20037   Tech companies' indiscriminate war on disinformation isn't working

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OVER 29 million Americans may have seen an alarming dispatch on their Facebook feeds last year: "Trump's grandfather was a tax evader; his father a member of the KKK." The accusation came from a website that publishes articles in English, written by Americans. The catch? These writers are paid by an operation based in Iran.

CNN reported last week on *American Herald Tribune*, a self-professed "genuinely independent online media outlet" that cybersecurity experts have determined is part of a far-reaching Iranian influence campaign. The strategy is simple: create a network of inauthentic news sites, then enlist associated accounts on popular platforms to spread the stories not only here but also in Europe, Latin America and the Middle East.

American Herald Tribune's modus operandi matches what we've already learned about online disinformation: Adversaries "launder" their campaigns through sympathetic citizens of target countries, or just citizens they offer money to — from authors on propagandistic or outright deceptive news sites to run-of-the-mill social media users.

But there's something else: these cybersecurity researchers identified this influence operation way back in 2018. Facebook removed *American Herald Tribune*'s page then, along with 651 others in its network, and Google made similar takedowns. Twitter, however, booted *American Herald Tribune* only this past month. Whatever companies today are doing to coordinate with each other as they fight disinformation, it's not enough. And that's a real problem — the manipulators themselves are very good coordinators.

On Jan. 14, researchers published in a Harvard University review a look at disinformation across platforms, focusing on a campaign to discredit the White Helmets, an organization of brave and selfless volunteers who operate in opposition-controlled parts of Syria. What they found was striking: once again, a mix of activists, journalists and media outlets — including state-sponsored channels such as Russia Today and Sputnik News — promoted each other in symbiosis. Key to their strategy was cross-posting content from YouTube to Twitter.

Social media sites have established channels for sharing leads on terrorist and child exploitation material, but when it comes to disinformation, collaboration is indiscriminate. There are challenges, from the privacy concerns that could surround the sharing of the most useful data, such as IP addresses, to the basic problem that many of these sites haven't come to their own definition of a disinformation or manipulation campaign, much less agreed on one. But the platforms that have long been saying they can't fight these wars alone should be doing far more to fight them together.

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