Weapons of Mass Distortion?
The Threat of Online Disinformation

Kelsey Carter
On December 4, 2016, a North Carolina resident by the name of Edgar Welch drove six hours north to Washington D.C. He entered a pizza parlor by the name of Comet Ping Pong, armed with an AR-15 rifle to investigate online allegations that the restaurant was a child sex trafficking hub that involved the highest ranks of Washington elite, including Hillary Clinton. After firing the rifle once, he was quickly apprehended by law enforcement. Despite the outrageous claims of the “pizzagate” conspiracy theory – as it became known online – Welch claimed that “the intel on this wasn’t 100 percent,” and that he, “just wanted to do some good.” (AP) While the Comet Ping Pong staff had already experienced threats in response to the rumors, they never expected to face a live gunman willing to take violent action because of a fake story.

The pizzagate incident is a true manifestation of today’s internet. While fake news, rumors, and conspiracy theories are hardly a new phenomenon, social media allows false stories to spread throughout the internet at an unprecedented pace and scale. No one was hurt in the strange pizzagate incident, but it shows how online disinformation can become the cause of real-world, kinetic threats. Online disinformation is not relegated to the subculture world of pizza parlors, either. The difficulty in establishing truth online complicates political and global conflicts, and inhibits the democratic and diplomatic processes. In our society, which is heavily dependent on receiving information via the internet, the proliferation of online disinformation has the potential to seriously destabilize our ability to make informed decisions. As editor of the Washington Post, Martin Baron recently wrote: “if you have a society where people can’t agree on basic facts, how do you have a functioning democracy?” (Shafer, 2016)

The Threat of Disinformation Online

Disinformation is no new phenomenon. Rumors and falsehoods have existed in tandem with communication since the beginning of time, and the news media industry has always had to grapple with the challenge of sorting fact from fiction. In the U.S., fake news stories were rampant in the “penny press” of the 19th century. Mark Twain himself was a prolific fake news writer – although his writings often veered on the side of satire. One 1874 fake story about “solar armor” was famous for having run in the San Francisco Examiner and the New York Times before being debunked as fake. This proliferation of “fakes” led to a journalistic campaign in the early 20th century to combat false information in the media. (Shafer)

Disinformation has also been closely linked with state-sponsored information campaigns, especially wartime propaganda. In World War I, Germany would send fake stories to American news agencies to try and sway American opinions. (Shafer) During World War II, the Allies were infamous for dropping leaflets on troops and populations. This tactic was intended to demoralize, confuse, and create counter-narratives to their own state’s war narratives, sowing doubt in soldiers and civilian populations. (Psychological Warfare and Propaganda in World War II)

Disinformation campaigns were most notoriously used during the Cold War. The Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policy have historically included tactics of information warfare, used to delegitimize its enemies and promote its own narratives. The most famous instance of Cold War disinformation was the rumor that AIDS was a project developed by the C.I.A. (MacFarquhar) Disinformation was also used to cover up K.G.B. activity, such as the false story that Soviet defector Nikolai Artamonov-Shadrin was killed by the C.I.A. when in reality he was assassinated by the K.G.B. (White) The Kremlin also sought to interfere with western information media by jamming transmissions of broadcasting stations, such as the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. (White)

Disinformation Today

Disinformation and Russian strategy

Today, Russia remains the specialist of disinformation. Russian information specialists use a multi-pronged approach to spread disinformation, including traditional media outlets such as news agencies Sputnik and Russia Today (RT), covert operators, internet trolls, and outright propaganda. The purpose of these efforts is to undermine or alter the truth with the goal of crippling policy making and causing the public to mistrust official narratives. In the digital era, spreading online disinformation has become a critical part of Russia’s foreign strategy. In 2013, Russian Armed Forces Chief of General Staff admitted that: “the role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in
Russia has been especially active in using disinformation tactics in Europe to undermine liberal political narratives, particularly those of the European Union. Part of this strategy includes empowering the populist right and euro-skeptic parties. (MacFarquhar) Fake stories about refugees have been a common trend since the refugee crisis, including a story that a 13-year-old German girl was raped by migrants. Even though the German police debunked the facts, the story still took hold in public imagination. NATO, as an institution perceived to be working against Russian interests, is another common target. When Sweden was considering joining NATO, fake news stories by Russian authors exploded throughout social media. These included the fake headlines such NATO troops being able to rape Swedish women without criminal prosecution.

One clear distinction that makes Russian cyber disinformation tactics different from Cold War-era methods is that they capitalize the public nature of the Internet to undermine the validity of the news environment and dissuade people of the reliability of their news sources, rather than attempt to directly change their opinion. Trolling is key to this tactic. Russian analyst Catherine Fitzpatrick writes: “trolls inhibit informed debate by using crude dialogue to change ‘the climate of discussion,’…if you show up at The Washington Post or New Republic sites, where there’s an article that’s critical of Russia, and you see that there are 200 comments that sound like they were written by 12-year-olds, then you just don’t bother to comment.” (White)

Disinformation and the 2016 U.S. election

Online disinformation played a major role in complicating the issue was the fact that later hacks published by Guccifer 2.0 included real data. (Newman) The effect of disinformation on the U.S. election was so remarkable; many people argued that it swayed the election in Donald Trump’s favor. Though this can hardly be verified, the election was undoubtedly affected by rumors and conflicting truth
81% of participants in a Pew Research Center poll said that information about the candidates was so muddled that partisan debates could not agree upon “basic facts.” (In Presidential Contest, Voters Say ‘Basic Facts,’ Not Just Policies, Are in Dispute) This was especially evident during the presidential debates, where Hillary Clinton spent a considerable amount of time imploring audiences to fact-check Donald Trump’s claims.

Weaponized online disinformation

Online disinformation also plays a crucial role in contemporary war contexts to demoralize and destabilize the enemy, as well as stir up war support in domestic audiences. This involves vilifying foreign enemies domestically, and targeting foreign audiences to confuse their domestic narratives. (Bolin, Jordan and Stahlberg) Russia is again the premier actor in the strategic use of weaponized disinformation in conflict. One instance of this was the swirl of internet rumors following the 2014 downing of Malaysian aircraft MH17 during the annexation of Crimea. The proliferation of conspiracy theories so complicated the news story that few people were able to decipher the simple truth, which was that insurgents accidently targeted the aircraft using a Russian-supplied missile. (Normalizing Misinformation on Social Media)

Disinformation propagated through Twitter and other social media channels has also been a critical factor in the conflict in Ukraine. The onslaught of false news stories is so prolific that analysts have begun to refer to online disinformation as a ‘weapon of mass distortion.’ (Online Conspiracies and Real World Ramifications) Inordinate amounts of trolling and fake news stories about the rape of Ukrainian women are meant to destroy the morale of the Ukrainian army, and the Russian government hardly bothers to deny the issue. (Veebel) When confronted by the debunking of the fake story that a Russian child was crucified by Ukrainian forces, an official responded that the ratings were what was really important. (White)

Disinformation in wartime context

The war in Syria has also suffered its own campaign of weaponized disinformation. The Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) uses disinformation tactics to confuse the Syrian population, particularly those who support the rebel forces. They hack trusted news networks such as Al-Jazeera, and post fake news stories on their sites. (Shehabat) Other tactics include targeting Facebook pages of U.S. public figures, including President Obama and Oprah Winfrey, posting comments such as, “leave us alone, we love Bashar.” (Shehabat) Photos of bombings are mislabeled to decry or justify violence and hashtags are used to confuse sieges. The proliferation of conflicting accounts from within Aleppo is so overwhelming that it is difficult for anyone to be sure of what is happening on the ground. (Shehabat)

The confusion can be represented by the debate surrounding the Twitter account of Bana Al-Abed, a 7-year old girl in Aleppo. Bana Al-Abed’s account depicts the siege from her eyes, and has 313,000 followers. (Al-Abed) Her posts include pleas for help and videos of the girl huddling in her apartment during a bombing. The proliferation of disinformation about Aleppo has been so extensive that many people doubt whether Bana’s account is real, citing the sophisticated nature of her tweets are too much for a young girl who barely speaks English. They also claim that some of the footage of Bana appears to be filmed on high-quality cameras that could only belong to media professionals. Trolls on her account claim that her father is a jihadist, or that her account is a propaganda fabrication by the U.S. This doubt is not completely unjustified when other Twitter accounts, such as that of a lesbian woman in Damascus later revealed to be written by a 40-year old American man, have been proven false. (Rick Gladstone, Megan Specia, and Sydney Ember)

Disinformation in wartime context is extremely powerful. To quote Dmitry Kiselyev, the director of the organization that runs Sputnik, “today it is much more
costly to kill one enemy soldier than during World War II...if you can persuade a person, you don’t need to kill him.” (Rick Gladstone, Megan Specia, and Sydney Ember)

The role of social media in contemporary society

How has online disinformation taken such a hold of our society? The answer may lie in the role of social media. Increasingly, individuals turn to social media as their source for news. Thirty-five percent of 18-29 year-olds referred to social media as the most helpful medium for information about the 2016 presidential election. (Rick Gladstone, Megan Specia, and Sydney Ember) This is different than any other generations. The ability to choose who you follow on social media makes it very easy for users to create echo chambers of opinions that simply confirm the views they already hold. (Online Conspiracies and Real World Ramifications) Receiving information in this setting makes it easy to not hear neutral, fact-based reporting, which as a result, can feed partisan narratives and proliferate extremist views. Online extremism is a particularly thorny problem because social media forums make it very easy to find any extreme political doctrines and beliefs, whether it is populism, nationalism, racism, or sexism. (Online Conspiracies and Real World Ramifications)

Social media is also an ideal platform for conspiracy theories to proliferate. One author of a study that examined social media networks states that the lack of reporting accountability online “creates an ecosystem in which the truth value of the information doesn’t matter. All that matters in whether the information fits in your narrative.” (Manjoo) Unfortunately, arguing against falsehoods can be a losing battle. The rumor that President Obama was born in Kenya has existed since the 2008 campaign; and despite proof of contradictory evidence, Donald Trump continued to insist on the rumor as fact during his 2016 presidential campaign – even arguing that it was Hillary Clinton, and not himself, that initiated the conspiracy theory. One Washington Post reporter who a column called “What was Fake on the Internet this Week,” realized that facts only caused the audience she was trying to convince to entrench themselves further in their beliefs. She wrote, “In many ways, debunking just reinforced the sense of alienation or outrage that people feel about the topic.” Managing editor of Snopes describes fact-checking as, “Sisyphean – we’re all pushing the boulder up the hill, only to see it roll back down.” (Manjoo)

The traditional news media has a role to play in the changing nature of information transmission as well. Increasingly, the news has become less about direct reporting and more about reporting on what people are talking about – which is often the splashiest topic zipping around social media platforms. One example of this included a segment on Megyn Kelly’s show, during which a correspondent repeated the rumor that Hillary Clinton proposed killing Julian Assange by drone. (Shafer) In response to the allegation, Kelly gasped dramatically. There is also an issue of the decline of the traditional news media industry. The ease and low-cost of accessing news online has decreased public demand for printed journalism. This increasingly puts the news in the hands of writers who have not been trained in reporting accountability. (Shafer)
Anti-disinformation measures

Ukrainian media efforts

Because of the proliferation of Russian disinformation about the Ukraine conflict, Ukraine has become extremely active in countering online disinformation. One initiative was the creation of the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UCMC) in 2014, which airs coverage of the conflict by international-renowned journalists, and provides military and civil society press releases on the issues. The UCMC, which operates in a role traditionally filled by government, is independently run and funded by European and American organizations. The president of the P.R. company that runs the UCMC says her reason for creating the organization was “to counter Russian propaganda, which is very powerful.” (Bolin, Jordan and Stahlberg)

Another similar effort is the website StopFake.org, which was founded by students of the Mohyla School of Journalism in Kyiv. Students and professors team up with fact-finding groups to identify fake news stories about Ukraine. StopFake.org publishes their findings in Ukrainian, Russian, Romanian, Spanish and English; and the founding team regularly speaks to international audiences about how Russian propaganda is affecting the war in Ukraine. The site is funded by grants from the U.S. Congress, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, and even George Soros. (Bolin, Jordan and Stahlberg)

Institutional efforts

The EU and NATO are active in countering online disinformation. (Macfarquhar) The EU East StratCom Task Force runs a website that identifies and counters Russian disinformation. It features English and Russian translations and publishes two weekly publications: the Disinformation Review and the Disinformation Digest. The initiative, which uses the tagline, “DON’T BE DECEIVED – QUESTION EVEN MORE,” also tweets and creates YouTube videos about the developments in Russian disinformation.

In 2012, NATO created its Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (StratCom COE) located in Lithuania. The StratCom COE – which cites the 24/7 news cycle and rise of social media as part of the reason disinformation is widespread today – aims to counter disinformation and propaganda by instituting “coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims.”

Private sector efforts

The private sector has also recently become involved in countering online disinformation. In the wake of the election, social media platforms – especially Facebook – were attacked for their complicity in spreading misinformation about the candidates. The result has been a rush, on the part of the private sector, to pledge their commitment to minimizing disinformation on their platforms. Post-election, Google announced that they would no longer accept fake news websites as part of their advertising services, and use the same technologies it uses to prohibit ads for fake luxury items and scams to block fake news sites.

Facebook has also taken measures to assure the public that it is working to fight disinformation. On November 19, Mark Zuckerberg published a detailed statement disavowing disinformation and detailing Facebook’s pending anti-disinformation efforts. (Isaac) These include artificial intelligence detection, easy reporting mechanisms, and fake news ‘warnings’ for readers. If enough readers flag stories as spurious, they will be forwarded to a group of fact-checkers that includes Snopes and PolitiFact. (Isaac) Zuckerberg argues that these measures must be pursued carefully in order to prevent censorship and the limitation of freedom of speech. (Eddy)

Unfortunately, the effectiveness of anti-disinformation measures is very difficult to evaluate, potentially even impossible given the sheer expanse of the internet. However, such measures being undertaken by Ukrainian journalists, NATO & EU centers, and the private sector are all important and
should be pursued with increasing rigor.

Recommendations

Countering online disinformation is extremely difficult. People who are convinced by fake information can rarely be persuaded away from their beliefs. The nature of online disinformation only adds to this problem. The scope of information online can easily create confusion. Adding more information – even correct information – can cause readers to mistrust all narratives, except those they are already convinced of. At an appearance with Angela Merkel, former President Obama expressed his deep concern with regards to this issue, stating: “If we are not serious about facts and what’s true and what’s not, and particularly in an age of social media when so many people are getting their information in sound bites and off their phones, if we can’t discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems.” (Eddy)

Efforts to prevent and mitigate against the threat of disinformation should take three approaches. The first are governments, which can look to European countries for inspiration on countering disinformation. Legitimate journalist efforts, such as the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, can be promoted to ensure factual counter-narratives have the means necessary to reach the public. The U.S. and other recently-targeted countries can also create their own counter-disinformation centers, like those hosted by NATO and the E.U. This kind of initiative should be done in conjunction with social media platforms to ensure that it is conveys information in a manner and forum that is attractive and easily accessible to social media users and other populations who are prone to viewing online disinformation. Finally, governments could a cyber task force to review and award factual sites with verified status, which will be displayed on their webpage. Readers will then know that the source they are reading has been vetted for reliability and truth. This would encourage good reporting practices, while steering clear of censorship and authoritarianism.

The private sector also plays a critical role in stemming the proliferation of disinformation via their online platforms and products. Search companies like Google can impose a click-through page that informs readers attempting to access fake news websites that they are entering a website known for proliferating fake news. This can be modeled on click-through pages that users encounter when trying to access known malware-laced websites. Social media platforms like Facebook can also create a similar function for their platforms.

The last group that needs to be addressed are young people who may be easily influenced by disinformation, or even profiting from it. Disinformation education should be integrated into school curriculum, particularly since children and teenagers are key stakeholders in use of the Internet and social media. Students should be taught how to distinguish real information from fake information, how to access fact-checking resources, and the negative effects of online disinformation. Young people who have been drawn into the lucrative world of disinformation should be provided with counseling and mentorship, since 17-year-olds who can generate up to $3,000 a day based on fake stories are clever entrepreneurs. Rather than treating them like criminals, the Macedonian government can provide these young people with business mentorship and resources to direct their energy into socially positive efforts. These savvy individuals should also be tapped as allies and resources (perhaps even as paid contractors) in thinking about how build mechanisms for countering online disinformation.


Zuckerberg, Mark. “A lot of you have asked what we’re doing about misinformation, so I wanted to give an update.” Facebook. 19 November 2016.