SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONVERGENCE COMPACT

No. 1.8
Version 01

MISSING RESPONSE - ORGANIZED INFORMATION DISTORTION WARFARE IN SERVICE OF ACHIEVING POLITICAL, FINANCIAL AND PRIVATE GAIN

This brief derives from the more comprehensive research to detect interrelation between use/abuse of social media and internet-based mass communication channels for political, financial or criminal gain published under the title "Trump's Code – Making Money on Populist Disorder". While many researchers concentrate on the individual online incidents and behaviour, we focused our work on the organized character of such efforts where more complex and comprehensive strategies were applied. We point out at key deviations that occurred, lack of protection instruments and most importantly on the benefits gained from the conducted operations.

There are several key elements of this story that allow understanding of the organized efforts to distort realities. The Georgian war 2008 was the first time in history that a military attack was accompanied by a full cyber-attack on the IT infrastructure of one country. The cyber-attack especially affected the government sites, news and information distribution networks with the aim to confuse the local and international public on the facts about the conflict and to distort reality. According to Ambassador David J. Smith, "DDoS attacks on Georgian government websites, particularly the president's website, began more than two weeks before the kinetic Russian invasion. On the day the kinetic war started, sites such as 'stopgeorgia.ru' sprang up with a list of sites to attack, instructions on how to do it and even an after-action report page. It is instructive that all this was ready to go—surveys, probing, registrations, and instructions—on day one! An Internet blockade was traced to five autonomous systems—four in Russia and one in Turkey—all controlled by the criminal syndicate RBN [Russian Business Network]." Multi-layered attacks were also conducted on Georgian media for example 'apsny.ge' and 'news.ge'. While this episode did not produce a significant strategic effect (due to limited influence of internet-based media at the time) it was a clear pre-text on how internet based communication can be deviated and abused in the future.

In the fall of 2013, Robert Mercer, mysterious US billionaire and automated trading mastermind, decided to fund the creation of Cambridge Analytica (CA) with USD 10 million, in the hope of shaping the congressional elections a year later. After the first, rather localized tests, the appetite of Robert Mercer significantly increased as his understanding of the power of social media and internet platforms grew. Weaknesses in prevention and detection of the abuse within the FB platform were at the heart of the CA strategy to influence political processes for political and personal gain.

While Robert Mercer was engaged in meddling with the political processes in order to pursue his own objectives, the Russian government at the same time had engaged in the operation to influence US elections in order to undermine the continuity of the US foreign policy that significantly affected Russian economy and politics in the years before the elections.

The FBI indictments against 13 Russian nationals from 2018 suggests that the accused Russian nationals, beginning in 2014, engaged in activities to influence the US elections through an operation coded as the *'Translator Project'*, the goal being to "*spread distrust toward the candidates and the political system in general*." According to the indictments, the Russian operatives used a cluster of companies, all linked to a larger company called the Internet Research Agency, for their 'information warfare.' The document further suggests that the 'Translator Project' was conducted by and large through a systematic and sophisticated social media campaign. The Russian protagonists splashed catchy memes and hashtags that reached 126 million Americans on Facebook alone. In addition, the intelligence report, FBI investigation as well as independent investigations have all confirmed that hackers known as "Fancy Bears", closely aligned with the interests of the Russian Government, were behind the "Clinton Leaks" – an operation that resulted in thousands of e-mails and messages being published on WikiLeaks prior to the 2016 election. Our investigation and analysis suggest that the WikiLeaks operation was carefully crafted by high-level analysts on many sides – Putin's operatives (including Fancy Bears and Guccifer 2.0), WikiLeaks management (including Julian Assange himself) and Trump’s campaign strategists. However, even these actors had completely different objectives, their synchronized activity was the result of the Robert Mercers management of Trump’s campaign, and Russian comprehensive operation that played on the WikiLeaks and their weaknesses in the area of checking the sources and their objectives.

After successful testing of the newly acquired Cambridge Analytica app for targeted marketing (designed by professor Aleksandr Kogan) on the BREXIT campaign, Robert Mercer focused on upcoming US elections. In June 2016 Robert Mercer switched his earlier preferences among republican candidates and decided to take Donald Trump as his favorite for the US elections 2016, despite low chances of winning indicated in public polling. Cambridge Analytica orchestrated micro targeting in both, Brexit and Trump’s campaign in order to assure winning of electoral votes in the US election which was successfully accomplished. On the other hand, Russia provided tools by hacking the e-mails of the Democrats, and assuring visibility through the Wikileaks participation in their operation. The results and impact of the conducted operations were significant. Brexit affected the lives of millions of UK citizens with yet to be seen impact on the global economy. Trump’s presidency created challenges to global stability, peace and economic growth with negative implication that directly affect billions of citizens.

However, Donald Trump benefited personally (through expansion of different family businesses) and politically (became the President of the United States). Vladimir Putin managed to create incoherence in the western responses to his actions, and to weaken the ability of the west to create joint political, economic and military actions, which was his ultimate objective. Robert Mercer has undoubtedly benefited. His Fund has made billions since the Brexit referendum and his first “controlled” market distortion, and continued to grow during Trump’s presidency.

These distortions and dangerous manipulations of democratic processes that rest on internet-based strategies and communication disorder showed significant exposure of today’s world to abuse of these communication channels that were welcomed as the beginning of a new era of digital citizenry. At this stage we have no effective mechanisms to protect citizens from being exposed to undue access to their data. While GDPR provides a general framework to prevention of the personal data abuse, the enforcement mechanisms are still weak and in most cases they are easily bypassed by nefarious movements. Information management systems and their protection from undue interference are incoherent and lack standardized approach, thus creating multiple challenges in designing comprehensive national or supranational responses to the problems. Finally, the lack of advanced instruments for prevention and detection of the organized information distortions leaves us in a disadvantaged position, where impact of counter measures (i.e. engagement of fact checking organizations) is simply chasing ghosts.

Compiled by PSD (2019)

Munir Podumljak (2018), Trump´s code. Making money on populist disorder. Edited by: Elizabeth David-Barrett, Published by: Partnership for social development, Zagreb
http://integrityobservers.eu/UserDocsImages/TRUMPS_CODE.PDF