REIMAGINING MEDIA SECURITY AS NATIONAL SECURITY: INCREASING THE NATION’S RESILIENCE TO THE WEAPONIZATION OF INFORMATION

SCUSA 71 Policy Paper

Executive Summary
The American people need to be more resilient to the weaponization of information. Increasing social media usage and exploitation has made the American public vulnerable to exploitation by foreign adversaries. The Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and the success of extremist organizations in recruiting through social media serve as examples of this threat. The responsibility to mitigate this threat falls to American governmental, educational and corporate entities.

Background
The United States maintains its commitment to freedom of speech in the public sphere (Trump, 2017). However, freedom of speech and civil discourse in open communication networks, particularly social media, is threatened by malicious foreign actors that spread disinformation and erode trust in the political institutions. During the 2016 presidential election, Russian intelligence agencies engaged in a social media propaganda campaign dedicated with the intent of advancing Russian interests via domestic polarization (Isaac & Wabayashi, 2018). Foreign and domestic extremist groups have used online algorithms as part of radicalization campaigns (Ward, 2018).

Other countries have begun to combat disinformation campaigns in both the public and private sphere. In 2018, the European Union advanced a program of working with technology and media companies to improve the ability to detect and eradicate Kremlin-sponsored disinformation (EEAS, 2018). Italy began a government education program focused on disinformation and how to identify authentic sources of information (Horowitz, 2017). While the problem of disinformation is a recognized national security threat, the United States lacks a comprehensive defense strategy against weaponized information.

Analysis
Disinformation campaigns succeed by exploiting legal ambiguities. An example of this is shown in the intersection between digital news media, advertising and social media. Social media and technology corporations allow users to access to an incredibly large audience at a relatively low cost. Humans are symbol-using and symbol-misusing beings (Burke, 1969). A link between this psychological phenomena and commercial activity has been recognized by corporate entities. These corporations utilize targeted advertising and content algorithms to influence their audiences’ decision-making processes, often to the detriment of collective critical capacity and civil discourse. The freedom of the press has left politicized clickbait unregulated, further enabling foreign aggressors to commercialize disinformation.

A lack of media literacy has left the American public vulnerable to disinformation campaigns. While social media has expanded the arena of civil discourse, the online activities of foreign aggressors have fostered political polarization rather than constructive political engagement. This threatens the American national interest by eroding the collective American identity.

Reforming educational programming and media awareness campaigns would create a “culture of preparedness” wherein the American public is resilient to information warfare. These reforms will safeguard the integrity of the national identity and democratic institutions (Trump, 2017).
Recommendations

1. **Public service announcements**: In order to educate the American public on the dangers of the weaponization of information, the committee highlights the importance of Public Service Announcements. These announcements should raise public awareness on media literacy, good information sharing practices, and the importance of reputable sources. Public Service Announcements should be infographic in nature, tailored for specific audiences, and spread through social media and search engines. The committee recommends the utilization of established platforms and social media influencers.

2. **Federal Elections Commission**: The committee recommends the amendment of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 to include any online communication.

3. **Integration of media literacy into school curricula**: The importance of educating the American youth on professional media behavior cannot be emphasized enough. The addition of media literacy topics to existing course curricula would provide students with knowledge on appropriate and inappropriate actions online, how best to trace the sources of information, and how to recognize the power and limitations of disinformation tactics.

4. **Sustainable training for the general population with FCC funding**: Because older generations didn’t always have technology at their fingertips, especially while growing up, the committee recommends that additional training on properly judging sources (and content) be made available for older individuals.

5. **Developing a ‘Defensive Advertising’ campaign**: Rather than admonish the populace for succumbing to the prevalence of disinformation, the committee recommends that the FEC start an advertising campaign on popular social media platforms. The advertisements in question would convey dubious, non-political information meant to surprise or entice the populace and, upon clicking the advertisement, the page would reroute to a website on the importance of recognizing disinformation in the media.

6. **Political topics removed from algorithms**: The use of tracking data to create algorithms that promote fringe/radical politics based on the user’s social media presence will be prevented by the FEC. Political advertisements are included in this matter.
Works Cited


