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"Diplomacy in a Challenging Global Environment"

A Research Report

COMMITTEE: Political

QUESTION OF: International Disinformation Campaigns

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Introduction and background

With the rapid growth of the internet, and subsequently social media, the popularity and impact of disinformation campaigns has risen. A body as widespread and variant as the internet is the perfect platform on which to deliberately spread false information, or as some call it - 'fake news'. People use these types of campaigns as a way to disrupt a stable society so that it is easier to manipulate in favor of political unrest; when a population is already unsettled by an internal conflict they are easier to use as vehicles for dissemination.

The malicious spread of disinformation has been seen time and time again, both in the United States and on an international level. For example, in the aftermath of the annexation of the Crimea region, social media was aroused with anger and frustration towards Russia. The blame of the conflict was constantly being shifted from one body to another, often with little to no reason. The same happened during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which the improper dissmeniation of news over social media radically severed ties between the politically active.

Social media is an omnipresent factor in everyday life, so it is reasonable that it is becoming one of the primary tools of social disruption in present day conflict. People use the internet as a way to escape their surroundings and are thus in the midst of a constant stream of news, whether is be true or false. In trying to use digital escapism as a means to distance themselves from prevalent political issues, people only delve deeper into the issue.

As the popularity of modern media continues to grow, its place in political disruption will only continue to increase. While disinformation campaigns are already terrifying enough, the potential that they hold to further disrupt society and promote political unrest is shocking.

How is the Effect of Media Manipulation Challenged by Democracy?

One of the most important principles in a democracy, or any free society for that matter, is the freedom of speech and press. Such institutions thrive on the dissemination of news from various sources because it allows the citizens to formulate a well-educated opinion on political topics. Nations that do not have a basis of such pluralism are more likely to struggle with disinformation campaigns because their information intake is already more limited and censored. Democracies provide a rational basis off of which people can formulate their opinions, but in nations that do not have this foundation there is little chance that a logical counter-opinion can be made.

The adaptation of a bright line policy when it comes to free speech and press in the United States is what makes it relatively easy for 'fake news' to be shot down quickly; legislation in the US is crafted with the best interest and public safety of the citizens in mind. Citizens in nations that do not have such legislation in regards to the freedoms of speech and press, such as Russia or China,

are more likely to fall victim to these campaigns because they are more disconnected from the source of their information.

Why is the Use of Disinformation Campaigns so Successful?

Unlike traditional media methods, the spread of news over the internet has a tendency to be quick and to the point with more emotional and biased undertones. Because of this, the dissemination of wrong information is easier to achieve because it adheres to the things people seek in social media: thought provoking and controversial news. Human communication and interaction is entirely irrational. People seek information that most interests them, whether or not it is completely factual. This part of human nature is only fueled by the vast sphere of information available through the internet because it allows people to view only the things they want to see while simultaneously blocking out topics they find uninteresting or upsetting. The use of the internet as a means for digital escapism is what allows disinformation campaigns to be so successful; by going online to get away from the issues surrounding them people can often wind up delving deeper into disturbing political issues.

Mainstream media such as television or newspapers offers a more streamlined flow of information that social media ignores. In being a melting pot for so many different opinions, it is harder to prevent the spread of misinformation on the internet because the information is more fluid. Rather than coming from one specific source, news online comes from a multitude that often have vastly differing viewpoints depending on the topic, making it incredibly difficult to determine what is true and what is false. Without the funneling of information that traditional

media has, it is harder for nations that restrict press and speech to ensure that their citizens are getting the information that the government wants, thus leading to the use of disinformation campaigns to narrow the flow of news so that it benefits those in power.

Fake news and disinformation is used as a vehicle to shape the perspective of a particular audience, whether it be a nationwide or global one. Such campaigns are not successful because they offer new information to these bodies in order to insight unrest or emotion, but rather because they are often based on the slight bending of what is true in order to promote one side of a conflict. The power of a disinformation campaign relies solely on how well it can disrupt a society; the closer to the truth the information actually is, the more likely people are to believe it and therefore act on it interpersonally. It is the interaction between individuals that make these campaigns so harmful, because after the spread of information leaves the source it is much harder to combat.

What has Been Done in the Past to Solve this Problem?

In the past, the United Nations has reaffirmed that their primary goal when dealing with the negative influences of disinformation campaigns is to uphold the values expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As such, they have made a myriad of efforts to tackle the spread of misinformation.

In order to prevent the further spread of disinformation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has released a guide to proper journalism that details how to handle the spread of information in a healthy manner. The guide details the

difference between disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, thus setting a boundary in an otherwise hazy area. It also addresses why trust in the media and journalists is so important in creating a society that has a healthy news stream.

Similarly, the United Nations has issued a joint declaration that tackles the concerns of disinformation that may lead to censorship, suppression of critical thinking, and other basic tenets of human rights. The declaration also pinpoints abstract ideas such as falsity and objectivity that are otherwise difficult to understand.

What are Possible Solutions to this Issue?

Being that media is a rapidly growing and changing industry it is important that all facets of the issue be addressed within their own context. In restricting the spread of misinformation it is important that the legislation does not infringe on preexisting rational boundaries, meaning that the freedom of speech and press that is present in many nations should remain relatively unchallenged.

Being that the use of social media to further such campaigns is an international issue, parties should not act solely in the interest of maintaining democracy, but rather finding a solution that will benefit all nations equally without taking a step backwards.

In most cases it is also important to ensure that the direct limitation on speech and the press is kept to a minimum, and instead taking the speaker and context into consideration when dealing with various disinformation campaigns. The issue with these campaigns that make them so hard

to combat is that they often do not violate any laws on the surface, rather finding workarounds of the law. By the time that area is legislated, the party spreading false information likely already had a new method of spreading their disinformation, which is why taking a long period of time to combat the issue is hazardous. As such, any resolutions to the use of disinformation campaigns should take the rapidly changing nature of media into consideration in order to reach the most effective solution.

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