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Social science research needed to help the IC identify and counter deception-related threats

The traditional framework for the study of deception considers techniques for “hiding the true” and “showing the false.” The digital information environment challenges us to update that model. We need to learn how to avoid being deceived in the face of limited information and rapidly unfolding events. We also need to understand how to counter deception and stimulate demand for and standards of information and communication integrity.

Showing False Information

The information domain will continue to include true content openly communicated by government officials or organizations they openly sponsor. But many of the battles of information warfare will involve deception, either in the content of the communication, the way in which it is disseminated, or the context in which it is presented. Deceived individuals will make false statements that support a strategic narrative, and these will be amplified by those who seek to propagate the deception. Some government officials will make false statements that are amplified by those who seek to convince populations that no politician can be trusted, and to discourage the pursuit of truth.

Hiding True Information

The digital environment also provides new tools for suppressing access to and desire for truth. For example, bots can deny conversation on a Twitter topic by overwhelming it with inauthentic posts. More subtly, it seems that amplifying certain types of objectionable content can result in a suppressed desire for true and meaningful dialogue about topics that matter.

Intelligence Community Needs

To adapt to this new information environment, the IC needs not only to better avoid being deceived but also to understand how the deceptive methods used by others may impact target populations, and how to best counter those methods. Our work in this area is hindered by lack of understanding on a number of fronts. Here are some examples.

How, if at all, does the “echo effect” work? It seems that search engines and news feeds which recommend content based on perceived interest tend to support confirmation bias. But we’ve also read that, because digital social media enables the maintenance of “loose ties” with a larger, more diverse set of people, participants are actually exposed to a broader range of views that they would be through traditional offline networks. Is there an echo effect echo effect?

How might false information be best identified and countered? News organizations and others are trying a number of methods to identify false stories propagated online. Which of these work best? How does bias influence them, or consumer acceptance influence them? For example, what some might consider a conspiracy theory others might see as a threat that has not yet been sufficiently corroborated.

How might the current lack of confidence in the media environment play out? Those who can afford to do so may purchase subscriptions for news produced by organizations they trust. Will there be a further polarization within society, dividing those who consume “free” news and those who consume curated content, with the second group further divided based on the view of the information curators?

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Will mixed reality media, and the opportunity to present curated views of events, deepen society divides?

How will the digital environment impact attention management and vulnerability to deception?

It seems that rapid information exchange increases vulnerability to cognitive bias. Yet in order to help policymakers respond quickly to rapidly changing events, analysts are often asked to make judgments based on limited information. We need information to help us consider how best to respond to this challenge. What are the costs and benefits of waiting for the facts to become available? How can analysts avoid bias while working quickly? How might a "content curation" role evolve within the analytic cadre, and how might expertise or talent for such a role be identified and developed? How might critical thinking skills, or the ability to avoid deception or bias, be identified and developed?