Securing Elections in an Age of Democratic Disruption

By Abby Williams

As the 2020 United States presidential election approaches, foreign adversaries are interfering with the electoral process by targeting the roots of democracy: the American people.

By harnessing disinformation and dividing the public, malicious cyber actors known as internet 'trolls' are manipulating voters and influencing the course of politics, with methods reminiscent of those used by Russia in the 2016 US presidential election.

Foreign influence is not a new threat; however, according to US Deputy Assistant Attorney General Adam Hickey, the nature of the problem is changing, and foreign operatives are now able to reach unprecedented numbers of American citizens.

"These efforts have taken many forms across the decades, from funding newspapers and forging internal government communications, to more recently creating and operating false US personas on internet sites designed to attract US audiences and spread divisive messages," Mr Hickey said in a senate judiciary hearing.

"Although the tactics have evolved, the goals of these activities remain the same: to spread disinformation and to sow discord on a mass scale in order to weaken the US democratic process, and ultimately to undermine the appeal of democracy itself."

While the US strengthens its defences against Russia, other nations which rely on the outcome of the upcoming election have also been classified as threats, some of which have already begun to interfere.

"Unfortunately, it's not just Russia anymore," said James Lewis, a cybersecurity expert from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC.

"In particular, China, Iran, a couple of others, studied what the Russians did in 2016."

Although disinformation is detrimental to the course of politics, new threats have emerged from these two nations, including a hacking group which is believed to have originated in Iran, and advocacy through traditional media outlets which has been traced back to China.

In a joint statement issued by top level US departments and agencies, the government outlined its approach to securing the election, which involves maintaining transparency with the public and encouraging a whole-society effort.

"The federal government is prioritising the sharing of threat intelligence and providing support and services that improve the security of election infrastructure across the nation," the statement said.

"An informed public is a resilient public."

While the US election is the primary target for foreign operatives, the insecure nature of the internet enables adversaries to infiltrate elections worldwide, and Australia is no exception.

Sarah O'Connor, a researcher at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, asserts that individuals can prevent the flow of disinformation by maintaining an awareness of the capabilities of foreign actors.

"Users on social media contribute – more often than not unwillingly – to the spread of disinformation by simply sharing or retweeting information they see on the internet without critically engaging with it or verifying that the information is correct," Ms O'Connor said.

"Disinformation acts like a disease, that is, it is transmitted from host to host.

"If users do not engage with disinformation, the spread stops."

Sources and Contacts

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