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Pentagon Seeks to Manipulate Social Media for Propaganda Purposes

By Washington's Blog

Theme: Intelligence, Media Disinformation

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Wired reported on Friday:

> The Pentagon is looking to build a tool to sniff out social media propaganda campaigns and spit some counter-spin right back at it.
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> On Thursday, Defense Department extreme technology arm Darpa unveiled its Social Media in Strategic Communication (SMISC) program. It's an attempt to get better at both detecting and conducting propaganda campaigns on social media. SMISC has two goals. First, the program needs to help the military better understand what's going on in social media in real time — particularly in areas where troops are deployed. Second, Darpa wants SMISC to help the military play the social media propaganda game itself.
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> This is more than just checking the trending topics on Twitter. The Defense Department wants to deeply grok social media dynamics. So SMISC algorithms will be aimed at discovering and tracking the "formation, development and spread of ideas and concepts (memes)" on social media, according to Darpa's announcement.
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> SMISC needs to be able to seek out "persuasion campaign structures and influence operations" developing across the social sphere. SMISC is supposed to quickly flag rumors and emerging themes on social media, figure out who's behind it and what. Moreover, Darpa wants SMISC to be able to actually figure out whether this is a random product of the hivemind or a propaganda operation by an adversary nation or group.
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> Of course, SMISC won't be content to just to hang back and monitor social media trends in strategic locations. It's about building a better spin machine for Uncle Sam, too. Once SMISC's latches on to an influence operation being launched, it's supposed to help out in "countermessaging."
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> SMISC is yet another example of how the military is becoming very interested in what's going on in the social media sphere.

Indeed, as I wrote in February:

> I noted in 2009, in an article entitled "Does The Government Manipulate Social Media?":

The U.S. government long ago announced its intention to “fight the net”.

As revealed by an official Pentagon report signed by Rumsfeld called “Information Operations Roadmap”:

> The roadmap [contains an] acknowledgement that information put out as part of the military’s psychological operations, or Psyops, is finding its way onto the computer and television screens of ordinary Americans.
>
> “Information intended for foreign audiences, including public diplomacy and Psyops, is increasingly consumed by our domestic audience,” it reads.
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> “Psyops messages will often be replayed by the news media for much larger audiences, including the American public,” it goes on.
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> “Strategy should be based on the premise that the Department [of Defense] will ‘fight the net’ as it would an enemy weapons system”.

Indeed, the Pentagon publicly announced years ago that it was considering using “black propaganda” – in other words, knowing lies.

CENTCOM announced in 2008 that a team of employees would be “[engaging] bloggers who are posting inaccurate or untrue information, as well as bloggers who are posting incomplete information.”

The Air Force is now also engaging bloggers. Indeed, an Air Force spokesman said:

> “We obviously have many more concerns regarding cyberspace than a typical Social Media user,” Capt. Faggard says. “I am concerned with how insurgents or potential enemies can use Social Media to their advantage. It’s our role to provide a clear and accurate, completely truthful and transparent picture for any audience.”

In other words, the government is targeting “social media”, including popular user-ranked news sites.

In addition, when you look at what the Israeli lobby has done with Megaphone software to automatically vote stories questioning Israel down and to send pro-Israel letters to politicians and media (see this, this and this), you can start to see how the U.S. military – an even larger and better-funded organization – could substantially influence voting on social news sites with very little effort.

> Moreover,the military has outsourced many projects to private contractors. For example, in Iraq, much of the fighting has been outsourced to Blackwater. And governmental intelligence functions have largely been outsourced to private companies.
>
> It is therefore not impossible that the government is hiring cheap labor to downvote stories on the social media sites which question the government, and to post pro-government comments.

(other governments and large companies “astroturf” online as well. See this, this and this.)

I pointed out the same month:

> Government propagandists, their hired private contractors and useful idiots are creating “downvote bots” or scripts to bury stories which question the government.
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> One free, simple scripting program to create automatic downvotes of certain topics or news posters is called “Greasemonkey”, which is commonly used on large social news sites such as Reddit.
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> For example, there are some 2,480 hits [now past 9,000] for the google search site:reddit.com greasemonkey downvote. This is some 2,480 times that Reddit users are publicly admitting to using greasemonkey (see also this).
>
> Propaganda agents obviously aren’t going to publicly brag about what they are doing, and you can bet that their use of downvote bots is much greater. Moreover, they probably have more sophisticated software than Greasemonkey.

Today, Raw Story reports that the Air Force ordered software to manage army of fake virtual people:

> Internet users would be well advised to ask another question entirely: Are my “friends” even real people?
>
> In the continuing saga of data security firm HBGary, a new caveat has come to light: not only did they plot to help destroy secrets outlet WikiLeaks and discredit progressive bloggers, they also crafted detailed proposals for software that manages online “personas,” allowing a single human to assume the identities of as many fake people as they’d like.
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> The revelation was among those contained in the company’s emails, which were dumped onto bittorrent networks after hackers with cyber protest group “Anonymous” broke into their systems.
>
> In another document unearthed by “Anonymous,” one of HBGary’s employees also mentioned gaming geolocation services to make it appear as though selected fake persons were at actual

events.

“There are a variety of social media tricks we can use to add a level of realness to all fictitious personas,” it said.

Government involvement

Eerie as that may be, more perplexing, however, is a federal contract from the 6th Contracting Squadron at MacDill Air Force Base, located south of Tampa, Florida, that solicits providers of “persona management software.”

While there are certainly legitimate applications for such software, such as managing multiple “official” social media accounts from a single input, the more nefarious potential is clear.

Unfortunately, the Air Force’s contract description doesn’t help dispel their suspicions either. As the text explains, the software would require licenses for 50 users with 10 personas each, for a total of 500. These personas would have to be “replete with background , history, supporting details, and cyber presences that are technically, culturally and geographacilly consistent.”

It continues, noting the need for secure virtual private networks that randomize the operator’s Internet protocol (IP) address, making it impossible to detect that it’s a single person orchestrating all these posts. Another entry calls for static IP address management for each persona, making it appear as though each fake person was consistently accessing from the same computer each time.

The contract also sought methods to anonymously establish virtual private servers with private hosting firms in specific geographic locations. This would allow that server’s “geosite” to be integrated with their social media profiles, effectively gaming geolocation services.

The Air Force added that the “place of performance” for the contract would be at MacDill Air Force Base, along with Kabul, Afghanistan and Baghdad. The contract was offered on June 22, 2010.

It was not clear exactly what the Air Force was doing with this software, or even if it had been procured.

Manufacturing consent

Though many questions remain about how the military would apply such technology, the reasonable fear should be perfectly clear. “Persona management software” can be used to manipulate public opinion on key information, such as news reports. An unlimited number of virtual “people” could be marshaled by only a few real individuals, empowering them to create the illusion of consensus.

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That’s precisely what got DailyKos blogger Happy Rockefeller in a snit: the potential for military-run armies of fake people

> > manipulating and, in some cases, even manufacturing the appearance of public opinion.
> >
> > “I don’t know about you, but it matters to me what fellow progressives think,” the blogger wrote. “I consider all views. And if there appears to be a consensus that some reporter isn’t credible, for example, or some candidate for congress in another state can’t be trusted, I won’t base my entire judgment on it, but it carries some weight.
> >
> > “That’s me. I believe there are many people though who will base their judgment on rumors and mob attacks. And for those people, a fake mob can be really effective.”
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> > “Team Themis” [tasked by the Chamber of Commerce to come up with strategies for responding to progressive bloggers and others] also included a proposal to use malware hacks against progressive organizations, and the submission of fake documents in an effort to discredit established groups.
> >
> > HBGary was also behind a plot by Bank of America to destroy WikiLeaks’ technology platform, other emails revealed. The company was humiliated by members of “Anonymous” after CEO Aaron Barr bragged that he’d “infiltrated” the group.
>
> And see this, this, this, this.

Indeed, as I noted in 2008, the Pentagon is using artificial intelligence programs to try to predict how people will react to propaganda:

> As a new article by investigative reporter Christopher Ketcham reveals, a governmental unit operating in secret and with no oversight whatsoever is gathering massive amounts of data on every American and running artificial intelligence software to predict each American’s behavior, including “what the target will do, where the target will go, who it will turn to for help”.
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> The same governmental unit is responsible for suspending the Constitution … in the event that anything is deemed by the White House in its sole discretion to constitute a threat to the United States. (this is formally known as implementing “Continuity of Government” plans).
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> Bear in mind that the Pentagon is also running an AI program to see how people will react to propaganda and to government-inflicted terror. The program is called Sentient World Simulation:
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> > “U.S defense, intel and homeland security officials are constructing a parallel world, on a computer, which the agencies will use to test propaganda messages and military strategies.
> >
> > Called the Sentient World Simulation, the program uses AI routines based upon the psychological theories of Marty Seligman, among others. (Seligman introduced the theory of ‘learned helplessness’ in the 1960s, after shocking beagles until

> they cowered, urinating, on the bottom of their cages.)
>
> Yank a country's water supply. Stage a military coup. SWS will tell you what happens next.
>
> The sim will feature an AR avatar for each person in the real world, based upon data collected about us from government records and the internet."

Postscript: Gaming social media is only one propaganda technique employed by the government:

- Famed Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein says the CIA has already bought and paid for many successful journalists
- The New York Times discusses in a matter-of-fact way the use of mainstream writers by the CIA to spread messages
- A 4-part BBC documentary called the "Century of the Self" shows that an American – Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays – created the modern field of manipulation of public perceptions, and the U.S. government has extensively used his techniques
- The Independent discusses allegations of American propaganda
- And one of the premier writers on journalism says the U.S. has used widespread propaganda

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