Disinformation Landscape

Present: Janelle Clausen, Alexander Mayer, and Emerson Brooking

In early June, the *Democracy & Society* team interviewed Emerson Brooking, a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab and co-author of *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media*. The conversation focused on the power of social media, the role of disinformation campaigns within modern democracy, and how the U.S. and other international stakeholders can effectively address said threats as they continue to emerge and proliferate throughout the digital environment.

The interview began with a fundamental question: What are the primary institutional threats that disinformation could pose to democracy?

Brooking said the threats are not directly institutional, but they are considerable in that they often undercut the pillars of accountability required within democratic polities. "The primary threat that disinformation poses to democracy is the possibility that one can masquerade as someone who they are not, or say something that is objectively untrue," Brooking explained, yet, "there is no resource in the modern information environment to punish them and impose [penalties] once the deception is discovered."

He recalled how democratic organization was previously "a local phenomenon," where politicians could wield the bully pulpit, but were still held liable for attempts at "obvious deception." However, the advent of social media has allowed for lies to now spread quickly, drastically changing the dynamic. "[It] creates a new sort of incentive structure where if you are a charlatan … you can decide to keep lying, even when your first lies are discovered," operating under the assumption that, as Brooking states, one is still able to reach a larger and vulnerable audience. Many notable examples came over the course of the presidency of Donald Trump, Brooking noted, with Trump wielding a "megaphone that nobody could match" because of his approval ratings among the Republican party. "[It's] the way that it subverts the consequences that one once faced for lying repeatedly in public life," Brooking said.

There is also the possibility for foreign actors to deliberately masquerade as domestic voices by inventing false and fabricated identities. This condition allows anyone with access to social media platforms and within the sphere of digital inclusivity to "throw things out of alignment," Brooking said, particularly when it comes to gauging public support and discourse. This, as he notes, "makes it possible for an organized effort by nationals in one country to subvert and hijack democratic deliberation in another."

Emerson Brooking's interest in studying social media formally began in 2012, as the world witnessed the "First Twitter War" between the Israeli Defense Force and Hamas and the subsequent "global tug of war" to shape public opinion and the encompassing information environment. Soon after, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) brought about a "sudden awareness by millions of people that [social media] could be subverted toward horrific ends, and that it was not solely a domain for democratic activists." Then, while working on his 2018 publication *LikeWar,* Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States—something that felt "inexplicable" at the time. For Brooking, this event further clarified that asymmetric actors of any sort, and within any context, could take advantage of social media and modern information systems to their benefit.

"Many of the systems that benefited say a disruptive, asymmetric actor, like the Islamic State, also benefited the Trump campaign who had sworn off or ignored many traditional elements of American presidential campaigns to focus almost entirely on a very aggressive communication strategy," Brooking said. "Then, of course, it began to come out that the Trump campaign had been aided by operatives out of the Russian Federation. And so it was obvious that not only did our politics more resemble this sort of online conflict that I have been studying, but that the conflict also came to our politics through the lens of those Russian intelligence activities."

Within its contemporary context, social media has become weaponized and strategically influential through its ability to exacerbate socio-political divisions and operate as a vehicle for disinformation. In sharp contrast to the traditional public diplomacy and soft power campaigns of the past, Brooking defines the modern iteration of disinformation as "purposeful deception and organized campaigns which seek to manipulate online discourse, to distort the truth and create false consensus or amplification, typically towards a certain policy outcome."As Brooking has found, while social media platforms may have been used as a means of enhancing traditional and transparent political communication in the past, they today hold the capacity to exacerbate social divides and further political stratification by enabling a proliferation of falsehoods and exposure to disinformation by vulnerable populations at-large.

The use of disinformation has unquestionably proliferated in recent years. A 2019 report from the Oxford Internet Institute found that 70 countries have shown evidence of organized social media manipulation — up from 48 countries in 2018, and 28 countries in 2017. Manipulative information strategies have also begun to utilize new technological instruments such as 'deep-fake' audio and video, advanced

micro-targeted advertisements, and a variety of increasingly sophisticated disinformation techniques.

While between 2018 and 2020, Facebook and Twitter successfully took down 147 influence operation networks, the current global acceleration in disinformation and social media use is set to remain a significant challenge to democratic stability and the digital landscape for years to come. Scholars have attempted to isolate the normative and institutional implications of these emerging trends in disinformation, but the turbulence in its manifestation — as a bricolage of complex political contexts, standing sociopolitical stratifications, normative institutions, and other societal facets which help to illuminate civic and political behaviors at-large — has made such a task increasingly difficult.

The emerging trend was also something few people had seen coming. Brooking specifically cited Evgeny Morozov and his book *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World,* which came out almost a decade ago. "It argued that Silicon Valley's embrace of the liberating, democratizing influence of the Internet was premature," Brooking said, adding that this proved to be correct. Social media, in fact, has and continues to be used by several nondemocratic and illiberal actors as an effective tool for subversion.

The United States' adversarial triumvirate of Russia, China, and Iran, have each taken on a variety of tactics, according to Brooking. Russia has been "willing to inhabit both sides of the issues" — both the far right and far left — to "identify and further exacerbate fissures in American society." Iran has been primarily focused on the public messaging business, utilizing Twitter bots "to amplify messages written by bureaucrats." As for China, it is less focused on disinformation than amplifying its own officials and suppressing democratic voices — perhaps misinformation in terms of forced omission.

One of the more surprising findings from Brooking's research, was the initial "over-exaggeration of the impact of influence operations." He recalled how Russian influence became an overwhelming part of the political dialogue, with many articles seeming to look for traces of Russian involvement everywhere, and said he believes researchers are now approaching a more balanced view of the impact of influence operations. "At the same time, it's been completely surreal to me to watch the development and professionalization of the study of influence operations," Brooking said. Now, technology companies and social media companies like Facebook are authoring reports about manipulation campaigns on their platforms and engaging in the comprehensive study of the disinformation phenomenon, Brooking said, when in 2013 they sought to avoid "responsibility for terrorist content on their platforms."

While the spread of misinformation is a global issue, Brooking has found that we are witnessing the fragmentation of the internet, complicating the possibility of multilateral or multi-stakeholder solutions with concerns of state sovereignty likely to emerge. "Most nations outside of the U.S. and the European Union are leaning toward asserting control of their domestic information environments," specifically citing debates between Twitter and the Indian government over the labeling of misinformation. "For many nations, their primary interest is in what they call data sovereignty — the fact that, to them, it is unreasonable that a Western social media company has any control over the information that's transmitting over their particular local internet. The problem though is that this erases any way for us to work with those countries to create some kind of global response to misinformation." The Europeans are also "extremely concerned," he noted, but they are wanting to "impose harsh penalties" — which raises questions about balancing internet sovereignty with concerns of national security and freedom of speech. Some actors like China are meanwhile offering an "alternate information environment," a model that he believes "will [unfortunately] become increasingly attractive."

Falling closer to a free speech absolutist, Brooking personally does not believe governments can "write just laws that penalize the spread of misinformation, in most cases," although he believes it would be appropriate for social media platforms to impose stiffer penalties. "I think a lot of the action falls on the corporate entities," Brooking states, "and where I think governments can do more is strengthening the rights of victims of disinformation campaigns." He contrasted the case of InfoWars broadcaster Alex Jones, who famously spread false conspiracy theories regarding the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting and caused "irreparable harm to private citizens," yet has largely failed to see any repercussions within the courts, with that of a recent defamation lawsuit against Rudy Giuliani, Sidney Powell, and Fox News by Dominion Voting Systems, a voting infrastructure company often subjected to conspiracy theories following the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The latter cases, he found, were taken far more seriously. "Most of the people who were targets that were named in the lawsuit settled out of fear of significant financial penalties," Brooking said. "So I think you should treat people at least to the standard that you treat big businesses."

In terms of countering organized disinformation campaigns, Brooking said he believes the Biden administration has "a good shot at reducing" the impact of foreign disinformation campaigns. The sources are easier to identify than a hacking campaign, given that they occur over a prolonged period of time, are less covert, and may be spreading a message that complements a goal. But "unfortunately, we're going to have to, in a lot of ways, adjust to this new dynamic," Brooking said. "Obvious manipulation and false personas … those can be moderated and eliminated on these [social media] platforms, but the incentives for influence in the attention economy remain."

When asked about public vulnerability to accepting or spreading misinformation, he noted that lies often spread faster than truth because they tend to be more interesting to an audience, often deliberately. As he detailed, current research shows people are not necessarily reading a story

before sharing or concerned about its truth, let alone "thinking about the health of the entire democracy." Emotionally laced content, or stories framed in an adversarial way, can spread like wildfire. Some social media companies have consequently been experimenting with a concept known as friction, which aims to slow the speed at which an article spreads rather than simply taking it down.

When asked about where he hopes and expects the disinformation landscape to be a decade from now, Brooking said that it is difficult to make concrete projections. On the one hand, he expects online fragmentation to grow and become "increasingly attractive," especially for authoritarian regimes looking to gain "absolute sovereignty over the information within its own borders." At the same time, he noted, there is a greater degree of "information literacy" among Generation Z and Millennials. They are an "incredulous generation," he said. "They have not only been born into an omnipresent social media environment, but also into an environment where they know that everyone may be lying or misrepresenting themselves from the start.Maybe it is a little bit harder for them to apply it academically, and they still need preparatory coursework in information literacy, but they [intuitively] know that not everyone speaking online is telling the truth."

When asked about a message he would want to share with readers, Brooking said that one should not simply look to the past and present, but to "deliberately project into the future" to be in a better position to help. "Look for the next great challenges that are coming down the pathway rather than what everyone is focusing on,"

Indeed, the future of disinformation may very well be one of the conversations that has yet to be had.