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Spy Agencies Manipulate and Disrupt Web Discussions to Promote Propaganda and Discredit Government Critics

New Snowden Documents Show that Governments Are "Attempting To Control, Infiltrate, Manipulate, and Warp Online Discourse"

By Washington's Blog

Theme: Intelligence

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Washington's Blog

The alternative media has documented for 5 years that the government uses disinformation and disruption (and here) on the web to discredit activists and manipulate public opinion, just like it smears traditional television and print reporters who question the government too acutely.

We've long reported that the government censors and manipulates social media. More proof here.

New Edward Snowden documents confirm that Britain's spy agency is doing so.

As Glenn Greenwald writes today:

> One of the many pressing stories that remains to be told from the Snowden archive is how western intelligence agencies are attempting to manipulate and control online discourse with extreme tactics of deception and reputation-destruction.
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> These agencies are attempting to control, infiltrate, manipulate, and warp online discourse, and in doing so, are compromising the integrity of the internet itself. Among the core self-identified purposes of JTRIG are two tactics: (1) to inject all sorts of false material onto the internet in order to destroy the reputation of its targets; and (2) to use social sciences and other techniques to manipulate online discourse and activism to generate outcomes it considers desirable. To see how extremist these programs are, just consider the tactics they boast of using to achieve those ends: "false flag operations" (posting material to the internet and falsely attributing it to someone else), fake victim blog posts (pretending to be a victim of the individual whose reputation they want to destroy), and posting "negative information" on various forums.
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> Critically, the "targets" for this deceit and reputation-destruction extend far beyond the customary roster of normal spycraft: hostile nations and their leaders, military agencies, and intelligence services. In fact, the discussion of many of these techniques occurs in the context of using them in lieu of "traditional law enforcement" against people suspected (but not charged or

convicted) of ordinary crimes or, more broadly still, “hacktivism”, meaning those who use online protest activity for political ends.

The title page of one of these documents reflects the agency’s own awareness that it is “pushing the boundaries” by using “cyber offensive” techniques against people who have nothing to do with terrorism or national security threats, and indeed, centrally involves law enforcement agents who investigate ordinary crimes….

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It is not difficult to see how dangerous it is to have secret government agencies being able to target any individuals they want – who have never been charged with, let alone convicted of, any crimes – with these sorts of online, deception-based tactics of reputation destruction and disruption. There is a strong argument to make, as Jay Leiderman demonstrated in the Guardian in the context of the Paypal 14 hacktivist persecution, that the “denial of service” tactics used by hacktivists result in (at most) trivial damage (far less than the cyber-warfare tactics favored by the US and UK) and are far more akin to the type of political protest protected by the First Amendment.

The broader point is that, far beyond hacktivists, these surveillance agencies have vested themselves with the power to deliberately ruin people’s reputations and disrupt their online political activity even though they’ve been charged with no crimes, and even though their actions have no conceivable connection to terrorism or even national security threats. As Anonymous expert Gabriella Coleman of McGill University told me, “targeting Anonymous and hacktivists amounts to targeting citizens for expressing their political beliefs, resulting in the stifling of legitimate dissent.” Pointing to this study she published, Professor Coleman vehemently contested the assertion that “there is anything terrorist/violent in their actions.”

Government plans to monitor and influence internet communications, and covertly infiltrate online communities in order to sow dissension and disseminate false information, have long been the source of speculation. Harvard Law Professor Cass Sunstein, a close Obama adviser and the White House’s former head of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, wrote a controversial paper in 2008 proposing that the US government employ teams of covert agents and pseudo-”independent” advocates to “cognitively infiltrate” online groups and websites, as well as other activist groups. [Background on Sunstein here and here.]

Sunstein also proposed sending covert agents into “chat rooms, online social networks, or even real-space groups” which spread what he views as false and damaging “conspiracy theories” about the government.

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Then there is the use of psychology and other social sciences to not only understand, but shape and control, how online activism and discourse unfolds. Today’s newly published document touts the work of GCHQ’s “Human Science Operations Cell”, devoted to “online human intelligence” and “strategic influence and disruption”….

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Under the title “Online Covert Action”, the document details a variety of means to engage in “influence and info ops” as well as “disruption and computer net attack”, while dissecting how human beings can be manipulated using “leaders”, “trust, “obedience” and “compliance”:

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The documents lay out theories of how humans interact with one another, particularly online, and then attempt to identify ways to influence the outcomes – or "game" it:

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No government should be able to engage in these tactics: what justification is there for having government agencies target people – who have been charged with no crime – for reputation-destruction, infiltrate online political communities, and develop techniques for manipulating online discourse?

Here are the newly-released Snowden documents in full:

The Art of Deception
