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Electronic flies and the fake news industry: a new generation of wars on Arab cyberspace

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Abstract:

Recently, the virtual environment space was defined with social networks, the phenomenon of electronic flies, and it is a group of people or automated programmed accounts that publish fabricated news in order to direct or change the direction of public opinion to a specific idea, which is one of the tools of war this phenomenon has been widely recognized in the fragile space of the Arab environment. In order to guide Arab public opinion, and therefore we seek in this paper to clarify what is meant by electronic flies, as well as to identify its implications for Arab public opinion and ways to confront them.

Keywords: Electronic flies; Electronic committees; Fake news; Cyberspace; Social Media; Cyber warfare.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The vulnerabilities of social networking sites have recently led to breaches of the cyberspace of many countries, including Arab countries , a new type of cyber threat has emerged within its framework, which is supervised by the so-called electronic committees, which have recently been called electronic flies, whose work is based on creating an unlimited number of accounts that pump out false and fabricated news in order to direct public opinion in the direction you want , this has made cyberspace a field for conflicts between all types of players, whether from states or non-states , the randomness of social networking sites has led to the creation of a new generation of wars that are no less deadly than traditional wars, an easy war that does not require much effort or money , it can attack the enemy's center of gravity (the minds and souls of its people) with just a smartphone and simple phrases, and the process of targeting users is achieved.

Fake news has recently become a major threat to the security and stability of Arab countries and their relations with each other and their peoples , with the great emergence of electronic flies in its electronic space, which activates and inoculates it (fake news) whenever it wants and with the force it wants , this plays on the religious and ethnic strings of these countries. which ignites crises and works to disperse and divide them.

The Arab region witnessed a fierce war based on the spread of fabricated and false news, driven by anonymous electronic committees , which led to the creation of many political crises, such as the recent Gulf crisis that occurred between Qatar and the Quartet (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain), as well as an attempt to inflame the political crisis in Algeria and exploit the Algerian popular movement .

Therefore, through this study, we seek to investigate the phenomenon of electronic flies in the Arab region by examining the following points:

1- Electronic flies as an electronic warfare mechanism.

2- Electronic fly activity in Arab cyberspace.

2. Electronic flies as a mechanism of electronic (digital) warfare:

The methods and means that countries rely on in their wars against their opponents are numerous and developing day after day. With the great development witnessed in media and communication technology with the emergence of the Internet and its many applications , states and non-state actors are now able to achieve their goals, as attacking the enemy’s centers of gravity (the minds and souls of its people) no longer requires massive bombing operations. All it takes is a smart phone, targeting users, and achieving the political goal of the war without firing a single bullet, which is what It is a new type of war that Peter Warren Singer and Umberto Brooking called “quasi-war” in their book entitled “Quasi-War: Weaponizing Social Media.” (Sabah , 2018) , the emergence of the Internet was a sudden and dangerous development in war and international

politics, especially after the emergence of social networking sites, where a new field of war emerged , these means have gone beyond being merely a tool for entertainment and communication between individuals. Rather, they can be considered as a primary actor in the axis of conflict between countries, as they have become a place for waging a new war targeting the minds and hearts of peoples - a war based on ideas.(Dalal,2019)

2.1 Digital warfare through social networking sites

Social networking sites have come to represent fourth generation wars, a new form of war called network warfare, which is intended to attempt to distort, destroy or alter what a group of individuals knows or believes they know about this world, which includes the use of all types of propaganda and media with the aim of Confusion of the mind, questioning facts, and rejecting certainties .(Mohammed , 2016)

The fourth generation war comes within a series of wars. There is the first generation war, which is the traditional war between two states and two regular armies, and the second generation wars, which include guerrilla warfare, where fire, tanks, and aircraft are used. As for the third generation war, it is known as preventive or preemptive wars, and wars of the third generation. The fourth generation, which belongs to digital wars on networks, is a war of ideas represented in spreading rumors and fake news , followed by fifth generation wars, which are the so-called cyber wars that depend on computers and the Internet to wage them, and they include both offensive measures to inflict damage and harm on adversaries' information systems, and defensive measures to protect the attackers' systems, to protect their systems from being attacked.(El Zahrani , 2017 , p 226)

Social media wars came to become one of the pillars of fourth generation wars, with characteristics such as: changing the nature of the opponents, goals, weapons, and the main actors in this war, as this war does not aim to achieve a military victory as much as achieving a moral political victory, aiming to break Will, and raise the cost of the opponent by continuing to repel these attacks. (Dalal, 2019) .

Social media wars have a specific style and characteristics, different from traditional wars in terms of tools, but they are no less harmful in effect, as they target the social structure of states, destabilizing them and the political system, and inflicting heavy costs on opponents to repel this attack., Social media wars depend on the use of technological, political, economic, social and military means, it has become a haven for many states and irregular groups in times of conflict to launch attacks against their people or enemies. (Dalal, 2019) .

Many nation-states as well as non-state actors have both begun to use social media sites to manipulate the cognitive biases of populations, by using them to influence their thoughts, attitudes, and choices , not only that, but it can be used to recruit individuals to carry out terrorist attacks, or spread hatred and resentment among competing peoples, which may lead to the outbreak of war or genocide. In addition to causing discord and division of votes within one country, achieving the political goal of the war without significant losses , therefore, social networking sites have formed a real parallel war front, in which the fighting tools are ideas, information, images, videos, spyware, and privacy breaches, the losses therein vary between political, economic, and security, starting at the level of the individual and ending at the level of the state, which is what prompted some countries to create electronic brigades and armies, whose mission is The main thing is to defend the state's image, contribute to achieving its goals, and confront its enemies. (Dalal, 2019) .

2.2 Electronic flies and spreading fake news via social networking sites

2.2.1 The concept of electronic flies

It is virtual accounts on social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) that are operated by specialized programs, or by a group of managers , these programs publish a range of posts or tweets that contain false or incomplete information for the purpose of misleading or falsifying facts. (Ali Al-Saadi Abdel-Zahra Jubayr, 2021, p. 349)

The term "electronic flies" has several names, such as "electronic committees," "black cells," electronic armies, "hackers," and pirates. These are terms that were created to describe automated or programmed accounts on social media sites, the goal of which is usually a purely political goal. (Wikipedia)

It is also described as fake accounts programmed and directed in a specific direction, and in systematic ways, managed by software and websites that write comments, likes, and retweets automatically, as they work to create hashtags and use social networking sites to defend a certain point of view, or attack a different point of view. against persons, entities, or countries with the aim of influencing public opinion (Boualem Barzik, 2018).

Electronic flies are a software package that can mimic human opinion and behavior and is designed to perform repetitive and automatic tasks, it also has great capabilities to publish, tweet, comment, share and interact on a large scale, as well as promoting an issue until it appears as if it is a public opinion issue, the intensification of electronic fly activity could also lead to the production and secretion of tags or hashtags that top the lists of the most frequently discussed issues in the world or the targeted regions.

The purpose of using electronic flies may be to increase the followers of a specific account in exchange for money or to support a cause and communicate it to a larger number of users. It is also

used for a commercial purpose by international companies to promote their products to raise the level of sales and outperform their competitors in exchange for providing a sum of money to robot makers (Boalem Barziq, 2018), electronic flies can be transformed into ferocious swarms led by programmers linked to government and security agencies, or even by hidden hands, and used to falsify facts, mislead, and deliver misleading and false information to people and public opinion.

Regarding the mechanism of operation of these programs, it works to spread quickly and widely on various international news sites, pages belonging to famous and influential figures that have an international resonance, and forums and communication platforms affiliated with the enemy state, by impersonating names and characteristics associated with the enemy state , it also works to exploit the customs, traditions, and beliefs prevailing in the state and to communicate with its people in their local dialect to hide and avoid attracting attention, spreading rumors and fake news, and calling for sabotage and the overthrow of the ruling regime. This creates a charged atmosphere and widens the gap between the state and its people. (Boalem Barziq, 2018).

Use real or reliable personal accounts loyal to publishing and commenting. This is to give credibility to the post, and then the electronic brigades work to support it and raise the level of interaction in it, by expressing admiration and promoting it on various social networking sites and forums.

These programs also fabricate pictures and videos of unreal facts and events and publish them, not to mention attacking the opinion or the opposing party with insults and treason, such as accusing them of treason, and working to change the direction of the discussion from an intellectual discussion about a specific issue to a discussion of personal matters related to the owner of the publication or the offending group , in addition to this, it programs posts and comments that work automatically. It repeatedly publishes rumors and comments about the same issue until it affects the recipient. (Boalem Barziq, 2018).

Electronic flies are characterized by a number of features, including:

- First: Real electronic identity indicators do not appear, as real personal information is not included in the accounts due to the lack of a real photo, phone number, personal address or email**.**

- Second: The use of pseudonyms and fake accounts, which are often names linked to national symbols and social figures (Boualem Barziq, 2018)**.**

- Third: Empty content. The account of the advertising element in electronic flies is devoid of any special ideas or analysis, in most cases.

- Fourth: Recency of creation, as the date of creation of the account is new in proportion to the time of the electronic attack, but this does not mean that all fly accounts are recent, as some of them may have a reserve for those elements and are allocated to the work of electronic flies.

- Fifth: Directed hashtags. Elements' accounts only work in hashtags with directed content. This is the most prominent feature of electronic fly accounts, as their presence and activity are linked to targeted campaigns aimed at spreading rumors or personal attacks.

- Sixth: Repetition. Given that the process is planned and depends on spreading a specific idea that serves specific goals, the elements of these campaigns lack the minimum level of thought and independence, so they are only interested in copying and pasting expressive words and sentences, news, or insults, and this is easy to discover by just entering the hashtag and seeing a tweet. One duplicated by dozens and hundreds of different accounts.

- Seventh: Lack of discussion. The members of the electronic flies, because they are employees, do not have an open space for discussion, so you see them posting their comments that include intimidation, insults, or judgment without waiting for a response.

Electronic fly campaigns often succeed because they play on people's sensitive nerves, such as religion, race, affiliation, language, defending rights, and the rest of the motivations that push users to write posts and tweets that serve the same context. (Al-Alam Channel, 2018)

Rumors and fake news are among the basic materials on which electronic flies arise and feed, as the basis for the latter's existence is the work of pumping a huge amount of rumors and fake news onto social networking sites in an intelligent manner that often leads to an attempt to form a public opinion about the issue being defended. about it or wants to distort it.

2.2.2 The concept of fake news

Fake news, also called fabricated or false news, can be defined as "a type of public relations that shows exaggerated bias in some facts while concealing others." (Sana, Aisha, Muhammad, and Manar, 2017) , it is also defined as false information, which is widely spread through the media, especially through the Internet and social networks, and is news that aims to deceive and mislead. (Wikipedia) , defined by Michael Radutzky, a producer for CBS 60 Minutes, fake news is "stories

that are more or less false, have enormous traction (popular appeal) in the culture, and are consumed by millions of people." (Manash, 2018, p. 2) .

The term fake news is fairly recent, although the manipulation of online content is not new and has been studied before under many names, such as misinformation, disinformation, and rumors and hoaxes , many descriptions of fake news have been offered, including a "digital wildfire" and a "global threat" to our hyper-connected world , social media has dramatically changed news consumption and production behaviors, which has created many repercussions by blurring the lines between professional journalists and users, which has led to a shift from a media scene that was controlled by journalists who worked as gatekeepers of information, to a scene characterized by large amounts of information , huge amount of user-generated content, this has led to the diversification of available information and has simplified and facilitated the dissemination of fake news. Such fake news is spread by computers controlled by humans in addition to those managed by algorithms called "social robots" (Björn & Anna-Katharina& Jennifer & Stefan, 2018, p. 1)

By fabricated news we mean every content or message that people produce and publish it sometimes out of ignorance and unintentionally, here because they are not sure of its authenticity, and they often publish it out of conviction, intent and awareness of its lack of credibility in order to achieve specific goals and objectives. In the recent past, the process of spreading fabricated news was difficult and rare through traditional media, including written press, radio and television, due to the strict control over these media and the inability to reach the portal of their dissemination. But with the emergence and spread of social networks and the expansion of their audience, which has become counted in the billions, fabricated news found the perfect space for reproduction and wide spread in a few seconds to become global news, even if it was incorrect.

The dissemination and spread of fake news often occurs in light of the presence of political crises between certain parties, such as whether there is a crisis between a political system and its people, or between two states, or between a terrorist organization and a state, fake news takes many forms, such as:

- Releasing rumors and fake news about a specific issue, so that it becomes the talk of the moment and is later discovered by followers to be a lie. This framework includes spreading the rumor of the death of a particular religious, artistic or political figure, as well as publishing news of someone escaping, killing, kidnapping, stealing money, or being involved in rape...etc.
- Fake news spread by electronic flies comes in the form of fabricated pictures or videos, fake news often receives support, due to the form and circumstance in which it is reported.

- Fake news is just simple social media posts with unbelievable stories. However, it is more than just an illusion. Fake news on social media is in fact not just a post that has been liked, shared or followed, but rather a powerful technique for spreading cyber propaganda with a dominant and far-reaching effect, it has recently emerged as the greatest threat to democracy, dialogue and free debate. (Manash, 2018, p. 3)

The creation and distribution of fake news on social media has recently turned into an industry, leaving a horrific impact on a large audience , it has contributed to the unprecedented growth of telephone subscribers via the high-speed Internet that provides access to social networking sites. Making fake news flourish on a large scale, and with the growth of smartphone users and people spending a significant amount of time on social media to get the latest updates on news and information, the possibility of users being exposed to fake news and causing any serious harm cannot be undermined or limited. (Manash, 2018, p. 3)

Through its exploitation of electronic committees, the Internet has given governments new ways to control their people on the one hand, and achieve global spread through the power of "misinformation" on the other hand, social media networks have witnessed many disinformation operations through the spread of false news through electronic committees, including : supporting fake news through social media sites enabled Trump to succeed in the US elections. A study conducted by Stanford University found that fake news sites received 159 million visits during the month of the 2016 US elections, and found that most of the fake news was supportive of Trump. (Manash , 2018, p. 3)

In a session on confronting fake news, within the activities of the Global Investigative Journalism Conference held in Johannesburg, South Africa, between 16 and 19 November 2020, speakers divided fake news into three main categories; The first: false information that was shared without any intent to harm. The second category is fake facts that were shared on purpose to cause specific harm. The third category refers to real information that is moved in a certain way and directed, to achieve special goals, such as leaks, and hate speech. (Harber, 2020).

Media researcher Claire Wardle of First Draft News identifies seven types of fake news (Cherilyn & Julie, 2018 , p 64)that would give us a broader idea of this concept:

- The content of irony or parodies: such contents often constitute a means for their owners to mock and ridicule certain parties and put them in comic templates that attract the public to like these active pages on social networks. Such publications may not aim to cause harm, but the possibility of deception and misinformation remains. List and may be done indirectly through humor.
- False link content: These are the published content that is not in line with the context of the event and does not support its main and original content. It may be in the form of headlines

or sub-headings or old audio or visual materials, which have been reproduced in the form of real-time news stories and often such outward content abounds. About the context in the rallies, protests, demonstrations and official statements by prominent media and political figures.

- Misleading content: It is that publication that uses the available information in a misleading, distorted and pre-directed manner in order to surround a particular issue or personality with a specific framework that the public cannot see outside of it.
- False content: in this publication, the content is real, but it is supported by false information that is not in line with the context of its occurrence.
- False content: here the content owner impersonates real sources by opening a fake page through social networks and providing information from false sources that the public thinks are official sources. Modified content: a publication that has been manipulated using special software to modify the image, sound and text with the aim of deceiving the public to achieve certain purposes.
- Fabricated content: It is that publication specially prepared to inflict harm on a certain party. It is new content that has nothing to do with previous contents and is 100% false. Its main goal is to deceive and cause harm. (Cherilyn Ireton, 2018 , p 65)

All these types of fabricated news share in the fact that they carry incorrect information and news, aiming to distort the truth and mislead public opinion for a specific period in order to reach a specific goal that may be personal or in the interest of certain parties, and these parties often rely on a group of intruders on a profession The press and the citizen's press activity, which should be far from such behaviors that violate the principles of the public service, which seeks to satisfy the public's news needs with credibility and objectivity.

3. Electronic fly activity in Arab cyberspace

Recently, Arab cyberspace has witnessed intense activity at the level of electronic committees, or so-called electronic flies, which have had a major role in bringing about many changes that have affected Arab countries (with their systems and peoples) , through the cyberspace, the Arab region is exposed to psychological wars aimed at influencing the critical mass of young people through social media networks, whether by parties based on political, religious or sectarian differences, or through attacks by external forces to influence security and stability, whether by fueling sectarian conflicts. (Adel, 2019).

3.1 The history of electronic flies

The first prominent and intense appearance of electronic flies was in 2017 in the recent Gulf crisis after the Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt) announced its blockade of Qatar. Which was against the backdrop of the publication of statements attributed to the Emir of Qatar and Qatar's claim that the Qatar News Agency website was hacked in May 2017. This crisis had a reflection in the development of the crisis between Qatar and the Quartet countries by imposing the boycott. (Adel, 2019)

Electronic committees were widely used during the crisis between countries through social networking sites, as many fake accounts were created on Facebook and Twitter to spread lies and misleading information to mislead and inflame public opinion, including: Azmi cells affiliated with Qatar were used in order to defend the Qatari position, in Confronting the boycotting countries: Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt.

3.2 Types of electronic committees and the strategy of confronting

Mutankh Army: affiliated with Saudi Arabia, which carries out hacking and hacking operations, and monitors the violating or independent tendencies of all tweeters. However, there are those who attribute it to the Syrian crisis, where it was noted on social media sites that a huge electronic army affiliated with the Syrian regime was created, working to support and serve the positions of the Syrian regime. (Khatib, 2018) .

Like other Arab countries, Algeria witnessed a strong presence of electronic flies in its cyberspace during the political crisis that began in 2019, in order to inflame political clarity in the country and create fragile and wavering positions about the future step that Algerian public opinion must take , the activity of these committees became apparent when the former president announced his intention to run for a fifth term, and electronic cells were formed to pass the fifth term project.

These committees have relied on presenting mixed news and obfuscating initiatives that are the subject of serious discussions in order to serve unknown parties , these committees also worked to build counter-opinions through the mechanism of instilling fear in the hesitant party and confusing the party involved in political action in a way that suggests that they are defending the entity of the state against those who threaten to do so, in this context, we work on issues that raise sensitivity among Algerians, including religion, identity, belonging, and employment and taxes , these campaigns resulted in conflicts in the positions of Algerians and their positioning between supporters and opponents, it distorts public opinion and destabilizes it on a single position that guarantees a sound democratic transition. (Hamza, 2019)

In order to avoid fake news that electronic committees intend to spread on social media sites, Petra Warren Singer and Emerson Broking tried to define three levels on the basis of which insurance measures are taken, which are as follows:

- First - At the government level: the authors believe that the first step for governments to limit the effects of these new wars is to realize the importance and seriousness of the new battle, and to take it seriously, and that is through establishing an observatory to monitor the content of social networking sites that monitors sites and pages that circulate rumors. and misleading information, and classifying the importance of websites and pages according to their credibility and accuracy.
- Second: Civil and governmental institutions activate their websites and pages on various social media platforms by providing accurate information, as providing these entities with confirmed information reduces rumors. (Samar, 2018)
- Third: At the level of social media companies, they must proactively think about the political, social and ethical ramifications of their services.
- Fourth: At the individual level: According to the authors, ordinary users must recognize their responsibility as citizens and "combatants" in the new war, and raise awareness of what the individual shares, what he publishes, and what he interacts with. (Sabah, 2018), this is done by working to confront rumors, news, and misleading information that are circulated on social media platforms, by providing correct information, awareness, and training on how to deal with these means, with the need to be careful not to publish any video after confirming its source. (Samar, 2018)

4. CONCLUSION

The dissemination of fake and fabricated news in light of the cyber environment has become an industry in itself, harnessed by institutions that work to spread it using a type of loyal agents called electronic committees, or what I call them electronic flies, who quickly pump a huge amount of false and fabricated news on social networking sites with the aim of directing... or changing public opinion to a specific idea, often required by a political party , which brings us to a new type of misleading psychological propaganda wars that take the idea as its basis. Which makes international countries and Arab countries that suffered from great weakness in securing their cyberspace vulnerable to misleading attacks through social media sites that lead to creating crises in them.

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