



FRACTURES: THE IMPACT OF DISCORD, DISINFORMATION, AND DAMAGED DEMOCRACY

Date: November 23, 2022

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KEY EVENTS

On November 23, 2022, Dr. Caroline Orr Bueno, Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Maryland, presented *Fractures: The Impact of Discord, Disinformation, and Damaged Democracy*. The key issues were the difficulty of defining and operationalizing disinformation, the major forms of extremist disinformation and what makes them effective to the human brain, and how disinformation was used by the 2022 Freedom Convoy.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Orr Bueno discussed the difficulty of defining disinformation, its major forms (propaganda, conspiracy theories, narratives, and memes), and what makes extremist disinformation content effective vis-a-vis the human brain and its vulnerabilities. Dr. Orr Bueno highlighted how disinformation interacts and utilizes moral narratives, grievances, emotion, and relatable issues to exploit its audience. Such exploitation is enhanced by an era of information overload, and the unique environment that online platforms provide, to which policy and research is trying to better understand.

Question & Answer Period

Dr. Orr Bueno discussed the extent to which foreign support aided the truck convoy, the effects of Section 230 in the U.S. on content moderation, and countering extremist content on secure, fringe platforms.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Orr Bueno first discussed the challenges of defining disinformation in a way that does not rely on unobservable or unmeasurable concepts, which could reduce the grey area that currently characterises disinformation analysis. She noted that disinformation sometimes can overlap with misinformation in real world scenarios, as well as the relative newness of significant scholarly work in the field. Nevertheless, according to the current consensus, disinformation is a deliberate act that involves spreading false information, which involves some sort of intent.

Extremism related disinformation has numerous forms, but four major ones which tend to interact and make hybrid forms are: propaganda, conspiracy theories, narratives, and memes. Such forms are often deployed on mainstream platforms, yet the structure of these often allow for echo chambers to organize, further isolating these groups from moderating opinions or challenges, and fostering cohesive and coordinated messages.

Dr. Orr Bueno discussed what makes extremist disinformation effective, including appeals to shared moral values and grievances, blaming and scapegoating, establishing a common enemy, utilising emotion, and transference. A widely shared moral value that is often appealed to is liberty and freedom, for example with vaccine disinformation. Disgust and fear are emotions often targeted by disinformation campaigns; for example, narratives that attach the threat of child grooming to trans people. Transference is the ability to transfer positive or negative qualities of one entity onto another. For example, Justin Trudeau being framed as a communist or globalist in extremist circles can inspire others abroad to apply the same labels to their enemy of choice.

Disinformation also exploits human biases and vulnerabilities. In an era of information overload, individuals are likely to fall back on cognitive shortcuts, such as relying on indicators of trust such as blue profile verification checkmarks. Disinformation also preys on emotions; for example, effective disinformation looks to match the mood of its audience. Repeating narratives and tropes can also result in the illusory truth effect, and exploits frequency bias. Lastly, users can feel more confidence in social media profiles which have the appearance of independence.

Dr. Orr Bueno argued that Canada was primed for an extremist event before the truck convoy, the yellow vest movement being one signal of similar sentiments, as were influxes of xenophobic and accelerationism narratives tied to COVID-19. The Freedom Convoy was then framed as a popular movement of the common people, a self-fulfilling prophecy, with significant coverage by foreign outlets like Fox News and Russia Today (RT).

Question & Answer Period

Dr. Orr Bueno was first asked the extent to which foreign support aided the truck convoy. She thought that foreign media certainly played a role in establishing expectations of a large, popular, and historic event. She felt the role of foreign funding is less clear, and that once funding could be dissected, we might find splinters into related groups or activities, such as the yellow vest movement. She concluded that foreign media coverage increased the size of the convoy and likely made participants more willing to stay longer.

Dr. Orr Bueno was later asked about the effects of Section 230 in the U.S on content moderation, and the work being done to counter extremist content on secure, fringe platforms. For the first question, she cautioned that policy change about liability (i.e., Section 230) should tread carefully to avoid an overcorrection. Here, she remembered a case abroad where a country had applied liability to a social media platform, and the response was a shutdown of comments. To the latter question of extremists moving to fringe platforms, Dr. Orr Bueno acknowledged that this closes off access for researchers, and generally makes it difficult to track such groups.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Challenges defining disinformation include the possible overlap of misinformation and the inability to directly measure it. Regardless, disinformation is a deliberate act that involves spreading false information, which involves some sort of intent, per the current consensus.
- Extremism disinformation has numerous forms, but four major ones are: propaganda, conspiracy theories, narratives, and memes, which can overlap and make hybrid forms.

- Effective extremist disinformation utilizes appeals to shared moral values and grievances, blaming and scapegoating, establishment of a common enemy, emotion, and transference.
- Effective disinformation also exploits vulnerabilities related to information overload, familiarity, and the appearance of independence from social media profiles.
- Early signals of the Freedom Convoy included the yellow vest movement, and xenophobic and accelerationism narratives tied to COVID-19. The truck convoy was also significantly influenced by media coverage by foreign outlets like Fox News and RT.

Question & Answer Period

- Foreign media certainly played a role in establishing expectations of a big, popular, historic event, although the role of foreign funding is less clear.
- It is likely that foreign media coverage increased the size of the Freedom Convoy and made participants more willing to stay longer.
- Policy changes regarding liability (i.e., Section 230) should tread carefully to avoid an overcorrection.



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