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Russia's playbook: China, Iran push 'fake news' to spark social discord

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Partisans may squabble over what impact Russian meddling had on the 2016 U.S. presidential election, but scholars are convinced other foreign actors are meddling, too.

Both Iranian and Chinese intelligence agents appear to be making efforts at “information manipulation” — the intelligentsia’s term for fake news.

The Chinese effort was hinted at in a recent Pentagon report, and the details are sketchy.

The Iranian scheme, meanwhile, was fleshed out in a report by researchers with the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, who dubbed it “Endless Mayfly,” and said it was responsible for “135 inauthentic articles, 72 domains, 11 personas, one fake organization, and a pro-Iran publishing network.”

Analysts in the field anticipate that these campaigns are just the beginning.

“I would expect that it will grow as other countries and movements seek to follow the example they see elsewhere,” said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. “But trying to quantify it won’t be easy even for the most knowledgeable specialist.”

Even tracking down who’s behind the efforts can be tough.

In the case of Endless Mayfly, which began in 2016, the Musk researchers say they are “moderately confident” it’s rooted in Tehran.

The researchers declined requests from The Washington Times to talk about their findings, but in their report, they say the effort involved concocting fake stories, then using inauthentic social media accounts to disseminate it.

The posts had an elaborate patina of legitimacy. There would be a screenshot of the fake article, for example, making it look as though it had been published in a British paper or by an international news service.

“Employing multiple tactics, personas, and narratives, Endless Mayfly seeks to amplify geopolitical tensions by propagating stories critical of Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel,” researchers wrote.

The bogus Twitter story pushers, such as “JoliePrevoit” in Paris, or “Shammari_Tariq” in New York, carried bios identifying them as freelance writers, or social justice and human rights activists. There were sometimes affiliated with fake organizations, such as the “Peace, Security and Justice Community (@PSJCommunity),” and pushing such hashtag campaigns as “#ShameOnSaudiArabia.”

It required close inspection to notice the hoaxers had usually changed a letter in the domain name. If a story got a foothold in the public, the intelligence operatives would then delete it, and direct searches for it back to a legitimate news website, giving it all a sheen Citizen Lab called, “ephemerality.”

The Musk Center report acknowledged, however, that “it is unclear to what extent the operations swayed public opinion.”

Indeed, two and a half years after the 2016 election, politicians still debate whether Russia’s more extensive fake-news operation, investigated and detailed extensively by special counsel Robert Mueller in court filings and his final report, affected the presidential election.

Intelligence analysts say Russia’s activities extend well beyond the U.S. to include political mayhem in other countries, too.

Meanwhile, Indian politicians have accused Chinese social media applications of being conduits for fake news in their elections.

More broadly, China is aggressive in recruiting its own nationals living abroad — and isn’t above using blackmail to win their cooperation — to get them to tell China’s story in ways favorable to the Beijing government, according to a Pentagon report released earlier this month detailing the People’s Liberation Army role in the Chinese Communist Party’s “public opinion warfare.”

Despite China’s public position that it does not interfere in foreign countries’ internal affairs, the Pentagon concluded the country “conducts influence operations against cultural institutions, media organizations and the business, academic, and policy communities of the United States, other countries, and international institutions to achieve outcomes favorable to its security and military strategy objectives.

“The CCP seeks to condition domestic, foreign, and multilateral political establishments and public opinion to accept China’s narrative” on the country’s attempts to expand its territorial claims and its attempts to foster economic dependence by other countries on China, the report concluded.