts were subsequently deleted or suspended by Twitter (6,542).

In total, almost 70% of followers fit the model of either fake or hijacked accounts that can be purchased and purposed as followers. This type of operation can give a Twitter user a higher profile or greater dissemination of messages. However, it is important to note that attribution of such activity can't be made based on this analysis, i.e., it cannot be determined that such an operation was ordered by Castro's campaign or, alternatively, that a person organized it outside the party and without the candidate's knowledge.

Conclusions

- The main Honduran parties made widespread use of botnets to promote their candidates and discredit their opponents. The use of these networks has become commonplace in Honduran electoral processes. The response of social media platforms to this problem is not always fast enough to address its adverse effects during the campaign.

- In some cases, these botnets were shared by parties of very different, or even antagonistic, political sides. It is not possible to know with certainty if this situation is due to a simple coincidence or if it corresponds to the use of the same advisors or for-hire consulting firms employed by different parties.

- The National Party of Honduras and LIBRE, in particular, appear to be linked to the proliferation of false and misleading media content during the primaries and general election. While it is unclear whether such content influenced voter decisions, such activity violates ethical standards and should be countered.

- The significant increase in the number followers of Xiomara Castro, including a massive number of likely bot accounts, in the months prior to the general election is suspicious at best. This increase began two weeks before election day and lasted until approximately two weeks after the vote. It is impossible to know whether this phenomenon was prompted by the candidate's party or by an external entity.

- The Consejo Nacional Electoral de Honduras, primary regulator of electoral processes, does not have the means to detect and sanction these and other irregularities in social networks.