

Juliano Borges & Arthur Coelho Bezerra (interviewers), Nandini Jammi (interviewed)

## **A trench in the fight against disinformation: Interview with Sleeping Giants co-creator Nandini Jammi**

### **Abstract:**

With the aim of gathering information for an article (recently published in Brazil) about Sleeping Giants' fight against the political economy of disinformation, Brazilian researchers Juliano Borges and Arthur Coelho Bezerra interviewed the co-creator of the SG movement in the United States, Nandini Jammi, on October 2020. In this interview, Jammi addresses programmatic advertising, discusses the tactic found by Sleeping Giants to demonetize uninformative sites and takes a position on the responsibility of platforms to contain hate speech and disinformation on the internet. She explains how the initiative begins by targeting the disinformation site Breitbart News, and evolves into a digital civic movement that now relies on the collaborative work of unknown volunteers, including spontaneous cell creation in countries like Canada, France and Brazil.

**Keywords:** Disinformation, Programmatic Advertising, Regime of Information, Sleeping Giants

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## Introduction

The following interview was conducted for the purpose of writing an article about the digital civic movement Sleeping Giants and their moral offensive against disinformation<sup>1</sup>, which was published in the Brazilian journal *Eptic*. The article analyzes the work of Sleeping Giants in tackling disinformation on the Internet by demonetizing sites that produce malicious content. To this end, Sleeping Giants exposes the failures of programmatic advertising on platforms, a mechanism that rewards the production of disinformation based on user data surveillance.

The research recognizes that the disinformation industry has become one of the main threats to contemporary democracies, playing an important role in electoral processes in several countries. The 2019 Global Disinformation Index study estimates that programmatic advertising revenue from 20,000 websites classified by GDI as spreaders of disinformation reached \$235 million, with Google Ads being the world's largest programmatic media service, present in 70% of the pages of disinformation earning an estimated revenue of US\$ 86.7 million for the company<sup>2</sup>.

If we consider that within the current information regime there is an ongoing political struggle against disinformation, Sleeping Giants must be understood as an agent endowed with a strategy capable of weakening disinformation supply in the digital ecosystem. Their tactic consists of demonetizing disinformation poles, exploiting contradictions between the image that advertising brands seek to project and the associations of these brands with harmful content, brought about by programmatic advertising anomalies.

Emerging in the United States in 2016 as a political response to the disinformation processes that provided a favorable environment for the election of Donald Trump, Sleeping Giants can be defined as a civic movement of digital activism, with operations in 16 other countries (including Brazil) through independent and anonymous cells. They promote campaigns on social networks to economically weaken sites recognized for disseminating hate speech, intolerance and sexism - or, as the description of the SG's official Twitter profile reads: "A campaign to make bigotry and sexism less profitable".

Sleeping Giants co-creator Nandini Jammi is described on her website as a speaker, activist and consultant for brand security and content moderation. She claims to have been immersed in this world since 2016, when she anonymously ran Sleeping Giants' social media campaign, which succeeded in encouraging advertisers to block the purchase of advertising space on websites with extremist content. Early in the interview, made on October 16th, 2020, Jammi makes it clear that she is no longer a member of the Sleeping Giants and that, therefore, she does not "speak for the group", although she can speak about it.

## How did Sleeping Giants start? And why did you choose this name?

*Nandini Jammi*: I didn't start the account. It was my partner Matt [Rivitz] who started the Sleeping Giants account. He picked the name. He's been asked before and he says that it just popped into his head and he thought it sounded cool. To me, when people ask who is Sleeping Giants, who are the giants supposed to be, my interpretation is that the giants are us, the consumers and the followers of this community who are able to exert an incredible amount of power and influence when they speak up on social media.

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<sup>1</sup> BEZERRA, A. C.; BORGES, Juliano. Sleeping Giants: a ofensiva moral dos gigantes adormecidos contra o novo regime de desinformação. *Eptic On-Line* (UFS), v. 23, p. 178, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> MARTINS, H. (Org.). *Desinformação: crise política e saídas democráticas para as fake news*. São Paulo: Veneta, 2020.

**And how did it start? And what was your participation on it?**

*Nandini Jammi:* Matt started one week before I did. But effectively, we independently had this idea. We both visited this website, Breitbart [News<sup>3</sup>], and immediately the first thing that we noticed was the ads, because we're both in marketing. And we have an idea of the way that programmatic advertising works, that these companies are not placing the ads on purpose on this website. But Google and Facebook are doing it for them. So, we thought if we alert the companies that their ads are on this type of a website, they will probably take action and block the site from their media. We figured this is probably the case, because so many of these companies invest in messaging and values that are the opposite of what Breitbart stands for. So, we started to contact these companies on social media, because it's the fastest way, it's public and we expected to get a quick answer from them. We took screenshots of the ad next to some of these headlines, ping or tweeted out the company and asked them politely to reconsider their media buy with Breitbart. And the reason we framed it usually as a question or as a request is because we knew that these brands and these marketing teams were not aware that their ads were even appearing on the site, because Google is placing so many ads across the web and they're not checking to see exactly where those ads are going. It was us alerting them and giving them a chance to respond.

**Was it only you and Matt or did you have more people working with you? Did it take a lot of time in your agenda to do this work?**

*Nandini Jammi:* I took a lot of time. I was running Facebook, Matt was running the Twitter and we had very immediately a handful of volunteers who joined us and throughout the whole campaign, people who have joined us and helped out in many, many different ways. But as far as running the communities, it was primarily the two of us, as far as I know. The volunteers (we're all volunteers, by the way), for example, they are updating the confirms list, doing research, pointing things out, finding things for us... someone made an entire sort of repository of the comments section of Breitbart, which is also extremely painful, and has just been documenting what's been going on in the comments for years. So, people have just helped out in whatever capacity they can.

**What we observe in your actions is that Sleeping Giants is not about a boycott of brands. How did you come up with this tactic?**

*Nandini Jammi:* This was a natural direction for us from the beginning, because what is the point of boycotting a company that didn't know their ads were on this website and is willing to take action immediately? It's kind of like an exaggeration, there's no need to spin out, create all this additional work and drama. And it also dilutes the concept of a boycott, which requires sustained efforts of people withholding their support of a company or a brand or a product. These companies would respond to us within minutes or hours, so how can we possibly boycott? That's ridiculous. After we started to target Fox News, Bill O'Reilly<sup>4</sup>, the TV host on Fox News, we continued with the same tactic, just asking a question: does this person or does this person's words or is this type of organization in line with your values? That question is so powerful that even for TV shows the same tactic worked. A brand doesn't want to be in a position that is potentially undoing all their other marketing work.

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<sup>3</sup>News-type website runned at the time by Steve Bannon, executive director of Trump's election campaign and primarily responsible for his communication. After Trump's victory, Bannon was named a member of the United States National Security Council. Breitbart News is still an important informational reference in the American conservative field.

<sup>4</sup>Bill O'Reilly was the host of Fox News' The O'Reilly Factor, fired in April 2017 after reports of sexual harassment involving employees of the station.

**In Brazil, we have noticed hostile reactions from the public to the brands that have been flagged. Did the public recognize that it was not a call for a boycott of brands?**

*Nandini Jammi:* There's no other word for our campaign, so, in the media, it was described as a boycott. We would call it a corporate accountability campaign. It got immediately a lot of attention from the media because anything that had to do with Breitbart in 2016 was a big deal because it's so powerful... this is actually a good question and I haven't really thought this through. The way that people viewed it and how the Twitter community understood it, it was just calling out saying, hey, what are you doing? The way that the media described it was a boycott; the brands that we contacted understood it as a threat, as if a social media campaign was coming to get them and to hurt their friends, their brand and their marketing. I only know this now with time, back then I didn't have any insights into how they think on the inside. But now I do because I talked to them, and I realized that they didn't see it quite as a boycott, because it's not, we never threatened that kind of thing, ever. But they did see it as if Sleeping Giants could get them in trouble.

**We had cases here in Brazil in which companies actually wanted their presence on those disinformation websites. Did anything like that happen in the US?**

*Nandini Jammi:* We never heard anyone saying "we want to be on Breitbart". No one ever said that. But there were companies that said: "this is just a programmatic campaign, we are willing to meet our customers, wherever they are". I believe one of those few companies was Nissan, but I would say almost none.

**There was a lot of pressure from the far-right, in Brazil, for boycotting companies that cancelled the ads. And, also, the reaction of the Brazilian extreme right appeared in the search for alternative forms of financing, such as the use of bitcoins or collective financing platforms. How did this happen in the USA?**

*Nandini Jammi:* Well, Breitbart is a media organization that makes a lot of money from its merchandise shop. As far as extremist groups, they have been using PayPal, Cash up, Stripe... we've gotten them kicked off of a lot and then they bounce around to other payment processors, lesser-known payment processors and lesser known banks. They do manage to still collect credit card payments, but we've made it a lot more difficult for them. PayPal has been very clear in their messaging, after the Charlottesville attacks<sup>5</sup>, that they will not partner with any organizations or individuals that are that are stoking racial hatred or violence. It's not the same language that we saw years ago. Now they're saying stoking racial hatred, which opens up a lot more leeway for activists to come for PayPal. Overall, PayPal has been, at least in terms of their messaging, a lot more proactive. I can't necessarily see that with their actions, but I know that [Olavo de] Carvalho just got kicked off of PayPal. So, these things are working.

**Concerning platforms, the tone was pretty different than with the brands. You were much more direct with some accusations against the platforms. How was this decision to target the platforms?**

*Nandini Jammi:* Well, the platforms have acceptable use policies, like Shopify, in their acceptable use policy; they say they won't work with people who are selling racist products on their shops. But then when we flag it

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<sup>5</sup>Attack occurred on August 12, 2017 when supremacist James Alex Fields Jr. premeditatedly used his car against a crowd that was peacefully protesting the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing one and injuring 19 people.

up with them, they don't do anything about it. So, what is the point of your acceptable use policies if you're not going to enforce them? That's why we take a different tone with the tech platforms because they have the power to kick anyone off their accounts. When you sign their terms and conditions, they can terminate your account for no reason. Of course, you don't want to terminate for no reason; you don't want to be the company that's just closing down accounts, that's not a good way to do business. You need to have a reason to do it. That's where the acceptable use policy comes into place. You can say "we reviewed your activity against our acceptable use policy, and it's in violation. We're sorry, we're going to have to shut down your account". So, within their power, the reason they don't do it is because the people within these organizations view themselves as a neutral sort of public utility, as a vehicle for free speech, which, of course, they're not that that's a pact between the citizen and the government. And they also view themselves as a result of having to be objective in their decisions: "if we kick this person off, isn't this just showing our bias". Of course, this isn't true, and acceptable use policy is biased, right? It's biased against violence, and it's acceptable that their use policies are biased against racism; you have to make judgment calls to live in society. It might be because they have to operate at scale, and they feel that it's not their responsibility to know who their customers are. And quite frankly, they don't know how to make the decision and take the potential public criticism, which, of course, they can mitigate immediately by being communicative and being transparent about their review process.

### **Isn't it possible to assume that they don't want to shut down accounts because this is actually profitable?**

*Nandini Jammi:* It's not profitable immediately. It's profitable over time in terms of their long-term brand equity. I'll give you an example. I recently got a company called Hotjar to ban the Trump campaign. This is a tech company, they view themselves as neutral, they just do analytics for websites. I found their code on Trump campaign's website, I called them out on Twitter and they responded saying "we are an anti-racist organization, we consider ourselves anti-racist, but unfortunately, Trump is just a political candidate. We don't make political decisions here". Well, then how can you say you are anti-racist? If you're doing that in your marketing, and you say you're anti-racist, then you better be consistent. So, either stop calling yourself anti-racist, or ban the Trump campaign. And this company in particular is unusual. They really sat down and thought about it, so they decided to ban the Trump campaign. And then they came up with a whole blog post where they explained their decision, and went public with it. And if you see the original tweet, where they announced their decision, you'll see all the comments; it is 99% positive, because they know who their customers are. And ultimately those are those are the people who are going to continue to refer them to their friends.

### **How do you see the recent initiatives that seek to produce stricter regulations or different ways of social control on the platforms?**

*Nandini Jammi:* I have a few thoughts on this. The first is: Twitter recently censored a New York Post<sup>6</sup>, and it upsets everyone, regardless of political affiliation, because Twitter did something that was so drastic, without communicating their decision behind it, their process behind it. When you just see that it's jarring because we all rely on Twitter for our information, and suddenly information is just being taken from us. So that is one argument for not necessarily regulating the content, or forcing companies to regulate the content in a certain way on their platform. But to force them to include some kind of a transparent review process where you can appeal, where you can understand what's happening on the platform, why you're being banned. That also reduces a lot of the risks to the companies themselves, because they're scared of making decisions and being

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<sup>6</sup>On October 14, 2020, Facebook and Twitter reduced the spread of an article against Democratic candidate Joe Biden published by the tabloid New York Post, which belongs to News Corp, the same Fox News holding company. Republicans accused the companies of censorship and meddling in the electoral process. Twitter claimed that the social media did not allow the circulation of hacked information, but went back the next day and allowed the distribution of the report with the flagged tweets stating that the source of the information was suspicious.

criticized for it. But if they can do their homework and show us the homework, how did they come to this decision, then at least we can have a conversation about it, and at least we're not blind in this relationship.

So there's that and then the Facebook Oversight Board<sup>7</sup>. I think that is really effective, I see that it's getting on the nerves of the actual Facebook employees. They find it really unnerving, because this allows the citizens to take control of the narrative that Facebook is constantly trying to spin in their favor. The committee can engage in such a transparent process that Facebook doesn't have. So, who are you going to trust more? Right, you're going to trust with the committee thing, because the committee is going through these cases. When the committee engages in that discussion, that gives them power over Facebook. I don't know what's happening inside Facebook, but I believe that that is having a real effect on Facebook, the company, and I believe that they're starting to speed up some of their own decision making as a result.

**Brazilian far right responded by calling for a boycott campaign against brands that decided to cancel ads. How do brands react by standing between two sides of a polarized public opinion? What is your experience with this in SG?**

*Nandini Jammi:* There's never been a serious threat to any company that has left Breitbart. I think the closest thing to a serious threat was the bank USAA, and that's because this particular bank serves a lot of military customers. But that is the only company that have made a decision like this, there has been no credible backlash because, at least in the United States, there's no real economic power to the group of customers or people or audiences that support Breitbart values. And brands have spent too much money marketing themselves as inclusive. It affects their profit margins to serve the opposite audience, so to speak. They spend too much money on marketing on recruitment of employees, and they are able to recruit better employees when they develop a more inclusive workplace. Basically, their entire marketing budget has gone towards being inclusive companies. There's just no chance that they would fall to that kind of pressure from the alt-right crowd.

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<sup>7</sup>The Oversight Board is a content moderating entity that analyzes resources for content blocked or removed from Facebook. The committee consists of 20 members from 16 countries, announced in May 2020, almost two years after being proposed by Mark Zuckerberg.