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Age of Disinformation

In the mid-20th century, human civilization marked the beginning of the Information Age. (Castells 43) Now, in the year of 2023, "the Israel-Hamas war sparked the highest volume of global propaganda—emanating not just from Israel, Palestine and other Middle Eastern countries but also from Russia, China, and Iran—that experts had ever seen." (THR Web Features) Humanity has embarked into the Disinformation[1] Age.

The flow of information is at the highest point in human history with numerous potential benefits for societal, economical, and scientific advancements. Unfortunately, with the conditions for the flow of information becoming ripe, it just so happens that the conditions for the flow of disinformation become equally ripe as well. Our society as a whole must exercise extreme caution in the development and maintenance of the technology that allows for the continuation of the Information Age and all of its benefits, because otherwise, disinformation can travel as fast - if not faster - than truth, and the rise of Disinformation Age can result in the demise of the Information Age.

The greater the information availability, the more potent the weapon of disinformation becomes. This requires solutions that can help us reduce the spread of disinformation, and at the same time, not slow down the flow of information that are critical components of our society. To this, many solutions have been proposed, such as laws to protect young children as well as

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[1] Beware that disinformation and misinformation are not the same. Misinformation refers to information that misleads unknowingly. Disinformation refers to information that causes harm intentionally. (Engle)

national interests from the reach of disinformation. This essay, however, will focus on two specific remedies to help reduce the spread of disinformation: (a) awareness among the public and (b) initiative to create an on-going effort to find solutions that work and continue fighting on this cat-and-mouse problem.

Beware that this essay does not and could not - even if it wanted to - offer solutions. In fact, this essay focuses on remedies, not solutions. It is important for academia to not give an illusion of having a solution, when it does not. Instead, what this essay proposes is that we must raise awareness. The Disinformation Age has begun, and everyone in our society must be equipped with the ability to look out for disinformation.

Distinguishing between truth and disinformation is difficult. In fact, largely in part of disinformation, even the "UN Security Council fails to agree on Israel-Hamas war," (Edith) A number of politicians make false claims to affect assessments of opponents, and "those effects can persist even after the false claim is forgotten." (Lodge et al.) Numerous reports have been made on "misinformation about the virus's [COVID-19] origins/government response … misinformation about treatments." (Kreps and Douglas) It is doubtful that a solution to disinformation will ever exist in the foreseeable future, but nonetheless, the global civilization as a whole must develop ways to continuously counter the ever-evolving disinformation. Otherwise, it will mean the end of the Information Age, and this planet and everything on it might be left with nothing but a wasteland of nuclear fallout, disinformation fallout, or both.

What, then, are the main instruments that are used by threat actors using disinformation to achieve their agenda? "The massive diffusion of sociotechnical systems and microblogging platforms on the World Wide Web (WWW) creates a direct path from producers to consumers of content, i.e., allows disintermediation, and changes the way users become informed, debate, and

form their opinions. This disintermediated environment can foster confusion about causation, and thus encourage speculation, rumors, and mistrust." (Vicario et al.) Among many forms of information available throughout the World Wide Web, social media has become one of the most popular. "Social media now gives every person the power to rapidly broadcast (false) information to potentially global, mass audiences." (Littrell) For example, microblogs can have greater influence than their counterpart news articles because, although news articles tend to be longer and harder to read despite being more credible, microblogs tend to be shorter and more memorable. "Bots, spammers, and astroturfers are also thought to play a part in the spread of misinformation, but there exist threat "actors who finance, produce, and repeat and amplify misinformation," which then is "repeated and amplified by the media, politicians and skeptical bloggers to reach the public." (Treen)

> "Social scientists use the term echo chamber to describe a particular situation some people are in as a result of media supply, distribution, and/or their own demand – namely one where they h what Jamieson and Capella in their influential book Echo Chamber defined as 'a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both magnify the messages delivered within it and insulate them from rebuttal' (2008, p. 76). The magnification part is typically taken to be a preponderance of attitude-consistent information (e.g., people on the left seeking out information that reinforces their pre-existing views) and the insulation part about the absence of cross-cutting exposure (e.g., people on the right not coming across centrist or leftwing perspectives that challenge their pre-existing views)." (Arguedas et al. 7)

> "In the political misinformation literature, Ehrenberg (2012) postulates that 'Though the strategic spread of misinformation is as old as elections themselves, the Internet Age has changed the game'. It is widely recognized that social media has made the diffusion of misinformation both easier and faster … with the structure of online social networks enabling misinformation to spread like a contagion." (Treen)

> "Several characteristics of (online) social networks, such as homophily, echo chambers, and polarization, as well as human behaviors such as confirmation bias, belief systems, and social norms, are all factors in how misinformation is diffused through social media." (Treen)

Surprisingly, disinformation is committed not only by bigger threat actors like state-sponsored organizations, but also by individuals. Some reported that they spread disinformation because doing so gives them a "greater feeling of power and control," while "many people (who are not political elites, paid activists, or foreign political actors) knowingly share false information in a deliberate attempt to deceive or mislead others, often in the service of a specific goal ... For instance, people who create and spread fake news content and highly partisan disinformation online are often motivated by the desire that such posts will 'go viral,' attracting attention that will hopefully provide a reliable stream of advertising revenue." (Littrell)

It is deeply saddening to watch the division in the world that is pulling everyone apart, caused by mistrust and confusion brought by disinformation. It has become so advantageous to tell lies; fabricate versions of the truth that is far from the truth; and just ignore the parts of the truth that is not beneficial to their agenda. What's more -- as long as one organization or a nation continues to do so, it is extremely hard for other organizations and nations to not follow suit. In a world where everyone plays the unethical way, the people who refuse to do the wrong and try to do the right way tend to get disadvantaged.

Remedy 1: Awareness of Disinformation

As an individual, one must be aware of the existence and prevalence of disinformation. This is the first defense against dark magic. The rise of the Internet gave birth to the Information Age, but it turns out that the Information Age has an evil twin. In the Disinformation Age, our society is put under a difficult choice. When there are threat actors that wage an all-out disinformation war against everyone on the Internet, including their own, it becomes extremely difficult to respond as disinformation can be spread faster than truth.

Remedy 2: Initiative for an on-goging effort to find solutions

Threat actors use disinformation to achieve their agenda. Usually, this means disinformation is used to create mistrust "by casting doubt." (Treen) This can go many ways. The doubt that the disinformation creates can be used to discredit someone or - on the contrary - give threat actors an ability to deny any evidence against themselves.

The difficulty of responding to disinformation lies on the fact that not only does disinformation travel faster usually than truth itself, thanks to limitations that exist today on social media, but disinformation also has the capability and tendency to evolve. What this means is that it is extremely difficult to find a cure. Continuing evolution of a disease such as disinformation requires an extremely delicate solution. It is doubtful that such a solution can be found in one's lifetime. Thus, it is apparent that our society as a whole must put an on-going effort to create an evolving remedy to continuously counter evolving disinformation.

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Appendix

Appendix A. An excerpt from "Diffusing Bias | Facing History and Ourselves" by Kandola

"The world is not divided up into those people who have bias and those who don't. It is divided up, though, into those people who recognize they have bias and those people who think they have none. And ironically-- and the work on unconscious bias is full of ironies-- one of the ironies is that those people who believe they have no bias probably are the most biased because there's no reflection going on. If I believed I had no bias, why on earth would I ever need to reflect on my behavior, review my decisions, or change anything about myself? Because I'm perfectly content in what I'm doing."

Appendix B. An excerpt from "Mis- and Disinformation Studies Are Too Big to Fail: Six Suggestions for the Field's Future" Camargo and Felix

"Undoubtedly, the main problem with building solid foundations for a field from the inside is that any such undertaking requires sometimes uncomfortable choices by the involved actors, which go against very strong incentives to keep things the same."