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Disinformation Campaigns – Are We Ready for 2020?

Disinformation online is a hot topic in 2020 due to the coronavirus, social justice, and the US presidential election. There are countless news stories and social media posts, questioning the validity of the information that is being presented. I picked Good Code's "*Camille François on Disinformation Online*" podcast because Good Code is part of Cornell Tech, which is located on the campus of Cornell University. Universities are usually held accountable for the information that is presented on their website and subsites. As for the topic, this podcast covers disinformation campaigns that occurred during the 2016 US presidential elections and to help prepare us for 2020. With the upcoming US presidential election, I thought I would be able to take a deeper dive into what was considered "fake" and how I find information from reputable sources.

The podcast begins with the following questions: "How do foreign actors spread disinformation online? What have we learned from the campaign of Russian meddling into the 2016 US presidential elections and are we ready for what is coming in 2020?" (Labbé, 2020). It is presented that Russian trolls have been trying to "sow chaos in the US since 2014" and this podcast will help detail the new threats that emerged in recent years. We would need to know what occurred during the 2016 US presidential election to determine if the information presented is skewed in any way.

Chine Labbé is a visiting journalist at Cornell Tech's Digital Life Initiative and the host of Good Code, a weekly podcast which focuses on "ethics in our digital lives." In March 2020, Labbé sat down with Camille François, Chief Operating Officer at Graphika. "Graphika is a network analysis company that studies the spread of disinformation online." (Labbé, 2020) François specializes in disinformation campaigns and media manipulation. Prior to Graphika, François was the Principal Researcher at Google's Jigsaw, working on electoral integrity and disinformation. She is considered highly skilled in these areas and has been involved in investigations since before they made headlines.

François started the discussion by talking about a report called "Operation Red Card," which detailed a recent and authentic campaign led by an Indian PR firm on several issues including soccer, known as football in America. (Nimmo, François, Eib, Tamora, 2020)

The podcast shifted gears to the 2016 US presidential election. After the 2016 US presidential elections, the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence provided Graphika with information regarding Russian hoax efforts that targeted the election. François reviewed these posts over 7 months and looked for what she called the ABCs of Disinformation: Actors, Behavior and Content. (Labbé, 2020)

Although François and the Graphika team did not have everything they needed and admitted to having "blind spots" on how users were targeted and communicated to, they were able to locate some "bizarre experiments." The Russian efforts to target US audiences started in 2014, two years prior to the US presidential election. It was called "Project Lahtka." These bizarre experiments were intended to create panic in the US and used local media outlets to share their message. One example was Columbian Chemical, which was a hoax claiming that an

explosion occurred at a chemical plant. SMS messages were sent to officials and even YouTube videos were developed showing a mimicked explosion. (Labbé, 2020) (Szal, 2015)

"Fairly-developed fake personas" which include fake accounts, fake news organizations and fake advocacy groups were developed in 2016 to help "divide the country." Some social media posts had call to actions which took their efforts offline to create "face-to-face" disputes/protests. (Labbé, 2020)

Some examples of fake accounts were shared, including Jenna Abrams. She is described as "Russia's Clown Troll Princess" and has 70,000 followers on Twitter. Abrams is so popular that her commentary on pop culture and even racism has been featured in mainstream media. (Labbé, 2020)(Collins, Cox, 2020)

After providing the examples from 2016, François stated that Graphika is focusing on capabilities and motives for actors who are hacking others. Several countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, were identified since they currently use these techniques to control their own local population. François stated that Graphika does shift their focus to the US local landscape and try to look for things like bots. However, they need to be careful to avoid silencing genuine voices (i.e. very passionate supporters) who could appear like bots.

If journalists receive direct messaging that appears to be questionable, François hopes that they will bring these inquiries forward for further investigation. When asked by Labbé if she could have a magic wand, François stated that she would want more transparency, even to see things that they got wrong. The advice to listeners was not to panic since these incidents are still very low. We should not let the adversaries win by questioning everything we read/see on the Internet.

After listening carefully to the podcast, I do not get the impression that François has other agendas. Her responses to questions are confident and well thought out. She maintained her integrity by stating that she did not see anything to report regarding actors pushing COVID-19 (Coronavirus.) She did not have any "meaningful feedback" (Labbé, 2020). François' work has been featured by many ethical sources. François is quoted as saying "Disinformation is a subtle art."

Although I did appreciate the fact that the podcast presented disinformation efforts from years past, the focus for 2020 was still minimal. It would have been nice to hear some examples for 2020 that we should be on the lookout for.

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