Epic Sock Puppet Theater

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Epic Sock Puppet Theater is an interactive installation featuring animatronic sock puppets that perform social media posts from "sock puppet" accounts known to have engaged in disinformation campaigns. "Sock puppets" are imposter social media accounts created to infiltrate groups, surveil and provoke people, and spread disinformation. The disinformation performed by the animatronics was compiled from datasets released by academic researchers, government agencies, journalists, and our own research. The goal of these campaigns has been to polarise and divide the public on various topics. Users of online platforms can have strong emotional reactions to sock puppet disinformation, prompting them to share content that was designed to polarise. Research has found that controlled exposure to sock puppet disinformation can serve as a form of "inoculation" against future disinformation. To promote critical reflection while participants experience sock puppet disinformation, our project uses techniques from Bertolt Brecht's *Epic Theater*, which emphasises audience participation and distancing techniques for the presentation of politically charged content. As participants scroll through a dataset of social media posts made by fake accounts that are performed by puppets, they become familiar with, and more resistant to, disinformation tactics.

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Description

Epic Sock Puppet Theater (2023 – ongoing) is an artistic research project in the form of an interactive, animatronic puppet theatre that resembles a combination of a classic Punch and Judy puppet stage and a dystopian video game or penny arcade. The project uses the animatronic puppets to familiarise viewers with the content and tactics used by imposter social media accounts engaged in disinformation campaigns. Often referred to as "sock puppets," these fake accounts are used to infiltrate online groups, gain the trust of the group's members, and then spread disinformation for political goals, or to simply polarise or disrupt a population. Disinformation originating from sock puppets is often spread by other online users, including influential celebrities, politicians, and public figures, in addition to mainstream journalists who write news stories based entirely on posts made by sock puppets (Lukito et al. 2020). The project allows participants to experience online posts that were part of sock puppet disinformation campaigns by scrolling through a dataset and selecting posts to be comically performed by animatronic sock puppets.

Fig. 1. *Epic Sock Puppet Theater* installation detail.

The first dataset of disinformation that was incorporated into the project was compiled from sock puppet posts made by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) that was released by the US Senate Committee on Intelligence as part of their investigation into election interference (US Congress 2020). This initial dataset contains nearly three million Twitter posts and Facebook ads (Linvill and Warren 2020; Lindblad et al. 2019). While it is not clear whether the disinformation campaign had any impact on the 2016 election, it is clear that the goal of this campaign was to polarise and divide the public, which is evidenced in posts representing opposing viewpoints on divisive topics. Sock puppet accounts make inflammatory statements representing both sides of issues such as climate change, Brexit, ongoing wars, opinions towards law enforcement, or they simply promote nationalist, racist or xenophobic viewpoints. These opposing viewpoints are presented by different puppets depending on the group that the disinformation is targeting. This allows viewers to compare and contrast the tactics used

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to target left-wing and right-wing groups. We have been expanding the dataset used in the project to include as many contexts and issues as possible, and have collected sock puppet accounts for disinformation campaigns in countries including Syria, Ukraine, and China. We have also created a small dataset of sock puppets controlled by US Central Command (CENTCOM) and continue to seek more US-controlled sock puppet accounts (Fang 2022).

Fig. 2. Project interface where participants sort through and select disinformation content.

Images and videos associated with these posts were scraped from web archiving sites like Wayback Machine in order to provide more context for the individual social media posts featured in the project. We reassembled the social media profiles for the featured accounts, so that participants can see the profile image for each account, along with the description and number of followers, in addition to any associated media for the posts that they select to be performed by the puppets. Based on our qualitative analysis of this dataset, we have found that the following definition of disinformation is an accurate characterization of these operations: "an adversarial campaign that weaponizes multiple rhetorical strategies and forms of knowing—including not only falsehoods but also truths, half-truths, and value-laden judgments—to exploit and amplify identity-driven controversies" (Diaz Ruiz and Nilsson 2023, 29). It is especially important to note that these campaigns attempt to manipulate targeted groups through various tactics, which often involves spreading false information, but can include promoting unprovable or even true statements if those statements help to increase polarisation and public discord by inciting feelings of pride, indignation, or hatred.

Research has found that carefully exposing the public to disinformation campaigns can serve as a type of "pre-bunking" or "inoculation" against future disinformation (Zerback, Töpfl and Knöpfle 2021). Since we are dealing with inflammatory content that is intended to radicalise viewers, it is important to provide adequate distancing for participants to prevent the negative effects of disinformation. We used Brechtian Epic Theater as a model for techniques that present political and emotional content while preventing identification with the character or content being presented. In *Epic Sock Puppet Theater*, participants cannot be passive spectators, the puppets will not perform without an audience member scrolling through the dataset and selecting disinformation to be performed. The puppets break the fourth wall by directly addressing

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participants. Unlike impostor social media accounts that hide their artificiality, the constructed, cyborgian nature of the puppets is foregrounded by exposing some of the electrical components and not suppressing or hiding the sound of the servo motors as the puppets move and talk. Another important tactic in the project is humour: the playful appearance of the puppets and their theatrical and overperformed voices contradict the seriousness of the content they present. To the extent that humour is incompatible with emotions, it can allow participants to reflect on why a fake account would post certain types of content, rather than emotionally reacting to that content (Bergson 1911).
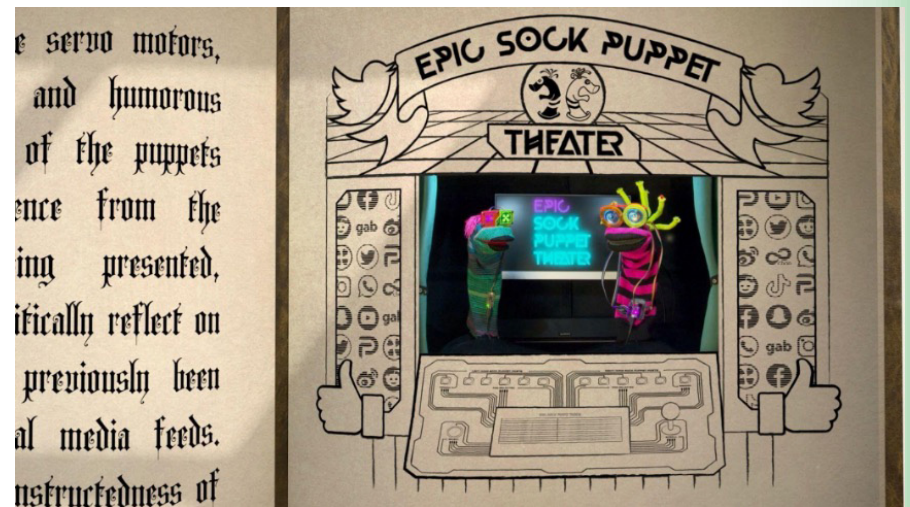
Fig. 3. Participants interact with *Epic Sock Puppet Theater* installation at MediaFutures Demo Days, Design Zentrum Hamburg.
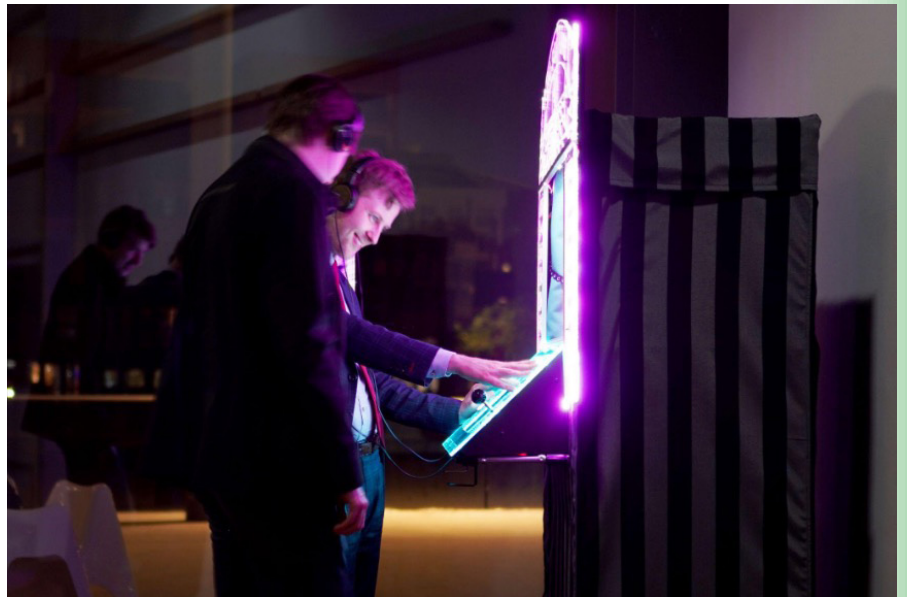
Conclusion

In summary, *Epic Sock Puppet Theater* serves as a platform to familiarise viewers with content and tactics from online sock puppet disinformation campaigns. The project is designed to be capable of quickly incorporating new datasets as disinformation campaigns emerge, so as sock puppet tactics evolve, the animatronic performances will be able to address them. Our user testing has demonstrated that the puppet show does incite critical reflection, and when presented in a physical space, has engendered conversations about online disinformation among viewers. While we have not conducted a longitudinal study on the impact of our project, we are optimistic that after engaging with the project viewers will reflect before sharing potential disinformation in their own social media feeds. Most importantly, *Epic Sock Puppet Theater* is an example of how academic research can be combined with artistic techniques to mitigate the spread of harmful disinformation online.

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Fig. 4. Screenshot of *Epic Sock Puppet Theater* informational video (https://vimeo.com/905424336).

Project website: https://epicsockpuppet.theater/
Informational video: https://vimeo.com/905424336

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