Russian Social Media Influence

Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe

Addendum

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Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe

Testimony of Todd C. Helmus[1]
The RAND Corporation[2]

Addendum to testimony before the Select Committee on Intelligence
United States Senate

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Following the hearing on August 1, 2018, the congressional committee sought additional information and requested answers to the questions in this document. The answers were submitted for the record.

Questions from Senator Tom Cotton

Question 1

As most people are aware, the most detailed accounting of Russia's past activities is the Mitrokhin Archive. On page 243 of the Mitrokhin Archive, as detailed in The Sword and the Shield, it states,

It was the extreme priority attached by the Centre (KGB Headquarters) to discrediting the policies of the Reagan administration which led Andropov to decree formally on April 12, 1982, as one of the last acts of his fifteen-year term as chairman of the KGB, that is was the duty of all foreign intelligence officers, whatever their "line" or department, to participate in active measures. Ensuring that Reagan did not serve a second term thus became Service A's most important objective.

On February 25, 1983, the Centre instructed its three American residences to being planning actives measures to ensure Reagan's defeat in the presidential election of November 1984. They were ordered to acquire contacts on the staffs of all possible presidential candidates and in both party headquarters…The Centre made clear that any candidate, of either party, would be preferable to Reagan.

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*Residences around the world were ordered to popularize the slogan "Reagan Means War!"
The Centre announced five active measures "theses" to be used…his militarist adventurism; his
personal responsibility for accelerating the arms race; his support for repressive regimes around
the world; his responsibility for tension with his NATO allies. Active Measures "theses" in
domestic policy included Reagan's alleged discrimination against ethnic minorities; corruption
in his administration; and Reagan's subservience to the military-industrial complex."*

*So, in 1982, over thirty-five years ago, we had the KGB using active measures in the United
States to sow racial discord, try to create problems with NATO, discredit our nuclear
modernization, undercut military spending, highlight corruptions, and try to encourage the U.S.
to retreat from the world stage. Aren't the themes the KGB used in 1982, similar to those we're
seeing the Russian Intelligence Services use on social media in 2018?*

Answer

The focus of the RAND research used as a basis for my testimony before the committee was
on Russia's propaganda efforts directed at Eastern Europe. The research for this study was
conducted in 2017[3]. That study, as well as my other research, did not review this historical
analog in great detail, and thus I cannot compare Russia's campaign against the Reagan
presidency, as articulated above, and Russia's modern political warfare campaign against the
United States at this time.

Question 2

*Isn't this Russian social media campaign really just old wine in new bottles, with perhaps a
different distributor?*

Answer

It is true that Russia has historically worked to meddle in the internal affairs of various
foreign countries. For example, a recent RAND Corporation study highlighted a Russian political
warfare campaign in Estonia known as the "Bronze Night," when Russia, in an effort to respond
to the Estonian government's quest to move a statue commemorating the Soviet victory in World
War II, launched cyber attacks against the country's web domains and possibly organized a
major protest that left one dead and 150 injured.[5] According to a recent Center for Strategic and
International Studies report, Russia has also cultivated "an opaque web of economic and political
patronage" that sought to influence internal politics, state institutions, and economies of

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[3] Todd C. Helmus, Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Joshua Mendelsohn, William
Marcellino, Andriy Bega, and Zev Winkelman, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian
Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2237-OSD, 2018. As of August 30,
2018: www.rand.org/t/RR2237

[5] Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, and
Katya Migazheva, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.:
RAND Corporation, RR-1772-A, 2018. As of August 30, 2018: www.rand.org/t/RR1772

Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Latvia, and Serbia.[6] Russia has most certainly sought to assert influence in other nation states as well.

As the question suggests, what is clearly unique about recent Russian political warfare activities is its use of social media. The Kremlin initially developed its army of *trolls* (fake social media accounts managed by Russian agents) and social media *bots* (automated social media accounts) in order to influence the Russian domestic audience.[7] With some apparent success, the Kremlin then began to train these capabilities on foreign audiences, most immediately against Ukraine, and then beyond.

These social media operations, which have also included the use of Facebook ads and pages, are particularly unique and potentially powerful because of their ability to link specific messages with specific target audiences. A simple review of Facebook's capability for ad-targeting illustrates its power as a potential tool for political warfare. Specifically, the medium allows advertisers access to "powerful audience selection tools" that can be used to "target the people who are right for your business."[8] Such tools can increase the efficiency and potential efficacy of messaging campaigns that had, prior to the social media age, not been available at scale to government propaganda campaigns. The social media campaigns can also mimic popular conversations and debates and so exert a kind of peer influence on American audiences. Ensuring that malign actors like Russia do not have easy access to such tools will prove a critical challenge to technology companies and policymakers in the years ahead.

Question 3

We've heard from open testimony before this Committee that the Russians are using active measures to undermine our missile defense deployments, nuclear modernization efforts, and to try and drive a wedge between the U.S. and NATO on these issues. Additionally, we know from Mitrokhin and Bob Gate's memoir "From the Shadows" that this was part of their playbook in the 1980s as well.

To what extent have you looked for and seen Russian activity on this front on social media?

Answer

The focus of the RAND research used in my testimony before the committee was on Russia's propaganda efforts directed at Eastern Europe.[9] As part of that work, we identified and reviewed Russian efforts to drive a wedge between Russian speakers in the Baltics and their home states, the European Union, and members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However,

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[6] Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016.

[7] Keir Giles, *Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*, London: Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, March 2016.

[8] Facebook, "Choose Your Audience," webpage, 2018. As of August 30, 2018: https://www.facebook.com/business/products/ads/ad-targeting

[9] Helmus et al., 2018.

we did not look for or identify Russian efforts to drive a wedge between the United States and NATO.

Questions from Senator Joe Manchin

Question 1

What modifications would you recommend to the large social media companies that would enable users to identify the source and potential funding of items posted on social media?

Answer

It seems logical to conclude that if consumers were able to determine whether particular social media content was the direct product of a foreign disinformation or influence campaign, then that content would potentially lose much of its influence value. If an intriguing social media post was outed as a social media bot or identified as coming from a known Russian troll, then that content would seem to lose all credibility. Consequently, the report I co-wrote on the topic, *Russian Social Media Influence*, identified several ways that technology firms or other external entities, such as governments, could inform audiences quickly and directly of Russian propaganda content.

We have previously noted that it is critical to highlight Russian propaganda in ways that are fast and that target at-risk audiences. Thus, our study highlighted several new approaches that could possibly take advantage of advances in modern information technology. For example, our study highlighted the potential use of Google Ads. This approach uses videos and other content embedded in Google search results to educate populations who search for Russian-created fake news on Google and other search engines. The report also highlighted the potential value of viewpoint bots. A viewpoint bot can, in theory, use advanced algorithms to identify Russian bots or trolls engaged in hashtag campaigns. Once it identifies a bot or troll, the viewpoint bot posts messages to the offending hashtags, informing audiences of Russian influence efforts.

However, there may be a need for some caution in the implementation of any disinformation tagging campaign. In 2017, Facebook implemented a campaign to mark inaccurate posts with a "Disputed" tag. However, less than a year after its implementation, Facebook terminated the program because the effort was deemed ineffective.[11] In particular, Facebook's testing revealed that marking some content "false" or "disputed" did not necessarily change some audience members' opinions about the accuracy of the content. And Facebook cited research suggesting that strong language or visualizations, such as the "Disputed" marker, can actually "backfire and further entrench someone's beliefs."[12] Other researchers show what they call an "implied truth" effect, by which "false stories that fail to get tagged are considered validated, and thus are seen

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[11] Tessa Lyons, "Replacing Disputed Flags with Related Articles," Facebook, December 20, 2017. As of August 30, 2018:
https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/12/news-feed-fyi-updates-in-our-fight-against-misinformation/

[12] Jeff Smith, Grace Jackson, and Seetha Raj, "Designing Against Misinformation," *Medium*, December 20, 2017. As of August 30, 2018: https://medium.com/facebook-design/designing-against-misinformation-e5846b3aa1e2

as more accurate."13 Consequently, it will be critical to ensure that any new efforts that tag false content undergo empirical evaluations to ensure that the regimens achieve their intended effect.

Question 2

Should there be disclaimers on anything other than personal information?

Answer

Unfortunately, our study on Russian social media operations in Eastern Europe did not address this type of policy response, so I will refrain from answering this question.

Question 3

Should everything posted on social media have a "tag" that allows users to determine who posted information, even if it was re-posted or shared by another person, so you can always determine the actual source?

Answer

Unfortunately, our study on Russian social media operations in Eastern Europe did not address this type of policy response, so I will refrain from answering this question.

Question from Senator Angus King

Question 1

At the hearing on August 1, 2018, I asked each witness to submit written policy recommendations to the Committee. Specifically, please provide recommendations on the following topics:

- *Technical solutions, such as requirements to label bot activity or identify inauthentic accounts;*
- *Public initiatives focused on building media literacy;*
- *Solutions to increase deterrence against foreign manipulation; and*
- *Any additional policy recommendations.*

Answer

While we were conducting field research in Estonia and Latvia and having phone conversations with numerous other regional activists, the recommendation we heard most frequently was the need for media literacy training.

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[13] Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, "The Implied Truth Effect: Attaching Warnings to a Subset of Fake News Stories Increases Perceived Accuracy of Stories Without Warnings," working paper, December 8, 2017. As of August 30, 2018: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3035384

Several such efforts in Eastern Europe are currently under way. For example, the Non-Governmental Organization, Media Baltic Centre, with some international funding, provides training to journalists in the Baltics and conducts media literacy training in the region. In addition to helping journalists avoid becoming "unwitting multipliers of misleading information," the organization works with school teachers in the region to help them "decode media and incorporate media research into teaching." The program also works to guide school children with media production programs and help raise awareness of fake news on social media. In addition, the U.S. embassy in Latvia was looking to initiate media literacy programming. A local tech entrepreneur in Latvia is interested in creating a nongovernmental organization start-up that would advocate for broader media literacy training and develop a Baltic-focused, crowdsourced, fact-checking website along the lines of the popular English-language fact-checking site Snopes.[14] Beyond these disparate efforts, we recommended establishing media literacy training as part of a national curriculum. Both Canada and Australia have developed such curriculums. In addition, Sweden, based on concerns of Russian fake news and propaganda, has launched a nationwide school program to teach students to identify Russian propaganda.[155]

Given that a curriculum-based training program will take time to develop and establish impact, we recommended that authorities in Eastern Europe launch a public information campaign that teaches the concepts of media literacy to a mass audience. This campaign, disseminated via conventional and social media, could be targeted to the populations in greatest need. It is likewise possible to meld public information campaigns with social media–driven training programs. Facebook has also launched its own media literacy campaign, most recently marked by distributing tips to users for spotting fake news stories.[15] As we noted, it would certainly be possible to develop such efforts for an East European and Ukrainian audience.

In theory, helping audiences, including those in the United States, better access, analyze, and evaluate media messages and their accuracy can help reduce the plague of fake news and limit the ability of Russia to blindly influence the U.S. public. However, the scientific evidence for media literacy training to help audiences detect the types of content produced by propagandists remains limited. Consequently, for both U.S. and European media literacy initiatives, it will be critical to scientifically evaluate the impact of such initiatives and determine the types of trainings (e.g., online versus offline, short course versus long course) that are suitable for specific audiences, mediums, and content.

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[14] Helmus et al., 2018.

[15] See, for example, Facebook, "Tips to Spot False News," webpage, 2018. As of August 30, 2018: https://www.facebook.com/help/188118808357379