Information warfare: valid use of media or illegal interference?

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1. What constitutes information warfare (and how easy is it to implement?):

The two most important and most mediatized aspects of information warfare today are psyops (psychological operations) and electronic warfare (cyber-attacks). Both are incredibly cheap and easy to pull off which makes them that much more dangerous. All it takes is either a couple dollars that you wire to places like India, Macedonia or Romania to hire yourself an untraceable team at the other side of the world or a dedicated military branch to conduct attacks on a specific target.

Information warfare as it's being portrayed is so recent, it only started entering the debate about 10 years ago with governments even creating new agencies to start dealing with offensive and defensive capabilities just like in the 1950s and 60s when nuclear weapons were being heavily developed by both the US and Soviet Union. Although that may be the case for media propagated psyops (fake news operations) and cyber-attacks, warfare through information is what made the cold war.

Between 1947 with the creation of the CIA and 1991 when the Soviet Union dissolved, spying, exchanging and stealing information from one another was common not just between the 2 superpowers but everywhere else in the world with Berlin being the capital of such activities. Grabbing information from an adversary would serve as a preventive strike by knowing what technology was available on the other side and thus better preparing against it. Two very famous examples of this come from the world of aviation. A Taiwanese sidewinder missile was lodged unexploded into a Chinese MiG 17 during the second Taiwan strait crisis in 1958. Lacking an infrared missile to rival the American made one, the Chinese were able to reverse engineer it and is now still used throughout the world as the K-13. The second most widely known example of technology theft was when the Israelis captured a Mig-21F during the six-day war in 1967. From this, the US Air force was able to figure out the engine was poorly armored as well as the fuel tank. Technological details weren't the only precious information goods during the cold war, diplomatic information was as well. Operation Gold was a joint CIA MI6 operation that involved tunnels under Berlin until 1956 when a mole informed the Soviets about them with the objective of gaining intelligence about the Soviet Army's movements from their headquarters in Berlin. The same kind of operation went on in Vienna under the codename operation silver.

Although the information theft still goes on today, rather than being copies of blueprints passed physically from hand to hand or left in dead drops, it's stolen from computers or passed along in storage devices. The most blatant example of such theft can be seen in China's Chengdu J-20 fighter jet that takes the cockpit and air intake from the F22, the engine exhaust from a F18, canards from the Rafale and a rudder from the F35.

That information never even required a physical presence in the United states. It was revealed in the Snowden leaks to have been cyber espionage, the product of electronic warfare which is now becoming more and more frequent.

As well as trying to steal data from other governments, a new trend has recently emerged tracing back to as early as WW1 but adapted to today's technologies and topics: psychological warfare (or now called media warfare). As opposed to propaganda which is when a government actively tries to change the minds of its own citizens, psychological warfare (also referred to as PSYOPS) are aimed at citizens of another country or a certain group outside of the country of origin. From radio stations in a foreign language aimed at enemy soldiers (Tokyo Rose for example was a Japanese woman who would broadcast on the air in English with American troops as her main target and would try to discourage them from fighting by saying things like "while you're fighting abroad, your loved one is in another man's arms") to leaflet droppings in war zones (the US would drop leaflets in Vietnam encouraging Vietcong defection) to more modern and adapted techniques like information flooding (filling the internet with fake news for example, common before elections), information rather than being distributed with the intent of teaching and being beneficial, is being used to divide people and cause chaos.

Facing the potential that people are now targets and weapons and that significant discoveries in the fields of computer security and cryptography have made hacking more complicated, a new question as emerged: what is there to do concerning this problem? After all, writing a story and sharing it online, whether true or false falls under freedom of speech but be propaganda which is a tool of war. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has not made this easier either. Some countries or groups may want another country to be deliberately given fake news about the pandemic for it to last longer thus creating havoc longer. This research report will go over 2 case studies:

-Russian media influence in Ukraine the (media warfare by a state actor)

-What has been done by Facebook and YouTube, possible approaches and solutions to the problem

2. Definition of key terms:
   a. Cyber warfare: Cyber warfare involves the actions by a nation-state or international organization to attack and attempt to damage another nation's computers or information networks through, for example, computer viruses or denial-of-service attacks. (source RAND.org)

      i.   **Computer virus:** A computer program designed to be undetected and disrupt a computer system. Known categories are trojans, ransomwares (WannaCry)…

      ii.   **Denial of service attack**: A computer attack involving a single or multiple (botnet) machines overwhelming a server or network by sending an overflow of requests with the intent to prevent legitimate users from accessing it through the virtual fog of traffic.

b. **False flag operation:** a political or military action that is made to appear to have been carried out by a group that is not actually responsible

c. **Public choice theory**: a theory by which government ownership (or control) of the media undermines political and economic freedom. A government owned media will most likely serve a purpose to persuade rather than inform

d. **Public interest theory**: a theory by which government ownership (or control) of the media should maximize social welfare. A government owned media is seen more as a public service rather than a company.

e. **Encryption**: A mathematical process consisting of the substitution of a byte string for another through a function involving a key (numerical value, character or string) used for encrypting and decrypting. Some functions are one way (hashing) and others are symmetric (cyphering). The reverse process is known as decryption. An encryption/decryption sequence follows 1 important rule: for an encryption function E, a decryption function D, a key K and a plaintext Pt, $D(K, E(K, Pt)) = Pt$.

f. **Domains of warfare**: the different domains warfare focuses on

    -Land (since forever)

    -Sea (since 1175 BC, battle of the Delta)

    -Air (since 1915, WWI)

    -Space (since 1960s, ballistic missile projects)

    -Cyber/information (since recently, various cyber-attacks)

g.   **Fake news**: false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or some other form of media with the intent of changing political views.

Fake news can is also claimed when an author takes a real event and twists the chronological order or deliberately leaves out crucial facts in order to give a story a whole new view of an event.

3. Russian media influence in Ukraine

On December 31st, 1999, the Russian federation's leader Boris Yeltsin resigned from the office of President of Russia. According to the constitution, his prime minister took over under the program that he would end the oligarchy in Russia and the corruption associated with it. On the following day, Vladimir Putin would take control of Russia and change it into the Russia we know and love today.

A Russian show by the name of Куклы (translated becomes « dolls » or « puppets ») was a very popular and beloved show in Russia based on the British TV show « spitting image » at the time of his inauguration and used puppets in order to mock political personalities. The show regularly made fun of him in it so much that some reported he would be infuriated at how he was depicted.

Putin, who values his image more than anything (cf the shirtless photos of him) decided after that private media in Russia shall no longer be, launching a campaign to change the constitution and legally acquire every media company in Russia (at least be the majority shareholder for every company). This would ultimately end the puppets show and rank Russia as one of the worst countries for freedom of the press (ranked 149/179 according to the 2020 report by Reporters without borders). TV6's owner at the time Boris Berezovsky would eventually go on to exile in England and die under unusual circumstances in 2013. This control over Russian Media would give Vladimir Putin a great platform for expression and cult of personality. Since his first days in office, he was obsessed with the media, going as far as to organize photo shoots in the Kremlin to put himself forward.

In 2014, between February and March, an army of mercenaries entered Crimea and took control of the local parliament as well as other key locations and evicted the local parliament. Not wearing any identification (which goes against the Hague convention stating that a combatant should wear an identification linking them to a faction or they will be able to invoke the Geneva convention), these forces would eventually occupy the entirety of Crimea by mid-March and by the end of the month, Crimea would become part of the Russian federation. This takeover from Russia would cause a war in the region that would bring rebels from around the world fighting for Crimea's freedom as well as for Russia. Putin justifies his actions by stating that the « little green men » do not belong to him as they wear no form of identification as well as by the fact that Crimea houses a certain percentage of 67% in 2014 (source: Crimean census). Annexation of Crimea can also be linked to Putin's will to divert

attention from the economy (inflation would reach 13% in 2015 and the ruble would collapse).

As Ukraine is populated by 17% of Russians (2001 census, that number has most likely changed especially due to the events of 2015) and being nostalgic for the Soviet Union which he first saw collapse in Berlin as a young intelligence officer, Putin today continues his campaign to recreate the easter superpower of the 20th century and that includes reconquering Ukraine.

Many Ukrainian media outlets have been replaced by Russian owned ones in Crimea in what journalists call an « information war » organized by Russia who in return says the west legitimized the actions against the country's current government of the time (which had decided to sway away from the EU and closer to Russia). These actions were condemned by the OECD (Organization Europeene pour la Cooperation et le developpement economique) who said that this would open the doors to « the worst kind of propaganda ».

The problem with the situation is that at times, western media and Russian backed media have described completely different scenarios which journalists in both sides have condemned. Liz Wahl, a journalist for the American division of RT (Russia Today) resigned on air due to those actions, claiming that she disagreed with the way Putin's actions were being « white washed ».

The propaganda that OECD refers to is the fact the intervention was labeled as a humanitarian action against the persecution of ethnic Russians living in Crimea and claim this fact is being ignored by the west. Some go as far as to claim that facts are only presented in a biased way and the truth is being half told.

The case in Ukraine is not a completely isolated one. Russia today (or RT as it's referred to by its domain name to not reveal its Russian ties in its name) continues to broadcast internationally and does the bidding of Russia's foreign policy. The constant attacks on western institutions and governments can be compared to the broadcasts of Tokyo Rose during WW2. This impact was especially felt during the US elections of 2016 and is still felt today concerning subjects like gun control in the US, Covid-19 throughout the world and Brexit in the UK. Fearing a similar consequence, Estonia (where Russians make up 25% of the national population) has increased its ties with NATO. Lithuania has also prepared for similar events with operation Lightning Strike.

4. Solutions to the problem (attempts)

Several solutions have been introduced in order to reduce fake news and the spread of false ideas, incomplete information in the media (mainly the internet).

a. Facebook

During the 2016 elections, Facebook was used as one of the main platforms to spread false information from both sides of the political spectrum. Pages like Eagle Rising would tell the tales of thousands of Syrian migrants wanting to come to the US to take advantage of the system and others would claim that Trump was not mentally fit to be left with the nuclear codes.

Some of the solutions provided include but are not limited to:

-Better identifying false news by submitting posts to 3rd party fact checkers

-Making it harder to monetize fake news (restricting advertisement purchases for pages known to produce that kind of content)

-The use of machine learning to better assist response teams in finding accounts that produce fake or « click bait » content

-Ranking improvements: making sure that the top-rated content is not just rated because of the traffic it generates. Fake news articles will tend to include every buzzword they possibly can in order to draw attention thus generating more traffic and increasing the probability that more people will think it's true.

-News integrity initiative: A tech industry and scholar backed initiative to better help the public make « informed judgement »

b. YouTube

Under certain videos published by well-known media companies, YouTube will include a small div stating where a news channel is from and who funds it.

Al Jazeera is funded in whole or in part by the Qatari government. Wikipedia ☑

An example for a video about the US and the middle east

YouTube takes a different approach to the problem. The google owned video sharing platform has been known to voluntarily keep fake news videos up. Although a video that it obviously fake news will not be taken down (unless it violates community guideline standards), it will be dereferenced from the trending section. The reason behind this is purely economic: the more news a video gets, the more attention the platform gets. This was especially made true 2 years ago when a youtuber named Logan Paul filmed a hanging man in the « Japanese suicide forest » and uploaded it on the platform. Many news agencies linked the video in their articles which in turn increased traffic on youtube.com.

5. Conclusion and questions to be answered

The problem posed in this report is one that will have a very different solution depending on the country represented. Many delegations may try to take advantage of the situation to get a certain media outlet (generally critical of that nation's government) banned. What really makes this question so difficult is the fact that during the entire process, the national sovereignty of the targeted country has been respected so the UN's role in the situation is that much more complicated.

On one hand, one can argue that without freedom of the press, fake news articles could never happen since a government could easily shut down any news agency that produces fake content. This however would mean a government can decide which stories get published. The fake news would not be in the fact that events and fact are invented but that they are blatantly distorted in order to convey a certain narrative.

On the other hand, it can be argued that a free press provides that verification of the information by putting news agencies against one another in terms of views and making sure that each outlet prevents the publication of such content which would ruin its reputation.

Trolls and bots have also been a major issue on social media platforms in these recent years. Accounts created deliberately to post inflammatory content in order to divide users based on certain topics have been at the source of recent polarization in politics in the western world. A good illustration of what happens can be found in Homeland's season 6-episode 5. It shows how many accounts can be controlled by one single individual in order to control or diverge a narrative. The same series also illustrates the fact that incomplete information can have disastrous consequences like in season 7 episode 4 and makes an interesting parallel with what happened in Waco, Texas.

A few of the questions the committee can answer are as follows:

-To which extent should a free press be free? Should there be some kind of government control on what is said and if so, to which extent?

-Should a government be able to own a media company or be its majority stock holder? (Public choice theory VS Public interest theory)

-Should a country's government owned media's propaganda be deemed as an act of war? If so, what should the consequences be? How shall one retaliate or negotiate?

-Should there be a period of mediatic truce before an election in order to prevent unverifiable fake news?

-Should a news outlet be able to report on news in a foreign country and then be able to publish in the country that is being reported on?

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-Is it a government's job to prevent the spread of fake news or that of the website provider/administrator?

-What about the UN in all of this? Is it equipped to deal with false information? Should a new body be created? Is there already an existing one that can receive that mission?

-If you were to look at media warfare and cyberwarfare as an invasion of a country, should a country's borders include its communication lines? Should the UN redefine national sovereignty?

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