

Flooding the Zone: a censorship and disinformation strategy that needs attention

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Social media has enabled the dissemination of news and rumors at a lightning speed and erased the perception gap between the two. Any internet user can create and propagate a piece of information within any network this person is part of. Such advancement in technology has opened the way to the dissemination of misinformation and false news. Belligerent actors have coalesced around the asymmetric tactic of spreading misinformation within populations and utilized social media to spread a specific narrative efficacious to their side. Many such narratives can be classified as disinformation. There are numerous disinformation campaign strategies that have been implemented over the years. However, there is one specific strategy that has not gained wide attention within the research community. This research brings the attention of the research community to the specific disinformation strategy known as “Flooding the Zone” (FTZ). This strategy has been successfully implemented by state actors over the years envisaged by the Russian government during the Skripal incident or the Chinese government when trying to suppress any news that is contrary to their narrative on the Xinjiang internment camps. In this work, we focused on the Skripal incident where a former Russian intelligence agent was poisoned with a bioweapon in England. The Russian state controlled media attempted to muddle the facts surrounding this incident by flooding the space of information with various narratives so that these confusing messages would dominate the social networks and spread further and faster than factual accounts of the attack.

FTZ is described as a form of censorship by Margaret E. Roberts in her work (Roberts 2018). FTZ doesn’t necessarily contain any disinformation when it is used for censorship; the goal is to make it costly and burdensome for media consumers to retrieve valuable articles where less valuable and irrelevant articles are deluging the information space. Nevertheless, this strategy would become more dangerous when disinformation is part of the low value, free access articles populating the information ecosystem. In March 2018, Sergi Skripal, a former Russian spy, and his daughter Yulia Skripal were found incapacitated on a public bench in the city of Salisbury, England. The United Kingdom and other Western governments proclaimed that the Skripals were poisoned with a the nerve agent Novichock and the British po-

lice identified two individuals who carried out the attack on behalf of the Russian government. From the Russian perspective, there was a complete denial of any Kremlin connection to the poisoning. The Russian media was persistent in their coverage of the Skripal incident, putting many influential individuals on the record denying any involvement by the Russian government.

Recent work by Ramsay and Robertshaw (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019) studied the Russian media narrative regarding the Skripal incident. They monitored the TV networks Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik and the narratives being propagated over these channels in regard to the incident. They found both channels “aired an array of competing and often contradictory narratives”. Over 130 different narratives were recorded about the incident and subsequent fallout. The authors’ work provided a detailed analysis of the narrative propagated on both RT and Sputnik and the time periods these narrative were covered on these networks.

The work of Roberts (2018) Ramsay and Robertshaw (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019) motivated us to investigate the effect of the FTZ strategy on social networks not only in Russia but in Western media-spheres as well. Based on Ramsay and Robertshaw’s (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019) analysis, we anticipated that the Russian narrative would dominate the social networks in March of 2018. Our research analyzed Facebook and Twitter data related to the Skripal incident in 2018 and we found that the Russian state media accounts managed to dominate both digital platforms in terms of user interactions and network spread. The results from the Facebook data indicate that Russian state media had the most numbers of user interactions (“posts”, “likes”, and “shares”).

For this work, data from two sources were collected: i) Facebook and ii) Twitter. For the Facebook data, SafeGraph¹ is used to collect posts created by notable news organizations during the period of the month of March 2018. From the Russian side of the narrative, the focus was on RT and Sputnik. Both channels are state-owned and known for strictly following the Russian’s government narrative. From the western media perspective, news from the British Broadcasting Corp (BBC), The Guardian, The New York Times, and other similar organizations are considered. The num-

ber of posts were analyzed along with the number of comments and shares on these posts to investigate which side of the narrative has more interaction online. We collected 1015 posts created by these news organizations. The keywords used to scrape the data are the following: "poison", "salisbury", "sergei", "yulia", and "skripal." If any of the scraped social media posts contained any of the previously mentioned keywords published by the aforementioned news organizations than the post was collected for this research sample.

The Twitter data was obtained through Listen First Media Inc.² The period considered was the months of March and April 2018 and the keywords for the data collection are "skripal" and "novichock". As in, if a tweet got published within the months of March or April and contains the words "skripal" or "novichock", then this tweet is considered and collected. The total number of tweets in our data is 130,000.

FTZ is about overflowing the information space with low quality, low cost news to make the high quality, legitimate news harder to access for the online consumer (diluting the recommendation algorithm). Therefore, in the 2018 Skripal case, Russian outlets would follow this strategy to limit the visibility of the news that contain facts and evidence regarding the poisoning. The two most popular Russian news outlets, RT and Sputnik, posted news headlines regarding the Skripal incident on their Facebook pages a total of 367 posts through their facebook accounts. Compared against two prominent British news outlets, BBC and The Guardian, which both posted a total of 96 posts combined. The numerous posts created by RT and Sputnik garnered much more engagement online than those of BBC and The Guardian with 45,785 comments created on RT and Sputnik posts compared to 42,071 comments created on BBC and The Guardian posts. Similarly, the data shows that the number of shares in the Russian spectrum totaled 42,203, while the Western oriented content shared 27,213 times; a 64% difference. This brings us to the concept of network dominance where we argue that for this strategy to succeed, a dominance of the network is required. We investigate this argument in the Twitter dataset by analyzing the engagements among the online users. Fig.1 shows the network of the engagements among the user IDs found in our dataset. We labeled the users that are most influential in the network and we classified the type of narrative they propagate. 'R' means the user is propagating the Russian narrative and 'W' for the Western narrative. Notice that the users propagating the Russian media narrative have the most engagements with other users, thus dominating the network.

In order to counter this strategy, a thorough analysis of the information diffusion dynamics (Jasser 2019) and the characteristics of the language used is essential. Dominance of the information space is required for the strategy to succeed. The factors that lead a specific narrative or narratives to dominate the social networks require more investigation and understanding. We show that when the Russian media implemented the FTZ, it managed to out perform a more robust Western media network from a social network perspec-

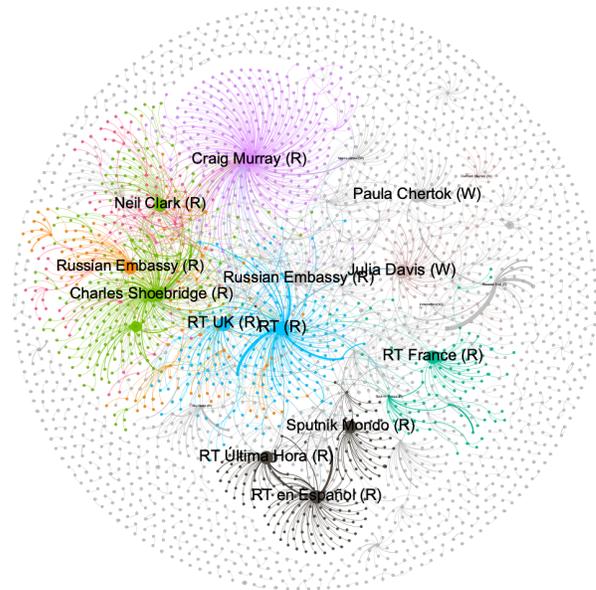


Figure 1: In this figure, the online user interaction network is presented. Each node is a Twitter user and the edges between the nodes indicates the engagements among them.

tive. Yet, we still need to investigate why the online users were more engaged with their posts? Did the language used in their posts contains elements of controversy? Controversiality is known to spread the narrative faster and further (Jasser et al. 2021). This work serves to highlight the needed research on the FTZ strategy and a starting point for a course of action required to counter it.

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²<https://www.listenfirstmedia.com>