

The War Of The Words

20th November 2017

Russia is currently facing multiple allegations of interference in the 2016 US Presidential election, but it now seems that the state has been doing far more behind the scenes, with the exposure of a “troll factory” that sees agents attempt to force the narrative of political events to their own ends.



Social media has allowed for almost 3,000 accounts to be created that pass derogatory comments on events such as the London Bridge attack and the EU referendum, making highly inflammatory comments and attempting to shape the context in which these issues are discussed. It is now apparent that the majority of this work is carried out by the Internet Research Agency, based in St. Petersburg, where bloggers work 24/7 to flood Western media with pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments. Prime Minister Theresa May has now openly accused Russia of ‘*weaponising information*’ and of planting fake stories.

Perhaps the outrage here should be reserved not for the fact that this is happening at all, but that it is only now reaching the crescendo of fury that should have come a long time ago. There is an extensive tradition of planting fake news: just ask the Hittites of Pharaonic Egypt, who fought Ramses II to a draw in the 13th century BC but who would have been surprised to see the monuments along the Nile indicating a crushing victory for the king. But it was not until the 20th century, and in particular the advent of internet technology, that saw the concept really take off. Sometimes it is harmless ‘*clickbait*’, promising a story so fantastical that one feels compelled to click and generate advertising revenue. Sometimes it is done purely for self-aggrandisement. Sometimes it is for far darker purposes entirely.

For Russia to be attempting to manipulate political discourse, and outcomes, in sovereign states is extremely worrying but this is not ‘*new*’ news. The Internet Research Agency has been promoting Putin for years, and China has veritable armies of civil servants happy to tell you why democracy doesn’t work. The difference is that there have never been such blatant attempts to affect outside actors rather than keep focused domestically.

Theresa May’s choice of the word ‘*weaponisation*’ is worryingly perfect. Now more than ever, online messages and ‘*facts*’ are being presented with the sole aim of being taken as truth and acted upon as such. Not only does this have the potential to do nothing less than change the course of history – as with arguably the election of Trump (who himself claimed to have invented the phrase ‘*fake news*’, in a delicious display of irony) – but it can creep into every aspect of business and professional life. Now more than ever it can be very difficult to determine what is ‘*real*’ and what is ‘*fake*’ and, if the latter, to ascribe motivation and intention. If negative, is it an attempt by a competitor to smear a genuine company or something reliably damaging? If positive, is it a truthful account of a position or is it emblematic of reputation cleaning to present an unblemished face to the world?

Understanding where the truth stops and where fake news begins is sometimes obvious, and sometimes complex (though not impossible), although that it has come to this at all – given the climate where telling

outright lies has seemingly become an acceptable part of business and political life. As Donald Trump himself might say: sad.

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