What is Media Manipulation?

Journalists face a barrage of information and they must make choices about which stories to cover based on available source materials. Some stories, though, are just that, stories. Our research maps and tracks attempts by “media manipulators” to influence journalists and bait them into picking up false stories. During breaking news events, media manipulators act quickly to establish their narratives by creating and seeding content in order to trick journalists into covering specific highly politicized wedge issues. Manipulators often rely on the speed and ubiquity of social media, which has quickened the pace of news, to make wide scale distribution of polarizing hoaxes possible. Manipulation campaigns are planned and executed across multiple platforms online simultaneously in an effort to capture a wide audience of both everyday users and to ensnare journalists. Broadly, we refer to these tactics as “source hacking,” a versatile set of techniques for feeding false information to journalists, investigators, and the general public during breaking news events or across highly polarized wedge issues. In this paper, we examine four different methods of “source hacking” and show how media manipulators rely on the specific affordances of sociotechnical platforms to surface false information and consequently sway and/or set media agendas. While most journalists are trained to spot savvy public relations, promotional content, and to avoid publishing propaganda, in this networked media environment, hoaxes assume new forms and often mask themselves as social movements. In order for journalists to effectively spot and debunk these hoaxes, theory and methods for addressing source hacking must be developed and widely disseminated across journalism schools and newsrooms.