#FAKE NEWS:
An Analysis of the Effects of Social Media on Democratic International Relations

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Abstract

The subject of international conflict and the strategies used in multinational disputes are frequently examined within the discipline of international relations. Much like existing debates related to the use of nukes or drones, social media is a weapon of international relations and should be analyzed as such. Using examples of Russian international relations and interference, I argue that states can ideologically weaponize social media to frame and position the narratives of issues in a way that is favourable to its goals, potentially threatening the functionality of democracy and the representative systems of targeted democratic states.

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Introduction

Social Media is an international relations tool that should not be overlooked. Much like the existing debates on the ethics of drones and nuclear weapons, social media should be considered a weapon of armed conflict and be analyzed as a political took with the potential to incite warfare.[1] Using examples of Russian international relations and interference, I argue that states can ideologically weaponize social media to frame and position the narratives of issues in a way that is favourable to its goals, potentially threatening the functionality of democracy and the representative systems of targeted democratic states. Moving forward, I will explain how social media poses a threat to the functionality of democracy using Russia's interference in foreign elections and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict as evidence before finally discussing potential solutions to protect the representative systems of democratic nations.

Social Media: A Hinderance to Democracy

The ability of government representatives to make decisions that reflect the will of the citizens is the fundamental principle of democracy. In addition to simply

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[1] Omar Dumdum, "Social Media Has Entered the International Relations Chat," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 12 (2021): 3703; Yanti Dwi Astuti, Rahmah Attaymini, and Maya Sandra Rosita Dewi, "Digital Media and War: Social Media as a Propaganda Tool for the Russia-Ukraine Conflict in the Post-Truth Era," in *Proceedings of the Annual International Conference on Social Science and Humanities* (Atlantis Press, 2023), 20.

voting for and electing representatives, democracy also involves the functionality of the institutions and social conditions that make it possible for a "citizen-owned, citizen-controlled, and citizen-driven" state to be actualized.[2] The proliferation of propaganda makes it particularly difficult for citizens to establish the facts necessary to hold their leaders accountable and evaluate the permissibility of their representatives' decisions.[3] This pertains specifically to international relations. For any semblance of democracy within global decision-making, citizens must be informed and aware of how their nation is implicated in international affairs. As information about international events is not always easily accessible, citizens use the availability of international information on social media to inform them of international happenings.

The international use of propaganda tactics on the international stage is not new with the creation of the internet and social media. However, the sheer intensity and quantity of potentially false international information made available and algorithmically promoted online differ between historical and modern digital disinformation. Social media also enables propaganda to be framed in a

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[2] Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2021): 703; "Definition of Democracy," Democracy Watch, last modified 2011, https://democracywatch.ca/definition-of-democracy/.

[3] Matthew Baum and Phillip Potter, "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media," *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (2019): 748, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331543555_Media_Public_Opinion_and_Foreign_Policy_in_the_Age_of_Social_Media?enrichId=rgreq-c28f0426ffa9c322bb2ed4fa0fdf2792-XXX&enrichSource=Y292ZXJQYWdlOzMzMTU0MzU1NTtBUzo3MzU3MTU2NjMwMjAwMzJAMTU1MjQxOTY5MTA3MQ%3D%3D&el=1_x_2&_esc=publicationCoverPdf.

particularly poignant way. Functioning modern-day democracies such as Canada and the United States view the protection of freedom of speech and expression as an essential element of democratic proceedings, thus making it potentially more difficult to moderate and regulate what is posted on social media.[4] The endorsement of democratic free speech on online platforms paradoxically makes a nation's system of democracy weaker, as it augments the opportunity for foreign nations to expose citizens to persuasive propaganda about their home nation or the decisions of their representatives. Furthermore, with the rapid development of artificial intelligence technologies, international adversaries can "flood the cyberspace with misinformation on a faster and wider scale."[5] The capacity for artificial intelligence to create realistic, deepfake videos and other forms of dishonest reporting is so high that I argue it is not impossible to believe there is potential for it to harm the democratic foundations of a nation.

Not all propaganda on social media or any form of historical or contemporary media is guaranteed to be effective in pursuing a populace. The effectiveness of propaganda relies on how the message's narrative is indexed and framed.[6] How an issue is framed can effectively alter how one conceptualizes facts or events.[7] The human brain relies on "unconscious emotional

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[4] Dumdum, "Social Media Has Entered the International Relations Chat," 3704.

[5] Ibid., 3704.

[6] Zachery Kluver, Skye Cooley, Robert Hinck, and Asya Cooley, *Propaganda: Indexing and Framing the Tools of Disinformation* (Strategic Multilayer Assessment Integrating Information in Joint Operations, 2020), 1, https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Quick-Look_Propaganda-and-Disinformation-in-Networked-Societies_FINAL.pdf

[7] Ibid., 5.

associations to form our most basic responses and understandings of the world," otherwise known as schemas.[8] When issues on social media are framed in a way that targets an individual's cognitive beliefs and prejudices through schemas, it forms “underlying narratives outlining who we are and how we should act in a given circumstance.”[9] Consequently, it augments the likelihood that the proliferated propaganda will work to alter the thinking of whoever is internalizing it.[10]

Propaganda and the truth are also not always antonyms. Half-truths, which can be defined as “a specific type of deceptive statement, a sort of bridge between the world of facts and the world of speculation or even fiction,” are frequently incorporated into propaganda messaging as “post-truth” political messaging causes for the distinction between what is real and fake increasingly blurred.[11] When elements of the propaganda rely on selectively applied verifiable facts, the intended message of the propaganda is more likely to resonate and alter the consumer's thought process. Social media can amplify this blurring of fact as it is uniquely suited to target consumers' emotions in a way that encourages them to be more likely to act based on “gut feelings or resentments than verifiable facts.”[12] The most effective propaganda campaigns rely on “half-truths” to legitimize itself and saturate its way into civic discourse.

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[8] Ibid., 5.

[9] Ibid., 5.

[10] Ibid., 5.

[11] Noëmi Kern, “A Half-Truth is Often Believed,” interview by Uni Nova, *University of Basal*, January 2024, https://www.unibas.ch/en/News-Events/Uni-Nova/Uni-Nova-143/Uni-Nova-143-A-half-truth-is-often-believed.html.

[12] Ibid.

Scholars have noted four ways in which media polarization and disinformation campaigns complicate the creation of democratically sound foreign policy.[13] First, it makes it difficult to receive bipartisan support, and if that support is found, it may be based on false conceptions due to disinformation.[14] If the popular narrative endorsed by one party is grounded on non-negotiable media-based disinformation, it creates an impossible impasse resulting in either a stalemate in achieving government-wide unity or the opposing party eventually bending to the demands of the party informed by disinformation. Second, polarized disinformation regarding previous policy failures complicates a nation's ability to agree on adaptations and prospective plans.[15] Third, policy swings, potentially arising due to polarizing disinformation tactics, threaten relationships with international adversaries and allies.[16] Fourth and finally, as it has been demonstrated throughout this paper, political systems, particularly democratic ones, open themselves up to systemic vulnerabilities when the information being consumed by citizens about international relations is false.[17] Social media being manipulated to polarize citizens with disinformation campaigns and fake news is a political strategy that is here to stay. Left untouched, it threatens the foundations of what so-called free nations claim to make them free.

Case Studies: The 2016 USA Election Controversy and Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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[13] Astuti, Attayamini, and Dewi, "Digital Media and War," 21.
[14] Ibid., 21.
[15] Ibid., 21.
[16] Ibid., 21.
[17] Ibid., 21.

When framed and deployed correctly, messaging on social media is a battlefield tool, particularly concerning the possibility of international interference with democratic processes.[18] The breadth of social media makes propaganda proliferation possible in completely new ways, for example, Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election. Broad academic and state consensus has been reached that Russia did conduct a "wide-ranging, multi-year disinformation campaign in the United States."[19] It is estimated that intense alt-right messaging created by Russian entities was spread to "at least 126 million people on Facebook, over 20 million Instagram users, and 1.4 million Twitter users."[20] The effects of this campaign contributed greatly to the political discourse and electoral discussions in the months leading up to November 2016.

While it is not certain that the Russian interference directly contributed to Donald Trump's victory, the ideals and talking points pushed by the Russian propaganda invasion were the same ones taken into consideration by voters when deciding which candidate to vote for.[21] These sorts of ideals were particularly poignant in their efficiency as their goal was not always to spread disinformation in the form of outright fabrications of information but rather to implant half-truths that are framed in a way that sows the seeds of distrust within the citizenry in a manner that is

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[18] Ibid., 19.

[19] McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," 707.

[20] Ibid., 705, 707.

[21] Ibid. 707.

favourable to Trump's campaign.[22] Half-truth divisive messaging is particularly effective in times of crisis.[23] For example, the Russian company The Internet Agency was found to have purposely pushed divisive content relating to the black lives matter movement, immigration, gun rights, and hashtags such as "#Hillary4prison" and "#Trumptrain."[24] The framing of these sorts of messages, combined with the utilization of advanced algorithms that are specifically attentive to sub-group categorizations such as religion, political identification, and identity group indicators, cause the recipients of the messages to be, based on emotionally or ideologically grounded positions that are detectable within these algorithms, uniquely susceptible to the information they are consuming.[25]

For democracy to function properly, citizens must be able to think independently and engage in political discussions concerning their nation. In the ideal form of democracy, voters decide who they wish to elect by judging which candidate advocates issues relevant to them. Propaganda that affects voters' ability to think through these issues does not need to always take the form of "hard propaganda" with overtly nationalist and "emotionally-charged pro-government slogans that rely on biased pro-institutional media outlets."[26] Soft propaganda, such as

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[22] Abigail Abrams, "Here's What We Know So Far About Russia's 2016 Meddling," *Time Magazine*, April 18, 2019, https://time.com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election/.

[23] Kern, interview.

[24] Abrams, "Here's What We Know."

[25] Massimo Calabresi, "Inside Russia's Social Media War on America," *Time Magazine*, May 18, 2017, https://time.com/4783932/inside-russia-social-media-war-america/.

[26] Kluver, Cooley, Hinck, and Cooley, *Propaganda*, 4.

divisive social media messaging, "is intended to guide exposed individuals into specific patterns of thought and associations."[27] When international powers, such as Russia, can deploy soft propaganda, plant discussions, and push narratives and talking points into the media streams of national politics, it will inevitably negatively affect the democratic output of the nation being attacked with propaganda. It is fair to conclude that the case of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election demonstrates that social media is a substantial threat to democracy and something that can be weaponized as a tool in international relations.

The case of the 2016 election is not the only example of Russia weaponizing social media for a strategic advantage in international disputes, as pro-Russian social media forces played a dominating role in the 2014 forced annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.[28] For instance, the "false story of citizens with pro-Russian political views who were beaten and later burned alive by pro-Ukrainian forces" or the stories of a "pregnant woman killed by strangulation by pro-Ukrainian extremists."[29] This sort of rhetoric not only proliferates disinformation but also emotionally frames the disinformation, appealing to readers' pathos rather than logos. While the proliferation of disinformation was seldom the leading cause for the annexation, the powers of social media and online

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[27] Ibid., 4.

[28] Lavinui Bojor and Alin Cîrdei, "The Challenges of Social Media Platforms. Aspects of the Social Media War in Ukraine 2014-2022," *Land Forces Academy Review* 27, no. 4 (2022): 297, 10.2478/raft-2022-0037.

[29] Ibid., 298.

propaganda deployed by Russia certainly contributed to the ability to annex the Crimean Peninsula.

Russian powers continually deploy this tactic, which can be observed in Russia's current invasion of Ukraine.[30] Since the beginning of the attacks, Putin has been made out in popular Russian media as a strong, brutal, and masculine embodiment of leadership and power.[31] In contrast, Russian propaganda makes Zelenskyy out as an unserious comedian, unfit to lead a nation.[32] Disinformation campaigns immediately following the invasion declared that Zelenskyy had fled the nation of Ukraine.[33] It is with this sort of messaging that Russian powers can hegemonically enforce submission to Putin's arguably unjustified dictations and undermine any positions brought forward by Zelenskyy or the nation of Ukraine. Social media-based propaganda does not stop at garnering support for Russia either. Researchers have identified 15 "disinformation narratives" being pushed by partisan Russian groups immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[34] These narratives push provocative messaging such as the EU exploiting Ukrainians for low-wage labour, the US influencing Ukrainian media, activists, and politicians, and George Soros and the IMF seeking to

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[30] Astuti, Attaymini, and Dewi, "Digital Media and War," 20.

[31] Petru Loan Marian-arnat, "The Meme War - Propaganda and Resistance on Social Media," *International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation* 10, no. 20 (2023): 156, https://journals.aseiacademic.org/index.php/ijsei/article/view/301.

[32] Astuti, Attaymini, and Dewi, "Digital Media and War," 21.

[33] Ibid., 20.

[34] Lennart Maschmeyer, Alexei Abrahams, Peter Pomerantsev, and Volodymyr Yermolenko, "Donetsk Don't Tell - 'Hybrid War' in Ukraine and the Limits of Social Media Influence Operations," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 22, no. 1 (2023): 7, https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2023.2211969.

exploit Ukrainian territories.[35] Surveys by the same researchers identifying these narratives demonstrate a clear statistical correlation between narrative exposure and international relations-related policy preferences.[36]

Similar to the case of the 2016 United States presidential election, these examples indicate the potential for state-infused social media-based propaganda to impede any sense of democracy in a nation. A war that the citizens support is more easily justifiable than one that the citizenry opposes. Commonly believed disinformation campaigns on social media have the potential to influence and polarize the masses, manipulating nations and international trading partners to serve the interests of those behind the campaign.[37] The interplay of political information and social media has altered the paradigm of being an informed citizen and civic participant. The responsibility of citizens is evolving from inputting information and outputting their political position in the form of a vote. It now involves deeper considerations of fact-checking information fully and deploying critical comprehension skills when consuming political information, particularly information sourced online through social media. This alteration is likely to be significant in terms of the functionality of democratic systems. It should consequently be a factor of much consideration concerning national affairs, particularly in international relations.

Social Media Attacks: Solutions to Protect Democracy

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[35] Ibid., 8.

[36] Ibid., 11.

[37] Bojor and Cîrdei, "The Challenges of Social Media Platforms," 300.

Solution-wise, there are many ways to approach the issue of online political disinformation. Many scholars and political figures have advocated for critical media literacy to be taught in schools.[38] In a world where the youngest generation is exposed to the internet and digital information, teaching critical media literacy as a fundamental educational skill may alleviate some of the future concerns of citizens consuming disinformation and politically motivated mental manipulation. Many citizens who participate in contemporary political and civic discourse are of the ages that their most formative years were when the internet didn't exist. This likely contributes to vulnerability as it pertains to disinformation consumed online.

Other scholars believe that nations have a responsibility to regulate the use of social media as a means to spread political information. It has been specifically suggested that governments should enforce laws that address intentional false claims made online.[39] Regulations of this nature need to formulate ways to "identify violations, decrease their circulation, and hold to account those who create or disseminate them."[40] This, however, may be easier said than done, as government regulation of any form of speech calls into question the democratic rights to free speech and expression. As is often seen in modern social discourse, the line between free speech and

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[38] Rhys Crilley, "International Relations in the Age of 'Post-Truth' Politics," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2018): 423, http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy038.

[39] McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," 711.

[40] Ibid., 711.

regulatable hate speech is often difficult to establish explicitly.

Conclusion

Many of the world's strongest, most powerful, and most successful nations pride themselves on their democratic foundations and functioning representative systems. The use of social media as a tool to frame propaganda for ideological warfare poses a significant threat and calls into question the democratic functionality of a nation. This paper sought to investigate the threat posed by social media in international relations, and using the examples of Russian international affairs and interference, it demonstrated the specific ways social media enables the framing and proliferation of propaganda tactics in a way that is uniquely powerful and may be weaponized and deployed as an ideological tool of international war. While, in theory, social media may be a tool for the free exchange of ideas and open discourse and should enrich a nation's democratic values, without proper oversight and regulation, social media can obstruct and erode the processes by which democratic functionality is possible. Further research should be done into normative solutions that can balance the democratic values of free speech and expression and the genuine need for regulatory oversight to prevent the spread of disinformation.

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