



ETHICS IN DYSTOPIA? DIGITAL ADAPTATION AND US MILITARY INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Date: November 22, 2022

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 22, 2022, Dr. Emma Briant, Associate Professor at Bard College (United States of America) presented on *Ethics in Dystopia? Digital Adaptation and U.S. Military Information Operations*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS-Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were: 1) the need for enhancing digital literacy skills so that one can be resilient in the face of online information that conveys an existential threat; 2) the competition between the different forms of media prevailing today, and its impact on the online information environment; and 3) the differences between the U.S. and Canada in terms of strategic visions and legal frameworks as it pertains to media, information, and public diplomacy.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Briant emphasized the significance of social media as a vehicle for U.S. military-driven information operations which relied on covert tactics to influence those who were less likely to be convinced by coverage from government-branded outlets. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are being used by democracies for clandestine cyber operations. The U.S. military has been most prominent in this regard through their facilitation of psychological operations which involve raising support for political issues by spreading value-laden news, many of them being falsehoods. Dr. Briant notes that unrestrained covert tactics

such as these hold dire consequences and must be curtailed through the implementation of an ethics framework.

Question & Answer Period

The question-and-answer period drew upon the importance of maintaining vigilance towards the burgeoning impact of online disinformation by ensuring that there is balance in media coverage and rhetoric; a reinforcing of standards and frameworks for cooperation; and a mitigation of algorithmic targeting over big data platforms. Dr. Briant stressed that it was necessary to avoid online targeted actions that would constitute acts of censorship; thus, leading to the development of reactive and defensive narratives that would ironically give credence to the conspiracy theories being spread. In addition, she added that it is necessary to create an information environment in which there is a balance and transparency in terms of political views. This would lead to a more informed public debate occurring over social platforms, and less polarization that only serves to amplify negativity or distrust. Currently, both Canada and the U.S. are following different pathways to achieve this outcome.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Briant discussed the need for governments to act ethically online, and ways this could be achieved. Since 2012, the U.S. military has been engaged in Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) over platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as indicated by Stanford and Graphica's 'Unheard Voice' report of 2022. These operations have involved the use of fake personas and websites aimed at winning the trust of audiences that are distrusting of state-sponsored news outlets. U.S. government accounts are known to receive the most engagement by audiences, and therefore stand to gain the most from inauthentic manipulation of audience views and sentiments. To limit the consequences, the government must move away from the "all or nothing" justification (i.e., the view that the U.S. must retain absolute dominance over the information space) that drives their influence operations against Russia. At the same time, they must be mindful of the costs of inauthentic manipulation which are greater in democracies that use "Russia-style" tactics. Such tactics also risk damaging trust irreparably since truthful communications are likely to be regarded with suspicion when compared with the blatant falsehoods being spread online.

In addition, the suppression of overt forms of Russian propaganda by the U.S. has led to Russian influence operations being used covertly online, and in a similar fashion to the U.S. military's PSYOPS. There is an increasing use of proxies for the spread of paranoid conspiracy theories, which has added to the complexity of the global information environment. Due to this complexity, Dr. Briant argued that there is a likelihood that public official communications will not be received fairly by the public as they become recipients of messaging in the global information war. Nevertheless, officials must remain mindful of public concerns in their strategies by ensuring that their actions are not communicated in an unwise manner that may place personnel at risk. An example of exploited public sentiment was seen during the Russian digital subversion operations conducted in 2016; during this period, clandestine accounts were created to co-opt & infiltrate certain political platforms such as the Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter movements. The purpose behind setting up these fake accounts and pages was to drive engagement that was hostile and destabilizing to the point that significant issues would become protracted over time, rather than resolved. Platforms are used to facilitate these hostile engagements because of their monetizing algorithms in the form of outrage, false, and extreme content that goes viral and, in turn, facilitates further data collection that can be used for nefarious purposes online. The deceptive way these operations are carried out further underscores the need for vigilance in how institutional communications are publicly tailored.

Finally, Dr. Briant concluded that due to the emerging technologies in the influence operation landscape, there are several potential challenges associated with developing and implementing an ethical framework. The most apparent challenge relates to how the military and influence operation policies are ill equipped to handle the changes brought on by emerging technologies. More specifically, Western militaries must focus on evolving their influence operations to handle this new context. Other challenges may rise as researchers begin to ask more difficult questions and militaries become more transparent as the public consciousness about online information changes. This means that as the public becomes more distrusting of what is on the Internet, the military will need to factor more openness in their processes to build trust. By embedding transparency into processes associated with military influence ops, hostile foreign actors are less likely to exploit divisions for their own ends.

Question & Answer Period

Content removal of terrorist content is a necessary solution in many cases; however, it raises significant concerns. Takedowns can be exploited by

conspiracy theorists seeking to advance anti-democratic ideas; ideas which can gain support from those that are anxious about censorship in general. In a liberal democracy, the taking down of content can be a valid concern as it indicates that platforms that are meant to be a source of transparency and engagement are instead prone to censorship. To prevent individuals from becoming vulnerable to disinformation by conspiracy theorists, it is important to reduce anxieties around perceived acts of censorship. To that end, platforms must enact privacy protection measures that signal that their platforms are fair and secure to all. In the U.S., funding for military operations means that certain activities cannot target the U.S. audience, whereas in Canada, there are similar constitutional protections for citizens. Overall, the haphazard nature in how domestic audiences are being targeted suggests more clarity is needed for the public to understand the nuances of current influence operations and how they are targeted by them.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Western governments, especially the U.S., must be aware of the costs involved in using “Russia-style” tactics for inauthentic manipulation of audience views and sentiments.
- Since 2012, the U.S. military has been engaged in PSYOPS over platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. These operations have involved the use of fake personas and websites aimed at winning the trust of audiences that are distrusting of state-sponsored news outlets.
- As the public becomes more embroiled in the global information war, there is a likelihood that official communications about issues will not be treated fairly. Nevertheless, public officials must be cognizant of how their communications may be perceived and whether it can lead to inadvertent risk against their personnel.
- Emerging technologies in the influence operations landscape create challenges for the creation of a viable ethical framework that can oversee online psychological operations conducted by militaries.
- Russian digital subversion activities during 2016 were focused on creating hostile engagement between different interest groups for the purposes of ensuring that discontent over significant political issues would remain protracted over time.

Question & Answer Period

- While content removal may be necessary in extreme cases (such as those following a terrorist attack), platform moderators must be cautious in excessive takedowns which can constitute as a form of censorship in the eyes of conspiracy theorists; thus, bolstering approval of their views by those that are anxious about censorship
- To reduce anxieties around censorship, platforms should focus more on implementing privacy enhancing measures which can signal that their platforms are fair and secure for all.
- The underhanded nature of current influence operations suggests that more clarity is needed for the general public so that they can understand how they are being targeted by them.



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