Forum: General Assembly 3

Issue: The Question of Usage of Disinformation and Propaganda in the Digital Era

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Introduction

The usage of disinformation and propaganda in the digital era is perhaps one of the most important issues to have arisen in the past few years, influencing significant events such as the United States presidential election and the United Kingdom's referendum decision to leave the European Union, also known as Brexit. One of the most crucial components in both of these decisions was the rampant spread of disinformation and propaganda on social media websites, with a clear lack of understanding over which news stories were real and which were false. Thus, as humanity begins to explore all of the benefits that the digital age has granted, it is essential that simultaneous regulations are imposed such that cases like disinformation and propaganda are less likely to occur. The virus-like spreading of false news stories on Facebook and Twitter need to be combated by the instatement of a regulation, potentially user-suggested, that would remove these news stories.

Definition of Key Terms

Digital Era

The information age, also known as the digital age, is the modern age regarded as a time in which information has become a commodity that is quickly and widely disseminated and easily available especially through the use of computer technology.[1]

Disinformation

False information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.[2]

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[1] "Information Age," Merriam-Webster, accessed November 25, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Information%20Age.

Propaganda

The spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person.[3]

Background

The technological advancement that humanity has experienced over the past half century has allowed for limitless information to be obtained simply by having a device with internet capabilities and an internet connection. This development has allowed for information to be accessed almost instantaneously; if anyone would like to find the answer to a question he or she possesses, this can be achieved in seconds with a simple Google search. Similarly, news developments travel across the world seconds after an important event takes place, which allows people around the world to get access to news from the other side of the world, and understand the implications of the event on themselves and the world as a whole[4]. However, with the need for news companies to be the first to report on a new development, the inaccuracy of initial reports compounded by false stories finding their way into the news have created the problem of disinformation[5]. There are two cases in this situation: one of these is that the news organization was simply unable to accurately report on the event that took place due to inaccurate information; the other case is that the news organization intentionally wanted to mislead the public with inaccuracies or fabricated stories[6]. While it is uncommon for large news organization such as the BBC or CNN to be spreading disinformation, it is becoming more commonplace for disinformation, and by extension, propaganda, to be spread on social media website such as Facebook[7]. Since those who intend to spread disinformation can pay for targeted advertising towards the most susceptible users, disinformation can spread rapidly and cause the original false news story to gain credibility. Two such cases where disinformation was widespread and potentially influenced the outcome were the British "Brexit" and the presidential election in the United States.

Brexit

The vote by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union last year was certainly one of the most significant events; the fact that the United Kingdom even decided to leave the European Union was

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[2] "Disinformation," Merriam-Webster, accessed November 25, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation.

[3] "Propaganda," Merriam-Webster, accessed November 25, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda.

[4] Mark Buchanan, "Why Fake News Spreads So Fast on Facebook," Bloomberg.com, August 31, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-08-31/why-fake-news-spreads-so-fast-on-facebook.

[5] Ibid

[6] Mark Buchanan, "Why Fake News Spreads So Fast on Facebook," Bloomberg.com, August 31, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-08-31/why-fake-news-spreads-so-fast-on-facebook.

[7] Ibid

relatively surprising, with most media outlets predicting that the United Kingdom would choose to remain in the European Union[8]. The Brexit vote was affected in part by the plethora of disinformation that caused at least a portion of the population to vote for leaving the European Union. One poster that was widely popular during the weeks leading up to the vote claimed that Turkey is entering the European Union, and one of the Defence Ministers of the British Government claimed that the United Kingdom would not be able to stop Turkish criminals from entering the UK or to veto Turkey's EU accession. Both of these statements were exaggerated at best, and the latter was simply untrue[9]. The inability of the media to prove these claims false allowed for some of the public to believe that these claims were in fact true, and led to some additional votes in favor of leaving[10]. The economic concerns about the UK gaining a "bonus" £350 million a week for leaving and paying for other countries in the European Union to develop their societies and maintain their defence compounded to sway the population in favor of leaving, despite both of these claims being inherently false[11]. In fact, the United Kingdom had a financial surplus from its involvement in the European Union; the disinformation spread overturned the facts and was able to influence the vote.

United States Presidential Election

The spreading of disinformation, or so-called "fake news", was very pertinent to the election process that occurred in the United States in 2016. The utilization of Facebook, a virtually unfiltered platform, aided in the rampant spread of disinformation that seemed believable yet was false. The outcome of the election displayed how the mainstream media and polling systems vastly underestimated the power of right-wing news sources to utilize Facebook as a method to reach an audience[12]. Facebook's ability to precisely identify the characteristics of their target audience allowed for the facilitation of right-wing news and propaganda reaching conservative Americans, and left-wing news and propaganda reaching liberal Americans[13]. The crux of the issue with disinformation being spread on Facebook is that, once a post gains enough traction with hundreds of thousands and millions of shares, it is virtually impossible to discern whether the story has originated from a legitimate news source, or from a source that intentionally spread disinformation to misinform voters.

Social Media

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[8] Siobhan Fenton, "Brexit: Majority of UK now wants to stay in EU, poll finds," The Independent, November 03, 2016, accessed November 28, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-poll-majority-uk-remain-eu-theresa-may-article-50-second-referendum-latest-a7395811.html.

[9] Andrew Grice, "Fake news handed Brexiteers the referendum – and now they have no idea what they're doing," The Independent, January 18, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/michael-gove-boris-johnson-brexit-eurosceptic-press-theresa-may-a7533806.html.

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid

[12] Olivia Solon, "Facebook's failure: did fake news and polarized politics get Trump elected?" The Guardian, November 10, 2016, accessed November 28, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/10/facebook-fake-news-election-conspiracy-theories.

[13] Ibid

The prevalence of social media has also allowed for governments and individuals to spread disinformation independent of news organizations. Since social media has provided obscure and established news organizations alike the opportunity for equal recognition, it has become increasingly difficult for social media users to discern between which news is reliable and which is fake[14]. The lack of clarity about the distinction between reliable and unreliable news has provided the opportunity for individuals or governments to create illegitimate news organizations that, upon first inspection, appear to be legitimate organizations[15]. What occurred during the time leading up to the US presidential election and Brexit vote was the frequent utilization of fake news organizations for the spread of shocking news stories- which would garner a large amount of clicks- that were false. Thus, the ability of illegitimate news organizations to pose as legitimate organizations that possess credibility is one of the driving forces behind the spread of disinformation; it has been alleged that the Russian Federation hired hackers and utilized bots to meddle with the outcome of the presidential election, although concrete proof has yet to be found[16].

Key member states and NGOs

United States

The United States is one of the two major world powers to feel drastic effects of disinformation and propaganda, with widespread disinformation being one of the largest issues mentioned during the year of 2016 leading up to the election. As stated in the Background Information, the United States felt the effects of disinformation gaining mass traction. Not only could the disinformation have swayed the election, it could have opened the door for disinformation to become more commonplace and influence other important decisions that the United States and other nations will have to make. Currently, the United States is having polarized debates over the effect of the disinformation on influencing the most recent presidential election, and although Facebook has been pressured to limit any further effects of disinformation, no solution has been found yet[17].

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is the other world power that was previously mentioned in the Background Information that has experienced major effects due to disinformation and propaganda. The widely circulated claims that the United Kingdom pays the EU £350 million every week and loses out on its

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[14]Kathryn Watson, "Russian bots still interfering in U.S. politics after election, says expert witness," CBS News, March 30, 2017, accessed December 13, 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russian-bots-still-interfering-in-u-s-politics-after-election-expert/.

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Tom McKay, "Facebook's 'Fake News' Solution Isn't Going to Solve the Problem," Gizmodo, September 13, 2017, accessed November 28, 2017, https://gizmodo.com/facebooks-fake-news-solution-isnt-going-to-solve-the-pr-1809062985.

economy due to protectionist countries were simply false[18]. These claims were some of the most repeated and crucial arguments of the advocates for the Vote Leave movement, and were more than likely to influence voters. Thus, the spread of disinformation and the failure of the media to counter these claims or identify them as false until after the vote were some of the most significant reasons for the outcome of the vote.

Russian Federation

Although Russia has not experienced the influence of disinformation in its elections, and has not admitted to spreading disinformation since it was the Soviet Union, Russia has been accused of meddling with the United States election and thus needs to be considered in this issue[19]. Although no concrete evidence exists that has been released to the public, American intelligence agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agree that Russian hackers were involved in the hacking of the election and the spreading of disinformation on orders by the Russian government[20]. Thus, while there is no evidence available to the public that perfectly implicates the Russian government, Russia is the biggest nation accused of spreading disinformation in another country, and must be considered when attempting to provide solutions on the issue.

People's Republic of China

The People's Republic of China is another country that has been heavily affected by the proliferation of disinformation. Articles containing disinformation that were popularized in the United States leading up to the presidential election were translated into Chinese and spread throughout the country[21]. The Chinese government utilized the disinformation that was popularized and spread throughout the United States as justification for the subsequent increase in Chinese internet censorship in November 2016[22]. Furthermore, the issue of fake news in the United States election gave the Chinese Communist Party an opportunity to criticize Western democracy and press freedom, as well as the apparent bias in Western media organizations[23]. Thus, the Chinese government was able to use the

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[18] Ashley Kirk, "EU referendum: The claims that won it for Brexit, fact checked," The Telegraph, February 20, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/eu-referendum-claims-won-brexit-fact-checked/.

[19] Dimitri Alperovitch, "Bears in the Midst: Intrusion into the Democratic National Committee »," CrowdStrike, November 03, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017, https://www.crowdstrike.com/blog/bears-midst-intrusion-democratic-national-committee/.

[20] Russell Brandom, "FBI and CIA now agree that Russia hacked to help Trump win," The Verge, December 16, 2016, accessed November 29, 2017, https://www.theverge.com/2016/12/16/13987634/fbi-cia-russia-trump-hacking-election-interference.

[21] Juju Chang et al., "When Fake News Stories Make Real News Headlines," ABC News, , accessed December 17, 2017, http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/fake-news-stories-make-real-news-headlines/story?id=43845383.

[22] Andrew Orlowski, "China cites Trump to justify 'fake news' media clampdown. Surprised?" The Register® - Biting the hand that feeds IT, accessed December 17, 2017, https://www.theregister.co.uk/2016/11/21/china_cites_trump_to_justify_fake_news_clampdown_surprised/.

[23] Javier C. HernÁndez, "China's Response to Reports of Torture: 'Fake News'," The New York Times, March 03, 2017, accessed December 17, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/world/asia/china-fake-news-xie.html.

issue of disinformation and turn it into pro-China propaganda within the country that would simultaneously display Chinese superiority and the fallibility of the United States and Western nations.

Facebook

The utilization of Facebook was one of the most crucial reasons for the widespread presence of disinformation during the presidential election and Brexit. Since average citizens of both the United States and United Kingdom spent more time on Facebook reading news than going to established networks' websites or watching news on their televisions, it was easy for false information with eye catching headlines to be spread on Facebook with a large amount of shares[24]. The inability of Facebook to mitigate this spread of disinformation led to false news being treated as real news; since there was no reason for established news organizations to discredit false news organizations, the disinformation was never proved to be disinformation[25]. Thus, the need for some validation of news stories on Facebook is required to limit the effects of disinformation on any further referendums and elections.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1930-1941	Russian Communist Party utilizes the journal "USSR in Construction" for the purpose of spreading propaganda
3 November, 1947	First UN resolution condemning propaganda passed by the General Assembly
October 1953	First issue published by *Encounter* magazine, funded by the CIA to spread anti-communist propaganda in Western Europe and the Third World
September 1967	Radio Hanoi utilized in Vietnam to spread pro-communist propaganda
2005	Selling Intervention and War published by Jon Western, analyzing the extent to which Bush used propaganda to influence opinion on the Iraq War.
2 September, 2006	UN resolution passed condemning political parties for using propaganda to promote superiority
20 December, 2016	First UN resolution to specifically address the issue of utilizing the internet for the purpose of disinformation
23 June, 2016	United Kingdom citizens vote to leave the European Union
8 November, 2016	Donald Trump elected president amid disinformation scandals
24 November, 2016	Newspapers such as *The Daily Beast* begin to investigate the effect of Russian tweets on the election

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[24] Chang, Juju, Jake Lefferman, Claire Pedersen, and Geoff Martz. "When Fake News Stories Make Real News Headlines." ABC News. Accessed December 16, 2017. http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/fake-news-stories-make-real-news-headlines/story?id=43845383.
[25] Ibid

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Inadmissibility of certain practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, 11 September 2006, (A/RES/61/47)
- Condemnation of propaganda against peace, 1 January 1951, (A/RES/381)
- Measures to be taken against propaganda and the inciters of a new war, 3 November 1947 (A/RES/2/110)
- Measures to be taken against political platforms and activities based on doctrines of superiority and violent nationalist ideologies which are based on racial discrimination or ethnic exclusiveness and xenophobia, including neo-nazism, 2 September 2006, (A/RES/59/175)
- Combating glorification of nazism, neo-nazism and other practices that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, 20 December 2016, (A/RES/71/179)
- Initial reports surface of the DNC being hacked by sophisticated adversaries, suspected to have affiliation with Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate, May 2016.

Possible Solutions

There are many potential solutions for the issue of disinformation and propaganda and their influence in the digital age, however the implementation of them will be the most difficult aspect of the solution. To diminish the influence of radical news organizations spreading disinformation and influencing elections, the UN would have to collaborate with social media websites to counteract the popularity that some fake stories obtain. However, Facebook has been working on solving this issue for longer than a year, and still claims that the solution has not been found yet. Perhaps a collaboration with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) or a non-UN NGO would benefit Facebook's efforts, however the premise of an international organization intervening in a private company's service, especially at the size of Facebook, makes this implausible.

One of the initiatives that Facebook has started is enlisting the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) of a Florida-based think tank named Poynter; Facebook users in Germany and the US may now flag articles that they think are deliberately false, and these articles will go to third-party reviewers that will determine whether or not the article will continue to circulate Facebook.[26] An expansion of the powers of the organization along with subsequent necessary regulations will allow for the IFCN to drastically limit the spread of disinformation on Facebook. Making sub departments in the IFCN for other social media website, such as Twitter, would greatly contribute to the solution of disinformation.

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[26]Mike Wendling, "Solutions that can stop fake news spreading," BBC News, January 30, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38769996.

Another method to combat the spread of disinformation is to tailor the algorithms utilized that decide which stories are presented to users. The reason for the popularity of false news stories during both Brexit and the presidential election was the inherent flaw in the algorithm that Facebook uses; stories with the most shares will garner the most attention on users' news feeds, regardless of the validity of the news story. Furthermore, the inability of Facebook users to discern between the true and false news stories compounded the flaw in the algorithm: the news stories that were able to gain the most headlines- the ones that most frequently turned out to be false- were never checked for validity or any other factors by Facebook. Thus, some government intervention could be required to ensure that the algorithm instated by Facebook will allow for the spread of false news stories to be limited. While this is a drastic solution, the seriousness of the issue requires such a solution, and a collaboration with the government could be in order to solve the issue. The FBI or CIA could both collaborate with Facebook to ensure that the algorithm is accurate, and monitor the implementation of the algorithm along with the subsequent spread of disinformation.

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