

Social media disinformation and the security threat to democratic legitimacy

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Everyone now knows about Project Lakhta, the Russian political interference operation conducted largely through fake social media profiles and aggressive disinformation. In February 2018 the US Justice Department indicted 13 affiliates of the St. Petersburg Internet Research Agency (IRA), alleging that they had conspired to “spread distrust toward the candidates and the political system in general”.¹ Other reports suggest similar operations were conducted against the United Kingdom and Germany. International news headlines put democratic citizens on notice: their politics are being manipulated by foreign bots and trolls.

But most discussion of social media interference has been misleading in at least two ways. First, commentators tend to focus on the tricky empirical question of whether Russia succeeded in changing voting outcomes – did it throw the 2016 US election to Donald Trump, or tip the Brexit referendum toward Leave? This misses the crucial point that these operations seem to be aimed less at affecting outcomes and more at stoking heightened domestic discord and partisan distrust. Second, many analyses treat social media interference as simply another species of political disinformation, akin to traditional propaganda. But this misses the most dangerous feature of social media interference operations. When citizens unwittingly spread disinformation by sharing social media posts from fake accounts they become *complicit* in their own deception, undermining their standing to credibly govern one another. In other words, these operations are intended to weaken the legitimacy of democratic government itself. And, unlike other forms of disinformation, their effects are most severe *after* they have been exposed, as citizens become aware that their fellow democratic deliberators are prone to being duped by foreign manipulation.

I will expand on this point in three parts. First, I will highlight the ways that democratic legitimacy depends on citizens' individual credibility. Then I will show how this credibility is systematically undermined by social media interference, especially when it has been exposed. I will conclude with policy recommendations for NATO member states.

¹ *United States of America v. Internet Research Agency* federal indictment. February 2018. 6. Text available at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1035562/download>

The epistemic preconditions of democratic legitimacy

In recent decades, political philosophers have increasingly noted the *epistemic* features of democratic legitimacy. Since laws intrude on individuals' freedom, the perceived legitimacy of state authority depends on its competence. A state claims legitimacy by representing itself as best equipped to determine for citizens their political obligations.² Democratic legitimacy therefore depends on the assumption that citizens themselves, acting through public debate and selection of representatives, are collectively better at figuring out their obligations than they would be on their own. In particular, it is assumed that citizens possess adequate *epistemic competency* – that they are sensible in how they acquire, share, and debate knowledge – and that public debate and democratic voting enhance rather than detract from collective reasoning.

Overtly epistemic questions are visible in many issues debated by democratic publics. For example: what role should expert opinion play in public deliberation? Should exclusive epistemic frameworks (e.g. faith assumptions) have full evidential status? How should policy account for uncertain scientific knowledge (e.g. details of the impact of climate change?) Should journalists be granted special immunities or protections to facilitate public information gathering?

Political theorists actively dispute the extent to which democratic systems *succeed* in fulfilling their epistemic functions. Philosopher David Estlund argues that fair democratic procedures provide citizens reason to comply even with laws they personally do not regard as wise. Political theorist Hélène Landemore goes further, arguing that (some) existing democratic systems do *in fact* improve public reasoning. However, other theorists dispute these claims. Philosopher Alex Guerrero argues that, since real-world politicking often directs attention to irrelevant electoral drama, better decisions would come from a 'lottocratic' system in which randomly-drawn assemblies of citizens made laws. Jason Brennan goes farther still, arguing that many citizens do not in fact possess sufficient epistemic competence to make their authority over others legitimate. Instead, Brennan claims, we should implement 'epistocracy', in which citizens who perform well on tests of factual knowledge wield more votes than others.³

The radicalness of these latter proposals shows the extent to which we currently assume democratic citizens deserve epistemic authority. This assumption means that democratic states are vulnerable in a way that authoritarian states are not. The legitimacy of an authoritarian state (to whatever extent there is such a thing) does not depend on the epistemic competence of individual citizens, since the authoritarian state does not typically consult its citizens' judgment. This means that attacks on citizens' epistemic competence affect democratic states much more severely.

This contrast was noted by the early 20th century Russian political theorist Ivan Ilyin, who regarded democracy as a fundamentally corrupt form of government, prone to empowering liars and fools. Ilyin

² See Joseph Raz (1986), *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ David Estlund (2008), *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton: Princeton University press; Hélène Landemore (2012), *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Alexander A. Guerrero (2014), 'Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42(2):135-178; Jason Brennan (2017), *Against Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

advocated for minority factions to expose democracy's foolishness to its own citizens, eroding legitimacy until the democratic system failed and could be replaced by totalitarianism. Ilyin's objectives were directed primarily at domestic politics, but historian Timothy Snyder has documented Ilyin's influence on contemporary Russia's international strategy, including its social media interference operations.⁴ The vulnerability of democratic legitimacy can be weaponized by authoritarian states prepared to amplify democratic citizens' suspicions of their own compatriots.

Social media disinformation makes democratic citizens complicit in their own befuddlement

In this section I will show how recent Russian social media interference operations target the legitimacy of democratic states. The scope of these operations is striking in itself; in late 2017 Facebook acknowledged that as many as 126 million Americans were exposed to 2016 electoral content posted by IRA operatives masquerading as fellow citizens. Twitter identified (and deleted) 2,752 fake IRA accounts. Researchers at the University of Edinburgh identified 419 IRA Twitter accounts participating in debate over the Brexit referendum. These techniques continued beyond the 2016 votes and seem to have been added to the arsenals of other authoritarian states; in August 2018 Facebook announced that it had deleted an additional 652 fake accounts linked to Russia or Iran.⁵

These operations undermine the epistemic presuppositions of democratic legitimacy in at least two ways. First, they trick citizens into actively spreading disinformation (through Facebook shares and Twitter retweets), making them personally complicit in their own befuddlement. Sharing of 'fake news' erodes norms of epistemic accountability among citizens and amplifies the divisive effects of partisanship.⁶ When citizens observe one another's complicity, they acquire evidence against the assumption that their co-citizens possess epistemic competence, weakening the perceived legitimacy of democratic decision-making.

Second, the use of fake *accounts* – invented or stolen identities purporting to be citizens of democratic states – threatens to make democratic citizens regard themselves and their compatriots as gullible dupes. For example, many Americans seem to have been unwitting participants in Saint Petersburg led strife operations. On November 12, 2016 (four days *after* the presidential election), the IRA used fake social media accounts to induce thousands of people to tune up to simultaneous pro- and anti-Trump rallies in

⁴ Timothy Snyder (2018). *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.

⁵ Jeremy B White (2017). 'Facebook says 126 million Americans may have been exposed to Russia-linked US election posts'. *The Independent* Oct 31 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/facebook-russia-adverts-americans-exposed-trump-us-election-2016-millions-a8028526.html> ; Testimony of Sean J. Edgett before the US Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism. October 31, 2017. <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/10-31-17%20Edgett%20Testimony.pdf> . p 12. ; Clare Llewellyn, et al. (2018). 'For Whom the Bell Trolls: Troll Behaviour in the Twitter Brexit Debate'. *arXiv* <https://arxiv.org/abs/1801.08754> p. 7 ; Olivia Solon (2018). 'Facebook removes 652 fake accounts and pages meant to influence world politics'. *The Guardian* Aug 22 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/21/facebook-pages-accounts-removed-russia-iran>

⁶ Regina Rini (2017). 'Fake News and Partisan Epistemology'. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27(S2): 43-64.

Manhattan. Similar techniques were used to summon Americans to clashing rallies outside a Houston mosque in May 2016.⁷ The perceived credibility of democratic citizens is endangered by their apparent readiness to be baited into fighting one another by trolls and automated ‘bots’ operated by a rivalrous anti-democratic state.

Again, it is important to see that this sort of disinformation is distinctively harmful to democratic societies. Authoritarian regimes may transmit disinformation through state media, but this does not implicate citizens themselves – nor does state legitimacy depend on citizens’ individual epistemic reliability. By contrast, democratic citizens who spread or act on social media disinformation become demonstrably complicit. For this reason, the *exposure* of effective social media interference is dangerous, perhaps more dangerous than the disinformation itself. It is a bad thing that citizens unwittingly fall for lies. It is far worse for democratic legitimacy that they come to *know* they and their compatriots have been made fools. It is possible that Russian social media interference operations were *intended* to be exposed, precisely to trigger this effect.⁸ This makes disinformation of this form tactically different from traditional propaganda and has important implications for how democratic governments confront the challenge.

Policy recommendations

In this final section I briefly present recommendations for how NATO member states (and other democratic governments) should respond to the likelihood of further, and increasingly more sophisticated, social media disinformation operations.

Given that exposure concentrates the harmful effects of this sort of disinformation, the most important lesson is that **prevention is much better than cure**. Once an interference operation has already taken place, exposing it may simply release the poison into democratic circulation. Instead, focus must be on preventing these operations from beginning in the first place, by blocking the creation of fake accounts and limiting the retransmission of false information in social media news feeds. This will obviously require the cooperation of social media companies. Democratic governments should support technical research on algorithmic techniques to pre-emptively identify deceptive social media activity.

Similarly, democratic governments should work to **advance citizen media literacy in ways that do not simply expose the effectiveness of foreign interference**. It is not enough simply to make citizens aware that they and their compatriots have been duped by disinformation, since this awareness is exactly what erodes democratic legitimacy. Rather, media literacy should be focused on helping citizens to learn active techniques for gaining power over disinformation. When there is evidence of success, this should be emphasized so that citizens can recognize their own increasing competence. A good place to start may be

⁷ *United States v. IRA*, 23.; Caroline Haskins (2017). ‘I Unknowingly Went to a Trump Protest Organized by Russian Agents’. *Motherboard* Nov 22, 2017. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/ywb9kx/nyc-trump-election-protest-hack-russian-agents-trolls-government ; Claire Allbright (2017), ‘A Russian Facebook page organized a protest in Texas. A different Russian page launched the counterprotest’. *Texas Tribune* November 1, 2017. <https://www.texastribune.org/2017/11/01/russian-facebook-page-organized-protest-texas-different-russian-page-l/>

⁸ I explore this possibility in an essay called ‘Weaponized Skepticism’, forthcoming in a volume on political epistemology edited by Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon.

publicizing statistics on the large number of citizens who were exposed to IRA disinformation but *did not* share or retweet it.

One project (run by the Alliance for Securing Democracy, with many connections to NATO policy-makers) that may need adjustment is the Hamilton 68 web dashboard, which tracks and publicizes data on active Russian social media interference operations. While this is a highly valuable resource, its public-facing presentation should be more directly integrated with proactive media literacy resources, so that citizens don't simply take away the message that there are very many effective vectors of disinformation duping their compatriots.⁹

Finally, it is essential that **democratic governments, especially NATO member states, cooperate in regulation of social media companies** and provide incentives for them to be transparent. Since the dominant social media firms tend to be based in the United States, this means that the American government must take particular care to govern these firms on behalf of its NATO partners. So far this has not always happened. For instance, though Facebook typically cooperates with American investigative authorities, it tends to stonewall similar demands from countries like Canada and the UK.¹⁰ The American government must use its authority to compel social media firms to cooperate with legitimate requests from democratic allies, in order to ensure transparency and efficacy in combatting disinformation. These requests must be understood not simply as law enforcement or corporate policy matters, but as defense against existential security threats to all democratic NATO allies.

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⁹ The Hamilton 68 Dashboard is available at <https://dashboard.securingdemocracy.org/>. For an example of reporting on Hamilton 68 that emphasizes vulnerabilities, see Tim Mak (2018), 'Tracking Shows Russian Meddling Efforts Ahead of 2018 Midterms', *NPR* February 8, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/08/584144083/tracking-shows-russian-meddling-efforts-evolving-ahead-of-2018-midterms>

¹⁰ See Catharine Tunney (2019), 'Facebook's Zuckerberg, Sandberg won't appear before committee, could be found in contempt of Parliament' *CBC News* May 27, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/facebook-contempt-parliament-1.5145347>; Jane Wakefield (2019), 'Facebook needs regulation as Zuckerberg 'fails' - UK MPs' *BBC News* February 18, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-47255380>