



MEMES, VIRUSES, AND VIOLENCE: A NATION STATE'S GUIDE TO MANAGING CONNTAGIOUS THREATS

Date: January 20, 2022

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On January 20, 2022, the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies (CASIS)-Vancouver hosted a Digital Roundtable titled *Mememes, Viruses, and Violence: A Nation Guide to Managing Contagious Threats*, conducted by Dr. Joel Finkelstein, the director of the Network Contagion Research Institute. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS-Vancouver Executives. The main discussion topics included the intersectionality of memes, violence, and viruses; their impact on the culture of escapism; and how big data mapping could model predictions for memetic violence before it manifests into violence.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

As societies break out of institutional networks, they become more likely to not only enable a transfer of viruses, but also engender disinformation about revolutions. A viral spread of anti-normative motivations provides ideal grounds for powerful individuals to seize control and exploit the medium through memetic violence. However, big data approaches can create predictive models that could counteract memetic violence before it spreads and escalates.

Question and Answer Period

During the question-and-answer period, Dr. Finkelstein discussed how memes, viruses, and violence generate a rampant culture of escapism. According to Dr. Finkelstein, we must recognize our own creation of the civic discourse that facilitates the loss of autonomy while increasing our vulnerability to propaganda.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Finkelstein began his presentation by noting that memes, the modern-age communication medium, have enhanced people's ability to communicate across traditionally isolated networks. In turn, institutions are often challenged to contain misinformation and the moral panics that result from it. For instance, when the printing press was first created, the church disseminated a witch-burning manual titled "Malleus Maleficarum" or "The Hammer of Witches" that targeted women, Jewish, and Black communities. Consequently, the traditional power institutions that advanced on people's literacy became increasingly overrun by disinformation and viral malicious memes. Similarly, contemporary digital spaces have introduced the means to use cryptic, obscure codes that enable memes to create separate realities, cultures, and language that encourage tribalism, which then feeds into conspiracy theories that correlate with offline conflicts.

PushShift, which was developed by Dr. Finkelstein, is a satellite engine that collects social media content which is then processed through the Natural Language Processing analytic device and forecasts the potential escalation of memetic violence. PushShift has the potential to create meaning out of social media trends and anomalies of code words in order to understand the way they are utilized across networks. Dr. Finkelstein highlighted the power that coded language in memes can hold by illustrating the attacks on Hamas in 2021. He added that the animosity created towards Jews and Zionists was supposedly originated in the memes by self-proclaimed Iranian actors who impersonated social justice progressives affiliated with the Black Lives Movement in Portland. Through big data mapping technology, Iranian anti-democratic and antisemitic propaganda were found to reference Israel as a colonist empire that allegedly murdered people of colour.

Similar to how PushShift detected the projected indicators of saturating social justice concerns across antisemitic ideas, the escalation of animosity could be predicted, and even prevented, before it manifests beyond control. Recently, Dr. Finkelstein produced a heat map of where anti-vaccine protests were taking place and found a spatial correlation with the areas wherein people were Google searching for vaccine conspiracies. Such modeling could help map vaccine reluctance and provide insight into where and when mobilization towards violence may arise.

Dr. Finkelstein stated that in critical moments in history, antisemitic myths have spiked into major episodes of violence because they activate interests to advance the belief that the Jewish community has brought in a threat to the welfare of the nationalist identity. Antisemitism advances the rationale that hate and extremism towards an identity are legitimate, which is at heart an inhuman hatred that is acidic to democracy. In this way, antisemitism is reflective of other kinds of hate and the way they operate.

Question and Answer Period

Regarding contagions and escapism, Dr. Finkelstein noted that simple contagions spread through just a few exposures, whereas complex contagions require constant exposure, cultivation, and effort. Memes are designed to travel passively and possibly work to obliterate human intelligence and critical thinking; where one begins to be exposed to bizarre ideas, the bizarreness causes individuals to become disengaged with the information they consume. On the other hand, complex contagions are much harder to build, yet they are very resilient to the disruption of their shared set of ideational boundaries. Through memes, their identities are insulated, and tribal bonds are entrenched further, all the while legitimizing their extremist rhetoric.

In relation to the media ecosystem, Dr. Finkelstein described it as an attention economy that acts voyeuristic towards the individual; the media ecosystem is arguably embedded with a feedback system that awards attention. With the additive effect of algorithmic proclivity, narratives have become increasingly sensationalized. Instead of us being able to deliberate in ways that enable autonomy and agency, the media system builds and pushes a certain version of ourselves.

In the discussion about accountability, Dr. Finkelstein suggested that there is a tendency to blame the digital platforms or politicians for the loss of autonomy when, in fact, we are allowing for the issue to persist. In the 1930s and 1940s, for example, the KGB spread a meme that showed the Statue of Liberty with a crown that had Ku Klux Klan figures as the peaks. Dr. Finkelstein stated that this kind of propaganda was designed to create divisiveness and undermine democracy in America. Dr. Finkelstein suggested recognizing our role in creating the culture that enables the spread of propaganda and vulnerability to its effects, while being wary of the possible inclination to claim it as someone else's responsibility.

Dr. Finkelstein also emphasized the need to manage our instincts about authoritarianism and stop viewing each other as memes. There is, arguably, a

psychological propensity towards left-wing authoritarianism as that of the oppressed, and right-wing authoritarianism as that of the supremacists. While we may recognize the authoritarianism that exists among the supremacists, the authoritarianism of the oppressed is arguably not recognized to the same degree. The empty slogans of authoritarianism that embrace a performative tribal identity have become dominant to the point that we are no longer capable of seeing each other past these slogans.

Regarding the next steps, Dr. Finkelstein argued that the future of the security field lies in trying to understand people's needs, where their needs come from, and devise ways that would be effective in addressing those needs. In the COVID-19 era, people have become isolated, unable to form normal social bonds, and more likely to self-medicate with social media. Dr. Finkelstein noted that individuals are offered the opportunity to express their interest in participating in a romantic movement, which incites feelings of dispossession. The conflicting advice on health measures has aggravated the distrust in public health officials and governments and has echoed across a wide network of individuals. It is not solely about anti-government extremism, but rather, about the disease of distrust that is permeating our society. This highlights the importance of seeing people and acknowledging their frustrations. Not seeing the frustrations and where they come from may fuel distrust and instigate further violence.

In concluding the session, Dr. Finkelstein reflected on the ways we position ourselves in the social media discourse and highlighted that social media is not a separate metaverse that we can set ourselves apart from. The online spaces are directly reflective of the world we reside in and where predictions of the offline mobilizations lie. There needs to be a collective understanding that both online and offline spaces are a reality that we share — a reality that we directly influence and become influenced by.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- As societies break out of institutional networks, they are likely to foster an ecosystem that not only permits a transfer of viruses, but also engenders disinformation about revolution.
- Institutions are often challenged to contain misinformation and the moral panics that result from it.

- The public's grim view of the future, combined with the inability to gain meaningful information from the virality of false information, creates ideal grounds for powerful individuals to exploit and seize control through memetic violence.
- Antisemitism operates in ways that exemplify how memetic violence spreads and legitimizes inhuman hatred that is acidic to democracy.
- Understanding how memes and violence spread together could help researchers to use big data approaches that model and contain memetic violence before they escalate into violence in the physical world.

Question and Answer Period

- Memes, viruses, and violence generate a rampant culture of escapism, where simple contagions spread through just a few exposures, while complex contagions require constant exposure, cultivation, and effort.
- The media ecosystem enables a relationship that can be described as an attention economy, where sensationalization and polarization are encouraged; we should recognize that it is ourselves and the discourse that we create that enable our loss of autonomy and vulnerability to propaganda.
- The empty slogans of memes that embrace a performative tribal identity have become dominant to the point that we are no longer capable of seeing each other past these slogans. It is crucial for us to stop seeing one another as memes and not lose the meaning of words to memes.
- Especially amid COVID-19, it is important to understand people's needs, where their needs come from, and devise ways that would be effective in addressing those needs because not seeing the frustrations and where they come from may fuel distrust and incite violence.
- Arguably, social media is not a separate metaverse, but part of the world we reside in and where predictions of the offline mobilizations lie.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© (JOEL FINKELSTEIN, 2022)

Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>

The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare
Volume 5, Issue 1

