North Atlantic Council

Research Report

The Question of:

The weaponization of social media

Introduction

Due to the arrival of social media in the past decade, governments have opened a new front in their conflicts: The internet. In order to spread propaganda, fuel social conflicts or even influence elections, numerous governments and militaries have used social media. This has a major impact on the world we all live in today, and in the future.

The Committee

The North Atlantic Council (NAC) is a political decision-making body and has "effective political authority and powers of decision". (North Atlantic Council, NATO) It was founded in 1949 by Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, The United Kingdom and The United States of America due to clause 9 in the North Atlantic Treaty. This treaty was signed by all nations mentioned previously, with the main purpose to work together in order to defend themselves from pro-communist nations, namely the Russian Federation. Another important task from this committee is to issue declarations and communiques about NATO's policies.

The treaty formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, commonly referred to as NATO. Clause 9 states that members of NATO will form a council where each nation will be represented in order to discuss matters concerning the nations of NATO.

The council is also responsible for having a subsidiary body to be used when necessary and the creation of a defence committee. This defence committee will be used when one or more nations are attacked and all of NATO believes the attack was toward NATO and not just the nation itself. The committee was also established to help aid each other and help all nations develop. (NATO, Its Purpose, History and Members, The Balance)

Rules of Procedure

The most important difference between normal Rules of Procedure and the RoP of the NAC is the fact that every nation has veto powers. As the NATO needs a unanimous consensus as they are setting up a Draft Communiqué, a document concerning the opinion of the council on a certain matter.

The goal of the NAC isn't setting up a resolution on a topic, but the production of accords: statements. While writing statements, you do not have to stay put to the rules when writing a resolution; you can write anything you like, as long as:

1. It stays a point-wise statement.
2. It contains a committee-wide vision and consensus.

Rules of Procedure

The course of the debate will be almost identical to normal MUN-debate with resolutions, but there will be a few adjustments.

1. All delegations will have a very short policy statement on each issue, so every delegate knows the view of each delegation on the topic.
2. After that, there will be a lot of lobbying time, in order for all delegates to form a consensus between all member states.
3. After lobbying, the debate starts according to ad-hoc rules. Delegates can hand in amendments for the statement, the chair will set debate time and after time has elapsed, delegates will vote on the amendment.
4. After time on the issues has elapsed, the committee will vote on the statement, which has to be passed unanimously.

N.B. These rules of procedure are formed to simulate the North Atlantic Council as well as possible. However, when the Student Officers believe the Rules of Procedure hinder the course of debate, they can, in consultation with the Executive Staff, decide to set aside these rules of procedure and proceed with normal Rules of Procedure, with debating a resolution and holding on to specific rules on phrasing.

Key Terms

NATO – The North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Military Alliance between the USA, Canada and numerous European countries. Formed by the North Atlantic Treaty.
Communiques – an official announcement.
Public Profile – a way to tell others about yourself and your interests.

General Overview

Technological innovations that become disruptive can go unnoticed at the time of their emerge. Most recently, social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and other platforms, intended to be used as a way of communicating for the public, have been used in order to spread political messages, coordinate social events or advertising.

Before social media existed, people were limited to traditional media like television, newspapers or radio. The usage of these mediums was limited through legislation and registration. There were only limited ways on how people could spread their own personal political opinion. In addition to that, it was difficult for foreign states to influence the opinions of the public.

The coming of the internet brought a lot of change to this situation. Suddenly media changed from something that only a few could control, to a platform where everyone could voice their opinion.
In December 2006 the social media platform "Facebook" became open for the public. And since then it has built up a user base which currently reaches 2.2 billion per month[1]. Followed by WhatsApp: 1.5 billion users per month[2], Instagram: 1 billion active users a month[3] and Twitter: 335 million active users a month[4]. Because of the large user bases of these social media, governments and other organizations can influence a lot of people's minds.

And because of this, numerous events have occurred that have impacted the world in several ways. In 2010 The Middle East was in an uproar because of the practices of its president Khaddaffi. Protesters were able to communicate via social media and organize protests against the regime. However, fueled by each other on social media, riots broke out. Starting the period otherwise known as the Arab Spring, a series of revolutions and the cause of instability in the region[5]. But not only can it be used to start revolutions; terrorist organizations are also roaming around on these platforms. They are recruiting and influencing people, setting them up for suicide attacks. This was noted by the American FPRI (Foreign Policy Research Institute) "Under the veil of anonymity, they spread hate, recruit members and advance divisions in society."[6] In this way, terrorist organizations can influence people worldwide. This means that they can leave their mark in countries that are actually way out of their reach. This is exactly why terrorist organizations use social media, because they can almost operate unnoticed. But the US is not the only place where this occurs. Only in Europe already there are about 50.000 people who are radicalized by terrorist organizations, through the Mosk, or through social media.[7]

[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/
[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/260819/number-of-monthly-active-whatsapp-users/
[3] https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/
[4] https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/
[5] http://www.journalism.org/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/
[6] https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/01/terrorism-social-media-big-tech-enough/
[7] https://www.trouw.nl/home/eu-terreurchef-europa-telt-meera4%20afmetingen-dan-50-000-geradicaliseerden~a78f4e28/

Because social media is something that connects people, it can also do the complete opposite, to divide. With the help of "fake news" someone or an organization can influence the opinion of the users drastically. The most known government to do this is the Russian Federation. With the help of the so-called "troll farms" they were able to influence the American presidential elections of 2016. The way they did it was complex, and well-organized. The meddling started in 2014, the Russians used about 10 million dollars to set up a huge network of social media accounts. Focusing on establishing a deep, authentic, long-term identity for individuals and groups within a specific community. Once accepted by their communities they had to add oil to the fire, by hardening or radicalizing the community's views[8]. For example, the Russians infiltrated a lot of alt-right communities. And with the help of fake news they spread hate and confusion, leading to a division in society.

This can also clearly be noticed in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Ever since the beginning of the country, there has been conflict in the area. However, social media has brought this conflict into the lives of people who have nothing to do with it. This resulted in a perfect example of how social media can be used as a weapon. Both sides in this conflict try to damage the image of one another. Small clashes between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers are recorded by both sides, and posted on social media. And depending on the perspective of the video, the people will choose their side. Now within this conflict there have been multiple cases of "fake news", which makes the conflict even more complicated considering that people aren't always aware of that. In this internet conflict the truth doesn't seem to matter anymore. The people on social media will take anything that looks like unnecessary violence or aggressive behaviour from a certain group, and portray them as the aggressor. In this particular conflict both sides seem to do it. The problem that arises then is the uncertainty. One cannot be certain of the credibility of news. News channels all over the world have to deal with this problem, and since social media provides a perfect platform for fake news to spread[9].

To conclude, social media might be one of the most complex problems the world has to deal with. Cloaked by civilian use, social media is used in multiple ways: to spread hate, to spread confusion, to recruit, influence and corrupt or ignite conflicts. It is necessary to find a solution to this problem, for the consequences could be high if we don't.

[8] https://www.wired.com/story/did-russia-affect-the-2016-election-its-now-undeniable/
[9] *https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/08/25/social_media_is_a_weapon_112148.html*

Major Parties Involved

The USA - The USA has been a major party in this conflict since the beginning. Especially since it is majorly involved in the conflicts in the Middle East. But also, since its elections have been influenced by Russian trolls on social media. The US is strongly in favour of controlling and watching over social media so that further incidents are limited.

The UK – The UK's history with internet censorship or surveillance is quite similar to that of the USA. They themselves are also in favour of surveilling the social media's and putting some restrictions on them.

Turkey – Turkey is also one of the nations in favour of restriction etc. This is because of the Coup d'état in 2016. Since then the nation has censored sites and social media users from promoting the thoughts of political opponents.

Internet companies - Internet companies have the power to block websites on the internet.

Denmark - Denmark has issued al law where the internet providers have to provide a user's history going back six months to the authorities if requested. This can then be used to solve crimes and terrorist threats.

Terrorist organizations: Social media has always been a way for terrorists to reach out to new recruits, influence people and to spread their ideas. In order to do so they need unrestricted internet access.

Minority groups and groups wanting independence – A lot of countries have certain independence movements in them, or minority groups wanting more attention. For most of those groups social media is the only tool they have to get what they want.

Russia: Russia undoubtedly uses the internet in its own interest. Russia is well known for exploiting the internet to get influence in other countries. A good example of that is the interference during the American presidential voting. They are therefore, a big fan of the free internet.

Timeline of Events

2006 - Social media becomes public.

2008 - Social media has an unknown impact on elections in the US, Barack Obama becomes president. First signs of terrorist organizations using social media. The USA wants to tackle that problem.

2010 – The Arab Spring is ignited because of people fueling it up on social media. Terrorist organizations now fully using social media to recruit and promote their cause.

2011 - Certain social media platforms remove and try to censor terrorist accounts, doesn't work that well.

2012 – First try to solve this issue on a global scale, failed.

2014 – The conflict between Israel and Palestine reaches the highest point on social media. Russian starts its plan to influence the American presidential elections.

2016 – The US presidential elections have been influenced by the Russians but it gets uncovered.

2017- now – It is only now that the dangers social media really gets attention from governments and the UN. Problems are still evolving around it.

The Future

What will happen if we do not do anything about the problems we now have with social media? Well one can almost be certain that the problems will only increase. That is because the internet almost has no limit, terrorists and governments can add new parts and communicate with their assets there, out of view of all the watchdogs installed by internet companies. The use of trolls will increase, and other governments will start to use it too. In the end the biggest source of information that humans have ever created will mostly consist out of information that either is not true, or will try to recruit you to a certain group. Therefore, it is most necessary to do something about it.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

In January 2012 Twitter, for example, updated their censorship policy. They did this in an attempt to stop terrorist organizations and other organizations from spreading their propaganda and fake news. However, since people can easily make a new account after a few weeks the terrorists had a new account and continued their work.

Facebook has done something similar. They introduced a "fake news war room". This room is filled with data scientists and specialists tasked with identifying fake news, terrorists and trolls. Thus far they are working hard to create algorithms that can identify and destroy such pages. However, they are still too small to deal with all the data that goes over social media.

Important Decisions a Resolution Must Take

The resolution must contain decisions on how to solve the following:

1. The spread of Fake News on social media
2. Terrorist groups recruiting and influencing online
3. The rise of fake accounts, used by governments
   (it doesn't have to stay limited to these issues, if you know another you can bring it up during the debate)

When thinking of solutions, do think about what consequences such a solution has. For example, if this council was to limit the use of social media, will that be in conflict with the freedom of speech? Or if this council was to ban Media accounts who have used fake news, would that be against press-freedom? It is **recommended** that you research how your country views such rights and their stance on this issue.

To reason with your resolution it is necessary that you provide a bit of information about the following:

a. Who is going to solve it?
b. How is it going to be solved?
c. Where is it going to happen?

When you eventually have your solution, ask yourself if it is a good one. Is every party involved discussed? Why is your solution better than any other solution? And how? If you think critically you can define whether your solution is a good one. Do note that the more information you give, the clearer it is. And when something is clear its chances of passing into the resolution will be higher. Also, you are not limited to only these questions, you can also explain what it exactly is, why it is, etc.

Further Reading

Here are a few websites that can provide you with some information. Good luck with your research!

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_and_surveillance_by_country

https://www.elitedaily.com/news/world/social-media-greatest-weapon-in-war-and-politics/783085

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terrorism_and_social_media

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