

New Technology, Ancient Battle

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Since the detection of massive Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election, there has been a morass of studies analysing the manipulation, fakes, and distortions, particularly on the Internet, which seem to assault the very notion of truth.

In the US, we have been horrified and perplexed by the huge numbers of people who believed, without much evidence, that there had been massive fraud in the 2020 presidential election, of whom hundreds attacked the building housing Congress in Washington.

Still others are convinced by conspiracy theories about the nation's elite being satanic paedophiles and cannibals swigging babies' blood.

The world's ability to achieve 'herd immunity' against the coronavirus pandemic is threatened, because millions of people across the planet believe vaccinations are a cunning cover to, among other nefarious goals, inject microchips into humans, or cause heterosexuals to become gay.

Numerous articles in publications ranging from the popular to the academic have discussed information manipulation, fake news, hybrid war—both classic black techniques used throughout history, and modern variants adapted for the new technologies which yielded 'social media'.

That a significant proportion of the new range of technologies and media has been exploited to transmit downright lies—in the way every previous form of communication has also been subject to abuse—should not have been a surprise.

Most of us—some sooner than others—became aware of the previously secret techniques, such as sophisticated algorithms, working like *Avatar* predators, luring or prodding us into informational zones filled with traps.

These mechanisms were designed to influence our perceptions and shape our ideas, about everything from the shoes and cars we want to buy to the belief systems or political leaders we like to think we have chosen for ourselves.

Most of us have known for some time now that the very choice of what we clicked on in our Internet searches was guided by a mechanism whose overriding principle was that the longer we carried on clicking, the bigger the advertising revenue for the platforms delivering the websites.

They guided us to places that we cared to linger in because they reinforced our existing beliefs, and prejudices resulted in bigger profits.

Therefore, what troubles me is why, even when the deceptions and machinations are revealed, so many people continue as before.

I am not talking about people who are mentally ill or suffer other clinical handicaps. Or those we smilingly dismiss as eccentrics—the flat-Earthers, or people who insist American astronauts never reached the Moon.

What puzzles me is why millions of people who would previously have been described as holding 'conventional', 'objective', 'rational', 'traditional', 'reasonable' (etc) beliefs have embraced views that, at some level, prompt questions.

Perhaps young people who have throughout their lives acquired and trusted knowledge via the Internet have fewer of the reference points that previously led to commonly held truths, and are therefore more susceptible to contrived, semi-fictional, 'alt-reality' interpretations of their world.

But why are so many people whose formative years at least straddled pre-Internet Earth life also buying into outlandish narratives? Why

are they ignoring the signs that previously would have warned them something was amiss?

Bizarre conspiracy theories have nourished gossip and cults for at least as long as humans have been able to record their own histories.

It was easier in the past to rationally explain acceptance of lies or misconceptions.

After all, until relatively recently means of mass communication—several centuries of printed publications for a tiny minority who could read, and the initial decades of radio and television—reached relatively few, and were controlled by even fewer.

Mass susceptibility to propaganda was also easily explainable in, say, the previous decades of Soviet and Chinese totalitarianism, because populations could be almost totally isolated from the outside world.

In those circumstances, where all ‘news’ and information was filtered, invented, and packaged by the government, it was simply impossible for most inhabitants to independently check it.

Publications, radio and television programmes, phone calls, and letters—any information from beyond the state’s borders—could be completely blocked.

And if people persisted in trying to get forbidden information, they could be jailed or killed.

But in today’s biggest authoritarian regimes, China and Russia, there are vastly more connections to the outside world, and complete isolation is impractical.

Despite the efforts of authoritarian regimes to obstruct it, the Internet continues to function even in curbed, semi-controlled form, and provides a means of communication with, and access to information from, everyone on the planet.

And the citizens of those countries, who once could only dream of travel beyond their own borders, now visit by the thousands the countries vilified by Moscow and Beijing, and can see for themselves the conditions there.

Scores of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s closest cronies own luxury properties in the US. They have educated their children in British and American schools, and they take their wives and mistresses for shopping expeditions to London, New York, Paris, and Rome.

Yet they parrot Putin’s propaganda about Western amorality, decadence, dishonesty, and overall rottenness. Some perhaps do so merely in order to preserve their favour with Putin, but others do so with relish and enthusiasm.

More perplexing, perhaps, is the willingness of people in Western countries to buy into accusations, fake news, and conspiracy theories generated abroad, or into the more insidious ones concocted and sown by individuals or groups in their own countries.

Some of the most potent and harmful lies are produced by the myriad US and other Western outfits and individuals bent on fostering vicious divisions in their own societies.

In some parts of the US, the divisions are so deeply pronounced that wearing or not wearing a pandemic face mask has become

a provocative political declaration which can lead to violent altercations or actual violence.

The capacity of Internet users in Western countries to check the facts is almost limitless, and restricted only by themselves. Mostly they need not fear that a secret policeman, monitoring what they click on or post, will visit them in the middle of the night.

Yet in the West millions of people have embraced, with unnerving passion, some of the most spectacular and absurd conspiracies that previously seemed to dwell in the eccentric or troubled minds of a tiny proportion of the population.

They believe the countless mendacious narratives that have generated entire ‘alt-reality’ universes, unmoored from truth and logic yet spreading no less fiercely than the coronavirus.

The lies range from the totally unhinged to the more plausible—from baby-eating paedophiles running Washington DC, to untested drugs or bleaches that can vanquish COVID-19.

For every one of these big lies infecting the Internet, there are scores of smaller lies, carefully manufactured in the Kremlin-financed troll farms of St Petersburg, by Chinese, North Korean, Iranian, and other malevolent actors, for political aims or for money. They are also manufactured by Western players.

The hundreds of pages of analysis I have read about fake information explain how the ubiquity of computers, iPhones, and other personal electronic communications devices has let the Internet vastly extend its reach.

I may have been reading the wrong things—they too have mostly come via the Internet—but this would not explain why people abandon guidelines learned previously for navigating the truth, in favour of ‘alt-reality’ and fantastical conspiracy theories.

One of the hallmarks of effective disinformation is a clever sprinkling of some truth amidst the lies.

New twentieth-century technologies of film and television widened the scope for blending truth and lies.

The Internet has greatly extended the reach of propaganda and increased the ability to produce boutique lies skilfully tailored for specific, sometimes niche, markets.

I had previously seen propaganda vilifying the enemy in conflict zones in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and former Yugoslavia.

While reporting on Ukraine’s 2004 ‘Orange Revolution’, I saw the Internet used effectively by young pro-democracy demonstrators. They used it to communicate truthful news mocking and countering the lies permeating the government-controlled media.

There were mass demonstrations, beginning in autumn 2013, that culminated in bloody revolution in February 2014 and ousted Ukraine’s pro-Kremlin and spectacularly corrupt president. During these, the government and the protesters used the Internet to spread ‘conventional’ lies and truths.

During the confusion of the days following the revolution, Russian dictator Vladimir Putin set in motion plans for an invasion of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula.

I flew to Crimea to report on growing unrest there for the UK's *The Sunday Times* newspaper, unaware I had arrived on the eve of Russia's invasion of the peninsula.

Crimea is the only area of Ukraine where members of a Russian ethnic population outnumber the local Ukrainian (and Crimean) inhabitants.

The local authorities for years had been overwhelmingly Russian-ethnic and sympathetic to Moscow. Except for a tiny number of schools, far smaller than the proportion of ethnic populations should have dictated, education was conducted in Russian.

The Russian language was omnipresent in Crimea, as it was in much of southern and eastern Ukraine, where the majority of the population identified as ethnically Ukrainian.

Putin accused Ukrainian governments since the country's 1991 independence of forbidding or obstructing the use of the Russian language, and otherwise persecuting ethnic Russians living in Ukraine.

This was despite the fact that most of Ukraine's presidents and prime ministers primarily spoke Russian, with some only feebly learning Ukrainian after they got their top jobs.

I met many Russian-ethnic inhabitants of Crimea who wanted nothing to do with Putin's Russia and joined pro-Ukrainian demonstrations.

But many told me and other journalists that they had felt persecuted because of using the Russian language.

When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union during World War Two, Crimea was the last part of the area that is now Ukraine that the Nazi forces captured.

The Soviet military held out on the peninsula in a prolonged, vicious battle. It claimed tens of thousands of casualties and was mythologised in scores of films, aired countless times every year, even after the disintegration of the USSR.

These films were frequently shown in Crimea by pro-Moscow authorities controlling TV channels after the pro-western and pro-democracy revolution had kicked out Putin's puppets in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, and in the run-up to the peninsula's invasion by Russian soldiers.

Stories in the Russian media and on the Internet warned—without any basis in truth—that Ukrainians from the mass demonstrations in mainland Ukraine, branded 'fascists', were preparing to march into Crimea and slaughter ethnic Russians.

The narratives drummed in comparisons between the evolving contemporary situation and the 1941 Nazi invasion of the USSR. They blurred the borders between reality and fake in a way I had not seen before.

People, especially older ones brought up on a diet of those Soviet movies and myths, began to believe they were in imminent danger from hostile forces advancing toward them.

There was real fear, verging on hysteria. People put up barricades and tore sheets into strips as bandages for the battle they were convinced was coming.

One man at a pro-Moscow demonstration in the center of the city of Simferopol explained that he and his friends had just seen Ukrainian nationalists with Nazi flags in their midst.

He was a taxi business owner, and was perfectly sober as he told me they were preparing to fight against the invading German army. I asked, 'Surely you mean a fascist Ukrainian army?' But he was emphatic it was a Nazi German army.

I also told him it was difficult to believe that any Ukrainians, however fanatical, would walk into a fervently pro-Russian demonstration waving Nazi flags. He was insistent that he had witnessed the scene, though he and his friends could not explain what had subsequently happened to the apparently suicidal Ukrainian nationalists.

The businessman and his friends had not been intentionally lying. They accepted the blend of lies, fiction, history, and myths that had been woven for them.

Under Putin, an aggressive, resurgent Russia worked to reimpose itself on the former Soviet empire. In the subsequent years, Ukrainians and others living in them experienced increasing amounts of this new type of propaganda. It not only spread lies, but contrived to construct an intricate fictional version of events and the world.

The Internet was used not only to sow confusion about truth and reality, but also to direct disruptive and potentially dangerous cyberattacks on features of the 'real world' such as electricity grids, nuclear power stations, and air traffic control towers.

Ukrainians had become accustomed to this new style of manipulating truth, and learned that it was part of Russia's formula for 'hybrid warfare'.

Those familiar with Russian hybrid warfare experienced a sense of déjà vu when increasing volumes of 'alternative facts' and 'alt-reality' narratives surfaced during the 2016 US presidential election campaign, and then during Donald Trump's term as President.

Numerous US intelligence investigations concluded that the Kremlin had used hybrid warfare disinformation techniques on a massive scale to try to skew the election in Trump's favour.

Although US agencies found that the Russians again tried to manipulate information to benefit Trump in the election of November 2020, domestic individuals and groups were held responsible for the mushrooming of 'alt-reality'.

The process was, of course, massively aided and magnified by President Trump. Trump had never been averse to lying, and eagerly embraced (or did not deny) the fake narratives that played into the web of fake news and 'alt-reality' that he and his accomplices spun.

Trump asserted for months before and after the November ballot that he could only lose the election if his opponents stole it from him. This led to the violent assault on the Capitol on 6 January 2021. There is some evidence that time spent on computers affects which parts of the brain become active or dormant.

But new technologies and their accompanying media, although far more varied and widespread than in previous decades, have not by themselves erased our ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, or reality from fiction.

The overpowering reason may be that millions accept unfounded, untrue, even extremely bizarre beliefs, not because they are forced to but because such beliefs are more comfortable and pleasant than reality.

If you live in a country governed by a dictator—like Putin—whom you are helpless to remove by election, and who is responsible for a whole range of evils, then perhaps it is more comforting to accept the state-manufactured version of reality.

The admission that you live in a society where your vote is meaningless and where you are powerless to change anything must lead to frustration and an unbearable misery.

But if you enthusiastically convince yourself of a narrative that portrays your country as a beacon of noble values, perpetually threatened by a decadent, corrupt Western enemy, then a lot of the depression and feeling of powerlessness is lifted.

In the US, many from the European-origin population, which used to be dominant, see others as competing for a greater share of political and economic power. They fear that their traditions and beliefs are threatened.

Some undoubtedly have good reason to feel they have been neglected by successive governments, as their traditional industries and livelihoods wither away and the gap between the poorest and richest grows remorselessly.

Rather than address these complex problems, which require difficult compromises, it is perhaps easier to blame for their misery a secret, evil 'deep state' bent on global domination.

It is especially easy if it isn't one random nutcase rambling about a sinister secret society running the world, but authority figures such as politicians, academics, journalists, pastors, and even the president of the United States, in the person of Donald Trump.

Pervasive new technologies, Internet-dominated media weaponised with lies, provide innovative and powerful ways to project illusions offering seductively simple solutions.

But in essence they do not differ markedly from the old techniques used by authoritarian regimes, whether communist or fascist, for providing simple explanations to still fears and focus hatreds.

Some of social media's algorithms, shunting us to sites reinforcing our beliefs and prejudices, indeed have a whiff of a sinister, secret society about them.

Once loosed on the Internet, any idea, however bizarre, can gain a traction that propels it from what previously would have been a short life in a tiny community to digital immortality within a potentially huge audience.

But I do not believe, as some suggest, that the Internet has irreversibly rewired humans to make them stupider or nastier.

Many malignant forces have used new technologies and immense effort to persuade people that a comfortable perception of the truth is as valid as the real thing.

But our main struggle is not against a Terminator-like, inexorable technology. It is to stand our ground in the old battle between truth and falsehood, which is, ultimately, a contest between life and death.