

POLITICS AS USUAL

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Mainstream media, fringe media and the tinfoil-hat wearing brigade of the blogosphere all play a significant part in how the public's attitudes towards business, politics and people are shaped.

Rightly or wrongly, that is the reality. Bots that 'troll' are a thing. A pretty big 'thing' as it turns out. The US Attorney General (AG) released a report stating what most of us already saw as obvious. A foreign entity, in this case Russia, waged an info war on various US institutions using all forms of media - but in particular by weaponizing troll bots and troll farms (because that's a 'thing' too apparently) - for the purposes of impacting the US election.

Before anyone sends me yet another flaming email about Trump, I am not saying that said well documented info-war actually handed Trump the election, so calm down please. What I am saying is that there is unquestionable evidence that there was a state sponsored program to interfere with the democratic process writ large.

Based on the US AG's report, Russian agents flooded social media with misinformation, often releasing simultaneously contradictory information, to sow discord and discontent; to force people to question the very existence of object truth. And they were - and are - very successful.

That's a game-changer. And it's quite simply terrifying.

This was no mere angry little man in a basement somewhere, eating Cheetos and firing off rambling, angry missives on Facebook or twitter. I dare say every community has its share of those kinds of folks. And every politician or public person everywhere has to deal with that kind of nonsense. Most recognize quickly that the tinfoil hat brigade are chattering to themselves and are best simply ignored.

This was something entirely different.

This was an organized, highly structured disinformation campaign.

And it doesn't appear that it's going to end anytime soon or that it's limited to the US. It is a tactic that is being widely used by a host of different actors across the globe on stages big and small.

People now have no way of knowing whether their supposedly local partisan political chat group has any affiliation at all with the views being pushed out. What is true? What is false? Who knows?

I think there is universal concern about how fast and insidiously misinformation is spread today. But identifying the threat is one thing. What to do about it? Well that's an entirely different terrifying concern.

How do you police the internet? How do you balance the right of folks to say what they want, to read what they want, to believe what they want with the need to ensure that the 'facts' that inform those beliefs, those opinions are in fact, well, facts? And who will determine what is a fact? And is that even possible?

My head starts to hurt the more I think about it. It seems like an intractable issue.

The internet has so many positives. It has democratized access to one of the most valuable commodities there is - information. It's frightening to think that it may have been all a façade.