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The Scourge of Disinformation-Assisted Hate Propaganda

Cherian George

In early 2017, the governor of Jakarta, Indonesia, was ousted with the aid of disinformation-fueled hate propaganda, a practice that has become an alarmingly common feature of democratic politics. Assailed by accusations that he had insulted Islam, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama was not only defeated in an election that he had been expected to win, but also convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to two years in jail. Basuki, an ethnic Chinese Christian, had long been dogged by opponents' carping that he should not be in charge of the predominantly Muslim country's capital city. In September 2016, the plain-speaking politician retorted that voters were welcome to vote against him if they believed his opponents' lies that the Quran prohibits Muslims from electing non-Muslims. This impetuous remark was swiftly twisted by his opponents to make it seem as if the governor had claimed that the Quran itself was deceiving the people. This incendiary mischaracterisation was aided by a genuine video of Basuki with crucial words omitted from the subtitles, posted online with a provocative caption. Hardliners seized on the episode to mobilise major protests that culminated in Basuki's defeat in April 2017 and his conviction the following month.

Governor of a city of 10 million in the world's third largest democracy, Basuki is possibly one of the biggest scalps to have been claimed by disinformation-aided hate propaganda, a particularly distressing genre of what is loosely called "fake news". Here, the term disinformation refers to falsehoods that are deliberately manufactured and circulated with an intent to mislead.¹ Hate, in the sense used here, refers to expression that disparages a whole community of people based on identity, such as race, religion, nationality, immigrant status, caste, gender, sexual orientation and so on.² We are not referring here to hate as a psychological state, but as a strategy of political contenders who, while certainly exploiting individual-level emotions of their followers, are themselves guided by cold calculation.³ Hate campaigns are a communication strategy of groups engaged in territorial conquests, genocides, pogroms and other crimes against humanity throughout history. In less extreme cases, they scapegoat vulnerable minorities in order to activate fear and harness identity politics as a means to accumulate power. Hate campaigns invariably incorporate disinformation—deliberately deceptive content ranging from outright lies and fabrications, to the use of misleading frames, selectivity in the presentation of facts, and misrepresenting context to show people and events in a false light.

Few speech situations cry out more strongly for public intervention than hate propaganda. When dealing with such expression, liberal faith in the

marketplace of ideas tends to be misplaced. The communities targeted by such campaigns are often politically, economically and culturally weak; they suffer historical handicaps that prevent them from protecting their rights in open competition with opponents who wish them harm. This structural imbalance is acknowledged in international human rights law and most democratic constitutions. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in Article 20, requires states to prohibit by law “[a]ny advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.”⁴ Even American First Amendment doctrine, which tolerates almost no government-imposed limits on public discourse, permits regulation of direct incitement to immediate violence.⁵ In the so-called Media Trial following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, an international tribunal found that a radio station and newspaper had inflamed hatred and instigated mobs to massacre Tutsis (Article 19 1996). No major free speech advocacy group objected to the criminal convictions handed down to three executives.

While the legal and moral philosophical case for strong regulation of extreme and dangerous forms of hate speech is relatively uncontroversial, it is difficult to formulate effective policy responses to the much broader challenge of disinformation-assisted hate propaganda. There are two major conundrums to deal with: first, hate propagation is conducted through amorphous, distributed campaigns that are practically impossible for regulators to come to grips with; and, second, the most sophisticated campaigns symbolically exploit attacks against them, thus making legal challenges backfire to their advantage.⁶ While this is not to say that law should not be used, it does suggest that legal prohibitions and penalties are never sufficient. Policy attention needs to shift from the supply side of hate-propagating disinformation to the demand side: how to reduce the demand for simplistic, exclusionary and intolerant rhetoric, and cultivate publics who value diversity and protect equality.

The Structure of Hate Campaigns

Unfortunately, an analyst of disinformation in hate campaigns has no shortage of historical and ongoing cases to dissect. Anti-Semitic propaganda leading up to the Holocaust included the hoax, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, fabricated to lend credence to the conspiracy theory about a Jewish plan for global domination. American history is replete with examples of hateful untruths disseminated in the service of power. The physical subjugation of Native Americans and then Africans required their symbolic dehumanisation by politicians, scientists, theologians, writers and artists.⁷ The success of the American Revolution depended in part on the vilification of the British, including through “fake news”: a 1770 skirmish in which British soldiers killed half a dozen civilians while under physical attack by a mob was transformed into the “Boston Massacre” by radical pamphleteers and lithographers to whip up public outrage.⁸ Contemporary politics the world over is filled with more examples. Elaborate and impactful conspiracy theories have been manufactured in the United States by the Islamophobia industry about the incursion of sharia law⁹; in India by the Hindu Right about Muslim men mounting “love jihad” on Hindu girls¹⁰; in Indonesian by Muslim hardliners

about a resurgent communist threat¹¹; and in Europe by anti-immigrant groups against sexual predators or “rapefugees.”¹²

Our attention tends to be drawn to speech that is extreme—either using language that violates social norms, such as openly racist epithets, or containing explicit calls to action, such as incitement to violence. But such expression forms only a small part of a hate campaign and does not work in a vacuum. Instead, hate campaigns comprise multiple, layered, loosely interlocking messages, disseminated by different actors over years or decades.¹³ Master narratives, usually emphasizing the in-group’s noble characteristics, often harken back to some mythical golden age that demonstrates the community’s true potential, provide the backdrop. Past traumas may also be highlighted, to heighten the community’s sense of victimization and impending danger. A complementary master narrative portrays a particular out-group as inherently untrustworthy because of certain irredeemable cultural, religious or ideological traits. The effect of these grand narratives is to cultivate an exclusive primary identity, a sense of belonging to a community that is both exceptionally valuable and uniquely vulnerable.

These master narratives are regularly refreshed with contemporary examples, largely from the news but also from popular culture and even scientific research. The examples are often drawn from faraway places and contexts that have little to do with the community, but they are appropriated and framed in ways that keep the group in a heightened state of anxiety. The final step is a call to action, in the form of voting for a populist leader or joining a riot against a minority, for example. Such incitement is usually pegged to a particular event in the here and now, such as a government announcement deemed as disadvantaging the in-group or the appearance of a cultural product seen as deeply offensive. The perceived provocation is treated as the last straw, requiring members of the community to rise up in defense of their values and way of life.

Structured thus, hate campaigns pose intractable regulatory conundrums. First, any attempt to police falsehoods (through fact-checking, for example) would find that much of the content of the hate propaganda is not wholly fabricated. For example, newspapers and websites intent on promoting the “rapefugee” myth can do so simply by playing up every report of an immigrant or refugee suspected of a sexual offence, each of which may be factually accurate. These stories are curated in a highly selective and often malicious manner, thus creating a distorted picture of the world; but they are not all falsifiable. Their master narratives may be even harder to contest, since they draw on myths and legends, poems and songs. Second, most of the messages making up a hate propaganda campaign do not cross the conventional threshold for hate speech (as applied by internet platforms’ community standards, for example). They neither amount to direct incitement nor contain extreme language. Many statements are innocuous in isolation but inflammatory when read in context. Hindu nationalists’ matter-of-fact references to population trends, for instance, are designed to dovetail with conspiracy theories about Muslims trying to take over India by marrying four wives and out-producing Hindus. It is usually not possible to hold speakers accountable for these campaigns because the messaging work is distributed across a wide network. There is a division of labor, with the most extreme language usually left to minor politicians and anonymous trolls, while the movement’s leaders keep their hands

clean. Think tanks and experts use pseudo-intellectual and even pseudo-scientific language to give the movement's ideology a veneer of reasonableness.

A third complication is that modern hate campaigners are adept at turning the tables on any attempt to counter them. Regardless of whether the intervention succeeds in restricting their speech, they can milk the episode to demonstrate to followers that the community is under siege and in need of the kind of committed leadership that only they can provide. One example concerns the anti-Muslim hate propagandist Robert Spencer and his Jihad Watch disinformation website. When Google quite reasonably adjusted its search algorithms to promote more authoritative sites over Jihad Watch, Spencer issued statements with headlines such as “Google bows to Muslim pressure, changes search results to conceal criticism of Islam and jihad.” Civil rights organizations' classification of Jihad Watch as a hate group was condemned on Fox News as an example of left-liberal bias. The calculated taking of offence in this manner is now a standard strategy of hate propagandists. Classic hate speech, openly instigating harms against a target community, is both legally and socially unacceptable in many societies. Instead of going on the attack, therefore, hate propagandists often play the victim, whipping up indignation and outrage at perceived—and often manufactured—symbolic injustices.¹⁴

Intervening in the Ecosystem of Hate

Societies already have at their disposal a range of possible responses to disinformation used as vehicles of hate. Criminal sanctions include laws against incitement to hatred, which exist in most democracies. Under civil law, defamation suits are sometimes an option. Self-regulation within the news media and advertising industries usually include codes against deceiving audiences. Internet intermediaries' terms of use and community standards disallow hate speech. Fact-checking organizations flag prominent falsehoods propagated in the public arena. More resources are being poured into such efforts as a result of heightened concern about how disinformation has undermined democratic processes. Internet companies, in particular, are under pressure to modify their algorithms and protocols to reward more authoritative information providers and disincentivize the deliberate circulation of falsehoods through their platforms.

While many of these moves are necessary, it is important to recognize their limitations. They tend to treat disinformation as discrete messages that can be picked off, sniper-style, by lawyers, moderators, fact-checkers and other gatekeepers and regulators.

But, the most powerful “fake news” deceptions are not usually made up of neatly self-contained messages. For example, the well-documented misperception among most Americans that crime has been rising cannot be attributed solely to election candidates' “pants-on-fire” lies, but is also due to selective but factual reporting by news media as well as fictional depictions violence in entertainment media.¹⁵ Similarly, hate campaigns comprise disaggregated collections of historical narratives, tropes about being and belonging, stereotypes about the Other, and curated streams of news and opinion that reinforce favored ideologies.

Viewed singly, most of these messages may not cross any regulatory threshold; it is in the audience's heads that they combine to harmful effect.

If this is what societies are up against, much more attention needs to be paid to the demand side of hate campaigns. From a psychological perspective, the behavioral sciences are shedding light on people's observed preference for untruths, even after their falsity is objectively exposed. Among the reasons is people's need to protect their identities,¹⁶ which in turn raises the question of why certain identities—race, language and religion, in particular—seem much easier to activate than others, such as class and, ultimately, humanity. From a political perspective, it is the relative ease with which leaders can mobilize collective action around tribal loyalties that helps explain why would-be demagogues opt for identity politics over appeals to reason. The human species has millennia's worth of practice in caring for members of one's family, village or tribe; but the idea that a duty of care should be extended to all strangers since everyone has inalienable human rights is barely a century old.¹⁷ At the core of most situations in which disinformation-assisted hate propaganda is causing havoc is this lag in societal conscience. Even democracies founded on the modern principle of civic nationalism, where citizenship is based on shared principle and not identity, have found themselves pressured to revert to more primitive racial or religious nationalisms. The battle to combat hate propaganda is part of this much larger contest between competing visions of nationhood and constitutional order.

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Notes

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