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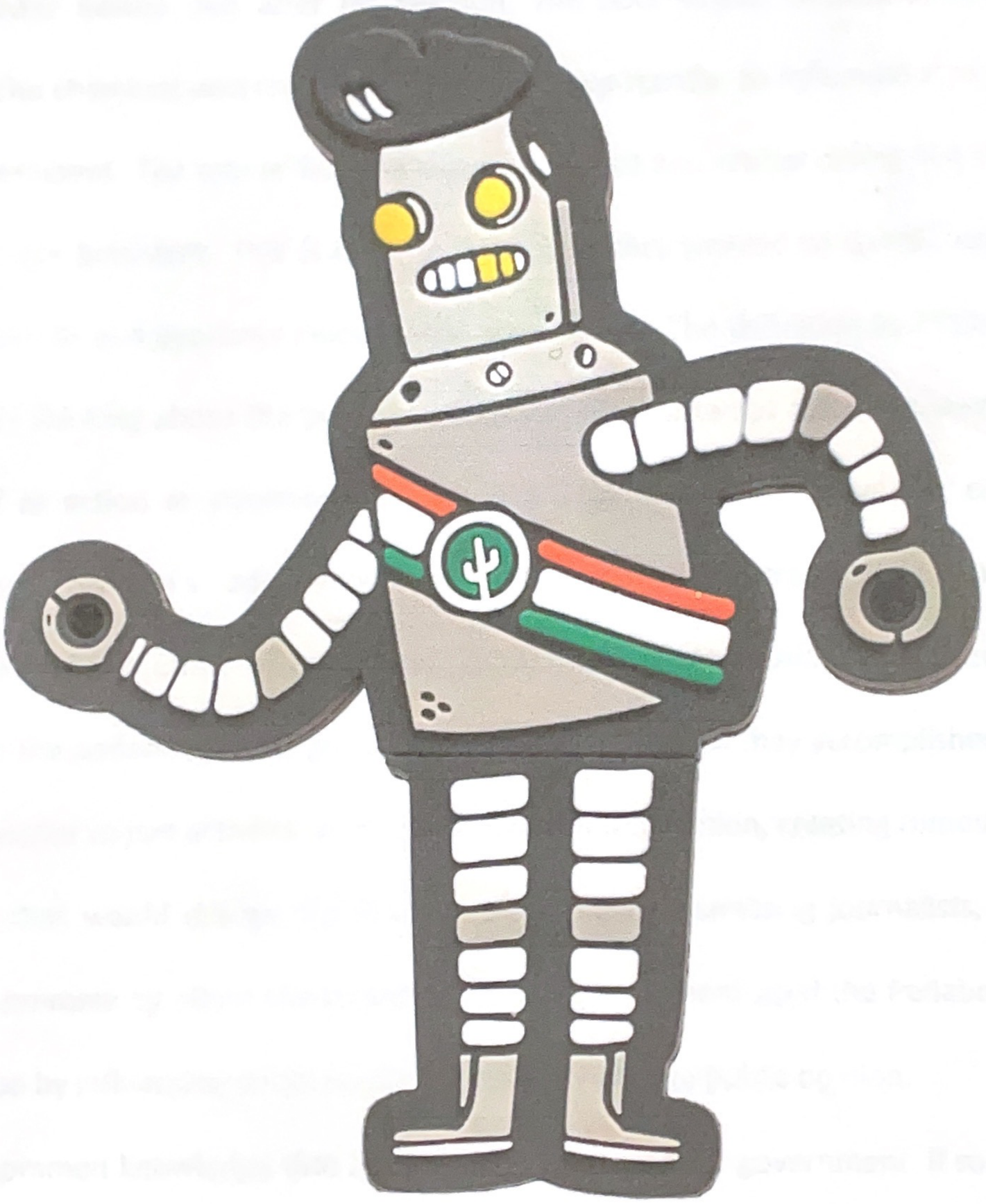
Peñabots: Are They Propaganda?



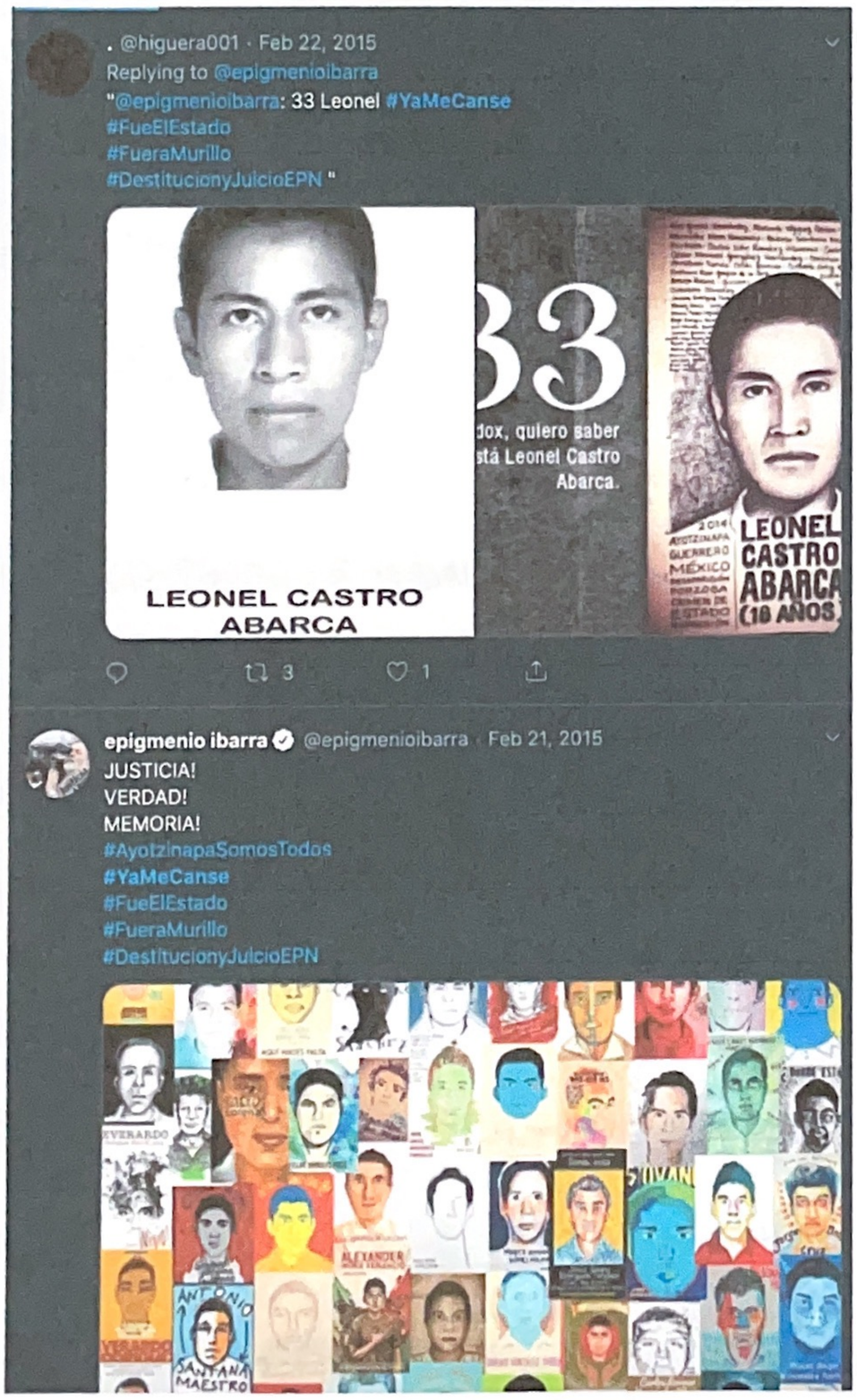
El Deforma (Daniel, Rise of the Peñabots, 2016)[Peñabot]

Propaganda PeñaBots

In 2012, Enrique Peña Nieto (EPN) won the electoral campaign, becoming the president of Mexico. What's important is not the person, but rather the methods and platforms that he and his team used to get Peña into power. The use of bots, or, 'Peñabots', was crucial to securing power before and after his election. The bots helped to disable communication channels, echo chamber, and create contra-contra propaganda to influence a popular opinion for the government. The use of bots by the government was crucial during the time in which Peña Nieto was president. This is important because they needed to change negative views towards new bills and decisions made by the government. The definition by Marlin provides a useful way of thinking about the penabots, "the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment" (Randall, "Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuation",2013). Marlin's description fits perfectly with the role given to the peñabots by the government. The way in which they accomplished this was by spamming Twitter to jam activists' main channel of communication, creating rumours about the government that would change the focus of the topic and harassing journalists, and to stop them from commenting about the government. The government used the Peñabots as a form of propaganda by influencing social media to positively change public opinion.

It is common knowledge that Mexicans do not trust their government. If something bad happens in the country, the first suspect is always the government. The people of Mexico tend to protest when popular opinion is not respected. A good example of this would be the 43

missing students of Ayotzinapan. What happened to the students is a mystery to our present time, but there are a lot of different theories that involve the government and the cartels. The abduction of the students occurred close to the anniversary of 'El Movimiento del '68" (The movement of the 68). This was a student movement protesting against the inequality of the time, which resulted in the massacre of a large group of students. The 43 students of Ayotzinapan created controversy on social media because of the parallel that they had with the students of the '68 movement. The creation of the hashtags #NosFaltan43 (We miss 43) and #YaMeCanse (I am tire) played an important role in the battle against the government.



"Justice, Truth and Memory" (Ibarra, 2015)IMG1

Twitter exploded with different opinions on the students, demanding justice for the 43 and making the government responsible for their actions. This is where the Peñabots came into play. Research by Erin Gallagher, a multimedia artist, writer and translator, discovered that the bots were spamming both of the hashtags, but did not write anything but punctuations (,,””--). The way in which someone could tell whether or not an account was a spam account, was by checking the number of followers and the different kind of posts on their timeline (Soloff, “Mexico’s Troll Bots...”, 2015). At the start of the internet battle, the Peñabots were primitive and easy to spot, but today they are harder to differentiate from a real person. Originally, the Twitter spam algorithm was able to eliminate or block the accounts seconds after the post was sent. Nowadays, the Twitter algorithm is unable to correctly identify what is and what is not spam. This is because they are now both controlled by people. However, to better understand why the government bought bots, we need to go back and study the presidential election of 2012.

THE BEGINNING OF PEÑABOTS

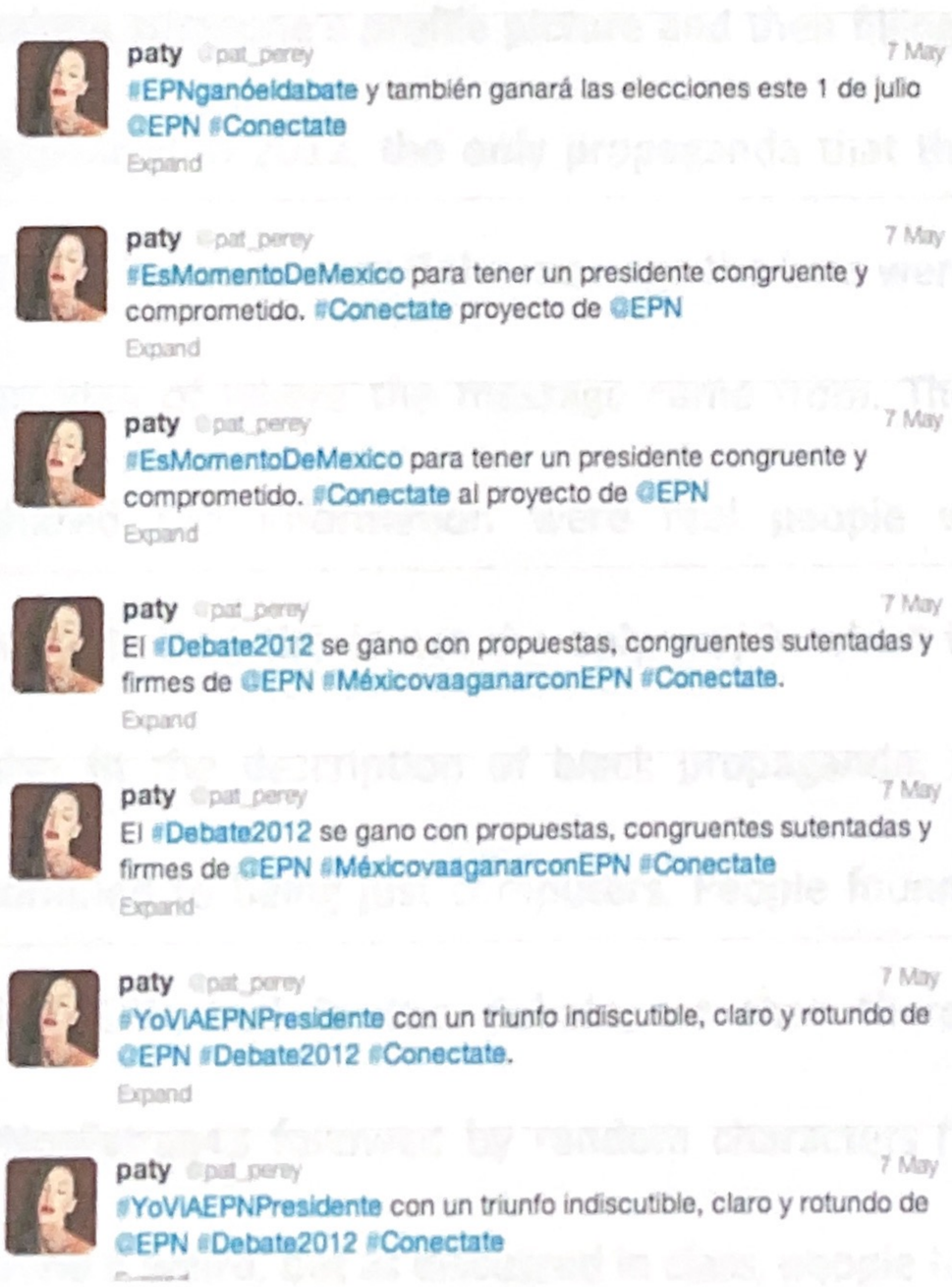
The beginning of the peñabots could be tracked to the presidential campaign of Enrique Peña Nieto in 2012. Popularity is vitally important to democratic politics, and during this time, one of the least popular candidates was Peña Nieto. His team came up with the idea to buy bots that could help boost his popularity on social media. The creation of fake accounts, as well as “fake news” was crucial for influencing popular opinion during this time. The peñabots activated soon after a political event occurred, like campaigning, sharing hashtags #EsMomentoDeMexico (It’s the moment of Mexico), #Conectate (Conect), and #EPNganóeldebate (EPN won the debate). People who were not able to see the events based

their perception of them on the trending topics on twitter caused by the accounts. At that time, people did not suspect the presence of bots. It was not until 2017 that when the University of Oxford was conducting research on Cyber troops in 28 countries, Peñabots were discovered. In the study they found out that "the Mexican government spends over 10 million pesos on 'cyber troops' to manipulate popular opinion on social media" (El Informador, "Gobierno gasta alrededor...", 2017).

"Is Mexicos turn to have a coherant and committed. Connect to the project of EPN" (Barbara, 2015)IMG2

The bots altered the image of the soon to be president to be more appealing to everyone. Right after Peña Nieto won the presidency, the bots were given another purpose;

more than just making people like EPN. That new purpose was to suppress activists and journalists. Since Peña Nieto found the bots so useful during his campaign and when he won the presidency, he upgraded them to keep people quiet on social media. Before the Oxford University study, civilians like Alberto Escorcia, an internet activist, first noticed the presence of the bots in 2010. (Soloff, "Mexico's Troll Bots...", 2017). He stated during his interview with Motherboard that upon his discovery of the bots he knew that a new type of war had come to Mexico, a new war that was going to take place on the internet (Soloff, 2017). This new war was being fueled by the propaganda created by the bots. They created a fake image within Mexico, where people trust posts from strangers. They created a Mexico where activists and honest journalists are harassed just for sharing the truth.



"EPN won the debate and will will the elections on July 1st"(Paty, May 7)IMG3

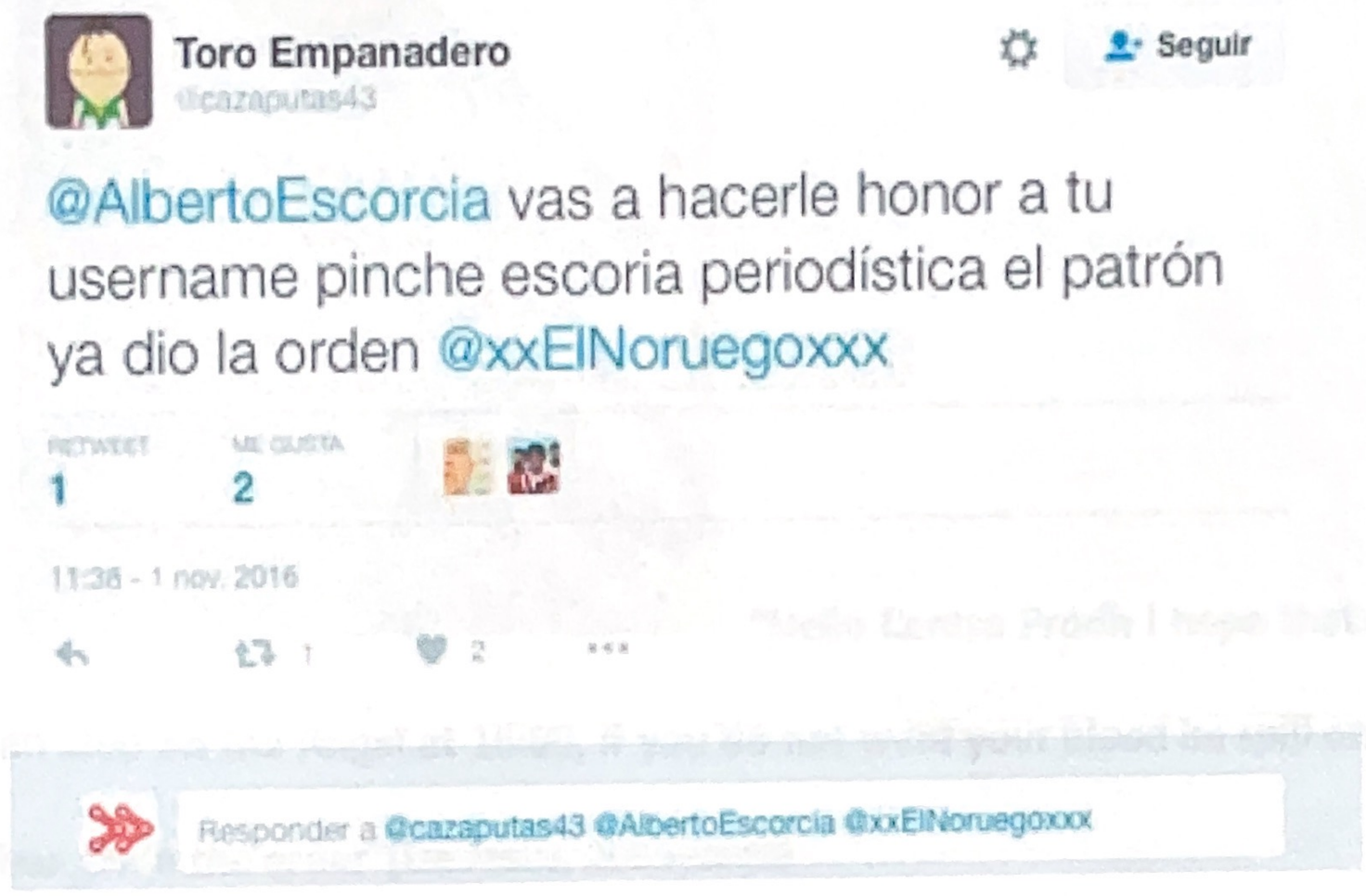
A new problem presented soon after the acknowledgement of Peñabots; the replacement of bots by propaganda accounts controlled by humans also known as trolls. During the disappearance of the 43 students and the beginning of the spam tweets, Escobar identified that not only were the bots were preventing the communication between activists, they were also creating Mexico's trending topics. He said that on an average day he would find between two to three trending topics, all created by the Peñabots (O'Carrol, "Mexico's misinformation wars..." ,2017). The fake accounts were not bots anymore, but were now real people behind the accounts. When real people started to gain control of the spam accounts, it became harder for the Twitter spam algorithm to catch the bots. This was a new version of the Peñabots and they were called trolls. The trolls got an account in the same way that the bots did before, by taking someone's profile picture and then filling in basic information. When the peñabots first appeared in 2012, the only propaganda that the bots could manage was grey 2 propaganda. This is because even if the message the bots were sharing were usually not true, the people had an idea of where the message came from. The public had a theory that the accounts that shared the information were real people who were paid to share that information. Nonetheless, this is not the only way in which the Peñabots could be categorised. They could also fit the description of black propaganda; since at the beginning the bots were simply confined to being just computers. People found it odd for accounts to talk about the success that EPN had in the debate, or that there were accounts sharing the #YaMeCanse, #NosFaltan43 followed by random characters (',,>'). Since the very beginning normal people found it weird, but as discussed in class, people tend to ignore the truth.

(Roldan, 2015)IMG4

Trolls: the better version of 'Peñabots'

The trolls as mentioned previously are the evolution of the bots that the government bought in 2012. Alberto Escorcia and Carmen Aristegui (one of the most famous journalists in Mexico) have discovered the way in which the trolls work. When the bots were first detected, Arestigui decided to talk about them which cost her her professional career. Aristegui's website tended to be filled with hate comments that are commonly written by the trolls . (2017) Similar to Aristegui, Escorcia has been targeted by trolls with hateful comments. He mentioned during an interview that every time he finds a troll, he reports them making one less troll on the

internet. Right after an account is blocked a new one appears. He showed to the interviewer O'Carroll an image of the death threats that he has received (O'Carroll, 2017).



"Alberto Escorcia you are going to make honour to your username human waste of journalist the boss gave the order already" (Empanadero, 2016)IMG5

This kind of harassment is directed to many activists and journalists. Using obscene language, the trolls tend to finish their threats with "Él patron ya dio la orden" (The boss has given the order). This kind of message appear all over Twitter targeting different activists that from time to time have to spoken their mind.

"Hello Centro Prodh I hope that you are not planning an stop on the Angel at 16:00, if you do not want your blood be spill on the ground. the boss has given the order"(De Jesüs, 2015)IMG6

Differentiating between the Peñabots and the trolls has been difficult since the Penñabots have become more sophisticated, while the trolls are controlled by real people. Something that could help to differentiate between the two of them could be that the Peñabots help create a good image of government while the trolls tend to harass people. The difference helps to identify the structure that the propaganda will follow. The way in which the peñabots tend to create their posts are more simple. They only use characters and little messages where people can see the support towards a certain individual. This kind of messages can be from "Buen trabajo en el debate" (good job on the debate) to "LA MEJOR OPCION PARA NUESTRO PAÍS" (the best option for Mexico). Both are supporting the government and try to create a fake positive image of the government.

Meanwhile the trolls have completely different approach. They are focused on the journalists and activists. They will be helping the government and giving the impression that they have a close relation with the president. They will use fear and profanity to make the individual stop whatever it is they are trying to accomplish. Not only will they have a small message that will be threatening the life of the individual, but they will also have images. Some of the trolls will even use images of people with weapons, using an identity that is not theirs. The troll industry has seen growth in Mexico and has become a profitable business. There have been witnesses that have admitted having worked for the troll industry. (Porup, "Así es como los peñabots censuran a los disidentes en México", 2017)

The Troll Industry

The troll industry grew rapidly and soon there were people on the streets that claimed to work for the trolls. The trolls were hiring people to manage the accounts from different locations in Mexico City. The troll industry has had a big influence on the growth of misinformation that is spread, since they are changing the flow of information on Twiter. An example could be the way interference that they had with the flow of information with the #Acapulco. The hashtag appeared due to some conflicts that were occuring in Acapulco, Mexico. When the Acapulco hashtag became part of the trending list was soon removed by another hashtag #SoyAmanteDe (I am a lover of). Escorcia tried to look into the connection that the hashtag had with the people that were comparing the new trending topic (Finley, "Pro-Government Twitter...", 2015). The trolls managed to neutralize the conversation for the people of Mexico City.

"There are many of us who support Peña bip, bip, brrrrt" (Points.datasocial.net)IMG7

Peñabots are they propaganda or counter-counter propaganda?

Throughout the course of this work you may be able to tell that the bots, along with trolls would fit the category of counter-propaganda. Both of these entities even if one is the evolution of the previous one, are used to attack the comments that will affect the reputation of different governmental figures. Stating this argument, farther more, the way in which each part of the spectrum has wont the credibility of the public depends on the echo chambers that each bot or troll is part off. Each of the different sides resonates within the internet community completely different. One example of this could be the way in which the issue that Escorcia had with the trolls in the past. They threaten his life soon after he reported the accounts with twitter, they send messages of what they would do to him or his family if he kept bothering

their "boss". Clearly the way in which trolls try to counter out some of the popular opinions is with the use of fear. This strategy may work with some of the other activists, clearly it did not work with Escorcia. According with his interview with O'Carroll, after the day of the interview. He was going to meet up with the government to talk about what could be done for his personal protection due to the diverse life threats that he has had ("Mexico's Misinformation wars...", 2017).

Trolls are not the only ones who have a decent enough of resonance, peñabots are capable enough to change the perspective of a group of people. It is clear until a certain point that bots did had a say for Peña to become the president of Mexico. During his entire political campaign, the only thing that kept him on a "trending topic" in Mexico were his looks. Apart from that there were people who believed he was not fit for the job due to his lack of knowledge and understanding for politics. On a similar note, it should be added that there is a big connection when it comes to the way in which he was elected. All along the campaign there were rumours about how he was related to Carlos Salinas de Gortari (the 58th president of Mexico), those rumours did not help his reputation. Mostly related with the fact that Carlos Salinas stole millions of dollars from Mexico. Furthermore to been related with Salinas, Peña Nieto was part of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional ([Institutional Revolutionary Party [PRI]), which was in power for about 70 years. Even if the bots help to elevate his image between the public, there was always the other part that were suspicious about letting the PRI back into power.

Both of these scenarios, help explain that the bots were used for the main purpose of counter attack any comment that could potentially ruin the image of the government. If the

image was already ruined, the bots were able to counter down some of the comments changing the perspective for some of the people. Serving as counter-counter propaganda most of the time.

The effect of Peñabots and trolls on the people of Mexico

First of all, the peñabots and the trolls are important in the life of the government. They help to create a smoke screen were people cannot see what is happening. The way in which peñabots reach people is with the use of echo chambers. Basing their information of the algorithm and the different social groups in which already exist a mindset about the government been trustworthy. Not only does the echo chamber help, but they also make it harder for a person who is scrolling down Twitter, to identify between bots and real people. The trolls on the other hand are like narco organizations, the trolls based usually follow each other to repeat similar hashtags and create trending topics. The trending topics will need to distract the public from whatever problem the government is involved with. In Mexican history before the bots or trolls, they used to manage the newspapers. Forcing the hand of certain journals to ignore the different issues in which the government was involved. The trolls work in a similar way, they create a completely different scenario where the government is not involved with (these events do not necessarily have to be true). The second topic would be the strength and weaknesses that the bots and trolls have as propaganda. While most of the information is targeted to people within the country, there are some complications when trying to reach the whole country. Not all of the people in Mexico use Twitter or have enough resources to have internet. Most of the time the government will try to target these people, because they are easier to persuade when it comes to political topics. Thirdly, are the bots ethical? The way in

which the government has been using them to quiet down people is ethical at all. Furthermore there is no way in which the trolls are ethical, threatening people's lives and swearing to them just for sharing knowledge is not the idea of ethical propaganda.

CONCLUSION

It is true that the peñabots are tracked all the way since the presidential campaign of 2012. This has show the obsession that the government has to keep the power for themselves. Both bots and trolls help the candidates to keep information from spreading over the country. The use of both of this has created cartels and has started an online war were until today the government has been effectively, stop the flow information between activist and journalist. The awareness in this topic could help the citizens of Mexico to find different strategies to stop the bots from interfering with the information that they are trying to share. The awareness of the people can make them be more suspicious of the tweets that they find on Facebook.

(Mexican, 2015)IMG8

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