Chapter 33
False Information Narratives:
The IRA's 2016 Presidential Election Facebook Campaign

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ABSTRACT

The issue of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election has been widely debated by scholars and journalists. However, these works have not fully analyzed the ads that have been released by Facebook and the U.S. Congress. This project uses a case study to analyze the ads posted by the Russian-affiliated Internet Research Agency, considering the quantities of ads targeted to particular geographic locations, the frequency of targeting for unique keywords, and the reach and impressions of each of the ads. Further, these results are compared to results from best practices in traditional social media campaigns as a way to better understand the goals and potential impacts of the IRA ads. In conclusion, the project, by analyzing the full set of IRA ads, sheds new light on the way false information narratives were leveraged by the Russian-linked IRA.

INTRODUCTION

This project examines Russian ads that were distributed on Facebook and Instagram between 2015-2017 and were released to the public by the United States House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. These ads were often filled with false, misleading information that compelled users to act, setting them apart from other fake news sites and actors.

The chapter presents a qualitative analysis of a set of quantitative data and analyzes the impact of these ads on their target population, highlighting this impact through the engagement mechanisms of their social network. As the networks themselves underwent interface changes during the distribution period of these advertisements, the impact of these advertisements was potentially greater as the engagement options increased due to the new interface possibilities.

We introduce the concept of "false information narratives" to the discussion of fake news and fake news agents that has been popularized in the wake of the 2016 Presidential election in the United States. Since these advertisements do not fall under news and information per se, but did have a potential impact, it is important to denote them as potentially impactful actors. Aside from the introduction of this concept, the analysis does not set out to build new theory, but rather draws on established communication and media theory in order to better analyze the data contained in the Russian ads released by Congress. In order to more fully understand these ads, we draw on existing work related to memetics, media effects, and sociotechnical practices.

Based on this framework, our research question for the project is: Were the false information narratives on Facebook created by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) successful in generating engagement? One important caveat for this research is that our question, based on the data available, is to assess the social engagement of these ads and *not* whether they were able to change the decisions of individual voters or impact the outcome of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

BACKGROUND

The term "fake news" became a popular talking point during the 2016 Presidential election cycle, but it has existed in academic networks as a catch-all descriptor for a variety of content, from satire such as *The New Yorker's* "Borowitz Report" to Photoshopped imagery, maliciously constructed false information, propaganda, and outreach pieces. Often this term is linked to the anxiety regarding the shift in distribution of news from newspaper and television stations to the online realm, where social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are used to circulate information.

Perhaps the best example to illustrate fake news comes from Dan Faltesek (2016), who describes the phenomenon as "social media news stories that feature sensational headlines referring to untrue information. These stories are produced by actors who are not mandated to do journalism and are remunerated by online ad networks." Indeed, this illustrates how fake news agents are not only distributed largely through social networks, but also places a focus on the monetary value of false information. While the attention of individuals is not a "zero-sum" game, there is limited bandwidth for information, which necessitates the use of tools such as sensationalistic writing to capture the attention of users. Faltesek's work suggests that users are more likely to be captivated by news that replicates traditional news writing, which makes these malicious actors invisible to the untrained eye (Faltesek, 2016).

While researchers have discussed the fact-checking apparatuses that have emerged to combat false information narratives – a term we introduce here to differentiate these advertisements from the more traditional fake news actors and artifacts typically discussed as rhetorical devices – only now are we able to better define how fake news and narratives operate in the online realm. These narratives often function as means of reinforcing narratives about race, class, and gender that help build and maintain collective identity, particularly for those users on the right of the political spectrum (Polletta & Callahan, 2017).

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