

Image Misuse and Memetic Propaganda

Andrew Moshirnia

Russian disinformation attacks through social media increasingly involve genuine photos paired with inaccurate captions to create false news. The relative ease and devastating impact of this meme-based (memetic) method has led domestic actors to adopt these same informational warfare tactics. This is apparent in an examination of the conservative effort to demonize the migrant caravan in the month before the 2018 midterm elections. Posters used miscaptioned images to push xenophobic tropes that the caravan was violent, rapacious, diseased, unpatriotic, and supported by outside funding groups including wealthy Jews. This article is the first to systematically document these propagandist threads and presents a legal countermeasure based on existing intellectual property and First Amendment doctrines.

Tracing the development of memetic misattribution reveals a powerful avenue for defense. Falsely captioned photographs in these memes typically originate from previously published news articles and are reused over several years. As such, a basic reverse image search can debunk the majority of these images; a photo cannot simultaneously capture current events and predate those events by several years. Social media firms should incorporate reverse image searches and resultant copyright information directly on their sites. This effort is imperative, as these firms have been slow to respond to this informational threat to our democracy. Moreover, an objective, measured approach is vital to avoid overregulating an important arena for speech. The novel transparency-based solution advanced in this article achieves this balance.