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Defending against Russian Propaganda

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses Russian propaganda, explains why it might work, and explores options available for Western countries to protect themselves from manipulation through propaganda. In previous research, we characterized the Russian approach to propaganda as a 'firehose of falsehood', capturing its volume, frequency, and lack of commitment to objective reality (Paul & Matthews 2016). The discussion here begins with a description of the nature and character of Russian propaganda, Russia's various techniques, their goals, and several examples of specific propaganda efforts as reported by news sources and other observers. This discussion should provide you, the reader, with a better understanding of the scope and scale of Russia's efforts.

Why is this firehose of falsehood effective? We then turn to experimental results from psychology and social psychology that match characteristics of Russian propaganda with human psychological vulnerabilities and limitations. This research reveals that falsehood-based attempts to manipulate people through propaganda are far more likely to be successful than we might realize or prefer.

What might we do about it? The chapter concludes with a review of various proposals and suggestions for defending against propaganda. We evaluate each of these against evidence and practical considerations.

THE CHARACTER OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

In many ways, the current Russian approach to propaganda builds on Soviet Cold War-era techniques with an emphasis on obfuscation and getting targets to act in the interests of the propagandist without realizing that they have done so (Oliker 2015). The Soviets would routinely employ 'active measures', a term that encompassed disinformation, forgery, and subversion (Averin 2018). However,

these old models are much better suited to the contemporary global information environment than they were to the level of communications technology available during the Cold War. Russia has taken advantage of the technology and media available in the contemporary context in ways that would have been inconceivable during the Cold War.

While most Western observers focus on Russia's use of propaganda outside Russia's own borders, other countries are not the primary targets. Russia uses propaganda to mobilize internal opposition in other countries, but also to mobilize Russia's own public (Andriukaitis 2018). Thus, Russia produces as much, if not more, propaganda aimed at its own domestic audiences. Much of this internal propaganda seeks to divide Russia from the rest of the world and create the perception that Russia is being besieged on all sides by enemies. This makes it easier for Russian leaders to invoke support for aggressive action in the name of defending the motherland and to silence domestic resistance as being unpatriotic (Snyder 2018). The focus of this chapter, however, is on Russian international propaganda. Our primary concern is finding ways to protect others from Russia, not Russians from their own government.

SOURCES AND TYPES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Russian propaganda includes text, video, audio, and still imagery propagated via television broadcasting, satellite television, traditional radio, and the Internet and social media. The producers and disseminators include a substantial force of paid internet 'trolls' who manage dozens of false online personas and amplify Russian propaganda themes through online chat rooms, discussion forums, and comments sections on news and other websites (Chen 2015, Pomerantsev & Weiss 2014). These various media and modes are discussed below.

Television is a staple for Russian propaganda, both traditional broadcast TV and satellite or cable dissemination, echoed online through station websites and video sharing platforms such as YouTube. RT (formerly Russia Today) is one of Russia's primary multimedia news providers. With a budget of more than US$300 million per year, it broadcasts in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and several Eastern European languages. The channel is particularly popular online, where it claims more than a billion page views. If true, that would make it the most-watched news source on the Internet (Pomerantsev & Weiss 2014). RT and Sputnik (another self-styled 'news' station) project a mixture of actual journalism, infotainment (feel good and human-interest stories), and lightly spun anti-Western stories that highlight shortcomings and perceived hypocrisies in the West, such as corruption, abuse of power, or infrastructure failures (Lucas & Nimmo 2015). While some RT content is good journalism and some is spun to be selectively critical of the West, some is unambiguously designed to mislead or obfuscate. Consider, for example, the period immediately following the 2014 shootdown of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Crimea: RT broadcasted more than six different possible explanations for the shootdown (some plausible, some less so; Snyder 2018), with manufactured evidence supporting more than one, but never presenting the actual explanation (a Russian-made missile fired by pro-Russian Ukrainian separatists; Thomas 2015).

Russian international broadcasting also includes Russian-language broadcasting in Eastern European countries with significant Russian-speaking populations. Russia has bought available TV and radio stations throughout this region over the past decade, so it can easily control content and format. Russian programming has high-production values and is generally entertaining, so it is preferred to genuinely local Russian-language programming, which is 'dry and unattractive' (Lucas & Nimmo 2015:7).

Viewers tune in to see flashy and entertaining shows; they then stay tuned for 'news' that is sometimes heavily laced with propaganda and spin.

The internet is a heavy focus for Russian propaganda. In addition to online echoes of Russian international broadcasting, the internet is infested with Russian trolls (fraudulent online accounts operated by humans) and bots (accounts operated by automated processes; Averin 2018). Volchek and Sindelar (2015) report that 'thousands of fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, LiveJournal, and vKontakte' are maintained by Russian propagandists. The 2018 indictment of the Russian 'Internet Research Agency' (a centralized structure for organizing, paying, and tasking trolls) by the US District Court for the District of Columbia revealed several features of the efforts of this infamous Russian 'troll factory', including:

- Employing hundreds of individuals to manage fake personas, with an annual budget of millions of US dollars;
- Attracting US audiences using false personas and posing as Americans;
- Disparaging political candidates prior to the 2016 US election, buying political advertisements (again posing as Americans), staging political rallies, pretending to be American grassroots organizations;
- Promoting allegations of vote fraud through personas and groups on social media, as well as through ad buys.

It is worth noting that the Internet Research Agency is not the only source of Russian trolls, just one that has been exposed and documented (and criminally indicted). It is entirely possible that Russia maintains other such troll factories, as well as relying on entities less directly tied to the state, such as trolls paid and coordinated by criminal oligarchs or collectives of patriotic hackers.

Sometimes, Russian propaganda is picked up and rebroadcast by legitimate news outlets; more frequently, innocent social media users repeat the themes, messages, or falsehoods introduced by one of Russia's many dissemination channels (Lucas & Nimmo 2015). For example, German news sources rebroadcast Russian disinformation about atrocities in Ukraine in early 2014 (Lelich 2014), and Russian disinformation about European Union plans to deny visas to young Ukrainian men was repeated with such frequency in Ukrainian media that the Ukrainian general staff felt compelled to post a rebuttal (Goble 2015).

As evidenced by the above descriptions, Russian propaganda has relied on manufactured evidence. This fabricated information is often photographic. Some of these images are easily exposed as fake due to poor photo editing, such as discrepancies of scale, or the availability of the original (pre-altered) image (Davis 2014). Russian propagandists have been caught hiring actors to portray victims of manufactured atrocities or crimes for news reports (as was the case when Viktoria Schmidt pretended to have been attacked by Syrian refugees in Germany for Russian's Zvezda TV network) and faking on-scene news reporting (as shown in a leaked video in which 'reporter' Maria Katasonova is revealed to be in a darkened room with recorded explosion sounds playing in the background rather than on a battlefield in Donetsk when a light is switched on during the recording; Smith 2015).

In addition to manufacturing information, Russian propagandists often manufacture sources. Russian news channels such as RT and Sputnik, as well as other forms of media, misquote credible sources or claim a more credible source as the origin of a selected falsehood (Miller 2013). Similarly, several scholars and journalists, including Edward Lucas, Luke Harding, and Don Jensen, have reported that books that they did not write – and containing views clearly contrary to their own – had been published in Russian under their names (Lucas 2015).

Using these different modes and media, general Russian tactics have been described as efforts to perpetrate the 'four Ds': **dismiss**

the critic, **distort** the facts, **distract** from the issue, and **dismay** the audience (Lucas & Nimmo 2015:5). Thus, Russia is not just spreading false stories, but trying to sow confusion about or distract from truths shared by other sources. Examples include the denials of the presence of 'little green men' in Crimea in 2014, or the aforementioned interpretations offered for the MH-17 shootdown (Thomas 2015).

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Various scholars and observers have imputed a range of goals, objectives, and motives to Russia in its use of propaganda. All are plausible, and none are mutually exclusive. For example, Brooking and Singer (2016) note two broad objectives for Russian propaganda: to overwhelm Russia's adversaries with misinformation, challenging the very basis of their reality; and to mobilize and maintain the support of their own citizens. Lucas and Nimmo (2015) note that Russian propaganda is often less about winning factual arguments and more about spreading confusion. Matthew Armstrong (2014) has described this as a 'war on information', seeking to destroy trust in and credibility of all sources of information. Overall, this nihilistic goal of weakening credibility in general and sowing chaos and discord in the West is a common theme in goals imputed to Russia: 'Sometimes, the goal is simply to stack tinder, throw matches, and see what happens' (Brooking & Singer 2016:22). This is consistent with Freedom House (2017) reporting on Russian efforts to use propaganda to influence elections in at least 18 countries in 2016 and 2017.

Beyond these broad goals, McGeehan (2018) asserts that Russia seeks to achieve its political and military objectives without escalating to military confrontation. One path to undercutting resistance to Russian aims is to manipulate foreign opinion to be sympathetic toward Russian objectives, since in Western democracies, the people are the ultimate decision-makers.

Russian propaganda can also seek narrow, specific goals. For example, in 2016, a small protest outside Incirlik Air Base in Turkey was portrayed as a much larger demonstration as part of a campaign to try to undermine US-Turkish relations (Brooking & Singer 2016).

A NOTE ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Just how effective has Russian propaganda been? That is difficult to quantify. Measuring the success of an influence effort requires clearly articulated goals and measurement both before and after the campaign, among other things (Paul et al. 2015). This is difficult because our understanding of Russian goals is partially speculative, and even where we have high confidence in their general goals, we lack specificity about their intended targets; we also lack clear baselines against which to measure change. Research on the effectiveness of Russia's efforts to date is possible, but it is difficult and little has been done in this regard. Such measurement should be a priority going forward (Applebaum et al. 2018).

Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018) have used Russian-language television broadcast footprints to form a natural experiment to study the influence of Russian propaganda on Ukrainian voters. They found that Russian propaganda was most effective on those who were already favorably disposed toward Russia while having no or negative effects on anti-Russia Ukrainians. Further, they found that Russian propaganda contributed to increasing political polarization in Ukraine, a concerning finding if it proves to generalize to other countries subjected to Russian propaganda. While we do not have good general assessments of the effectiveness of Russian propaganda, we can put it

between a left and right bounds: Russian propaganda is more effective than we in the West would prefer that it be, and is less effective than they (the Russians) would like. Further research can only help narrow that bounds.

THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RUSSIAN FIREHOSE OF FALSEHOOD PROPAGANDA MODEL

Based on our observations of Russia's propaganda efforts, we have identified four central characteristics of their approach. First, Russian propaganda is **high volume and multi-channel**. As noted, Russia uses numerous modes, and has multiple channels (in the broadest possible conception of channels) in each mode. Russia does not just have one international broadcasting arm, but several (and more that are Russian funded but not clearly attributed). The trolls of the internet research agency each managed dozens of false personas.

Second, Russian propaganda is **rapid, continuous, and repetitive**. Contemporary Russian propaganda is continuous and very responsive to events. Due to their willingness to perpetuate falsehoods, Russian propagandists do not need to wait to check facts or verify claims; they just disseminate an interpretation of emergent events that appears to best favor their themes and objectives. This allows them to be remarkably responsive and nimble, often broadcasting the first 'news' of events (and, with similar frequency, the first news of non-events, or things that have not actually happened). They will also repeat and recycle disinformation. The January 14, 2016, edition of *Weekly Disinformation Review* reported the reemergence of several previously debunked Russian propaganda stories, including that Polish President Andrzej Duda was insisting that Ukraine return former Polish territory, that Islamic State fighters were joining pro-Ukrainian forces, and that there was a Western-backed coup in Kiev, Ukraine's capital (Disinformation 2016).

Third, Russian propaganda makes **no commitment to objective reality**. Contemporary Russian propaganda makes little or no commitment to the truth. This is not to say that all of it is false. Quite the contrary: It often contains a significant fraction of the truth but is spun as a selective truth. Sometimes, however, events reported in Russian propaganda are wholly manufactured, as described above. Wardle (2017) notes seven different types of disinformation, and the Russians employ them all: satire or parody, false connection (when the images or headlines do not match the content), misleading content, false context (genuine content but out of context), imposter content (impersonating a genuine source), manipulated content (genuine information or imagery that is then changed), and fabricated content.

Fourth, and finally, Russian propaganda makes **no commitment to consistency**. Different Russian media do not necessarily broadcast the exact same themes or messages. Different channels do not necessarily broadcast the same account of contested events. Different channels or representatives show no fear of 'changing their tune'. If one falsehood or misrepresentation is exposed or is not well received, the propagandists will discard it and move on to a new (though not necessarily more plausible) explanation (Snyder 2018). Lack of commitment to consistency extends to the statements of Russian President Vladimir Putin. For example, he first denied that the 'little green men' in Crimea were Russian soldiers but later admitted that they were. Similarly, he at first denied any desire to see Crimea join Russia, but then he admitted that that had been his plan all along (Pifer 2015).

FINDINGS FROM PSYCHOLOGY: WHY RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA MIGHT WORK

Russia propaganda's lack of commitment to objective reality or to consistency flies in the

face of the conventional wisdom on government persuasion, wisdom that holds credibility as paramount and infers credibility is lost through untruths or inconsistencies (US Department of Defense 2008; Paul 2011; Muñoz 2012). How can Russia's approach to propaganda be inconsistent and often untrue but still persuasive? We turned to the relevant literature in psychology and social psychology to find out. In what follows, we review psychological findings relevant to each of the four distinctive characteristics of the Russian 'firehose of falsehood' propaganda model.

HOW DO VOLUME AND DIVERSITY OF SOURCES CONTRIBUTE TO PERSUASIVENESS?

Russian propaganda involves dissemination of a high volume of messages across multiple sources, and decades of psychological research provides insights into the persuasive efficacy of this tactic. For example, experimental research has demonstrated the persuasive advantage of multiple arguments presented by multiple sources over other conditions in which a single argument was presented by multiple sources and in which multiple arguments were presented by one source (Harkins & Petty 1981). More recent research addressing the influence of cross media campaigns on consumer perceptions has also shown that presentation of information across more than one media type (e.g., television and the Internet) has a stronger effect on perceptions, attitudes, and intentions than presentation through one media type (Lim et al. 2015).

HOW DO RAPIDITY AND REPETITION CONTRIBUTE TO PERSUASIVENESS?

Rapid dissemination of fabricated information provides Russian propaganda with a first mover advantage, thereby providing an early opportunity to frame how and whether people process subsequent information. Various studies have shown the competitive advantage that first movers can achieve, such as consumer preferences for first-in market brands over later brands (Kerin et al. 1992), preferences for options presented first during a serial order presentation (Hung et al. 2017), and a primacy processing effect where individual judgements favor messages presented first (Haugtvedt & Wegener 1994).

Although people tend to accept that first impressions matter, it is easy to underestimate the power of the first mover advantage. Some of that power comes from how humans store information. Our memories are not card catalogs in which we store individual facts in isolation. We store information in stories, in an integrated model of intertwined and interrelated bits of information that collectively frame our understanding of the world and support our worldview (Narvaez 1998; San Roque et al. 2012). When we receive a new factoid (something presented as fact, whether it is true or not) and we accept it, we do not simple store it in a cognitive card catalog. Rather, we integrate it into our understanding of the world. Therefore, when someone or something subsequently calls that factoid into question, we do not remove a single cognitive data card that holds that factoid. Instead, removing a factoid is a challenge to our existing story, and it is easier to continue to embrace a false impression than to change our understanding (Swire & Ecker 2018).

In addition to rapidity of dissemination, Russian propaganda's use of repetition can also have powerful effects on attitudes and perceptions, such as by increasing familiarity with a message. Research suggests that stimuli or messages that match with one's memories (e.g., are recognizable) are more positively evaluated than those that do not (Montoya et al. 2017). Through some repetition of messages, people can come to perceive the information to which they are repeatedly exposed as accurate and justified.

HOW DOES A LACK OF COMMITMENT TO OBJECTIVE REALITY CONTRIBUTE TO PERSUASIVENESS?

Russian propaganda's frequent use of falsehoods, or lack of commitment to objective reality, has the potential to be particularly persuasive. For example, research suggests that the more misinformation that people are presented with, the more difficulty they have in identifying misleading information (i.e., in differentiating true and false information; Pena et al. 2017). In addition, pathbreaking research by Vosoughi et al. (2018) examined the spread of verified true and verified false news stories from more than ten years of Twitter data. They found that false stories spread farther, faster, and deeper than true stories, with those effects being even more pronounced for false political news than for other categories. Their work confirms the old aphorism that lies are half-way around the world before the truth has its boots on. However, one should also consider when and why lies can be persuasive.

Generally, sources and messages perceived as more credible are more persuasive than those seen as less credible (Pornpitakpan 2004), and ingroup members are perceived as more credible than individuals who belong to another group (Clark & Maas 1988). De Dreu (2013) shows how humans are 'parochial altruists', willing to bear costs on behalf of groups to which they feel they belong and to fight, resist, or derogate rival outgroups. This creates considerable vulnerability to being persuaded by false messages that are propagated by members of a group or appear to have been propagated by members of that group.

Group membership is one of many heuristics, or cognitive shortcuts, that people us to evaluate credibility. People use credibility heuristics in attempts to quickly determine source and message credibility. However, use of these heuristics can contribute to errors in credibility evaluations. As evidenced by their tactic of pretending to belong to another's ingroup (either by claiming membership or by manifesting characteristics consistent with ingroup membership), Russian propagandists attempt to use these heuristics to their advantage.

The endorsement heuristic is an additional manipulatable cognitive shortcut used in the online environment, such that people are more likely to believe sources and messages when others have done so (Metzger & Flanigan 2013). Russian propagandists can influence this heuristic by spreading and supporting one another's accounts, comments, and sites.

Another heavily used heuristic is the self-confirmation heuristic, or a bias toward placing greater weight on individuals and messages that support pre-existing beliefs (Metzger & Flanagin 2013). Whether a piece of information or news is consistent with our worldview is one of the first things we consider when evaluating its credibility and truthfulness (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). People search for and favor information consistent with their beliefs, also known as confirmation bias, and they subject information inconsistent with their pre-existing beliefs to greater scrutiny, known as disconfirmation bias (Marsh & Yang 2018). Our natural tendency toward confirmation bias is served in the contemporary information environment by 'filter bubbles' driven by our own choices about television programs and websites, and reinforced by algorithm-driven advertisements and search results (Pariser 2011).

As evidenced by the limitations of heuristics, the potential persuasive efficacy of Russian propaganda might be bolstered due to human difficulties in differentiating truths from falsehoods. Demonstrating this difficulty, previous research found that participants relied on information from clearly fictional stories when subsequently responding to general knowledge questions, suggesting that people integrate incorrect information from untrue descriptions with their own understanding of the world (Marsh et al. 2003). Various additional studies have also demonstrated

the impact that rumors, political misinformation, and misleading media claims can have on individual beliefs (see Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Despite this difficulty in differentiation fact from fiction, people tend to overestimate their own ability to identify misleading information (Pena et al. 2017).

HOW DOES INCONSISTENCY AFFECT PERSUASIVENESS?

The fourth characteristic of Russian propaganda, its lack of consistency, runs counter to traditional wisdom regarding persuasion. Indeed, inconsistent messaging can hinder persuasion, such that message recipients tend to more carefully scrutinize inconsistent messages from a single source (Ziegler et al. 2004). At times, however, recipients may overlook inconsistencies. For example, when a source appears to have modified their messaging after greater consideration of different perspectives, recipient attitudinal confidence can increase (Rucker et al. 2008). Even if a source changes accounts, recipients are likely to evaluate the new message without overweighting the prior, 'mistaken', account, when the new message is sufficiently strong and the source is believed to be credible (Reich & Tormala 2013).

DEFENDING AGAINST PROPAGANDA

Thus far, Russia's disinformation campaign has been met with limited effective resistance (Lucas & Nimmo 2015). What can Western governments, citizens, and companies do to protect themselves against Russian propaganda?

EDUCATION

One of the most frequently proposed avenues to addressing the existence and potential influence of Russian propaganda and falsehoods is the promotion of media literacy. Media literacy education encourages people to use critical thinking when making decisions informed by media messages (Hobbs & Jensen 2009). Media literacy education might include provision of information that increases knowledge regarding potential influencer goals and the tactics used to mislead and influence audiences, also known as persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright 1994). Persuasion knowledge increases abilities to resist the influence of misleading claims and information (e.g., Xie & Quintero Johnson 2015).

Generally, media literacy interventions appear to have positive impacts on multiple outcomes, including knowledge and criticism of the media and awareness of media influence (Jeong et al. 2012). However, the full utility of media literacy education in promoting knowledge of and resistance to Russian propaganda across diverse audiences requires additional investigation. In addition, the design of media literacy education efforts must be considered when promoting resistance to influence, such that it cannot be assumed that any media literacy education will be effective. For example, individuals exposed to media literacy education might assume that they are already resistant to persuasion and propaganda, reducing the effectiveness of this education. Possessing knowledge of manipulation tactics and disinformation does not guarantee that people will use this knowledge (Pratkanis & Aronson 2001).

People underestimate their own susceptibility to biases and misperceptions, such that they perceive they are less susceptible to biases in judgement and inferences than others, and this tendency might reduce the extent to which people pay attention to and use media literacy education. Pronin and colleagues have termed this phenomenon 'bias blind spot', wherein people see themselves as less susceptible than others to multiple biases in cognition and motivation (Pronin,

2006; Pronin et al. 2002). This bias blind spot appears when people evaluate the perceived effects of fake news and online comments. Research has demonstrated that individuals believe that others, particularly those who are members of different social groups than themselves, are more susceptible to the harmful effects of fake news (Jang & Kim 2018) and more influenced by online comments (Chen & Ng 2016) than the individuals themselves are. To be most effective, individuals need to be aware of, or made aware of, their personal vulnerability to be influenced by information, including deceptive and illegitimate messages (Sagarin et al. 2002).

Through awareness of their own vulnerability to influence, people may be more inclined to monitor their own responses to information and messages. For example, if someone experiences an emotional response to a message, their acknowledgement of these feelings might stimulate analytic considerations of why they have experienced these emotions, or what characteristics of the message primed these emotions (Pratkanis & Aronson 2001).

However, for people to remain vigilant to their own exposure and responses to false and misleading messages, they must have the cognitive resources to do so. Although they may have knowledge regarding different disinformation sources and tactics, individuals might not draw from this knowledge when fatigued. In other words, the ability to detect manipulative intent and falsehoods is diminished when people are distracted, tired, or cognitively overloaded (Wentzel et al. 2010). Avoiding propaganda rich environments when fatigued, preoccupied, or in a similar cognitively vulnerable state may reduce the potential to be influenced by propaganda.

Promoting analytic thinking and careful consideration of sources, messages, and one's own cognitive biases and limitations can help individuals to develop a healthy skepticism to use when exposed to different pieces of information. However, ill-considered use of different strategies, such as by never trusting any new information, has the potential to lead to the development of unhealthy skepticism, or fear of and an unwillingness to consider new ideas (Johnson 2002).

Certain practices might promote unhealthy skepticism. For example, as part of efforts to appear neutral, reporters often present claims from two or more sides of an issue or story without adjudicating this information, known as he said/she said reporting. The issue with this strategy is that it can provide credibility to clearly false claims and promote misperceptions (Weeks 2018). Although he said/she said reporting might be implemented as part of journalistic efforts to appear unbiased, research suggests that journalistic intervention through provision of additional facts and analyses not only minimizes misperceptions but also promotes positive perceptions regarding news quality (Pingree et al. 2014).

DEBUNKING, REFUTING, COUNTERCLAIMS, AND ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

One tactic that has been used in attempts to counter falsehoods is to disseminate clear and credible corrections to this incorrect information, or to debunk the myths. The common, yet false, assumption about debunking is that misperceptions are a function of a lack of knowledge, so simply conveying correct information will be sufficient in eliminating the influence of the false information. This model, known as the 'information deficit model', is wrong (Cook & Lewandowsky 2011). Corrections are often of limited use in reducing or eliminating reliance on misperceptions developed through exposure to falsehoods. Even if people receive and believe corrections, the previous falsehoods to which they were exposed, and had believed to be true, continue to impact their reasoning (Ecker et al. 2011). Successful debunking requires an understanding of not just what people know and think, but *how* they think.

Reliance on false information following a correction is thought to be due to mental models, or stories, that people develop after receiving initial information on a topic or event. A correction produces a gap in the mental model one had developed, and as noted previously, people would rather hold onto an incorrect mental model that contains falsehoods than an incomplete mental model that has gaps due to removed inaccuracies. To address this, corrections can include correct and factual alternative information to replace the incorrect information people held in their mental models (Swire & Ecker 2018).

In their *Debunking Handbook*, Cook and Lewandowsky (2011) propose that successful debunking efforts must have three major elements: 1) a focus on core facts rather than the myth or falsehood being debunked in order to avoid reinforcing the familiarity of the falsehood; 2) preceding any explicit mention of the falsehood with forewarning that upcoming information is false; 3) an alternative explanation to replace the falsehood being debunked.

INOCULATION AND FOREWARNING

One way to address the potential influential effects of Russian propaganda and falsehoods is by inoculating audiences against these messages or moving first. The concept underlying this approach is that, just as one's immune system can be inoculated against viral infections, so can one's attitudes be inoculated against false and misleading information. Inoculation typically involves both forewarning individuals about falsehoods to which they may be exposed and providing counterarguments to these falsehoods. Multiple studies have shown that inoculation promotes resistance to persuasion (Compton 2013). For inoculation to be most effective, audiences must understand that they will be the targets of persuasive attacks, acknowledge their potential vulnerabilities, have information that they can use to counterargue falsehoods to which they will be exposed, and be motivated to counterargue these falsehoods.

Moving first can also be advantageous in addressing crises and negative information. Proactively communicating negative information about one's organization or self is known as 'stealing thunder' (Pratkanis & Aronson 2001). This approach allows those who implement it to control the information flow and minimize others' ability to sensationalize a topic. Further, stealing thunder can promote positive perceptions, such that the voluntary release of negative information promotes perceptions that the entity of interest is honest and credible. However, if audiences perceive this approach is being used to manipulate them, then the positive effects of stealing thunder disappear (Lee 2016).

Naming and shaming, or discounting, the sources of and outlets for Russian propaganda and discussing Russian tactics are additional strategies for countering disinformation that also assume a protective advantage can be gained by providing individuals with pertinent information. James Farwell (2018) advocates transparent discussion of Russian tactics and practices, both to increase public awareness of their efforts and to signal to the Russians that the United States is aware of and does not approve of these activities. He also advocates better enforcement of the requirement for various entities to register as foreign agents (in compliance with the Foreign Agents Registration Act) and would like to see Russia's Sputnik International, RT, and other foreign agents required to label their informational materials (web pages, broadcasts, etc.) with a conspicuous disclosure of their foreign agent status. This source identification strategy is most likely to effectively counter falsehoods when people must attribute information to a source or otherwise remember where information came from. However, people often forget the sources of information. As such, they may remember the influential

information and forget that this information came from a source with little or no credibility (Marsh & Yang, 2018).

FACT-CHECKING AND VERIFICATION

Consumers increasingly use social media sites and applications to get their news, and social media are major sources through which Russian propagandists can spread disinformation (Lazar et al. 2018). Keir Giles (2017:2) at the *Council on Foreign Relations* suggests that 'Social media companies should more aggressively police their platforms for malicious state-sponsored content, and they should work with news organizations to promote verified and fact-checked content on their platforms'. Anne Applebaum and her colleagues (2018) suggest broader revision to the digital rules, including a social media code of conduct, more transparency regarding political advertising, and better systems for authentication of users. Categories of services for addressing online disinformation include fact-checking and verification services (Brandtzaeg et al. 2017). Fact-checking services examine and ascertain the validity and credibility of online content, and verification services analyze the authenticity of users and pieces of online content (e.g., images).

Three potential social media approaches to fact-checking are (i) increased use of human editors; (ii) crowdsourcing; (iii) technological or algorithmic solutions (Althuis & Strand 2018), and each of these approaches has its own inherent limitations. The volume of online content hinders the ability for human editors and experts to review all, or even most, online claims, and crowdsourcing fact-checking can be both highly prone to error and resource intensive (Babakar 2018). Ensuring accuracy among computational fact-checkers can also be challenging, in part due to large variability in online content and the ability of disinformation disseminators to modify messaging content and strategies (Boididou et al. 2014).

As discussed earlier, debunking previously believed claims can be ineffective. As such, consumers would ideally receive information regarding the validity and credibility of claims before they have a chance to believe them. This might be accomplished by encouraging consumers to include information from credible fact-checking sites in the feed of information they receive (e.g., 'follow' fact-checking sites) and by labeling social media content.

Traditionally, social media has sought to democratize the news, allowing that egregious political clickbait and items from respected news media appear without discrimination in newsfeeds. However, sources could be scored based on criteria that users value and contribute to trust, and those scores could be displayed (Waldrop 2017). Such a labeling approach must be implemented carefully, however. A 2017 study by Pennycook and Rand found that a newsfeed in which some items were labeled as 'disputed' backfired, in that all items that had no flag were then considered to be more credible. This suggests that, to function effectively, a labeling system would need to label all items, even if just with a placeholder tag that indicates an item is new and has not yet been either verified or disputed.

Better verification of users and content through identity resolution and bot removal has also been considered as part of efforts to disinformation. In April of 2018, the European Commission announced the introduction of a European Union-wide code of practice on disinformation. Among the things that will be required of online platforms are transparency about sponsored content (particularly political advertising) and taking measures to identify and close fake accounts and accounts run by bots (European Commission 2018).

Supporting increased use of regulations requiring user and content verification, James Farwell (2018) has noted that the freedom of

speech commonly guaranteed in democracies does not extend to robots, and inauthentic speech or speech artificially echoed should not be protected. However, there are risks involved in indiscriminate use of verification, particularly with regard to a user's identity. While identity resolution and elimination of false personas (run by bots or otherwise) would be a positive step in protecting established democracies, it could be dangerous in fledgling or non-democracies. If discoverable by an authoritarian regime, it would not be a positive development for pro-democracy advocates to be restricted to one account per platform, each associated with a confirmed identity.

CHANGING THE INCENTIVES

Beyond fact-checking and verification services, sites and application can also reduce incentives for promoting misinformation. Some entities may use disinformation to bolster their ad revenues or brands, so making it harder to profit from disinformation may help to decrease its production and dissemination. Addressing this, Waldrop (2017) noted positive steps by Facebook and Google in 2016 and 2017 to prevent blatantly fake news sites from earning money on their advertising networks and lowering the newsfeed ranking of low-quality sources.

REGULATING CONTENT

Several countries have implemented regulations or policies aimed at reducing the flow of propaganda. For example, in 2014, Latvia suspended broadcasts from Russia's RTR Planeta for three months based on a violation of their national law on Electronic Mass Media (Freedom House 2015). In addition, Indian authorities have warned social media group administrators that they can be held accountable for disseminating false news or fabricating stories that could inflame communal tension (Connolly et al. 2016).

Notably, content regulation has the potential to become, or might be considered to be, censorship that prevents the human right to freedom of expression. In addition, if a site or application removes content without educating users regarding why or permitting appeals, then users may feel dehumanized and frustrated (Myers West 2018). This can lead users to search for alternative online communication avenues.

CYBER-BLURRING

An additional possible avenue for addressing Russian propagandists' tactics is to create confusion through the use of cyber-blurring. Cyber-blurring includes creating fake email accounts and fake documents to confuse and slow hackers. This tactic appears to have been used as a counteroffensive measure employed by Emmanuel Macron's campaign team during the 2017 French presidential election to address Russian hackers (Nossiter et al. 2017). Although this might be effective in addressing hacker activity, deliberate dissemination of falsified information to the public could harm the credibility of an individual or organization.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Russia's approach to propaganda represents a firehose of falsehood with four distinctive features. It is high volume and multi-channel; rapid, continuous, and repetitive; shows no commitment to objective reality; and shows no commitment to consistency. Although difficult to quantify, at least some research suggests this approach has been effective in influencing audiences. This runs counter to conventional wisdom on

government persuasion, which suggests that truth and consistency are of paramount importance, However, research in psychology suggests these features can be persuasive.

Various studies have demonstrated that dissemination of a high volume of messages across different types of media sources can influence attitudes and perceptions. In addition, rapid dissemination of information provides a first mover advantage that can influence the mental models, or stories, that individuals create; thereby influencing an individual's interpretation of related subsequent information. Repetitive and continuous presentation of falsehoods makes it more difficult for audiences to identify misleading information, and propagandists can use false and misleading information about themselves (e.g., pretend to be in a group) and a topic to manipulate the cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, that people employ. Although a lack of consistency can reduce persuasive impact, there are instances when a lack of consistency might promote persuasion, such as when a source that is believed to be credible appears to have been previously mistaken.

Although research suggests that the characteristics of Russian propaganda might promote its ability persuade audiences, there are avenues to countering this propaganda. For example:

- Media literacy programs that both increases awareness of personal vulnerabilities to being influenced and educate audiences regarding the goals and tactics of propagandists are avenues to reducing the persuasive efficacy of Russian propaganda.
- Debunking efforts that not only indicate previous information to which audiences were exposed was false but also provide an alternative explanation to replace the incorrect information can also be used in efforts to counter disinformation.
- Inoculation efforts that inform audiences that they will be targeted and might be vulnerable to persuasive attacks and that also provide audiences with information to counterargue falsehoods can be pursued to reduce audiences' potential to be influenced.
- Rapid and increased fact-checking of claims and verification of information can be used to reduce audiences' exposure to disinformation on social media.
- Reducing the potential for disinformation disseminators to profit from their messaging tactics may also help to reduce the creation and spread of disinformation.
- Another avenue that different governments have considered or used is that of increased regulation of social media users and content. Importantly, the multiple implications of and potential issues with this approach, including the potential to limit freedom of expression, should be strongly considered.
- New strategies to counter propagandists and disinformation, such as cyber-blurring, continue to be considered and developed, and their utility in reducing the effectiveness of Russian propaganda should be evaluated.

Use of only one approach to countering disinformation is likely to be far less effective than a multi-pronged approach that promotes multiple different avenues. Further, any set of approaches that is pursued with little or no consideration of the social contexts and audience characteristics of those who will be exposed to these efforts will also be less effective. Continued development of new strategies, based in theory and research, followed by implementation and systematic evaluation is also needed to effectively counter Russia propaganda.

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