

Information Environment

Peter Carragher, adapted from Trust & Safety Teaching Consortium

**TRUST &
SAFETY**
TEACHING CONSORTIUM

2026-04-18

Information Environment

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Peter Carragher, adapted from Trust & Safety Teaching Consortium

- Describe different definitions of disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda
- Identify strategies from social media and governmental organizations for identifying, tracking misinformation.
- Understand the demand-side: Cognitive aspect: Why does information/rumors/ conspiracy theories resonate with individuals
- Examine interventions designed to mitigate misinformation
- Analyse the supply-side: Influence Operations / Monetary incentives of misinformation

Learning Objectives

- Describe different definitions of disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda
- Identify strategies from social media and governmental organizations for identifying, tracking misinformation.
- Understand the demand-side: Cognitive aspect: Why does information/rumors/ conspiracy theories resonate with individuals
- Examine interventions designed to mitigate misinformation
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└ Disinformation

There are multiple definitions for disinformation. The intent is to give students several and establish a framework from which to define it and categorize content.

For example, disinformation can be a subset of misinformation. Under this construct disinformation is misinformation that is deliberately propagated. (Guess and Lyons)

What distinguishes disinformation from misinformation is a matter of intent. Disinformation is meant to deceive, while misinformation may be inadvertent or unintentional.

Other definitions for disinformation characterize it as wholly distinct from misinformation.

Guess, A. M., & Lyons, B. A. (2020). Misinformation, disinformation, and online propaganda. *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform, 10*. [Accessible for free here.](#)

└ Disinformation

Disinformation can be distinguished from misinformation using criteria. To determine if a piece of content is disinformation or something different:

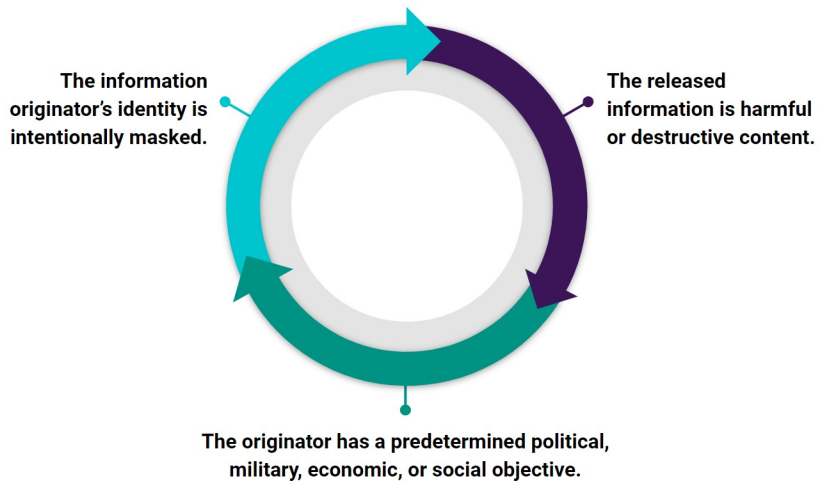
- Content is disinformation when the identity of the content originator is intentionally masked;
- The released information is harmful or destructive content intended to influence an outcome;
- The originator has a predetermined political, military, economic, or social objective. (Murphy)

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-Murphy, Brian J. "The Impact of Social Media Conveyed Russian-Backed Disinformation in a Polarized America: An Examination of the Executive Branch's Ethical Responsibility to Respond." Ph.D., Georgetown University, 2022.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2760166084/abstract/9EE61E3EE4184D8E>

Disinformation's Three Criteria



2026-04-18

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Disinformation's Three Criteria

Disinformation's Three Criteria



- For instance, in August of 2022, the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General released a reported title "DHS Needs a Unified Strategy to Disinformation Campaigns." The report indicated that the department lacked a coherent strategy to counter foreign and domestic-based disinformation. Among its finding were multiple definitions for disinformation used by various DHS components. [OIG-22-58 - DHS Needs a Unified Strategy to Counter Disinformation Campaigns](https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2022-08/OIG-22-58-Aug22.pdf)
- Another way to analyze the problem is to consider there is often an implied understanding when the term is used. It is conflated in the public domain with terms such as a lie, political speech, and opinions.

2026-04-18

└ Disinformation

<https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2022-08/OIG-22-58-Aug22.pdf> (OIG-22-58 - DHS Needs a Unified Strategy to Counter Disinformation Campaigns)

The fact there is no standard definition has caused confusion in research, for institutions, and among policy makers.

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└ Misinformation

The various definitions for misinformation are more similar than different:

- Misinformation is defined as conveying information constituting a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts. (Guess and Lyons)
- The intent behind transmitting the factually inaccurate content is inadvertent or unintentional.
- When discussing misinformation there are epistemological questions that can weaken any definition. For example, evaluating its relationship to a lie or determining what makes up a fact are just some of them.

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-Wardle, Claire, and Hossein Derakhshan. "Thinking about 'Information Disorder': Formats of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Mal-Information." In *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*, 43–54. Paris: UNESCO, 2018.

- Initially, propaganda had a positive connotation. The term gained notoriety in 1627 when Pope Urban VIII founded the College of Propaganda. The mission of the college was to educate priests.
- The term became more and more associated with coercive attempts of a state to distort and manipulate information for the state's benefit.
- After World War I the propaganda had become negative in meaning.



2026-04-18

Propaganda

-Murphy, Brian J. "The Impact of Social Media Conveyed Russian-Backed Disinformation in a Polarized America: An Examination of the Executive Branch's Ethical Responsibility to Respond." Ph.D., Georgetown University, 2022.

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Like disinformation, the meaning of propaganda can vary:

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- One definition for propaganda is “information that can be true but is used to ‘disparage opposing viewpoints.’” (Guess and Lyons)
- Another is it is the “systematic dissemination of information for control, especially biased or misleading, promotes a political cause or point of view. All propaganda contains inherent epistemic defects.” (Murphy)
- Disinformation the sender’s identity is masked. Not necessarily the case for propaganda
- Disinformation is designed to be disruptive. Propaganda is intended to exert control.
- Propaganda and misinformation are different based on the intent of the sender.

└ Propaganda

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Class Questions

- Have all three been around since humans could speak?
- Has the social media age made the terms more potent?
- Why have the terms become political?

[Accessible here.](#)

[Accessible for free here.](#)

2026-04-18

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Class Questions

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Disinformation vs. Misinformation vs. Propaganda

- Have all three been around since humans could speak?
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Additional Reading: Murphy, Brian J. "The Impact of Social Media on Political Disinformation: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Political Science*. In: *Encyclopedia of the History of Ideas, Ideals, and Ideologies*. Ed. by Robert E. Bellamy. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 1-15. doi:10.1017/S0022216X22000001

Levy, D., M. Ryan, M. A. Smith, V. Strohman, & J. Sussman. K. M. Weiser. P. ... & Z. Shkedy. J. L. (2019). "The Journal of Information Science." *Journal of Information Science*. London: Sage. Available for free here.

Ward, C. and M. Ryan. (2019). "Disinformation, Misinformation, and Propaganda: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Information Science*. London: Sage. Available for free here.

- Countries on the periphery of authoritarian nations have come up with strategies to spot mis and disinformation.
- Just a few of them are: Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, and Sweden
- One thing they share in common is building a more resilient population

Strategies from social media and governmental organizations for identifying, tracking and countering mis and disinformation.

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- Formed and budgeted for an agency called Psychological Defense Authority (PDA).
- The PDA serves as the single point of coordination for civil and military institutions combating Russian disinformation operations.
- The PDA is sensitive to losing its moral authority if it is viewed as partial or political.
- Independent assessments have indicated the Swedish approach is successful. Sweden has a more media and social media literate and, therefore, resilient populace.

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Sweden



-Niklas H. Rossbach, "Psychological Defense: Vital for Sweden's Capability," *Strategic Outlook* 7 (November 2017), <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206207>

-Gordon LaForge, "Sweden Defends Its Elections Against Disinformation, 2016 – 2018," Princeton University Innovations for Successful Societies, December 16, 2020, <https://successfultsocieties.princeton.edu/publications/sweden-defends-its-elections-against-disinformation-2016-%E2%80%93-2018>



- Resilience building program relies on formal education and is reported to be among the most successful in the world with the highest Media Literacy Index score in Europe
- The score reflects a discerning population that scrutinizes the source of information.
- This does not mean Finns believe everything they read in the papers and never look at social media for information. But when they do, most have the ability to critically evaluate information.

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└ Finland

Finland

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- Erica Benke and Marianna Spring, "US Midterm Elections: Does Finland Have the Answer to Fake News?," *BBC News*, October 12, 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63222819>.
- "Countries and Territories," Freedom House, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.



- 5000 volunteers called Elves cull through and report on the accuracy of thousands of stories per year. The stories are passed to the Elves in several ways.
- One of the primary conduits is from debunk.eu. Debunk.eu is an advanced platform using algorithms designed to spot disinformation almost as soon as it is generated.
- Should the Elves determine a story is likely disinformation, they pass it to local journalists. Journalists review the reports and, at times, will publish stories.

2026-04-18

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Lithuania

-Content Commons. "A Counter-Disinformation System That Works," February 20, 2020. <https://commons.america.gov/article?id=44&site=content.america.gov>.

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- Estonia has a sizeable ethnic Russian population which makes up a quarter of the population
- Estonia's Defense League (EDL) is under the Ministry of Defense but staffed primarily by civilian volunteers.
- EDL's mission is to locate, expose, and counter disinformation
- Like the Lithuanians, the EDL utilizes elves and a technical platform, Propastop.org, to work its mission

2026-04-18

↳ Estonia

Estonia



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-Robbins, Joseph. "Countering Russian Disinformation," September 23, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/countering-russian-disinformation>

Class Questions

- Consider the United States?
- All of the above-listed countries score better than the U.S. of democracy and freedom scores
- The U.S. funds overseas efforts to spot and counter mis/disinformatoin at a much higher amount than it does domestically
- Could one of these European programs be utilized in the U.S., why, or why not?

<https://commons.america.gov...>

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2026-04-18

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Strategies from social media and governmental organizations for identifying, tracking and countering mis and disinformation.

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- Social Identity
- Avoidance of cognitive dissonance
- Heuristics

Why do information / rumors / conspiracy theories resonate?

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└ Why do information / rumors / conspiracy theories resonate?

- Partisanship congruence is one of the leading predictors of belief in false information
- Partisan identities alter information processing linked to reasoning, memory, implicit evaluation, and even perception.

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- Partisan identities alter information processing linked to reasoning, memory, implicit evaluation, and even perception.

1. Partisanship heavily outweighs other factors such as media literacy, age, cognitive reflection, or gender that correlate with belief in misinformation
 - a Those that self-identify as male are more likely to believe misinformation
 - b Those younger are more likely to believe misinformation
 - c Those with lower levels of media literacy are more likely to believe misinformation
 - d Those with lower levels of cognitive reflection are more likely to believe misinformation

Education or income levels do not appear to correlate with belief in misinformation.

└ Social Identity Theory

- Evolutionary theory has argued that the brain evolved to detect coalitional alliances.
- People behave and experience emotions in ways that are congruent with the activated social identity, in some cases, political affiliation.
- Social identities have been shown to shape the way people interpret information.

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- Social identities have been shown to shape the way people interpret information.

- Partisan identities fulfill basic social needs such as belonging, distinctiveness, and epistemic closure.
- This can generate a powerful incentive to distort beliefs in a manner that defies truth – especially when the net value of these goals outweighs accuracy goals.

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└ Cognitive Dissonance is Avoided

- When different beliefs are in conflict with one another, people experience an uncomfortable cognitive state – known as cognitive dissonance.
- Because cognitive dissonance is aversive, people are motivated to reduce that experience.

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Social Identity Over Accuracy

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└ Social Identity Over Accuracy

Social Identity Over Accuracy

The brain may allow highly identified individuals to value the outcomes of in-group members and engage in cognition and action consistent with their identity goals over accuracy goals.

Two Explanations for Partisan Belief in False Information

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Two Explanations for Partisan Belief in False Information

- **Heuristics:** People use information about party endorsement of particular attitudes, beliefs, or policies as cues that guide their own position either directly through low-effort strategies.
- **Social Identity Protection:** Making judgments that are aligned with one's political identity is more important than achieving accuracy

- **Heuristics:** People use information about party endorsement of particular attitudes, beliefs, or policies as cues that guide their own position either directly through low-effort strategies.
- **Social Identity Protection:** Making judgments that are aligned with one's political identity is more important than achieving accuracy

How can we reduce these partisan biases in processing Information?

- **Fulfill social needs through nonpartisan means**
- **Motivate people to search for the truth:** This increases the strength of accuracy goals and will reduce partisan bias.
- **Providing broad context:** Enriching corrective information so as to provide a broader account of the news is more likely to change false beliefs about an event.
- **Emphasizing Accuracy as a goal:** Prompting an accuracy goal to reach a correct conclusion can elicit greater cognitive effort towards that goal.
- **Appealing to a superordinate identity, such as Americans or human beings**

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- Individual-Level Interventions
- Systemic-Level Interventions

- Boosting
- Nudging
- Debunking
- Automated content labeling

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└ Individual-Level Interventions

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- Boosting
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Individual-Level Interventions (Boosting)

- Improve individual's ability to identify misinformation.

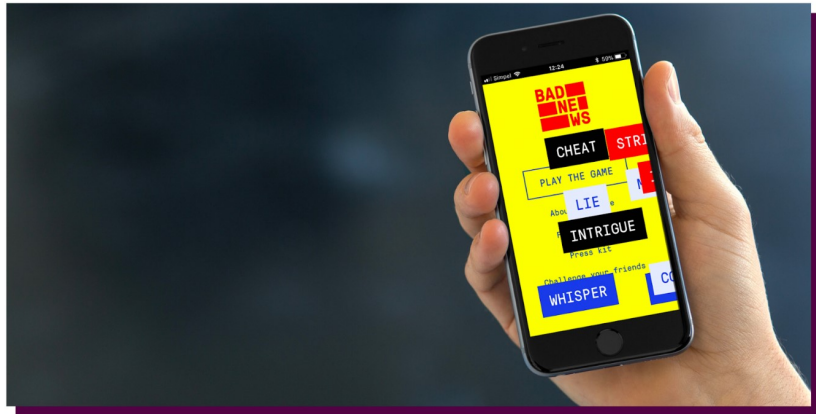
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└ Individual-Level Interventions (Boosting)

- Improve individual's ability to identify misinformation.

Examples: Pre-bunking/inoculation, increasing critical thinking, and increasing media literacy.



Bad News Game

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└ Pre-Bunking - Inoculation

Pre-bunking intervention

Pre-Bunking - Inoculation



[Bad News Game](#)

Individual-Level Interventions (Nudging Interventions)

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└ Individual-Level Interventions (Nudging Interventions)

Individual-Level Interventions (Nudging Interventions)

Shift people's attention towards accuracy, thus reducing the likelihood they share misinformation with others.
Examples: Accuracy primes and social-norms nudges.

Individual-Level Interventions (Debunking)

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Individual-Level Interventions (Debunking)

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 9h

There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent. Mail boxes will be robbed, ballots will be forged & even illegally printed out & fraudulently signed. The Governor of California is sending Ballots to millions of people, anyone.....

[Get the facts about mail-in ballots](#)

22K 24.3K 86.7K

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · 9h

...living in the state, no matter who they are or how they got there, will get one. That will be followed up with professionals telling all of these people, many of whom have never even thought of voting before, how, and for whom, to vote. This will be a Rigged Election. No way!

[Get the facts about mail-in ballots](#)

Correcting misperceptions after they have spread

Examples: Fact-checking and corrections.



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Individual-Level Interventions (Automated Content Labeling)

 **Reliable** (Reliability Rating 60-100)
Examples: CNN, Fox News, and the Washington Post

 **Unreliable** (Reliability Rating 0-60)
Examples: Gateway Pundit, Epoch Times, and the Daily Kos.

 **Platform with user-generated content**
Examples: Youtube, Reddit, and Wikipedia

 **Satire**
Examples: The Onion, Babylon Bee, and the Daily Mash

[NewsGuard](#)

The use of automation to quickly label content at scale.

Examples: Automated or manual fact-checking labels, content warnings, or credibility labels.

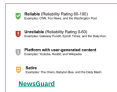
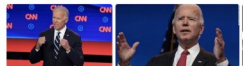


Figure comes from: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abl3844>

Search Engine Results

Joe Biden news: Latest on the 46th US President - CNN
<https://www.cnn.com/specials/politics/joe-biden-news>
 The Biden White House: Latest news on the 46th President of the United States, Joe Biden

Images of President Biden CNN
<bing.com/images>



See all images >

Opinion: President Joe Biden is making a major mistake on ...
<https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/13/opinions/biden...>

Apr 13, 2021 - [CNN] On Wednesday, President Joe Biden is expected to formally announce the planned withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by September 11...

CNN Viewership Has Dropped More than 50% Since Biden Took ...
<https://www.foxnews.com/2021/04/17/cnn-viewership...>

2 days ago - CNN has been hemorrhaging viewers since President Biden took office, with ratings down more than 50 percent in multiple categories since Inauguration Day. The liberal network spent years attacking former President Donald Trump and the network thrived during his final days in office amid a brief post-election split.

Social Media Feed (Twitter)



Visited URLs (Browser Toolbar)



Social Media Feed (Facebook)



NewsGuard

2026-04-18

Information Environment



Figure comes from: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abl3844>

- Test interventions in the non-western and non-english speaking world.
- Intervention efficacy in the lab does not always translate to the real-world.
- Measure how interventions work together rather than solely in isolation.
- Open access data from social media companies is necessary.
- Requiring social media companies to give insight into their platforms' recommender algorithms is necessary.
- More transparency about tech companies' efforts to measure the efficacy of their own interventions.

└ Path Forward on Individual-level interventions

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- Algorithms
- Business Models
- Legislation
- Geopolitics

2026-04-18

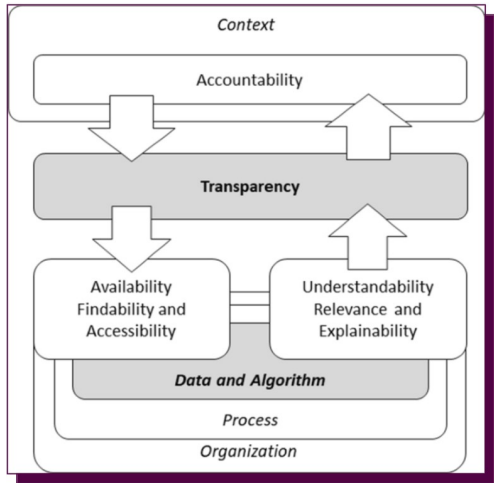
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└ Systemic-Level Interventions

Systemic-Level Interventions

- Algorithms
- Business Models
- Legislation
- Geopolitics

Systemic-Level Interventions (Algorithms)

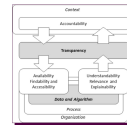


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Systemic-Level Interventions (Algorithms)

Systemic-Level Interventions (Algorithms)



Algorithmic transparency leads to accountability

Figure comes from: Roozenbeek, J., Suiter, J., & Culloty, E. (2022). Countering misinformation: Evidence, knowledge gaps, and implications of current interventions.

Systemic-Level Interventions (Business Models)

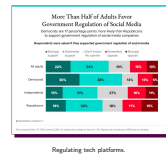
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└ Systemic-Level Interventions (Business Models)

Addressing ad-tech and supporting reliable media.

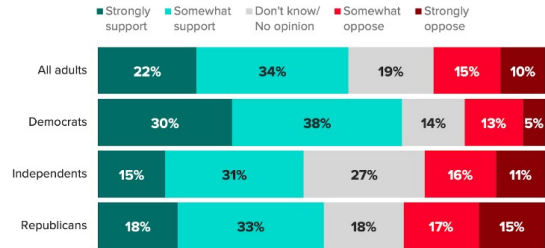
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More Than Half of Adults Favor Government Regulation of Social Media

Democrats are 17 percentage points more likely than Republicans to support government regulation of social media companies

Respondents were asked if they supported government regulation of social media



MORNING CONSULT

Poll conducted Dec. 3-7, 2021, among 2,200 U.S. adults with a margin of error of +/-2%. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

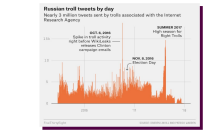
Figure comes from: <https://morningconsult.com/2021/12/15/social-media-regulation-poll-2022/>

Systemic-Level Interventions (Geopolitics)

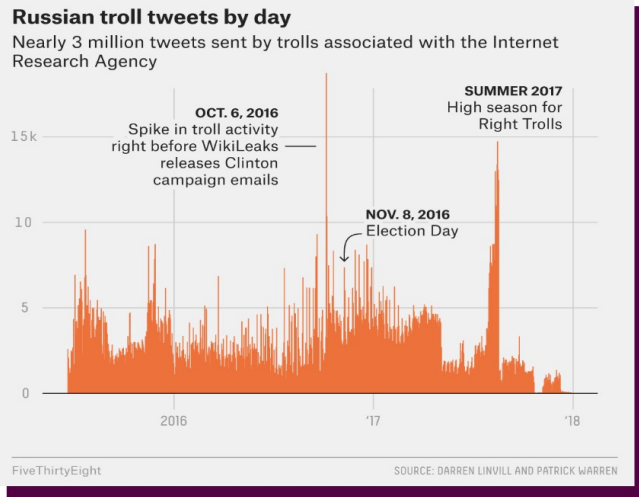
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Systemic-Level Interventions (Geopolitics)



Combating nefarious actors and reducing polarization.



The figure is pulled from this FiveThirtyEight piece:
<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-were-sharing-3-million-russian-troll-tweets/>

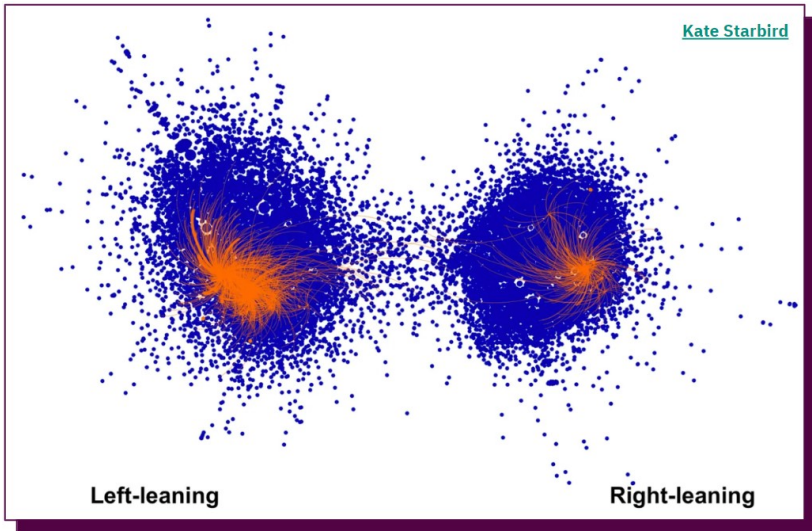
- How do disinformation campaigns operate on social media?
- How do Authoritarian State Actors Spread Propaganda?

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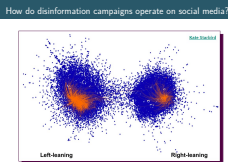
How do disinformation campaigns operate on social media?



2026-04-18

Information Environment

How do disinformation campaigns operate on social media?



To understand how IRA accounts participated in the #BlackLivesMatter Twitter conversation, Kate Starbird and co-authors a network graph using retweet patterns from Twitter accounts using the hashtag. Two different clusters of accounts tended to retweet other accounts in their cluster, but not accounts in the other cluster. There was a cluster of accounts (on the left) that was pro-BlackLivesMatter and liberal/Democrat and a cluster (on the right) that was anti-BlackLivesMatter and conservative/Republican. They then identified and highlighted the accounts identified as part of the IRA's information operations on Twitter during the Black Lives Matter protests. That graph is pictured here, with the IRA accounts in orange and other accounts in blue. As you can see, the IRA accounts impersonated activists on both sides of the conversation.

This comes from: <https://medium.com/s/story/the-trolls-within-how-russian-information-operations-infiltrated-online-communities-691fb969b9e4>

How do Authoritarian State Actors Spread Propaganda?

- Social media accounts rarely directly confront the opposition and act on the behalf of Authoritarian state actors when criticized.
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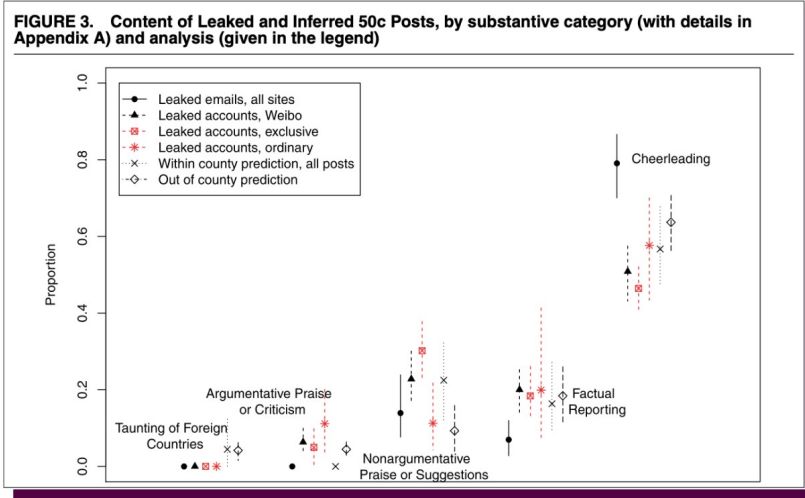
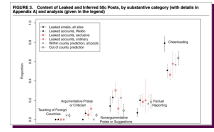


Figure comes from: King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2017). How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument. *American political science review*, 111(3), 484-501. [Accessible for free here.](#)

- 1 Guess, A. M., & Lyons, B. A. (2020). Misinformation, disinformation, and online propaganda. *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform*, 10. [Accessible for free here.](#)
- 2 Kallas, Kristina. "Claiming the Diaspora: Russia's Compatriot Policy and Its Reception by Estonian-Russian Population." *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 15, no. 3 (2016): 1–25. <https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/downloads/publications/JEMIE/2016/Kallas.pdf>.
- 3 Rossbach, Niklas H. "Psychological Defense: Vital for Sweden's Capability." *Strategic Outlook* 7 (November 2017).
- 4 Van Bavel, J. J., & Pereira, A. (2018). The partisan brain: An identity-based model of political belief. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 22(3), 213-224.
- 5 Roozenbeek, J., Suiter, J., & Culloty, E. (2022). Countering misinformation: Evidence, knowledge gaps, and implications of current interventions. [Accessible for free here.](#)
- 6 Starbird, K. (2019). Disinformation's spread: bots, trolls and all of us. *Nature*, 571(7766), 449-450. [Accessible for free here.](#)
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Readings / References

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