

Written Representation 114

Name: Qsearch

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2018 SELECT COMMITTEE ON DELIBERATE ONLINE FALSEHOODS – CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND COUNTERMEASURES

Submitted by QSearch. Roger Tu Lee, CEO

This report is primary on (b) the motivations and reasons for the spreading of such falsehoods, and the types of individuals and entities, both local and foreign, which engage in such activity;

Propaganda, Disinformation, and Influence Operations

Propaganda & Disinformation

For the purpose of the Select Committee's inquiry, Propaganda and Disinformation are terms of art used interchangeably for 'narratives designed to sway a reader's view without regard to veracity, accuracy, or basis in reality.'

Influence Operations

While the Select Committee's focus is on propaganda and disinformation, I feel it is important to mention Influence Operation, the combination of digital disinformation and realworld interaction. While most Fake News focus on the persistent presence of biased information to change people's perception, Influence Operations combine biased information with psychological warfare in the real world to either create realworld "proof" of the online propaganda, or to incite conflict that "proves" the disinformation. Two examples from Russia's 2016 US election meddling;

The Black Fist project, where the Russians paid AfricanAmerican martial art instructors to promote selfdefense classes to AfricanAmerican in swing states prior to the 2016 presidential elections, then used the footage from the classes as proof the AfricanAmerican community is arming itself in order to inflame racial tensions.

The Dueling Rallies Provocation. The Russian operatives set up an antislamic event from a Facebook Page they had taken time to cultivate and grow. The two sides, which looked like a normal protest and counterprotest, quickly escalated into confrontation. What is disturbing about both cases is that; 1) The American participants did not break any law. They were unwittingly involved in causes they believe in strongly. 2) Even despite clear evidence, some of the participants still deny being influenced by the Russians. This type of attack is very difficult to detect, nearly impossible to prosecute, and are cheap enough to be within an average individual's budget. (The Dueling Rallies cost US\$200 to promote.)

Motivation & Reasoning

Financial

Most of the Fake news are created by people trying to make money from web traffic and accounts for most of the content and circulated fakes news, rather than the creation of fake news. As a practice, most of the fake sites circulate existing articles or plagiarized. Most of the apolitical Fake News are often translated articles or simply copied articles without attributions.

The fake news websites are targeting specific demographic, mostly readership from wealthy countries, like the USA, since an average traffic from the USA pays much higher than other countries. On financial ground, this would seem to make Singapore a poor market for Fake News, but as the Singaporean reality shows, the small but rich Singapore market makes financial sense if the operation is small enough in scale, or if there is a dramatic difference between the cost of living from the source country to Singapore.

Electoral/Political

The use of Fake News by one political party to gain electoral advantage is not new, although less applicable in Singapore where a strong media control is in place, and the political disparity is wide enough that use of Fake News for electoral and political gain will not garner sufficient outcome, are too obvious to be effective. The punishment, too, acts as sufficient deterrent.

National Security

The use of Fake News as an instrument of National Security and Policy has the same advantages as Cyber Warfare: plausible deniability and low detection threshold. In addition to the advantages of a cyber attack, Fake News exploit and exacerbate pre-existing social and racial tensions, whose causes are always beyond the responsibility of the attacker. In addition, because most governments lack adequate monitoring and visualisation tools, it is hard to measure the health of news and discussions. A prolonged systematic Fake News attack would not work without either a pre-existing social issue or prolonged systematic influence operations. However, as a precursor to diplomatic, economic or military action, it could be devastating in paralyzing national responses by identifying and fostering government opposition, proinvasion collectives or militia, and sow distrust to turn the citizens on the government.

Domestic Propaganda & Disinformation

Sometimes, those in charge of maintaining the distinction between real news and fake news, through the governmental licensing agency, also have the incentive to propagate fake news, despite their legal charter and mandate. In the ongoing drug war in the Philippines, President Duterte's administration has both deployed Fake News as a tool of opposition suppression as well as creating a fictitious cheerleading section for President Duterte himself, to the point where the manufacturing Fake News is industrialized. This is an increasingly common trend across the globe, to create the illusion of popular support through Fake News as a political justification for unpopular policy or cover for scandals.