

All.Net Analyst Report and Newsletter

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Countering the “natural” spread of deceptive social media memes

Deceptive memes spread in social media tend to spread quickly. But there are reasonably effective countermeasures. Let's start by identifying two different classes of 'spread'; (1) natural meme spread and (2) artificially enhanced meme spread.

- Naturally, memes are spread by people communicating them to others on an individual or groups basis, then other individuals receiving the meme and deciding to spread it to others. This is artificially enhanced by the “like” feature in some social media sites and the ease of reposting (e.g., retweeting) a message. This is the one I address herein.
- Artificially, automated mechanisms are used to increase the spread. For example, automated systems (bots) with sets of accounts in social media each disseminate the information required to plant and spread the meme, by doing so in volume, they create “trends” that are noticed by the social media engines and then listed higher in priority or put in front of more people. “What's trending”? The artificial memes for the most part, and the memes of the “popular” people. Computer virus spread is much the same as we identified in the 1980s with respect to users who were more highly connected.

None of this is new

The New York Times Best Seller list lists authors based on number of sales through specific media outlets. A company in Los Angeles was discovered a few years ago to be responsible for getting authors on the best seller list by buying specific numbers of books from those outlets at the cost of the author/publisher, resulting in feigned popularity and listing as a “best seller”. Naturally they were then discussed in other media through natural and enhanced spreading and became actual high volume books. This is also known as marketing.

These days television news and commentary people seem to be allowed to use their shows to publicize their books. Naturally if you give me 15 minutes a day for a week or two on national or global television, my books will sell more, I will make more money, and I will have a greater effect on public perception. Only a few years ago, you could get on most shows that did book reviews by paying an agent who did whatever they did (pay the network or its people in one way or another) \$5K-\$10K and get a 5-minutes interview. You don't think those folks got there because the interview host happened by the book do you? F so, now you know.

So what can you do about it?

The natural meme read can be defeated pretty readily by individual action in a timely fashion. Lately, I have been countering deceptive memes and the results seem clear – fewer of them are showing up from the people who used to post more of them. Here's how as an example:

- Earlier today I saw a LinkedIn posting equating book burning in WW2 to Youtube policy changes to remove select content and make it unavailable. That's the deceptive meme.
- I don't care where you stand on youtube policies such as this, it's not the same as or in almost any way comparable to burning books in the public square in Germany leading up to WW2. That's the problem with the meme regardless of your position on the issue.

- I posted a small reply – one of the first two up there – just after the one saying “excellent!!!” or some such thing. My response was something like “Not excellent. This is a deceptive and a false comparison. Hitler’s regime burning books in WW2 is nothing like a change in corporate policy by Youtube”.
- The thread stopped propagating and the meme was deprecated on this branch.

I have done this before to others and their threads also stopped propagating. In addition, as this is done by more people to the same spreader of deception, the spreader starts to realize that they are losing what they thought they were trying to gain (popularity), and they stop it or at least slow it down. Of course for professional trolls, they may not stop, but their memes do.

And this too is nothing new. In a social situation, if someone says something that is spreading a false rumor, you don’t need to call them an idiot or anything like that. But if you call them on the deception and identify the false narrative in a reasoned way, your stock will go up and they will stop it. Here’s a reasonable way of saying it: “I don’t think Youtube changing its policy regarding which videos to allow is quite the same as Hitler’s ordering of book burning in WW2, do you?”. Say it right away to the same folks in the same conversation. Don’t let that false meme spread and grow. “Nip it in the bud”.¹ This was part of the counter-propaganda campaign in WW2 as well... when the Nazi 3rd column was acting within the US; to reduce the will to fight; to create sympathies for the Nazis and against the Jews, Gypsies, people of color, and others; and to create their sabotage campaign.

Yes – I mean you

Now when I say what you can do about it, I don’t mean me or someone else. If you want your democracy and/or freedoms to persist, you cannot rely on me to fight your battles for you. You have to fight them yourself. It’s not hard. It takes a few words here and there. And you should also know the facts of what you are talking about. Otherwise, you will be spreading false information as well.

Here’s a good recent example. The President of the United States has been tweeting claims that most of the FBI agents investigating him are Democrats and that this is not fair. Here are few ways you could counter such a tweet:

- The people in charge of the probe who the President fired were all republicans.
- This assumes the false notion that all Democrats are dishonest.
- This is a claim without facts behind it. Just like the Canadian “trade deficit” false claim.

You can probably find many more fallacies to point out. My point is, you should be looking for fallacies and pointing them out rather than accepting an idea because (1) you think it makes sense and/or (2) you are sympathetic with the conclusion.

Conclusion

Stopping the natural spread of false information and propaganda in our society can be done by **you** noticing it, identifying it to others, and saying something about it. If you see something say something – it applies in social media as it does in the physical world. Just because it seems to make sense, doesn’t make it true. Think and seek facts, then point out the fallacies to others in the same venue to slow or stop propaganda and deceptions.

¹ Barnie Fife in the Andy Griffith Show was known to say “Nip it! ... In the bud...Nip it...”