Social media - Weapon of mass confusion?

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Introduction

As our society is getting more and more linked globally, many warn that we are exposed to the dangers of powerful new technologies. This article considers two technological trends: the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and mass communication. I have two main goals. Firstly, to deliver a summary of how mass communication has been used to alter public opinion on WMD according to the will of incumbent politicians. Secondly, to raise some questions and concerns about the peculiar role that modern social media plays in this story. I am interested in how the recent changes in media outlets affect the risks, dangers but also the opportunities of the widespread use of social media. I hope that this article will demonstrate the continuity between traditional and new media practices, while also spelling out recent changes in the role media plays in armed conflicts involving WMD. In particular, I would like to raise questions about how the diversity of voices and media producers in the internet age may hinder collective political action around WMD.

From Luther to Bush: A historical perspective

Protestants and Nazis: Examples of media alterations

Media is a powerful tool for politics. It seems that the constant development of media enables newer and newer forms of power practice. For example, Protestantism spread so quickly in part due to the newly invented printed press, which made the production of written material cheap and thus easily available to the wider public. Another example is how radio broadcast was used in pre-WW2 Germany by both the democratic and Nazi sides to rally supporters.[1] As the study by Adena et al shows, the growth of Nazi popularity slowed down in areas with access to radio due to pro-government

political news, whereas after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, Nazi-biased broadcasts helped to recruit new party members and incite antisemitism.

Cuban Crisis: Milestones in television and conflict

With the introduction and spread of WMD (not only nuclear bombs but biological and chemical weapons), the newest forms of communication were used as a tool to amend opinion consonent with the will of incumbent political power. A milestone of modern media was President Kennedy's speech on television during the Cuban missile crisis[2], which was also a milestone of the Cold War conflicts involving WMD. His request for air time from all three broadcast networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) implied a new era of mass communication, in which political power is fully aware of the benefits media technology can provide them. Kennedy's plan with television was to give the demand of Cuban missile disarmament full force and demonstrate strength against Soviet demands. By television commitment, retreat from the ultimatum to Khrushchev seemed impossible. Given the fact that at that time 90 percent of the households already had television[3], this plan worked as an amplifier to the reaction against Soviet WMD in Cuba and effectively rallied public support. Kennedy's speech on television was underpinned by facts and emphasized the dangers of WMD in Cuba for American civilians[4]. It managed to persuade other nations and build the desired unity against Soviet claims. Thus, we may state that television played an important role in the peaceful reconciliation of the crisis.

Iraq war: Weapons of Mass Deception?

During the Cuban missile crisis, the dangers of Soviet WMD in Cuba were clear. However, as we will see, politicians can even shape public opinion with mass

1 Adena, Maja et al (2015), *Radio and the Rise of the Nazis in Prewar Germany. Quarterly Journal of Economics*, November 2015, v. 130, iss. 4, pp. 1885-1939

2 *The Paley Center for Media. Media's Role in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Available:* https://www.paleycenter.org/p-cuban-missile-crisis
3 *No.TV Household in America. Available:* https://tinyurl.com/y9pdx89b
4 *Joseph F. Kennedy's television Speech (22/10/1962). Available:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgdUgzAWcrw&t=390s

communication in less obvious cases. A prime example is the Iraq war, where the Bush administration "sold the war to the American people" (Andrew Bacevich). The mechanics of manipulation were build on the excessive use of internet, television and printing press. One question to consider is whether it was an organized propaganda operation or the press were simply following the administration.

Press, by it nature, is "too focused on extreme menaces, the nation is being trained to consider terrorism in its most apocalyptic tone" (Leibovitz). As Bush committed a strategic break from his predecessors' more modest approach with his new war rhetoric, it is plausible that the receptive press just simply reiterated what the administration was saying. In an environment where the incumbent does not make any distinction between "terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them" and states that "If nations around the world develop WMD, that will be used to terrorize nations", it is likely that the scandal-centered press would be keen on spreading these apocalyptic and exciting messages. When the White House stated that Americans were vulnerable to Iraq's alleged WMD, the media effectively magnified those fears by prioritizing that news. A good example of independent press functioning as the speaking tube of the official standpoint is Richard Perle's article in New York Times titled 'US must strike on Saddam Hussein'[5], which was seen by many as an unofficial declaration of war. There are many other examples, including pieces in the New York Times titled 'Defectors cite Iraqi training for terrorism' and 'Iraqi Tells of Renovations at Sites For Chemical and Nuclear Arms'[6]. In works like this, the provocative headlines made clear the official standpoint on the WMD issue, while even if there were alternative perspectives mentioned, they were buried deep inside in the body of the article. As a consequence, roughly 80 percent of Americans actually believed Saddam had an atomic bomb or was building one[7]. Similar processes occured in the UK, where acknowledgement and an unbiased evaluation of what happened during the war has not happened.

We can see that mass communication used to be a powerful tool in the hands of politicians to alter public opinions to their favour, even on issues as serious as WMD. Now, with the introduction of the internet and social media, things have changed dramatically. In the next part, we will see some of the implications of these

new media technologies.

Social Media: Scattered opinions, scattered action

With the introduction of the internet, yet another media market has risen next to print and television, whose attributes are somewhat unlike what we have experienced so far. As we saw in the previous section, traditional media seems to support the ideas of incumbent governments. However, social media has the capacity to open up new dynamics by introducing new actors and thus new ideas as well. In this part, after a brief introduction of the peculiar structure of the social media markets, I examine the opportunities, risks and dangers regarding the role social media plays in contemporary WMD-involving conflicts. In particular, I explore examples from the ongoing Syrian civil war, such as the role of social media in the uncertainties around the alleged chemical weapon attack at Douma, Syria on 7 April 2018.

The social media market

Compared to other media markets, the fixed costs of entering the social media market are small. This tells us two important characteristics.

Firstly, it increases the likelihood of writing for short-term profits. As Alcott and Gentzkow's study[8] in the subject shows, since the price of producing new content on the internet is vanishingly small, this increases the relative gains of the small scale while it reduces the importance of building a long-term reputation for quality. This aspect relates to another feature of the modern media market - fake news. According to the definition set by Allcott and Gentzkow, fake news is "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers". However, as my fellow British Pugwash member Andrew Gibson puts it, "For many, it means wildly inaccurate news stories that are shared and read on the internet. For others, like Donald Trump, it means the output of the entire mainstream media." So as we see, different actors have differing definitions of and application of the term "fake news".

This results in a sharp distinction between political camps based not on facts but opinions on what they regard fake and real based on the slant of their preferred media sources. As this study shows[9], these differences

5 Perle, Richard. (2001) The U.S. Must Strike Saddam at Hussein. New York Times. Available: https://tinyurl.com/yb562on4

6 Articles available at: https://tinyurl.com/y834yaqn and https://tinyurl.com/yc49erva

7 Moeller, Susan. (2004) Weapons of Mass Destruction and the Media: Anatomy of a Failure. Available: https://tinyurl.com/yd88h2j8

8 Alcott, Hunt; Gentzkow, Matthew. (2017) Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. Journal of Economic Perspectives, Spring 2017, v. 31, iss. 2, pp. 211-36

9 DellaVigna, S; Kaplan, E. (2007). The Fox News Effect. Media Bias and Voting. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Vol. 122, No. 3 (Aug., 2007), pp. 1187-1234

are very hard to overcome.

Secondly, we are witnessing changes not only in content writing but also the structure of media markets. Since basically anybody can share new or existing content, the structure seems to be rather decentralized. Surely, this structure has its advantages. It is probably impossible to monopolize social media in the way the Bush administration managed with traditional media during the Iraq war. Thus, the boundless movement of any information theoretically works better than in the case of traditional media. Moreover, since anybody can share and reach masses, one could argue that social media is a good fit for the fastest flow of first-hand information ever imaginable.

The problem is, that without the demand for comprehensive editorial verifiability, there is basically no control on the content. Thus, the decentralized market structure just fuels the magnitude of the fake news. In the next part, we explore how all this works in practice.

Douma: a case study

Douma, 7 April 2018. 34+ people found dead with symptoms very much like exposure to chlorine gas but this is all we know for sure. The problem is complex. There are hardly any professional journalists in the Middle East these days, simply because it is too dangerous[10]. The Islamic State and its clones prefer beheading journalists, unlike their Al-Qaeda predecessors who preferred ransom for the valuable Western prisoners. Thus the vast majority of the episodes of the Syrian nightmare has been shared through social media by non-professionals whose bias is often obvious towards a particular fighting group.

In this case, as a Bellingcat report[11] concludes, we have four main sources. First, a Facebook Page named Douma. Revolution, that may not seem to be biased but the name implies a pro-rebel narrative. Second, A Youtube blogger [12]with connections to both Douma.Revolution and a former hardline Islamic group Liwa al-Islam. Third, the White Helmets, also known as the Syrian Civil Defense, who were accused of various charges in the past few years from cooperating in an execution to staging fake videos[13], however, denying all charges so far. Finally, the Russian professionals who arrived later to investigate the scene, and allegedly found no trace of WMD[14]. As we

can see, three of these four sources are mostly active on social media and their content reaches masses without any veracity check.

The stage is set for the debate of what really happened in Douma. As we can see, three of these four sources are mostly active on social media and their content reaches masses without any veracity check, while it is plausible that these sources have strong biases towards a given participant in the war. Bias itself would not be a problem in traditional media, as there are editors to evaluate the information. However, in this case their evidence was uploaded directly online and it spread very fast, even though there were still uncertainties. Although it has become clear that the evidence was filmed in Douma due to big data-based location technology, there is no proper evidence on what gas the canisters contained. Even world leaders seem to be a bit cautious, with Theresa May stating that the gas "appears" to be chlorine and Jim Mattis suggesting that it may be that a second gas was also used[15], while the pro-Assad Russian government says the all the evidence was staged by Britain and anti-Assad rebels such as the White Helmets[16].

So as we see, there is no wider consensus over what really happened in Douma. As I pointed out earlier, an environment like this is highly favourable to fake news. As this article[17] brilliantly summarises, a compelling fake news item has to contain a plausible story which is carefully planted in a way that seems to be logical and easy to believe in. Then, due to the ever fastening 'net effect' of social media, the story spreads like lightning around the globe. Moreover, the impact of these fake stories never fully fades away as the clarification of the story almost never reaches as many people as the fake news itself. On Douma, there is no wider consensus over what happened. Even leading news websites and politicians have to use second-hand information from the previous actors in the story. The quick spread of news results in an inability to examine veracity. As a result, several conspiracies were born, each side accusing the other of providing staged or slanted evidence (I strongly recommend the comment section of the Bellingcat article). It seems that social media, due to its special qualities, effectively magnifies fake or slanted stories as well. As even world leaders cannot agree on what to do with the alleged use of WMD in the Syrian war, the foundation of a coalition-based action against WMD use is being delayed in the conflict. Maybe it is worth posing the question of whether uncertainty over facts and diverse media sources are one of the reasons why there

10 https://tinyurl.com/y7ta2a3e

11 Bellingcat Investigation team (2018) Open Source Survey of Alleged Chemical Attacks in Douma on 7th April 2018. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yagynk5o

12 His channel (very graphic): https://www.youtube.com/user/islamdoma/videos

13 Worrall, Patrick. (2016). Fastcheck: Eva Bartlett's claims about Syrian children. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/hx3ap5b

14 Euronews: Russia's ambassador to the EU tells euronews there was no chemical attack in Douma. (2018) Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y8a99c7k

15 Williams, Martin. (2018) Syria Chemical Attack: the Evidence. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yc9xslcp

16 Sputnik (2018). We Have Evidence of UK's Role in Staging Douma Provocation - Russian MoD. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yd2tp7sr

17 Meyer, Sam. (2017) Fake News, Real Consequences: The Dangers of WMD Disinformation. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yd2auahp

is not a universally agreed response to WMD use in Syria.

Conclusion

This paper examined how media was and still is used to influence public opinion on WMD-related conflicts. I have came to the conclusion that modern social media's distinctive aspects have definitely altered the way public opinions are formed. Having explored a real life example from an ongoing conflict involving WMD, it is clear that social media as a channel of communication does not function flawlessly. A future task is to explore what we can do to limit the dangers of social media and fake news vis-a-vis WMD.