Summaries of Working Group presentations
WG 2 - Digital technologies and peace/freedom
Warwick Peace Conference, 10ᵗʰ March 2018

BRITISH
PUGWASH

Contents

Presentation 1: Impact of Social Media on 21st Century War
Ananya Tiwari, University of Warwick

The exploitation of social media is a powerful propaganda tool and its use is shifting the balance of power from the nation state to its people. However, in the attempts to control and minimise the negative impacts, governments are beginning to shift towards a mass-surveillance state.

Since this is a large topic, this presentation focused primarily on terrorism, concluding with the future of counter-terrorism strategies and our movement towards a mass-surveillance state.

Firstly, terrorist organisations seem to have created specific recruitment strategies for optimal radicalisation. These can be simplified into three strategies: narrowcasting, virtual interactivity and lone wolf acts. Narrowcasting is the dissemination of information to a narrow audience. Terrorists on one side of the screen target specific subpopulations based on demographic and geographic basis. Online terrorists use social media to communicate, seduce, radicalise and instruct future operatives by virtually interacting with their audience and creating a strong personal bond. Lastly, lone wolves: individuals who are not members of any terrorist organisation but commit acts of terrorism alone. However, just like in the wild, these lone wolves are being trained by their virtual packs and are infected and then activated with radical ideologies. Propaganda also occurs after acts of terrorisms occur in the form of justifications, to spread fear. The first instance Twitter was used to take responsibility for an attack was 21st Sept 2013 at the Westgate Shopping Mall hostage situation in Nairobi by a Somali- based terrorist group, al-Shabaab. Over 70% of their tweets during the attack were propaganda, based on justifications, aimed at the Kenyan public.

There are many counterstrategies that are currently being debated and implemented by the governments and anti-terrorist organisations. In the aftermath of the 9/11, the US government created the terrorist surveillance programme, initially to intercept communications linked to al-Qaeda. Slowly, however, instead of just focusing on criminals, governments first turned their attentions to racially profile Arab and Muslim nationals, and now increasingly everyone else. In this debate about privacy and security, concerns are often met with the argument, 'if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear'. The reasoning to utilise the data available is understandable and motivation to stop radicalised individuals is noble, but one must question: who should have the power to decide the line between right and wrong? Freedom of expression and the press in Turkey has been seriously undermined in the last few years with people sentenced to prison for simply criticizing the government. Ananya argued that if we allow our personal freedom to be limited, the terrorists are winning in creating a state of oppression and fear. Terrorism is a complicated problem, heightened by our interconnectivity, and it does not have a simple solution. We need to take advantage of the potential of technology and social media outlets to create overpowering narratives, strengthen our international cooperation and better apply our present laws instead of new and stricter ones that undermine our freedom.

Presentation 2: Weapons of Mass Deception - Expert responses to fake news on WMD, Andrew Gibson, British Pugwash

This presentation considered examples of so-called 'fake news' about Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), the potential dangers of erroneous stories on this topic spreading, and how experts, such as senior Pugwashites, might respond to fake news. It was based on a small research project Andrew conducted in 2017, in which leading experts were surveyed on this topic.

Following Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), fake news can be defined as 'news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers'. This issue has received significant academic attention following the 2016 US presidential election, which saw many stories that could fit the above definition of fake news reaching audiences of millions on the social media platform Facebook.

Andrew surveyed around 20 interested individuals, such as weapons experts, former diplomats and academics, for examples of fake news in their specialist area. One example, provided by Hans Kristensen (Federation of American Scientists), was of a story carried by RT that included false information that US tactical nuclear weapons in Turkey had been moved to Romania. Hans stated that Russian news media approached him for comment on the story but withdrew their approach when they realised he intended to refute the story. Another respondent relayed an interesting example of fake news, which involved an author on the website Veterans Today repeatedly claiming that Israel used a nuclear weapon in Yemen, using video footage purporting to be from the alleged incident and various 'scientific' claims to back up his case. It is worth noting that Veterans Today has repeatedly been accused of being a conspiracy theory website and blatantly anti-Semitic (claims Andrew supports).

Respondents were asked the extent to which fake news matters. The majority sentiment was that an informed population, particularly in a democracy like the UK, helps produce the best policy decisions. One respondent also noted that "in a crisis, when adrenaline is high and news reports are few and far between, fake news reports could have significant implications, such as miscalculation or distraction." Andrew gave a number of examples supporting the latter assessment, such as a story of the defence minister of Pakistan using Twitter to threaten Israel in response to a fake news story.

On how experts should respond to fake news, there were mixed views. A number of respondents felt that experts should actively and publicly 'fact-check' and challenge fake news stories. Another felt they should systematically create resources to provide verifiable facts (such as websites/databases rather than ad hoc responses). Another called for a 'fact-checking think tank or organisation that is committed to providing a balanced perspective'. Overall, there was little appetite for government regulation but there was support for online content providers to delist / deprioritise fake news stories and develop appropriate codes of conduct.

Presentation 3 - Telegram in the Dec 2017 - Jan 2018 Protests in Iran
Daniel Amir, LSE

When Daniel first sent in an abstract to apply to give this talk, the protests in Iran that spanned the week of the 28th December to the 4th of January had only just ended. From the Baluch south-east to the Azeri North West and the Arabic-speaking regions of Khuzestan on the borders of Iraq, people wanted a couple things expressed fairly succinctly: the end of corruption, high prices, the theocratic Islamic Republic. Within this, as in the case of many social movements, were nested a range of demands for specific groups including minorities and women, whose voices gradually rose up in the mix during and after the period of protests.

Telegram channels acted as meeting places for like-minded people in the first place to organise events. Channels would publish a list late every night of meeting places for the protests of the next day, with many also taking their own initiative and conducting local patrols of these busy areas to alert others to danger. One of the recurrent themes in social movements is the idea of feasibility or, the fact that the likelihood of a movement's success encourages people to participate. What better incentive can there be for this in an autocratic regime that is violent and repressive than seeing the sheer breadth of protests geographically? This also allowed the fast delivery of new chants, allowing memes and slogans to metastasise and give the impression of a unified movement across linguistic and geographical barriers. Telegram channels became a one-stop shop for organising, sharing, shaping, protests and all the news about them and their development and policy concerning them.

The physical presence on the street may have petered out after the first week of January, but two important things need to be said about the aftermath of the protests on Telegram. Crucially, anti-regime channels remained part of online communities even after the protests had stopped. Here you had (and still have) a full anti-regime digital infrastructure that is hard to reach, broader than ever, and active in preserving the memory of the protests and continuing their messages even as life 'as usual' goes on.

During the 2009 protests that saw millions marching against the regime in a similar vein, Facebook was extremely important for mobilisation, and during the late 1970s in the build-up to the overthrow of Iran's Shah and the foundation of the Islamic republic, we saw cassettes with speeches by Ruhollah Khomeini, the future republic's primary ideologue. So what's new with Telegram?

The first is to say that Iran's usage of new technological media for protesting ties into a long history of this happening: as these technologies involve and are clamped down on by regimes, they become renewed stakes in people's stealthy struggles for freedom in the country. Technology in these cases not only makes change and protesting more possible, it renews and refreshes a sense of what is at stake. But why not also look outwards, on a transnational level, to see encrypted messaging technologies as long-term proactive tools for securing human rights and means for solidarity?

Presentation 4 - Speech, Freedom, and Peace in a Digital World
Hassan Fiaz, SOAS

This presentation focussed on the changing and tentative role of technology and digital media in the context of free speech and censorship, and its relation to the securement and proliferation of peace in society. An overarching premise was put forward as the position that free, fair, and open speech is an essential component of public discourse and democratic participation, and by extension the long-term stability of peaceful societies.

An account of the great optimism that was generated during the internet's early formation in its seemingly unprecedented potential to build bridges of communication and understanding across and within societies, was contrasted with current fears and concerns associated with the online world, including fake news, echo chambers, internet radicalisation, and the threats they pose to peace and democracy. The presentation challenged this shift in mainstream narrative and public perception, regarding it vital to maintain a sense of perspective whilst avoiding knee-jerk reactions rooted in both well-intentioned concern and dubious attempts to consolidate power.

Attempts by tech-firms and governments to regulate the internet and dictate 'acceptable' means of communication were juxtaposed with the 'Streisand effect', through which censored online material takes on an illicit appeal, going on to be viewed considerably more than would originally have been the case. The counter-intuitive dangers of ideological censorship were also framed as emboldening authoritarianism, pushing already fringe ideas to extremities, encouraging partisanship, and fundamentally diminishing the authenticity of public debate and discourse. A threat to the free speech of one section of the political spectrum was referred to as a threat to all sections of the political spectrum. It was thus posited that a *free and open marketplace of ideas*, in which the digital world has a valuable role to play, offers the most effective means of legitimately challenging ideas we deem harmful to society, making it necessary to acknowledge that the process of truth-seeking and ideological development inherently comprises risk of offence.

In terms of policy recommendations, the presentation proposed that governments should seek to *constitutionally* protect online speech from future encroachments, whilst offering greater clarity on what can legitimately and reasonably be deemed as unlawful speech. It was also noted that as certain online platforms such as Google have now become so powerful and pervasive to the extent that they in many ways effectively constitute the internet itself, there is the possibility of viewing them in the same legal light as a public utility. This would enable and justify legislation curtailing their ability to selectively censor and restrict content which doesn't violate a reasonable code of conduct.

In closing, it was noted that in developed societies where smartphones are ubiquitous and most of our work, and indeed often our leisure time is spent online, it's easy to forget that humanity's relationship with digital technology is still in fact formative and immature, and it will inevitably be a gradual and sometimes uncomfortable journey as we try to navigate our way around the evolving challenges that are brought about by increased connectivity and access to information.

Presentation 5 How to cope with illiberal systems in a peaceful way?
David Almasi, University of Warwick

David is a first year undergraduate from the University of Warwick studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics, and the local vice president of the Hungarian opposition movement Momentum in his hometown. As a political activist, he not only wanted to share some of his experience on how to cope with illiberal regimes, but also to show some ideas about changing what you do not like in your closer environment.

First, he showed how to recognize illiberal regimes. These systems are authoritarian, but also far from earlier totalitarian regimes. They control not via open oppression, but via controlling all the information sources, filling democratic institutions with their own kind and creating a new economical order in which not the economical value, but family bonds and social relations matter when investing. As a result, these governments are always legitimately re-elected, despite of their bad governance and crazy xenophobic rhetorics, thus they have all means to brainwash people by controlling most of the media.

Against them, we can use techniques including 21st century technology and humour in order to mobilize pressure groups against these government. Technology is our friend. The government controls printed media? You can always run a Facebook-campaign for less money, reaching even more people. Against oppression, you can always count on humour, because it makes fun of the regime, and laughter is the best medicine against fear. Illiberal systems always count on the apathy of the voters, so an opposition movement has to make politics 'sexy' to mobilize enough people. Demonstrations are good, but in order to build a community in the long run, you will need to create a distinctive group identity. You can do it by organizing events (festivals, forums, demonstrations) and share the unique merch of the community (pins, jackets etc…).

David believes that these techniques are useful not only when overthrowing oppressive regimes but also when you want to change something you do not like in your environment.