

INFLUENCING PUBLIC OPINION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA: A NEW CHALLENGE TO THE WORLD DEMOCRACY

DR. APARUP PAKHIRA

Abstract

A substantial body of scholarship has long explored the ways emerging media may foster and also hamper an informed and engaged citizenry. Individually, digital media have become an integral part of citizens' political life as a growing number of people around the world use digital media technologies for information and communication. Collectively, digital media have also constituted an important platform that people use to coordinate among them and mobilize each other. In this paper, the author has analyzed the reporting by Internet Reporting Agency (hereinafter IRA) those are alleged that public opinion has been influenced during the poll. It is not possible to test to which extent public opinion was influenced but it is possible to find the source of such reporting and intention behind such reporting and who are involved. Apart from this, the technicality behind such allegation has also been analysed. Lastly, by analyzing the existing cyber-security mechanisms,

Keywords: Social media, new media, Face book, Twitter, mass communication,

Introduction

In the book 'Manufacturing Consent' [2], Herman and Chomsky developed a 'propaganda model' which explained how different inhabitants are manipulated and how the consent for economic, social, and political policies is 'manufactured' in the public mind due to this specific propaganda. After all, propaganda is nothing but broadcasting the fake news many a times before the public, resulting that they begin to believe that the fake information provided to them, is true. It should be noted that this was successfully applied by Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda. It was also successfully applied by the communist undivided Soviet Union. In fact, the same strategy was applied successfully with the application of technology during the last presidential election of America. In the last election of America, the largest democracy in the world, Mr. Donald Trump won the election in the last round. Analysing the popularity of Mrs. Hilary Clinton and the open support she got from the ex-President Mr. Barack Obama, her countrymen began to believe that Hilary Clinton was going to be the first women President of USA as did the whole world. And then came the shock! The more surprise a waited when the news spread that Russia had manipulated the Presidential election by influencing public opinion through social media. The more disturbing news followed when rum ours surfaced that Russia was now trying to influence the electoral process in India, Brazil and few others third world countries with vested interests.

In this paper, the author has analysed the reporting by Internet Reporting Agency (hereinafter IRA) those are alleged that public opinion has been influenced during the poll. It is not possible to test to which extent public opinion was influenced but it is possible to find the source of such reporting and intention behind such reporting and who are involved. Apart from this, the technicality behind such allegation has also been analysed. Lastly, by analysing the existing cyber-security mechanisms, the author has suggested the ways to prevent such activity which pose a grave threat to world democracy.

Dr. Aparup Pakhira, Assistant Professor(II) of Law, School Of Law, KIIT University, Ph.D. from IIT Kharagpur, LL.M- KUIS Kolkata, Post Graduation in Computer Sciences- Jadavpur University, Cisco Certified Network Associate

Posts under Suspicion

Few selected social media posts are stated here and analysed to assess whether those posts could make any impact on people's mind, at large. Posts from Instagram, Twitter and Facebook have been considered as samples:

- Just one month before the election on Oct. 2016, this was posted in one of their Instagram accounts, "Woke Blacks".
- Another post from the same month also stated, "Hillary is a Satan, and her crimes and lies had proved just how evil she is."
- On Nov. 3, 2016, just before Election day, the Internet Research Agency posted on Instagram for its "Blacktivist" account where it is mentioned that, "Choose peace and vote for Jill Stein. Trust me; it's not a wasted vote."
- "United Muslims of America" accounts posted in November 2016 like: "American Muslims [are] boycotting elections today, most of the American Muslim voters refuse to vote for Hillary Clinton because she wants to continue the war on Muslims in the Middle East and voted yes for invading Iraq." (SIC)
- Around Nov. 2, 2016, days before the election, a fake account namely @TEN_GOP is alleged to post "#VoterFraud by counting tens of thousands of ineligible mail in Hillary votes being reported in Broward County, Florida."

When all these, among various such posts are summed up and analysed, then it emerges that the posts were intended to influence the presidential election. It is quite evident that all the posts were made to favour one aspirant for the post of President. The operation was orchestrated to favour directly or indirectly Mr. Trump. It is very basic of poll strategy that if you can earn one opposition vote that is equal to two votes and if you fail to bring that vote then ensure that person is either abstaining from voting or voting any third party and needless to say, that also amounts to one vote. In this operation, basically the second option has been applied. Prediction of most of the pre-poll survey and settled policy of both the presidential candidates ensured that Mrs. Hillary is going to sweep the Muslim and Black American votes. The perpetrators pretended to be Muslim and Black Americans with an expectation to have the confidence of the Muslim and Black Americans. The perpetrators attempted to muzzle Hillary Clinton's support encouraging U.S minority group not to participate in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In few cases they have also requested the minority groups to vote third party depicting Mr. Trump and Mrs. Hillary as bigger and lesser devil respectively. So, after analysing the posts, it is quite apparent that there was a desperate attempt to influence the Presidential election. Now it will be discussed to which extent such attempt was successful.

Impact of Fake Post

The allegations arising out in the post-election scenario are like: identify theft and conspiracy, failing to register as foreign agents, violating the U.S. laws that prohibit foreign funds from being used in the U.S. elections, discouraging minorities from voting, using bots and stolen identities, deceptively pretended to be Americans and participating in 2016 presidential campaign getting involved in activities like fake social media posts and organizing rallies. It is per tenant here to mention that there is no concrete evidence that proves whether those alleged posts made an actual impact in the mind of the targeted population. The same is also seconded by the leading newspaper 'USA Today' [3]. Further to this, the investigation is going on and there is a reasonable doubt whether it is possible to quantify the impact of such postings on the voter. But the domain of target may be measured and may imagine the impact in case a little percentage of the targeted population is influenced.

The campaign operation was conducted through Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. All these social networking sites had an option to hire for the purpose of political campaign. This option was

² Herman and Chomsky, 1998, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, p 12- 29.

³ Brad Heath and Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY; Published 1:03 p.m. ET Feb. 16, 2018 | Updated 6:16 p.m. ET Feb. 16, 2018

utilised by the perpetrators to make political advertisement. Among all these social networking sites, Facebook has a maximum number of users. Through Facebook, such sponsored posts reached to almost 126 million Americans (based on estimates from November).

Next is Twitter, where minimum 2,752 accounts and more than 36,000 bots partaking fake posts were linked to Russia. That means those were suspected to influence the voters. Quoting Twitter, only 0.74 percent of election-related Tweets originated from those accounts, having just 0.33 percent of impressions out of all the political Tweets between 1st September and 15th November, 2016.

On the other hand, 1,108 English-language videos were found in YouTube originating from 18 Russian trolling accounts. Indeed, it is fact, that all of those videos were not political and was viewed by 5000 viewers, on an average. From this statistics, it is apparent that the perpetrators targeted a huge number of people and they also successfully reached to a large number of people. Out of those people how many were influenced is not possible to calculate but one inference may be drawn is that the attempt was made with a clear intention to influence the election in favour of Donald J. Trump. Consider this-if 15 per cent of those people were influenced then also that number is good to change the result of the votes in the states those went for election at the last phase and where the Muslims and Black Americans were good in number.

Russian Links

There are so many developments which took place in the post-election scenario. Mueller's office received one guilty plea agreement of Michael T. Flynn [4], where the defendant admitted that he made materially false statements and omissions during an interview with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (herein after FBI) on January 24, 2017, in Washington, D.C. Michael T. Flynn served as a surrogate and national security advisor for the presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump, as a senior member of President- Elect Trump's Transition Team. Mueller's office charged thirteen Russian individuals and three Russian businesses in February 2018, including the Internet Research Agency, with a criminal conspiracy to defraud the United States of America. Some defendants were also charged with wire fraud, bank fraud, and aggravated identity theft. All defendants were outside U.S. jurisdiction at the time of the indictment. The federal investigators also uncovered an email from one of those 13 nationals, Irina Kaverzina where she confesses that though she created all the posts and pictures but the Americans believed that those were written by their people.

In the same month, Mueller's office received another guilty plea from Alex V. D. Zwaan, a Dutch-born attorney and son-in-law of a Russian billionaire, who confessed to lying to U.S. investigators about his contacts with Gates during a time when both of them were lobbying in favour of government of Ukraine. Subsequently, in an indictment, the special counsel charged Manafort and Gates for committing financial crimes which includes failing to report foreign accounts, filing of false tax returns and committing bank fraud. Thereafter, Gates pleaded guilty to two criminal charges, confessing to conspire and defraud the United States and lied to federal investigators. In October, Mueller obtained another guilty plea from one Trump associate George Papadopoulos, a foreign policy advisor to the Trump campaign. He also confessed that he made false statements to the FBI about meetings with Russian nationals.

Facebook issued a press release alleging IRA for using inauthentic accounts consistently to deceive and manipulate people. The company posted in a blog substantiating its decision of removing each and every account those are linked to the organization irrespective of their area of activity whether in the U.S., Russia or elsewhere. Facebook also promised to take all such pages down those are posted by IRA to malign the organization and the company also alleged that the IRA is changing their tactics to hide from their security team. Recently Facebook removed a number of Facebook pages and Instagram accounts solely because those were controlled by Russia. In total, those pages had more than 1 million followers while the Instagram accounts had nearly 5 lakh followers.

⁰⁴ Case 1:17-cr-00232-RC Document 4 Filed 12/01/17, Available At: <https://www.justice.gov/file/1015126>

Application of Technology

The above discussion undoubtedly transpires that Russia is involved in the operation to manipulate the mandate of U.S. presidential election influencing the people of America. It was proved long time back in 1988 by Herman and Chomsky that in a society where property is distributed unequally, biased information create a huge impact and public opinion may be manufactured very easily. That theory is successfully implemented in this case where Russia manipulated the public opinion of U.S. people. Russia did not leave a single option to fulfill the mission. Russian agents scanned the servers, hacked e-mail id of many leading political leaders, theft identities of many people and all those activities were confined to conduct one 'information war' that was leaded by 'Internet Research Agency' (herein after IRA). The objective of this campaign was "to propagatate discord in the U.S. political system," through operations to denigrate Clinton and favour Trump.

A small house was hired by mysterious organization at St. Petersburg namely 'Internet Research Agency,' which pays dozens of people for trolling news websites and blogs. Such blogs are written on the basis of information collected through known traditional methods of cyber crime. According to U.S. authorities, Russian agents targeted major U.S. political parties and hacked into their computer systems. Russian agents are simultaneously accused for spoofing the email ids and believed to have stolen thousands of private emails from leading Democratic Party members. Selective information was spreaded across U.S. using Guccifer 2.0 persona, DCLeaks.com, and Wiki Leaks. Hacking, spoofing, Identity Theft is known term in the area of cyber crime and the prevention mechanism is also developed. So such cyber crimes are not subject matter of this discussion. One new addition in the series of cyber crime that was adopted in this operation where the perpetrators used the popular highly trafficked social network to post fake news to influence the public opinion. Using different highly trafficked social networking sites they reach to a huge number of people and try to influence them. Investigators tracked good number of Twitter and Facebook accounts that would post conspiratorial, anti-racism, and abusive content. Most of those accounts organised propaganda against Mrs. Hilary Clinton and it is alleged that helped Mr. Donald J. Trump to sweep the last phase of the presidential election surprisingly. The Russian operation involved overt activities by government sponsored agencies, state-backed media, and paid internet "trolls," as well as covert a operation which includes illicit cyber activities operated by intelligence agents.

U.S. intelligence report discloses that the Russian government used state-funded media outlets, including the website and radio broadcaster Sputnik and television network Russia Today (RT), to disadvantage the Clinton presidential campaign. The Internet Research Agency created 'Back the Badge' and 'Blacktivists', two groups on opposite sides of the issues during the Black Lives Matters movements. These groups weren't necessarily election-related but could have been designed to spark chaos and unrest, the Times suggests. Many of the ads had few clues indicating that they came from outside the United States. The names used were often misleading, and the largest group behind those ads is simply called the Internet Research Agency. On Twitter, where usernames can be pretty much anything, one account linked to Russian trolls pretended to be Tennessee Republicans and used the handle @Ten_GOP — and even members of the Trump administration re-tweeted some posts from that account. Twitter user handles among the list of known troll accounts also included regular names and misspellings of celebrities like "ashleysimpsn."

Russia orchestrated the 'information war' not only from outside America rather Russian agents intruded inside the administration as well as into the social arena. Many posts were made from America and rallies were also organized to influence the people. So, this 'information war' is not only a technical challenge for the democracy but its impact is deeply rooted and should be nipped in the bud.

Technical remedy

The above discussion undoubtedly reveals that Russia is involved in the operation to manipulate the mandate of U.S. presidential election influencing the people of America. Russia did not leave a single stone unturned to fulfill the mission.

Technical Remedy: Only the technical remedies are discussed here. Propaganda intruding inside the jurisdiction physically is out of this discussion. The different kind of threats created by IRA has been addressed here one after another.

- The first issue is how the IRA or other Russia-linked entities have been identified? Coordinated activity by IRA is observed. The social networking sites, especially Facebook, have used the best tools and analytical techniques that are available at present to identify the full extent of this malicious activity. Continual monitoring of such networking platform has been also implemented to stop abuse and to share and receive information from others.
- The next issue is, what measures are suggested to identify the unauthentic accounts? Social networking sites should continuously update their technical systems to identify, checkpoints, and remove the unauthentic accounts, and must block millions of attempts to register the fake accounts. The method adopted will not be shared in details so that the perpetrators don't get any idea about the tools used. Special monitoring should also be activated on election-related posts among other critical issues. Any election-related post by any suspicious account will be taken down immediately followed by the de-activation of that account.
- What measures to be taken against inauthentic accounts once identified?
- When an account is suspected then generally the account should be enrolled in a checkpoint that requires the account holder to provide additional information or verification. Account will be disabled as a severe sanction and that after the confirmation that the account is liable for violating the policy.
- What about the IRA posts those was shared by other users? Is it sure that the IRA has not been able to create new fake accounts once existing ones are removed?
- Investigation as well as strict monitoring is going on aggressively for the evidence of recidivism. Once any additional account is identified, these accounts will be removed.
- Is it technically possible to tell if any ad buyer is either intermediary or proxy? Screening mechanism of the advertisers is already implemented to stop such practices. When any foreign advertisers will be allowed, then it will be communicated to the users to make them aware and they will be requested to intimate if any suspicious post is identified.
- What policy may be adopted to identify businesses and organizations that run election ads?
- Strict and compulsory verification and disclosure requirements for advertisers will be made mandatory and they must activate their location option so that they may be spotted easily. Election advertisers, those will not comply with such requirements will be identified proactively with the application of automated tools.
- Is it possible to ensure that any platform will not be used to incite violence or lawlessness?

It is possible to ensure when the users will be aware about the policy and comply with the Community Standards of the platform. Stricter guidelines will be imposed on the advertisers too.

Last, but not the least, it is pertinent to mention that it is very easy to commit any offence in the cyber space and it is more the easiest to identify the perpetrators. The offender and the investigator-both are on their toes. It is not possible to make any system full protected in the web space and is it possible to educate the users fully?