Strategies and Economics of Disseminating Political Misinformation Online

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Cybersecurity Approach to Combating Misinformation

- Progressively more sophisticated misinformation campaigns
- Platforms creating policies with regards to political misinformation and deploying targeted defenses
- Transformation from purely profit-seeking attackers to political motivated campaigns
Fake Accounts

• Initially used for spamming to promote adult services and counterfeit goods

• Robust ecosystem of fake account creation emerged
  • Accounts sold by the thousands for $10-20 per 1,000
  • Platforms deployed defenses to increase the cost of account registration
  • Deployment of defenses is not uniform resulting in differential pricing of fake accounts
# Current Fake Account Pricing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>1K-10K:</th>
<th>10K-20K:</th>
<th>20K +:</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>
## Current Fake Account Pricing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th>1K-10K</th>
<th>10K-20K</th>
<th>20K+</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>$200</td>
<td>$200</td>
<td>$200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fake Account Countermeasures

• At registration defenses
  • Limited information
  • Do not want to create friction in the registration process

• Account usage defenses
  • Increasing information
  • Leverage the decoupling of the creator and (ab)user
Decline of Abusive Fake Accounts

- Increased investment in abusive fake account detection
  - Likely resulted in quicker detection of abusive fake accounts
  - Driving their use towards less abusive purposes

- “Fake news” was not against platforms policies
  - Promoting fake news likely did not trigger detection
  - Can generate “traffic” to third-part sites and ad revenue
Clickbait and Fake News

• Fake accounts can manipulate content curation algorithms
  • Used to drive increased visibility of fake news content

• Fake news largely did not violate platforms’ policies
  • Actors can purchase paid ads to promote fake news
  • Paid ads are likely more efficient and targeted promotion method
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State-sponsored Misinformation

- Russians largely motivated at undermining the democratic process targeted 2016 elections
  - Created fake identify-affinity communities (i.e., African Americans, gun owners)
  - Promoted fake communities using paid ads containing misinformation
  - Also used fake accounts to inject misinformation and coordinate off-line events
Domestic-sponsored Misinformation

LinkedIn co-founder says he unknowingly backed disinformation effort in Alabama Senate race

By Chris Welch | @chriswelch | Dec 26, 2018, 3:41pm EST
Duped by Russia, freelancers ensnared in disinformation campaign by promise of easy money

By Jack Stubbs
Policies Related to Misinformation

• Fact checking
  • Credibility Indicators (differing effectiveness based on demographics and ideologies [Yaqub et. al. 2020])
  • Algorithmic blocking in recommendations or content down ranking

• Banning political misinformation from paid ads*
  • Facebook allows political candidates to buy ads with misinformation**
    • The exception being election interference
Policies Related to Misinformation

• Limiting political ads
  • Google has limited targeting options for political ads
  • Twitter has ban political ads

• Banning specific types of harmful misinformation
  • Anti-vax, Election interference, QAnon
  • Whack-a-mole

• Deplatforming people and communities
  • Risk of displacement
Political Ad Transparency

- Platforms have voluntarily made political ads
  - Definition of political ad differs based on platform
  - Facebook broadly includes political and social issue ads
  - Google only makes transparent political ads by or about candidates
  - Twitter banned political ads but not social issue ads
Limitations of Ad Transparency

• Not all political ads are detected
• Targeting criteria is not made transparent
• Ads by influencers are not made transparent
• Facebook has news source exemption
  • Political and social issues ads by exempt news sources not made transparent
  • List of exempt news sources is not public
Influencers

• Not subject to the same policies as platform ads
  • Influencer sponsored posts (i.e., ads) not made transparent
  • Disclosure difficult to enforce
  • Organic content policies
Partisan News Sources

- PACs and "dark money groups" creating "news sources"
  - Some disclose partisan funding sources and some do not
  - Exploit trust in news sources
  - Loopholes, such as no ad transparency
Limitations of Defenses

- News exemption for political ads
- Non-political ads to build political communities
- Evolving misinformation themes
- Focus on state-actors
- Missing security mindset in policies and enforcement
Likely Trajectory of Misinformation

• Attacking gaps and loopholes in policies

• Sophisticated attacks against algorithms

• Usage of paid ads (platforms and influencers)

• Exploiting trust in news sources
Recommendations

- Take a more “whole of ecosystem cybersecurity” approach rather than “whack-a-mole” with specific issues (i.e., Anti-vax, QAnon)
- Design products such as ad transparency and recommender systems to be resilient to attacks
- Collaborate with advocacy groups to assist with identifying harmful misinformation themes