Russia and Disinformation: Origins of Deception

As technology advances, providing more complex and creative opportunities for alternative media, accurate reporting has become synonymous with exercising information literacy on not only the information provided, but also the source itself. While many rely on online news feeds and alternative media outlets, when strategically placed, these platforms have been used to effectively push ideologies and agendas that are not aligned with fact-based information. Some media outlets, such as RT, provide English-language news directed to audiences in the United States, the United Kingdom, as well as RT France, RT en Español, and RT Arabic. RT has also embedded itself on most Roku tv and other smart-tv devices bought at most local electronic stores globally. What is likely not known by RT's 4 million YouTube subscribers and the RT America's 375,000 Twitter followers is that RT (aka "Russia Today") is one of Russia's state-owned social media networks based in Moscow.

In a journal entry written in the International Communication Association, the level of sophistication and meticulous application of real and fabricated information woven into RT's numerous media platforms are briefly explained.

"RT is known for being the home for controversial voices; it has hosted WikiLeaks's Julian Assange, the Holocaust denier Ryan Dawson, InfoWars's Alex Jones, the leftist George Galloway, and the Brexit leader Nigel Farage (Pomerantsev, 2015; Yablokov, 2015). At the same time, RT hosts industry heavyweights like Larry King, Chris Hedges, and Ed Schultz, whose contributions serve to boost the channel's legitimacy (Richter, 2017). With such controversial speakers and prominent news personalities, RT has had an undeniable impact on the business of journalism and the profile of state-backed news outlets. Yet, we still know very little about how this organization works." (Elswah, M., & Howard, P. N., 2020).

While the Obama Administration has openly dismissed Russia as "no more than a "regional power" whose actions in Ukraine are an expression of weakness rather than strength", on the contrary, the past decade shows Russia as a threat to U.S. national security. (Borger, J., 2014). Russia exercises both soft and hard power to extend its influence internationally, even

in the form of indirect diplomacy through third parties, likely without the third party realizing it is being used. For example, in 2019, Russia received direct international media attention when U.S. president Donald J. Trump petitioned the G7 to allow Russia to regain its diplomatic position in the organization during their summit conference in Biarritz, France. (Borger, J., 2019).

Despite the claim of a weakened and irrelevant country by the Obama Administration, Russia has proven for decades to be experts of a labyrinthian system of disinformation and calculated persuasion for decades. Prior to the dismantlement of the USSR, Operation Infektion was launched in conjunction with the discovery of AIDS in the early part of the 1980s. After extensive information provided by former spies who defected to the United States, it was revealed that the Soviet Union planted propaganda claiming the U.S. created HIV/AIDS. After well-placed U.S. investigations, the Soviet Union acknowledged the Operation to the Reagan Administration and vowed to cease such acts against the United States.

Russia's evolution of disinformation campaigns not only gained its roots from the Soviet Union, but has taken on a revised mission of a proxy war of words almost consistently through social media outlets. A 2016 article from John White with the Institute for European Studies adds to this concept.

"If Russian disinformation can convince some westerners of the truth of Russian disinformational themes, so much the better, but Russia will settle for a more modest goal. They want to undermine the credibility of the media, especially the internet, as a medium itself in western eyes. Russian blogger Anton Nosik calls this "internet pollution." The Russian government aims for the more modest goal of making people abroad believe that the internet is simply informational chaos, utterly unreliable." (White, J., 2016).

With a specific department in the FSB (previously the KGB) with the sole purpose to carry out such campaigns, there are likely countless ways in which Russia has used social media to push for an agenda of confusion and diversion that have yet to be discovered. In previous disinformation campaigns, Russia seems to use the psychological urge to believe in the initial information that is presented to its audience to push or indirectly present an alternative agenda.

Prior to the widespread discovery of the use of disinformation, some target audiences were absentmindedly prepared to believe the first piece of information given to them in the media. Countries densely populated and developing countries provide easier delivery of this type of budding confusion from countries like Russia and China to "throw the stone and hide their hands". With the opportunity to deposit stories into the media while websites that are in support of the agenda assist to bring added attention, it has become more difficult to decipher what is fact among the information and what is not.

Sarah Oates, in a journal article published by the University of Maryland, College Park, stated that Russia's propaganda, "is useful for denying specific facts – such as refusing to admit that a Russian missile shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 or that the seizure of the Crimean Peninsula was illegal -- but even more useful for undermining the institution of the media in general." (2018).

In recent times, Russia has used disinformation tactics to execute the concept of the term itself – to spread false information, likely mixed with factual elements to improve the delivery of deception among a population. As the use and accessibility has grown popular in demand by the average person, Russia quickly identified Twitter and Facebook as ideal platforms to assist in disseminating their pro-Kremlin agendas. With the onset of the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, Russia has been identified by the European Union as planting disinformation about the virus since January 2020. In an article published on *The Guardian's* website, a classified European Union report was leaked, pointing out pro-Russian media as the driving force to exacerbate the health crisis prior to it becoming a pandemic.

"The European commission's chief spokesperson on foreign and security policy, Peter Stano, said there had been an increase in "disinformation, misleading information, outright lies and wrong things" since the start of the outbreak.

The commission had noticed, he said, an increase in disinformation from Russia, providers based in the country and those with links to pro-Kremlin sources." (Rankin, J., 2020).

In the wake of 2020's COVID-19 pandemic, Russia was revealed as the culprit, accusing the United States to be the source of the global spread of COVID-19. Some have taken it upon themselves to organize media outlets that specifically point out the disinformation from countries like China, Iran, and Russia.

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On the *Washington Examiner* website, Tom Rogan wrote on social media, "Here, the Russians can hope their scaremongering lies will earn attention from a wide array of individuals, including individuals otherwise largely disinterested in news reporting." (*2020*). Other media outlets such as Yahoo! News, The Daily Beast, BBC, The New York Times, and Fox News have reported how Russia has used the economic crippling COVID-19 pandemic to blame the United States and other countries for its conception and spread to kill populations worldwide. With the sharing of a border with 14 other countries that have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia has maintained reporting rather low numbers of coronavirus cases, compared to its neighboring countries. While its surrounding countries report spikes in death and positive cases throughout 2020, Russia has yet to provide substantial information on their fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

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