Muddied Waters: 
Online Disinformation during Crisis Events

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Office of Naval Research
Fake News
Fake News

Misinformation

Fake News
Political Propaganda

Misinformation

Fake News

Information War
Disinformation

Political Propaganda

Hybrid War

Active Measures

Fake News

Information War

Information Disorder

Misinformation

Information Operations

Asymmetric Warfare
Online Disinformation during Crisis Events

Disinformation

Information Operations
BOSTON BOMBING SMELLS LIKE A CIA BLACK OPS FALSE FLAG SET UP! AGAIN! Don't be fooled by the mainstream media lies!

2:42 AM - 16 Apr 2013
Truth has been revealed: Boston Bombing culprits found as NAVY SEALS UNDERCOVER. bit.ly/12mZePa

THIS IS UNBELIEVABLE.
Las Vegas Concert Shootings (2017)
Parkland School Shooting (2018)


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Parkland School Shooting (2018)

“Hoax”
“False Flag”
“Crisis Actors”


Sandy Hook Shootings (2012)
9/11 (2001)
Boston Marathon Bombing (2013)
Downing of Flight MH17 (2014)
San Bernardino Shootings (2015)
Umpqua School Shootings (2015)
Paris Attacks (2015)
Orlando Nightclub Shooting (2016)
Munich Market Shooting (2016)

“Hoax”  “False Flag”  “Crisis Actors”

Las Vegas Concert Shootings (2017)
Parkland School Shooting (2018)
Conspiracy Theories or “Alternative Narratives” of Crisis Events

- 9/11 (2001)
- Sandy Hook Shootings (2012)
- Boston Marathon Bombing (2013)
- Downing of Flight MH17 (2014)
- San Bernardino Shootings (2015)
- Umpqua School Shootings (2015)
- Paris Attacks (2015)
- Orlando Nightclub Shooting (2016)
- Munich Market Shooting (2016)
- Las Vegas Concert Shootings (2017)
- Parkland School Shooting (2018)

“Hoax”  “False Flag”  “Crisis Actors”
Methods Interlude

Grounded, Interpretative, Mixed-Method Research


Jim Maddock, Kate Starbird et al., 2015. Characterizing online rumor behavior using multi-dimensional signatures. *CSCW 2015*. 
Method: Data Collection

- Collected Twitter data on shooting events: shooting, shooter, gunman, gunmen
- Nine months (January - October 2016)
- Used the Twitter Streaming API
- 58,000,000 tweets
- Scoped to tweets with: false flag, falseflag, hoax, crisis actor, crisisactors
- ~100,000 tweets
Police Investigation Reveals Orlando Shooting An 'Inside Job'~ yournewswire.com/police-investi ... #OrlandoShooting #FalseFlag

13 Important Elements To Look For In Every Staged Shooting Event~ activistpost.com /2016/07/13-imp ...
Method: Visualizing the Surrounding Ecosystem

Police Investigation Reveals Orlando Shooting An 'Inside Job'~ yournewswire.com/police-investi ... OrlandoShooting FalseFlag

13 Important Elements To Look For In Every Staged Shooting Event~ activistpost.com/2016/07/13-imp ...
Alternative Narratives of Shooting Events (2016)

Red: Affirms Alternative Narrative
Blue: Denies Alternative Narrative
Yellow: Used as Evidence
Method: Content Analysis of Web Domains
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Aliens  Anti-Big Pharma  ChemTrails  Anti-Corporate Media  Anti-Globalist
Geo-Engineering  Anti-GMO  Anti-Vaccine  Anti-Zionist  Anti-Media
Flat Earth  Illuminati  Koch Brothers  New World Order Cabal  9-11 Truther
Nutritional Supplements  Pedophile Rings  George Soros  Rothschilds

Many, Many Conspiracy Theories
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Method: Content Analysis of Web Domains

Aliens    Anti-Big Pharma    ChemTrails    Anti-Corporate Media    Anti-Globalist
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Flat Earth    Illuminati    Koch Brothers    New World Order Cabal    9-11 Truther
Nutritional Supplements    Pedophile Rings    George Soros    Rothschilds

9-11 Truther: http://infowars.com
Anti-Corporate Media: http://newsbusters.org
Many, Many Conspiracy Theories

Method: Content Analysis of Web Domains

- Aliens
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- Pedophile Rings
- George Soros
- Rothschilds
- Infowars.com
- Newsbusters.org
Co-Opting Critical Thinking
The 21st Century is the beginning of a new information epoch and you, the reader, are the freshman class of free and critical thinkers in a new and dynamic information age. In its totality, there is an immense volume of information to be had on the Internet but we truly believe than in this new decentralised, grassroots and egalitarian World Wide Web, the cream will eventually rise to the top — but this can only be achieved by keeping this internet ‘neutral’ and free from excessive government and corporate control.
Stories related to all of these topics appear on 21stCenturyWire

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- ChemTrails
- Anti-Corporate Media
- Anti-Globalist
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Co-Opting Critical Thinking
Presence of State-Sponsored Media
• RT, Sputnik (Russian government)
• PressTV (Iranian government)
• Katehon (Russian-Ukrainian Think Tank)
Presence of State-Sponsored Media

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- PressTV (Iranian government)
- Katehon (Russian-Ukrainian Think Tank)
- VeteransToday (partnership with NEO)
- GlobalResearch.ca
- 21stCenturyWire, YourNewsWire, Infowars, ZeroHedge (common amplifiers)
Content-Sharing across Domains
Information Operations during Conflict
Another View of the Alternative Media Ecosystem
Information Operations during Conflict
Another View of the Alternative Media Ecosystem
Information Operations during Conflict
Another View of the Alternative Media Ecosystem
“Independent” Media Hubs
Russian Government Media are Integrated into the Alternative Media Ecosystem/Echo-System
Disinformation
The purpose of disinformation is not to convince.

Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014
The purpose of disinformation is not to convince.
The purpose of disinformation is to confuse...

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The purpose of disinformation is to confuse...
to create “muddled thinking” across society.

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Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014

“As for who to believe, who you can’t believe,
can you believe at all — you can’t believe anyone.”

Vladimir Putin, July 16, 2018
Information Operations
Disinformation as Sowing Division:
The Trolls Among Us

Retweet Network Graph
2016 Shooting + #BlackLivesMatter/#BlueLivesMatter tweets

Left-Leaning

Right-Leaning
Retweet Network Graph
2016 Shooting + #BlackLivesMatter/#BlueLivesMatter tweets
RU-affiliated accounts in orange (w/ retweets)

Left-Leaning
Right-Leaning
Implications for Researchers
Thank you!
Students
Ahmer Arif, Tom Wilson, Leo Stewart,
Kaitlyn Zhou, Katya Yefimova, A. Conrad Nied, Katherine Von Koevering,
Jim Maddock, Isabelle Edwards, Stephanie Stanek
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Note on Conducting Research on Disinformation
“Information Operations” as Online Activism