Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.

Intelligence and Analysis Division

WHITE PAPER SERIES

Foreign Influence on Protest Activity: An Overview

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INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.

Foreign Influence on Protest Activity

Introduction

This white paper will examine the relationship between social media, protest activity, and foreign adversaries. Protest activity, referring to protests, rallies, counter-protests, and other such gatherings, is an important component of American society, in expressing beliefs and demonstrating opinions to others for a wide variety of political, economic and social goals. However, the manipulation of protest activity can have a toxic effect on the nation. Sowing discord and division can cause internal harm. Misrepresenting support for an issue can trigger changes in local, national, or international issues in a way that is contrary to, or an exaggeration of, reality. Furthermore, protest activity has the potential to develop into civil disturbance activity; defined as group acts of violence and disorder prejudicial to public law and order. It includes acts such as riots, acts of violence, insurrections, unlawful obstructions or assemblages, and other disorders. Foreign adversaries may benefit from encouraging or provoking the development of civil disturbance activity from initially peaceful protest activity.

Social Media and Protest Activity

Foreign powers have increasingly weaponized social media to influence U.S. public opinion, disrupt societal cohesion, and strategically promote agendas. Over the last decade, foreign nations have utilized social media by creating fake accounts and personas, influencing search results, amplifying extreme content, and using other methods. These social media strategies, which generate a more intense and divisive virtual environment, have sought to make U.S. society more polarized, influence U.S. political decisions, delegitimate democratic institutions, and create confusion. This promotion of divisiveness by foreign adversaries has contributed to the formation of protests, rallies, and other similar gatherings in the U.S.[1, 2]

Adversaries, such as Russia, China, and Iran, have bolstered misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation on social media to create chaos, confusion, and division in the U.S. For example, Russia's extensive disinformation campaign from 2014 to 2020, which heavily relied on social media, established new methods to create deceitful content. Russia's primary strategy was to produce social media content that contained partial truths and objective falsehoods on a large scale to distort information. During the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, Russia flooded Twitter hashtags to dilute legitimate information and alter communication messaging during the demonstrations. Iranian accounts also sought to influence public discourse during the 2020 protests, openly criticizing the U.S. and sharing hashtags about the death of George Floyd.[2, 3, 4, 5]

In 2017 and early 2018, Twitter found that the Internet Research Agency (IRA), an organization that promotes propaganda and is tied to the Russian government, created 3,814 accounts on their medium. Twitter calculated that more than 1.4 million people interacted with these accounts during the 2016 election cycle. Some estimated that there were as many as 150,000 Twitter handles tied to the Russian government. One study reported that from 2015 to 2017, 32 significant American media organizations published at least one (1) article that included a tweet from IRA-linked accounts, totaling 116 articles. Most of the tweets did not convey misinformation but offered

sources of evocative opinions. Partisan media outlets were the U.S. news sources that most frequently included IRA account tweets. These media outlets would include the tweets to portray the intense and divisive nature of political discourse.[1, 6]

Russia has also used social media platforms to target specific communities by focusing on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, geography, and other factors. Accounts that have developed audiences and credibility through consistent content, combined with advertisements, have aimed to impact public opinion and increase polarization even after the 2016 election. For instance, IRA-purchased advertisements on Facebook after the Trump administration's May 2017 strikes on Syria sought to impact the public's view of the military decision. IRA-linked Twitter posts in March 2018 about the NFL National Anthem protests aimed to promote divisiveness.[1]

Open-source reporting suggests that Iran and China have interfered in social media dialogue by creating propaganda to support their nations' actions. In addition to its activity during the 2020 protests, Iran has disseminated pro-Iranian propaganda over the past decade on social media, amplified conspiracy theories, and discredited the U.S.'s negative views of Iran's policies and human rights record. China has correlated U.S. issues with events in other countries via social media, such as promoting tweets comparing the California independence campaign with the Hong Kong independence movement. China and other adversaries have been able to establish some plausible deniability regarding social media interference through bots, which give the impression of increased influence and can reach a vaster audience. Bots that use artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and other programs can pretend to be legitimate users, and bots that amplify disinformation through automated capabilities can distort perceptions. Foreign adversaries also seek to manipulate the public through trolls, which are human users with obscure identities that look to promote polarization online. Since a majority of Americans have been found to use social media as a source to receive news, automated and manipulated accounts controlled by foreign adversaries can promote extremist dialogue and contribute to increased polarization in the United States.[1, 2, 7]

Case Study: Protest Organized by Russians on Facebook – November 2016

In 2016, Russia garnered national attention with its unprecedented level of election interference in the United States. This interference was heavily dependent on influence operations, to include misinformation, disinformation, and amplifying a variety of narratives (occasionally playing both sides of an issue) to drive increased polarization amongst the U.S. electorate. This was made apparent in November of that year as thousands of Americans attended a march organized by a Russian group that used social media to interfere in the 2016 election. The demonstration in New York City was one of the largest and most successful pulled off by Russian-linked groups intent on using social media platforms to influence American politics. Sixteen thousand Facebook users indicated they planned to attend an anti-Trump protest on 12 November 2016, organized by the Facebook page for BlackMattersUS, a Russian-linked group. In this event, the group was seeking to create discord by capitalizing on racial tensions between Americans. The event was shared with 61,000 users. BlackMattersUS efforts persuaded five to ten thousand protesters to convene upon Manhattan's Union Square where they then marched to Trump Tower. The BlackMattersUS-

organized rally took advantage of outrage among groups on the left following President Trump's victory on 8 November 2016, and galvanized support for its event.[8, 9]

According to an investigation by the Russian Magazine RBC, the Russian-linked organizing group was connected to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a Russian "troll farm" with ties to the Kremlin. Facebook also identified the IRA as the group responsible for purchasing 3,000 political ads on Facebook's platform and operating 470 accounts that appear to have attempted to influence the perspectives of Americans during the 2016 elections. Facebook has since deleted those 470 accounts. The BlackMattersUS account was deleted as well. Twitter also deleted an account associated with the group, possibly in its own purge of accounts linked to Russian actors.[9]

The BlackMattersUS had organized other protests, but none reached the level of support that the 12 November 2016 protest received. Other events organized by the group tended to focus on rallies around race flash points, including the deaths of black men killed by law enforcement. Posts on the BlackMattersUS website also focused on matters of racial justice, highlighting instances of police brutality and racial justice concerns within the U.S. The group reportedly recruited Americans who were unaware of its links to Russian actors to help its mobilizing efforts and organize these events.[9,10]

Case Study: Meddling Related to "Freedom Convoys" – February 2022

Open-source reporting indicated in February that the U.S. anti-vaccination community had the potential to organize rallies that mirrored those demonstrations held in Canada. The "Freedom Convoy" paralyzed Ottawa, Ontario, and that effort received further assistance from overseas content mills. Some Facebook groups that promoted similar American "trucker convoys" were being run by fake accounts tied to content mills in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Romania and several other countries, according to Facebook officials. The groups popped up as extremism researchers began to warn anti-vaccine and conspiracy-driven communities in the U.S. who were increasingly embracing and promoting the idea of disruptive convoys. The anti-vaccine protesters, some of whom were truckers, successfully clogged roads in Ottawa for more than a week and demanded the Canadian government remove mask and vaccine mandates. American far-right groups on Facebook, Telegram and the voice chat app Zello also aimed to replicate the demonstration in U.S. cities.[11, 12, 13]

Major websites and social media accounts behind the anti-vaccine mandate protest are rebranding as "trucker convoys," part of an effort to bring versions of Canada's anti-vaccine road closures to United States. Many of the groups have changed names multiple times, going from those that support former President Trump or opposition to vaccine mandates, to names incorporating "trucker," "freedom" and "convoy." Facebook allows groups on its platforms to change names but tracks the changes in each page's "about" section. The groups frequently directed users away from Facebook toward websites that sold pro-Trump and anti-vaccine merchandise. The accounts and the groups they run can be used for any purpose, from selling T-shirts to executing a foreign influence campaign. A Facebook spokesperson also noted that the majority of the content posted in these groups came from real accounts and that the company has removed the groups tied to foreign content mills. The details of foreign interference comes as anti-vaccine protesters and pro-

Trump groups have shifted their efforts to making trucker convoys more common place on American roads.[11, 13]

Conclusion

As observed through the case studies above, there are numerous benefits to foreign adversaries becoming involved in protest activity. Foreign adversaries seek to influence local, state, or national politics and discourse. While at times a singular goal or policy may be sought after, other times playing both sides of an issue can bring benefits. Discord and division can be grown, inflaming tensions and exacerbating pre-existing discord between internal groups. Even when foreign influence is public knowledge, these effects can persist. Additionally, the awareness of foreign influence attempts can create general confusion and distrust in news/information sources. Decreasing trust in democratic process or institutions results in long term impacts. Importantly, as technology continues to grow and shift, new search engines, social media platforms, and communication tools will emerge, potentially serving foreign adversaries as tools by which they seek to influence the United States. While difficult to consistently track, understanding the usefulness of these tools to foreign adversaries is vital both now and in the future. RMC's Intelligence & Analysis Division continues to monitor foreign information operations, as well as their impacts to the U.S. security environment.

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