



Foreign Interference through Social Media

Submitted to

Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media

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BACKGROUND

Following an invitation from the Committee Secretary, RAND Australia provides this submission in relation to the Inquiry into Foreign Interference through Social Media.

RAND is a respected, nonpartisan entity with a mission to improve policy and decision-making through evidence-based research and analysis. RAND Australia manages multidisciplinary research teams that combine local talent from our small Australian office with over 1,000 research experts from RAND offices in the United States and Europe. Those teams address a variety of defence, national security, social and economic well-being, education, labour and health topics

TRUTH DECAY

In 2018, RAND released its first report on Truth Decay¹, the deterioration of political and civil discourse characterised by four interrelated trends: an increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data; a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; an increase in the relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact; and lowered trust in formerly respected sources of factual information. The study identified the primary drivers for Truth Decay as cognitive processing and biases, changes in the information systems that we rely upon, competing demands on education that diminish the time we spend on critical thinking, and polarisation within our population. It also noted that whereas agents of Truth Decay may include domestic actors, foreign actors may exploit these vulnerabilities to influence views within the population, blurring the line between opinion and fact and increasing the relative volume and influence of opinion over fact through dissemination of false information.

Although this initial work focused on the extent of Truth Decay in the United States, our investigations suggest similar trends exist to varying extents in other countries, including Australia. Current efforts under RAND's strategic priority to *strengthen democracy* include examination of international case studies in relation to Truth Decay, and development of policy interventions to mitigate its impact.

ELECTION INTERFERENCE

The Truth Decay study identified the potential for foreign actors to interfere with democratic processes through the spread of misinformation, with the starkest example being Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.² Examples of foreign interference predate this election, however the trends and drivers associated with Truth Decay more readily facilitated interference in 2016. In a program that examined the threat to the integrity of democratic processes, RAND reviewed the Russian interference in the 2016 election³, identified potential exploits through social media⁴, assessed potential interventions⁵, and analysed public views on falsehoods and the use of public service announcements to highlight such manipulation⁶.

¹ Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael Rich (2018) *Truth Decay: an Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, RAND report 2314, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html

² *Truth Decay*, pp 184-185.

³ Marek Posard et al (2020) *From Consensus to Conflict: Understanding Foreign Measures Targeting U.S. Elections*, RAND report A704-1, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA704-1.html

⁴ William Marcellino et al (2020) *Foreign Interference in the 2020 Election: Tools for Detecting Online Election Interference*, RAND report A704-2, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA704-2.html

⁵ Todd Helmus et al (2020) *Russian Propaganda Hits Its Mark: Experimentally Testing the Impact of Russian Propaganda and Counter-Interventions*, RAND report A704-3, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA704-3.html

⁶ Marek Posard et al (2021) *Countering Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections*, RAND report A704-4, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA704-4.html

In subsequent internally funded research, RAND Australia scrutinised Twitter data related to the 2019 Australian federal election. Using the same tools⁷ as used in the U.S. studies, we did not detect similar exploitation in the Australian election as had been evidenced in the U.S. election. This does not necessarily mean that there was no interference during the election, only that there was no evidence of exploitation using similar techniques and tactics. Moreover, it did not identify that there was any reason that similar techniques and tactics would not be successful.

IDENTIFYING FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

In the case of the U.S. elections, RAND's analysis identified that partisan content created by Russians was easily mistaken by most of the sample audiences as being from a U.S. source.⁸ This places greater emphasis on the need to identify foreign interference, as differentiated from foreign influence that is shared openly with transparency of content origin. Such identification could be a matter for the social media platforms, for government and also for consumers of such content.

RAND Australia has developed a training package on behalf of a government client to help people detect and counter foreign interference.

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION

Foreign interference, through social media or otherwise, is a threat that will potentially undermine Australia's sovereignty, values and national interests. It is a threat that is a subset of, and enabled by, the broader issue of the spread of disinformation, as raised within the Truth Decay program. Efforts to counter disinformation should also help to address the more specific and threatening matter of foreign interference.

Disinformation involves a sequence of steps for false information to be created, disseminated, observed and amplified. Countering efforts at each of these steps may help mitigate the impact of disinformation, including the use of information by actors that represents foreign interference. A strong countering strategy should combine such efforts within a survival chain, rather than expecting a singular solution to defeat disinformation.⁹

CONCLUSION

Foreign interference is part of a broader threat to democracy facilitated by a combination of factors, which undermines facts and analysis, and thus erodes political processes and civil discourse, creating division and policy uncertainty. RAND Australia has identified interventions that can mitigate the threat of foreign interference through social media, most notably through education and identification of foreign sourced content and actors that attempt to represent as domestic content and actors.

We recommend that such efforts be undertaken concurrently with other solutions to address the broader concern of Truth Decay, including strategies to counter disinformation and to build trust in national institutions and processes. Moreover, we note that such interventions involve lead times that make early intervention (ahead of growth in threats to democracy and deterioration of our civil discourse) a prudent investment.

⁷ Specifically RAND-Lex, a suite of tools that combines text analysis and machine learning to provide deep linguistic analysis and data science analysis techniques, including a RAND developed and refined machine learning model for detection of troll accounts. These are outlined in Marcellino et al (2020).

⁸ *Countering Foreign Interference*, p 34.

⁹ An explanation of counter strategies and the specific disinformation survival chain is at Andrew Dowse and Sascha Dov Bachmann (2022) *Information warfare methods to counter disinformation*, Defense and Security Analysis Journal, <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/14751798.2022.2117285>