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Asia Pacific & Japan

A Virtual Learning Experience | 15–17 July

HUMAN ELEMENT

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Recent Trends in Information Operations and Predictions for 2020

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What is Information Operations (IO)?

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WHO is behind it

Actors with political ambitions, criminals seeking to make money or trolls

WHERE do they appear

Social media, forums, news channels, video sharing websites, chat applications

WHAT is it about

Distortion and deception of news or information to propagate a certain narrative or to promote certain ideology

WHEN did we first see IO

Most famously observed during 2016 US presidential elections. It has stuck around ever since, spreading globally

WHY are they effective

Not everyone is able to identify what is true or not. Fact-checking is still a new concept. People tend to believe messages sent from friends / family.
Social media tend to promote popular posts, recommend people what their contacts posts

Information Operations and its implications

Pizzagate

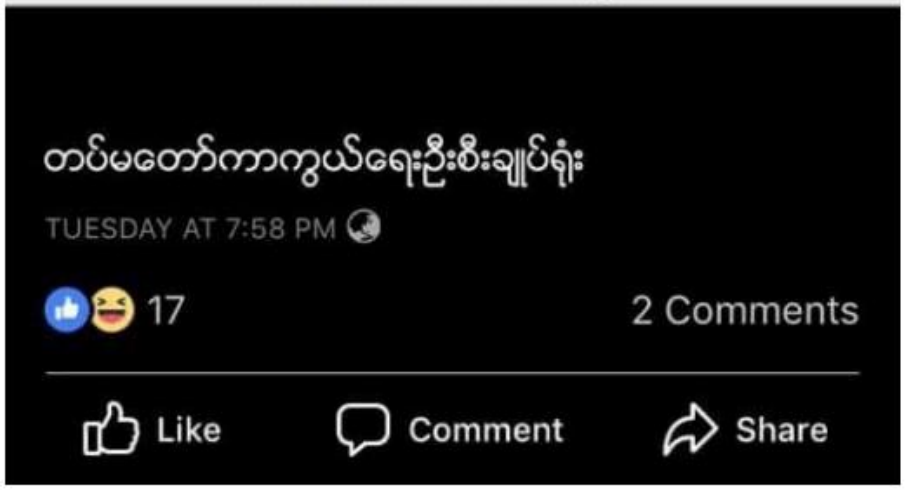
In one infamous case, a fake news story (and the comments people attached to it) moved one man to shoot up a pizzeria that was linked by bogus statements to human trafficking and a presidential candidate. In the incident nicknamed "Pizzagate," a man with a semi-automatic rifle walked into a regular Washington, DC pizza joint - Comet Ping Pong - and fired shots. Why? He was convinced that the pizzeria contained a hidden pedophilia trafficking ring led by Hillary Clinton and her presidential campaign. Where did he come up with this notion? Alt-right communities first created this piece of fiction, and fake news websites promoted the lie by citing specific locations such Comet Ping Pong. It was then tweeted further by people in the Czech Republic, Cyprus, and Vietnam, as well as many bots, getting the story much additional attention. Fake news - political in nature - influenced a man to fire shots inside this restaurant, nearly killing innocent people. The spread of information that was knowingly false had potentially deadly consequences [2].

Edgar Welch, the Pizzagate shooter

Information Operations and its implications

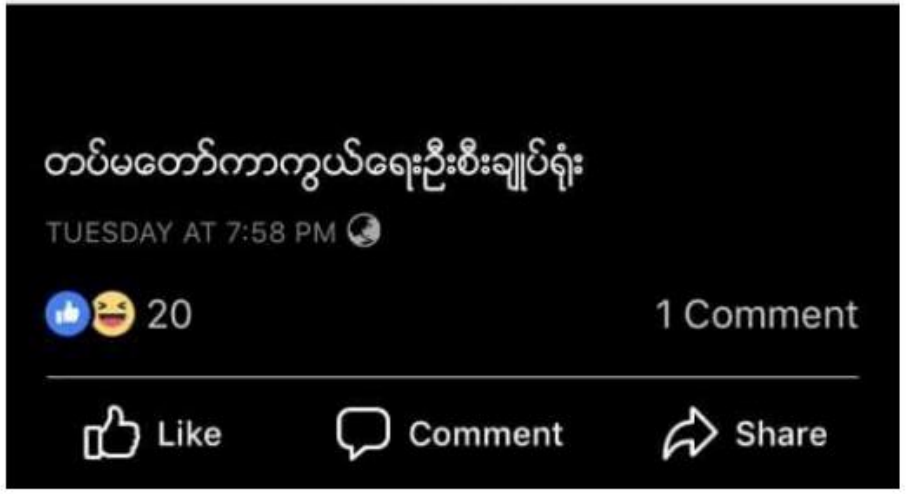
Information Operations and its implications

Members of Mujahidin muslim group holding arms left by British Army who retreated due to the offensive attacks on Japan



Screen shots from the official account of the Myanmar military's commander in chief, whose pages were taken down in August. Facebook

Mujahidin Conflicts between the two communities in 1942.
30,000 of ethnic Rakhine people were killed and thousands of people fled from their native villages



The photos claim to show evidence of conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State in the 1940s, but the images are from Bangladesh's war for independence from Pakistan in 1971. Facebook

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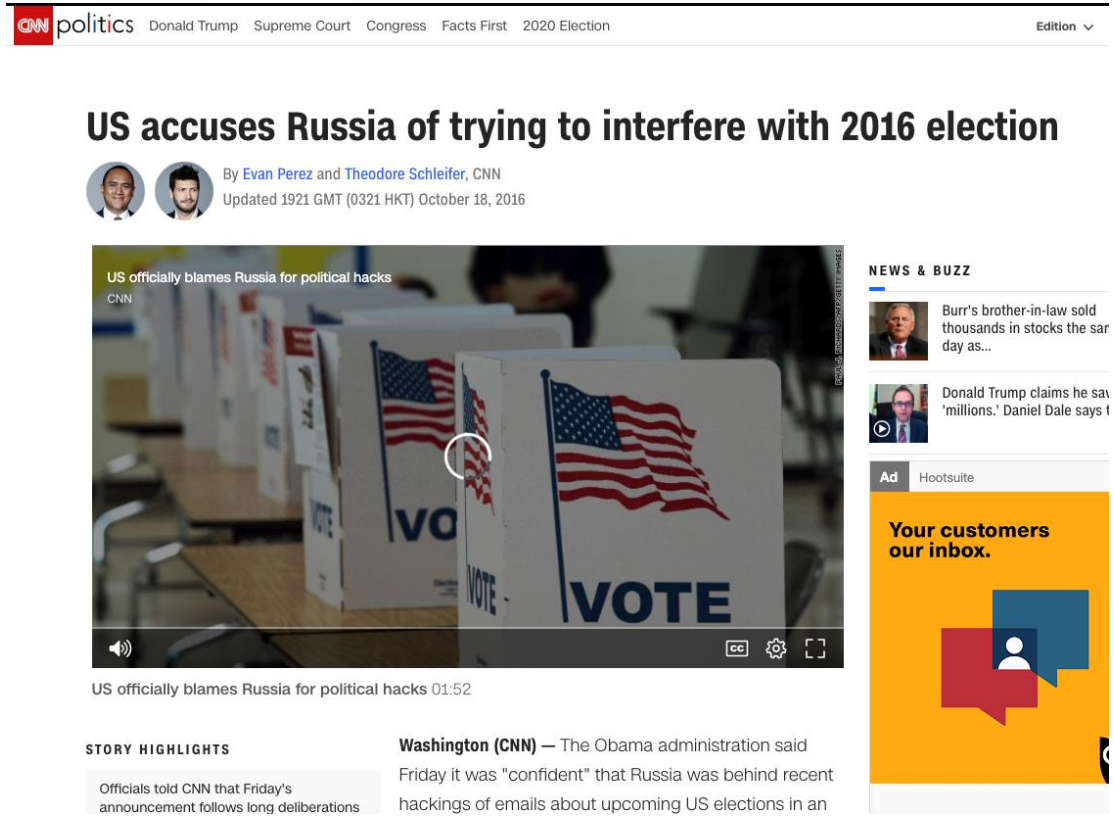
Information Operation (IO) as a new weapon

- More nation states adopting information operations in support of their own political interests
  - Russia, China, Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)
  - Activity was particularly intense during period before elections

- Russia's success in 2016 strengthened perception that such operations are effective



Repercussions from heightened public awareness about IO

- Increase in enforcement by social media platforms led IO actors to further mature their operations
  - Actors now pay more attention to operational security
  - Actors now adopted more carefully designed personas in increasingly elaborate operations
  - Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, we also observed increased IO activity – IO is no longer just limited to elections

Categories (Authentic)

1) Disinformation

Falsehoods and rumours knowingly distributed **to undermine national security**, which can be part of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns

3) Entertainment

Falsehoods **propagated in parody, satire** or seemingly humorous pieces

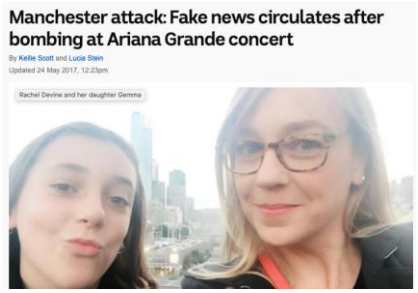
2) Financial Gain

Falsehoods distributed **for financial gain**

4) Mal-information (With Agenda)

Falsehoods and rumours propagated as part of a political agenda by **differing interpretation of facts based on ideological bias**

5) Misinformation (Without Agenda)



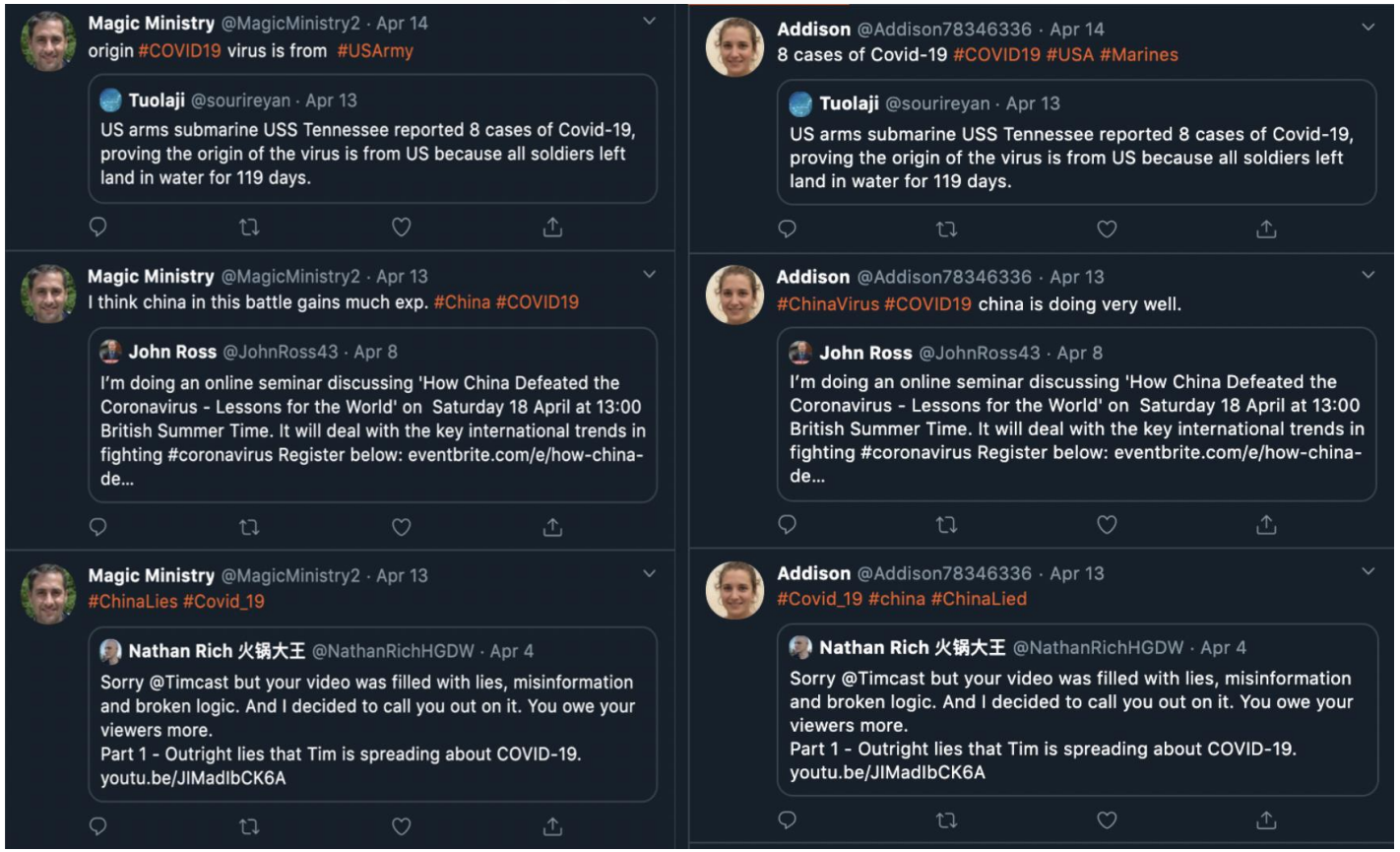
Falsehoods and rumors propagated **without a broad political aim**, either with or without malicious intent that achieves viral status

Categories (Inauthentic)

1) Disinformation

Falsehoods and rumors operating in a **coordinated, inauthentic manner promoting narratives** in line with the political interests of certain actors

Bots in social media sites post continuously, spreading non-curated content using trending topics and hashtags as the main strategies to reach a broader audience



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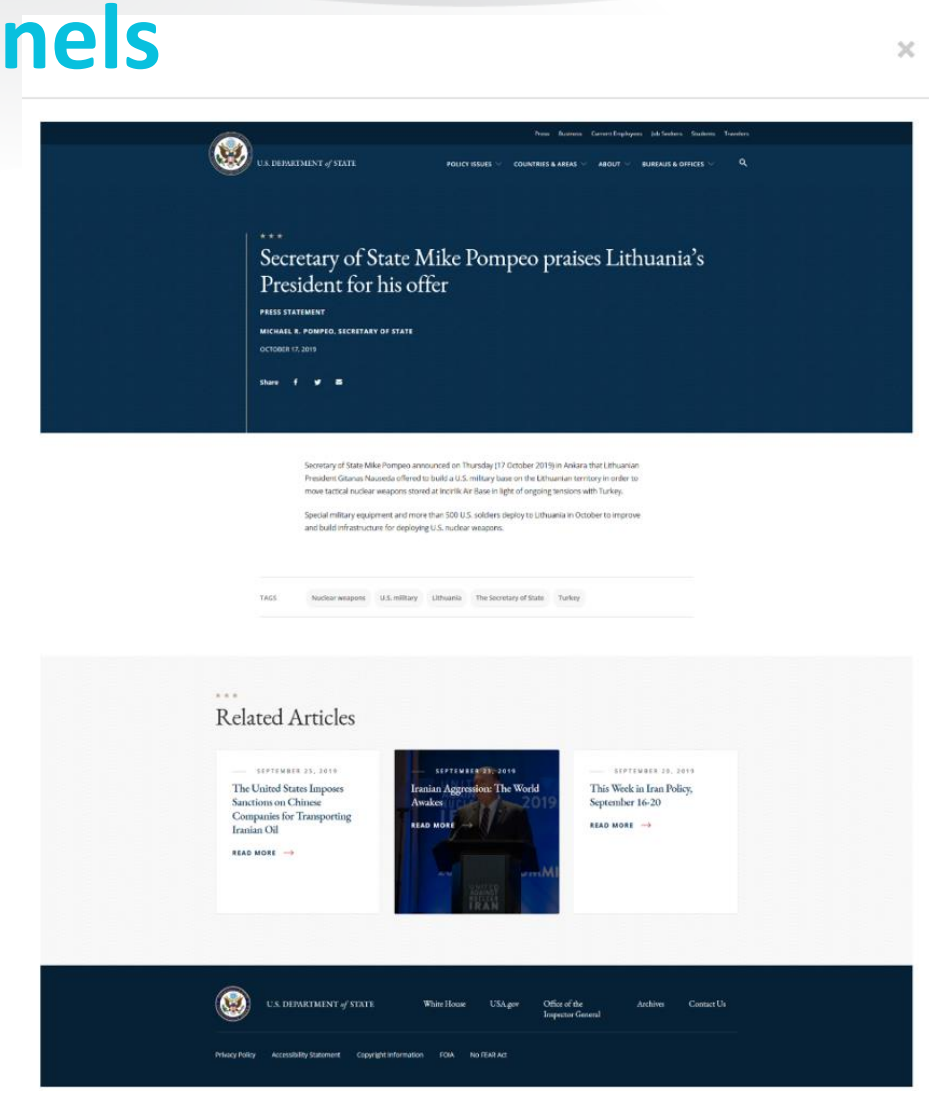
Recent Trends in IO and Predictions for 2020

Recent trends in Information Operations and Predictions for 2020

Trend 1: Amplification of Organic Content and Planting of False Content in Legitimate Channels

- Dissemination of fabricated communications and correspondence to promote specific political narratives
  - On Oct. 18, 2019, a press release was sent from what appeared to be a Lithuania Ministry of Foreign Affairs email address
  - Press release mentioned that a U.S. military base in Lithuania would-be built-in October and that the base would be used for the storage of nuclear weapons to be transferred from Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.
  - In early 2020, compromised Kuwait's state-run KUNA news agency stated that American forces will be withdrawn from Kuwait immediately



Trend 2: Inauthentic News Outlets

- IO actors will continue to leverage their own inauthentic news sites and produce fabricated news articles aligned with their political interests.
  - Throughout 2018 and 2019, we investigated and reported on a network of inauthentic news sites and associated social media accounts aimed at audiences globally that we believe are of Iranian origin

Trend 3: Use of Public Relations / Marketing firms for IO

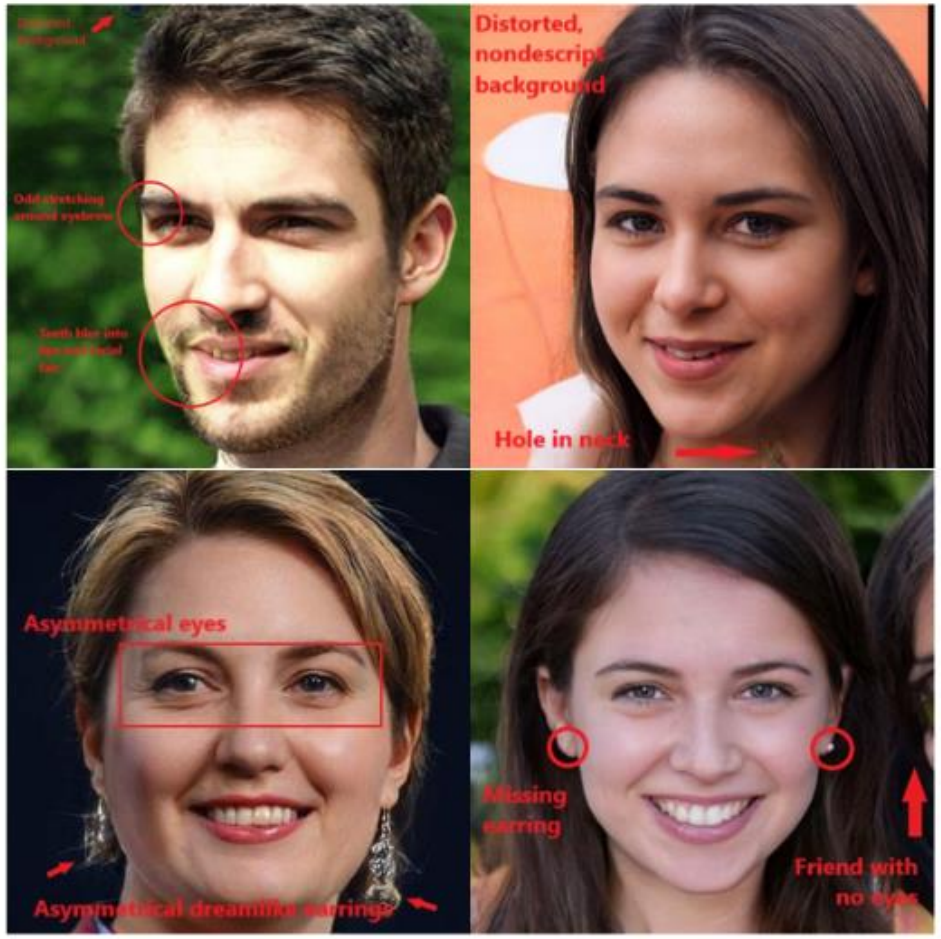
- We anticipate this trend will continue as actors seek to both further inhibit effective attribution and leverage the expertise of specialists who may be perceived as better understanding the online influence space.
  - Throughout 2018 and 2019, we investigated and reported on a network of inauthentic news sites and associated social media accounts aimed at audiences globally that we believe are of Iranian origin

Trend 4: IO by Non-state actors

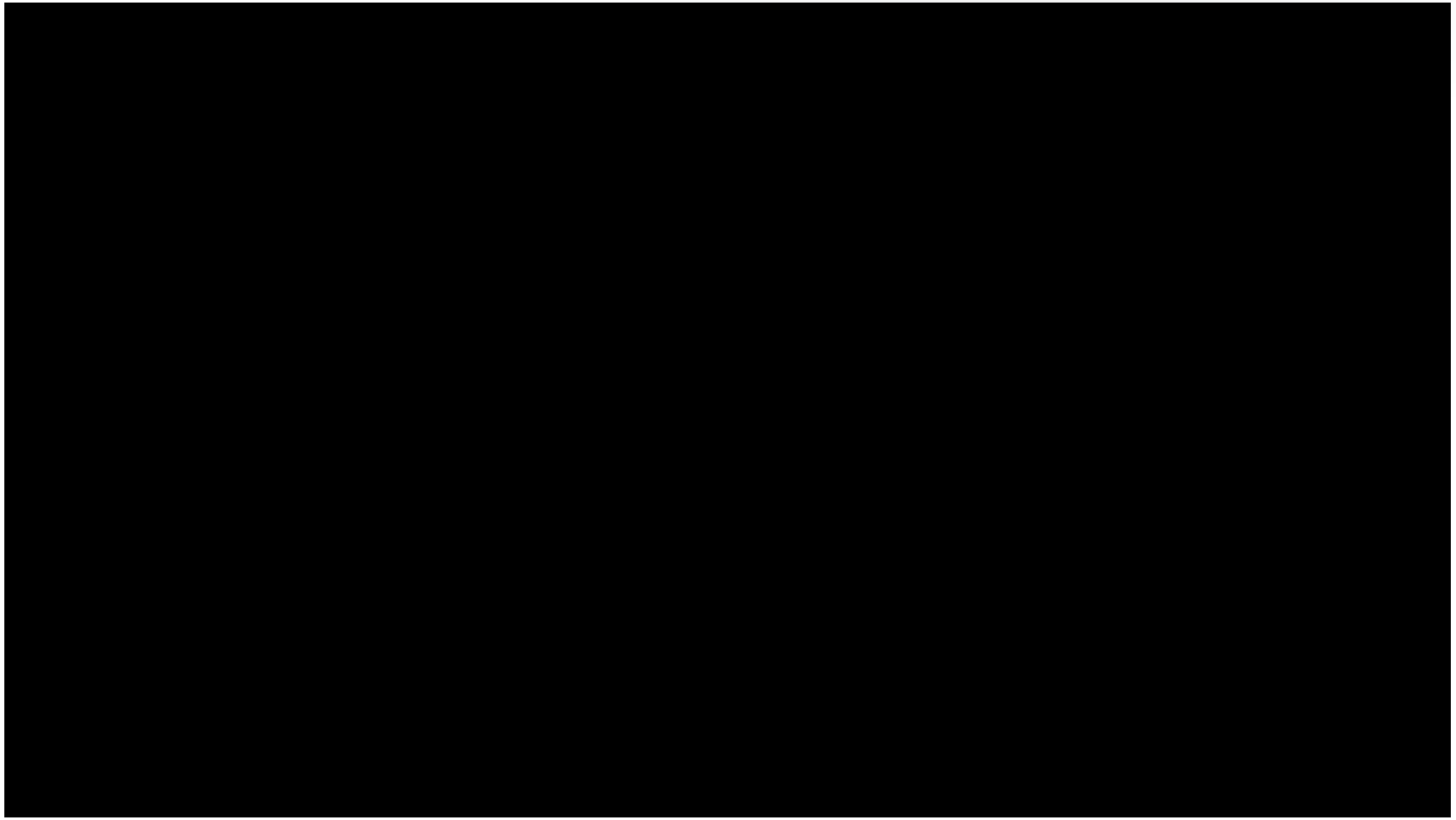
- Identified a network of suspected inauthentic accounts on Twitter and Facebook promoting content from the news site "The BL" (thebl.com) as well as political material in support of U.S. President Trump.
  - The BL is a news site that maintains pages in English, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, and Vietnamese.
  - We have observed indications that The BL is linked to The Epoch Times and to The Sound of Hope Radio Network, media organizations
  - Open sources have reported as linked to the Falun Gong (also known as Falun Dafa) movement. The practice of Falun Gong has been banned in China since 1999.

Trend 5: Media manipulation and “Deepfakes”

- We assess with high confidence that actors will increasingly explore the use of artificial intelligence and "deepfake" technology for their operations through 2020 and beyond.
  - Network of inauthentic accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube
  - Assess with moderate confidence are pushing narratives in support of the Cuban government and critical of the U.S
  - Many of these accounts are using AI-generated "deepfake" images as profile photos



Trend 5: Media manipulation and “Deepfakes”



Credit: CNA Insider

Legislation from around the world

SINGAPORE

Singapore's new law would require social media sites like Facebook to carry warnings on posts the government deems false and remove comments against the "public interest".
Violations could attract fines of up to S$ 1 million ($737,500) and 10 years in prison.

RUSSIA

Last month, President Vladimir Putin signed into law tough new fines for Russians who spread what the authorities regard as fake news or who show "blatant disrespect" for the state online.
Authorities may block websites that do not meet requests to remove inaccurate information. Individuals can be fined up to 400,000 rouble ($6,109.44) for circulating false information online that leads to a "mass violation of public order".

FRANCE

France passed two anti-fake news laws last year, to rein in false information during election campaigns following allegations of Russian meddling in the 2017 presidential vote.
President Emmanuel Macron vowed to overhaul media laws to fight "fake news" on social media, despite criticism that the move was a risk to civil liberties.

GERMANY

Germany passed a law last year for social media companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, to quickly remove hate speech.
Called NetzDG for short, the law is the most ambitious effort by a Western democracy to control what appears on social media. It will enforce online Germany's tough curbs on hate speech, including pro-Nazi ideology, by giving sites a 24-hour deadline to remove banned content or face fines of up to 50 million euros.

MALAYSIA

Malaysia's ousted former government was among the first to adopt a law against fake news, which critics say was used to curb free speech ahead of last year's general elections, which it lost.
The new government's bid to deliver on an election promise to repeal the law was blocked by the opposition-led Senate

EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union and authorities worldwide will have to regulate big technology and social media companies to protect citizens, European Commission deputy head Frans Timmermans said last month.
EU heads of state will urge governments to share information on threats via a new warning system, launched by the bloc's executive. They will also call for online platforms to do more to remove misleading or illegal content.

Legislation in Singapore

Singapore

Report of Punggol Waterway Terraces roof collapse a 'hoax': HDB

The Housing and Development Board says it will inform the police about the hoax.

Legislation in Singapore

- Singapore
  - Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill (POFMA) to prevent the electronic communication of falsehoods (i.e. false statements of fact or misleading information)
  - Safeguard against the use of online platforms for the communication of such falsehoods.

Why was POFMA implemented

- Fake news has been an ongoing phenomenon in Singapore. In 2016, a hoax was widely shared about the alleged collapse of a roof at Punggol Waterway Terraces. This false news caused anxiety among residents, and led to the wastage of substantial resources, as grassroots leaders, police and Singapore Civil Defence Force personnel had rushed down to the scene over fears of mass casualties.

Impact on businesses operating in Singapore

- Ensure all digital content is accurate and factual
- Temper down expectations around freedom of speech (e.g. US First Amendment). Recognize that in Singapore it is a very different political climate and these rights are being counterbalanced against the need to maintain balance in Singapore
- If there is a need to publish content or views that is unsubstantiated, label it as such. Provide context and provide opposing views.
- In the content you create, avoid discussions on sensitive topics along the lines of hate-speech / racial / religious / inclusivity / social progress themes that are likely to create negative sentiment, unless such topics are germane to your business.

More details in

https://singaporelegaladvice.com/law-articles/singapore-fake-news-protection-online-falsehoods-manipulation/

POFMA implementation

Facebook page, run by Alex Tan, asked to put up corrections to falsehoods on Pofma

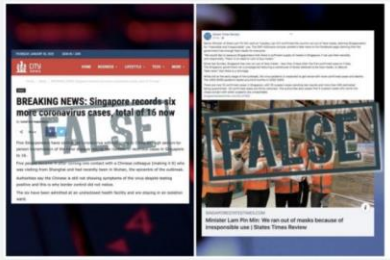
May 28, 2020, 5:00 am

Pofma office orders National Times Singapore to correct misleading Facebook post

May 27, 2020, 11:49 pm

Pofma order for Facebook user who made false Budget claims

Apr 2, 2020, 5:00 am



Govt debunks fake news on Singaporeans contracting the Wuhan virus and Singapore running out of masks

Jan 31, 2020, 10:10 am

SPH Magazines obeys Pofma correction order

Jan 28, 2020, 5:00 am

SPH Magazines complies with Pofma correction order on false HardwareZone post related to the Wuhan virus

Jan 27, 2020, 10:03 am

Opposition politician told to put up correction notices for online posts

Dec 17, 2019, 5:00 am

Opposition politician Lim Tean told to correct posts alleging Govt spends more on foreign students

Dec 16, 2019, 9:53 am

SDP complies with Pofma orders but will seek to cancel notices

Dec 16, 2019, 5:00 am

SDP complies with correction directions initiated by MOM under fake news law

Dec 15, 2019, 7:24 pm

What's next?

- More countries are coming to perceive IO as an effective weapon, signaling a potential growth in IO activity over the coming months
- COVID-19 related IO activity is a good indication that current affairs can also lead to IO campaigns by actors seeking to generate certain narratives
- We assess with high confidence that actors will increasingly explore the use of artificial intelligence and "deepfake" technology for their operations through 2020 and beyond.

References

- “Singapore Fake News Laws: Guide to POFMA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act)” - Singapore Legal Advice
- “FAKE NEWS: NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA” - Norman Vasu, Benjamin Ang, Terri-Anne-Teo, Shashi Jayakumar, Muhammad Faizal, and Juhi Ahuja
- “POFMA Correction”- The Straits Times
- “Factbox: 'Fake News' laws around the world” - Reuters

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Apply what you have learnt today

Apply what you have learnt today

- **After this session you should:**
  - Be more skeptical about what you see online, and always remember to cross-reference
- **In the three months following this presentation you should:**
  - Be able to educate colleagues / friends / family on the potential dangers and implications of IO
- **Within six months you should:**
  - Refer to the slides again if you forgot what was discussed