Information Warfare Watch No. 25

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THE DOWNSIDE OF MONETIZING X

Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk has signaled that he plans to force all users of the wildly-popular X social media platform to start paying a "small fee" as a way of eliminating unwanted bot accounts and media trolls. But the scheme could have an unintended side-effect: silencing ordinary Iranians. *Iran International* reports that a monthly payment of any magnitude would have the practical effect of keeping "thousands of users living in Iran" off the platform. The reasons are practical; as a result of international sanctions, the Islamic Republic is largely isolated from the international financial system, with forms of payment available to ordinary Iranians severely limited.

The end result would be nothing short of a boon for Iran's ayatollahs. "For many years now, the anachronistic regime in Iran has been trying to cut off Iranians from thousands of websites and social media – generally, because it doesn't like spaces it can't control, even virtual ones, but more specifically, because more elite Iranians use X for political expression and organization perhaps than any other platform," *Iran International* notes. And any monetization scheme for the platform would make that objective much, much easier for Iranian authorities. (*Iran International*, September 21, 2023)

HOW AI IS TURBOCHARGING DISINFORMATION

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the way malicious actors spread disinformation – and making them more effective in doing so. That's the conclusion of experts like Sarah Brandt of NewsGuard and Andy Parsons of Adobe. Both spoke last month at the TechCrunch Disrupt 2023 conference in San Francisco, California. They noted that artificial intelligence, in particular "generative AI" – that is, algorithms (such as ChatGPT) that can be used to create new content such as audio, text and videos – is making it much easier and cheaper to disseminate disinformation on a mass scale. For instance, earlier this year, NewsGuard identified no fewer than 49 news and information websites that had been almost entirely produced by AI tools. Since then, the company has found hundreds more.

The motivations of such activities may be commercial, but their impact is strategic. "It's really a volume game," Parsons noted. "They're just pumping out hundreds — in some cases, thousands — [of] articles a day, and it's an ad revenue game. In some cases, they're just trying to get a lot of content — make it on to search engines and make some programmatic ad revenue. And in some cases, we're seeing them spread misinformation and disinformation." (*TechCrunch*, September 21, 2023)

CHINA STOKES THE DISINFORMATION FIRES

The recent tragic wildfires in Hawai'i, which ultimately claimed the lives of 97 people, were made worse by a spate of misinformation disseminated by malicious Chinese actors. The online activity sought "to cast the wildfires as a deliberate act by American intelligence agencies and the military," and thereby sow doubt in authority, the *New York Times* reports. The effort represented a "rapid change in tactics," according to experts; to date, Chinese disinformation and influence campaigns have concentrated on amplifying official narratives surrounding core national objectives (such as Taiwan). However, China's involvement in the coverage surrounding the Hawai'i fires "suggests that Beijing is making more direct attempts to sow discord in the United States." (*New York Times*, September 11, 2023)

INDONESIA PROTECTS ITS ECONOMY... BY BANNING TIKTOK

In the United States, Chinese social media giant TikTok has emerged as a distinct national security issue – and an element of the unfolding "great power competition" now taking place between Washington and Beijing. Elsewhere, however, the proliferation of the wildly-popular Chinese platform has had other consequences, including economic ones. That is the case in Indonesia, which recently passed legislation aimed at separating TikTok's shopping feature from its online video platform. The decision reflects a broader effort on the part of the Indonesian government to protect local retailers, both online and physical, and maintain a fair and competitive e-commerce landscape.

Indonesia's Trade Minister, Zulkifli Hasan, has stressed that "e-commerce cannot become social media," giving platforms a week to comply or risk losing their operating licenses. The move aligns with Indonesian President Joko Widodo's statement highlighting the importance of regulated e-commerce. The Indonesian decision, meanwhile, is the latest problem to confront TikTok, which is now facing growing scrutiny and skepticism in various world regions. (*BBC*, October 4, 2023)