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Identity as a tool for disinformation: Exploiting social divisions in modern societies

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Hybrid CoE Strategic Analyses address timely questions concerning hybrid threats and can serve as an opening for a theme that requires further research. They aim to identify gaps in knowledge and understanding, explain processes behind a phenomenon, and highlight trends and future challenges.

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Hybrid CoE's mission is to strengthen its Participating States' security by providing expertise and training for countering hybrid threats, and by enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in this respect. The Centre is an autonomous hub for practitioners and experts, located in Helsinki, Finland.

Identity as a tool for disinformation: Exploiting social divisions in modern societies

Negative representations of gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and other identity markers are used in disinformation campaigns to target audiences with existing prejudices or hostility towards those identities. This Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis examines strategies and tactics used to exploit existing societal weaknesses or wedge issues rooted within social identities. Understanding how power relations between social identities can be manipulated to provoke conflict is key in building resilience and countering hybrid threats.

Introduction

State or non-state actors can use disinformation alone or combined with other hybrid threat activities for strategic and overarching objectives to destabilize a target society or state.[1] Such objectives can undermine public trust in a target state's democratic institutions (general distrust) and/or exacerbate distrust and hate between specific groups in society (particularized distrust).[2] The result is deepening hostile political polarization that can challenge core values of democratic societies. This in turn can affect the decision-making capability of political leaders, and of the people (e.g., through interfering in elections).

Disinformation is most effective when agitating existing social divisions in society. Social divisions are often rooted in individual and societal assumptions and prejudices linked to identity markers like gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or age. These identities often play a central role within existing wedge issues, or issues of conflict in societies.[3]

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Identity and power as targets of disinformation

Disinformation campaigns often target social identities that reflect power relations between people in society, and between dominant and non-dominant groups.[4] Dominant "ingroups" are

1 Georgios Giannopoulos et al., 'The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model', JRC Technical Report (2020).
2 Ali Bilgic et al., 'Trust, Distrust, and Security: An Untrustworthy Immigrant in a Trusting Community', *Political Psychology*, Volume 40, Issue 6, (2019): 1283–1296.
3 Jane Freedman et al., 'Identity, stability, Hybrid Threats, and Disinformation' *ICONO,* Volume 14, Issue 19, (2021): 38–69.
4 Gunhild Hoogensen et al., 'Gender, Resistance, and Human Security'. *Security Dialogue*, Volume 37, Issue 2, (2006): 207–228.

those who usually have more power to define and dictate societal norms, and will benefit from the parameters and expectations of those social norms. The same power dynamics determine who are not included or will not benefit, populating "outgroups" who have less power to define norms and values in society. Social identities and their identity markers play an important role in expressing who has power in society. Different identities are often pitted against one another when it comes to access to services, benefits/rights, and political decision-making.[5]

Typical examples of these power dynamics include historical power differences and hierarchies between genders, races and ethnicities, sexual orientations, abilities and disabilities, and social classes. Struggles for equality become flash points for conflict – both for those who are fighting for their rights, as well as those who oppose them. People rarely belong to or identify with just one such identity, and often experience the impacts of intersecting identities, which further determine their role and power in society.[6] Today, a white, middle-class Christian man still has considerably more societal influence in Europe or North America, and is part of a dominant group, compared to a young, black, Muslim, middle-class, queer woman, who would often find herself relegated to a non-dominant group with less power to contribute to or define societal norms and privileges.

The more egalitarian a society is, the less susceptible it is to disruption based on identity markers. Egalitarian societies generally have social norms, values and laws that are already established to protect most, if not all, social groups in society, minimizing power imbalances between people. In general, egalitarian societies are also democratic societies. However, not all democratic societies are egalitarian, and none are completely equal. The nature and extent of inequalities within a society matters, as it is these inequalities that can be manipulated to foment unrest, if not instability in a country.

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Equality is politically contentious, however. Some people, particularly within dominant or "ingroups", feel threatened by the potential gains made by people in "outgroups", thinking that equality for marginalized groups comes at the expense of dominant groups. This is often reflected in trust levels in a society where particularized distrust for certain groups can be central to exacerbating conflict.[7] For example, dominant majority population groups in many European societies have framed migrants/refugees of colour and/or Muslims as a potential

5 Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, Volume 43, Issue 6, (1990): 1241–1300.

6 Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Volume 1989, Issue 1, Article 8, (1989): 139–167.

7 Bilgic et al., 'Trust, Distrust, and Security', 1283–1296.

threat to the dominant group.[8] Malign actors engaged in disinformation campaigns use these existing conflicts in an attempt to stoke further polarization and political discord. Democratic states are easy to target as they generally allow for dialogue and debate regarding benefits and rights (political security), as well as freedom of speech.

Powerful emotional narratives target value systems

Disinformation targets people's emotions, particularly negative emotions like hate, disgust, anger, fear, and sadness.[9] Emotions, in turn, are "intimately tied to values".[10] Hence, emotions can influence the core of democratic governance, which relies on respect and trust between populations and their governments, and between people. Disinformation attempts to increase particularized distrust for "the other". Destabilizing trust within the population is achieved when targeting the fear that certain values will be eroded, increasing distrust that the government will, or even can, ensure that the values of the population – often those of the dominant group – are secured. Societal norms about identity are embedded within our values and are reflected and secured in our political institutions. Identities can therefore be manipulated and attacked through the use of disinformation to exacerbate a threat-oriented framing, where one identity, or a combination of many, is perceived as being in conflict with another.

Emotional narratives are powerful tools, and the messaging is often tailored to a particular audience. The adversary tries to identify the most divisive topics where it is easiest to evoke strong emotions, and these topics vary from one audience to another.[11] In the US, it might be a matter of divisive racial narratives,[12] whereas in many Central and Eastern European countries, one often encounters disinformation about migrants and refugees[13] or anti-LGBT messaging, such as narratives about "gay Europe" versus countries where traditional values and masculinity are typically favoured. The norms around these identities are closely linked to state-building: how we govern, who has the power to govern, and who sets the governing agenda.[14]

8 Ibid.

9 Luciana Oliveira et al., 'Using Social Media Categorical Reactions as a Gateway to Identify Hate Speech in COVID-19 News', *SN Comput Science*, Volume 4, Article 11, (2023).

10 Steffen Steinert et al., 'Emotions, values and technology: Illuminating the blind spots', *Journal of Responsible Innovation,* Volume 7, Issue 3, (2020): 298–319; Michelle Montague, 'The Logic, Intentionality, and Phenomenology of Emotion', *Philosophical Studies*, Volume 145, Issue 2, (2009): 171–192.

11 Jakub Kalenský et al., 'Amplify divisions, take advantage of vulnerabilities: Russian disinformation strategy in Western Balkans', *Information war and fight for truth,* (2022): 3–5, https://www.cep.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Fight-for-Truth.pdf.

12 Julian E. Barnes et al., 'Russia Trying to Stoke U.S. Racial Tensions Before Election, Officials Say', *The New York Times*, 10 March, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/us/politics/russian-interference-race.html.

13 EUvsDisinfo, 'Greasing the Wheels with Disinformation: Migration and NATO in the Focus of the Pro-Kremlin Media', 25 November, 2021, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/greasing-the-wheels-with-disinformation/.

14 EUvsDisinfo, 'Russophobia, Dependence, and the Belarusian Gay-Opposition', 4 July, 2019, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/russophobia-dependence-and-the-belarusian-gay-opposition/; Leigh Raymond et al., 'Norm-based governance for severe collective action problems: lessons from climate change and COVID-19', *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 21, Issue 2, (2023): 519–532.

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Many authoritarian states use disinformation to champion a traditional value narrative as a countermeasure to the observance of human rights, which are labelled as "Western". Work done around the world to champion women's and other human rights is rejected in order to create a narrative that pits the "West" against "traditional" states.[15]

For example, a Russian advertisement went viral in the summer of 2022, encouraging people to move to Russia and touting its advantages of beautiful women, no cancel culture, strong traditions rooted in Christianity, and cheap energy.[16] This narrative caters to people in both authoritarian and democratic states that share similar values and assumptions about identities. These sentiments are manipulated to encourage a greater rift between those fighting for traditions, and those fighting for human rights that appear to threaten certain traditions.

Other examples of anti-rights and pro-tradition disinformation targeting sympathizers and supporters include the denigration of the Women's March movement in the US, which arose in 2017 after the election of President Donald Trump. Existing criticisms or conflictual narratives were pitted against one another to potentially increase political polarization and/or hatred, including black feminists critical of white feminism, or conservative women's values excluded from the political system.[17] Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian American activist wearing a hijab was framed as a radical jihadi who had infiltrated American feminism.[18] When this narrative generated a lot of attention, Russian amplifier accounts consistently worked to spin narratives about Ms Sarsour, claiming that she was a "Jew-hating Muslim" intent on imposing Sharia law in the US. This resulted in a massive hate campaign against Ms Sarsour, ultimately leading to her stepping down as one of the leaders of the movement, and to the eventual breakup of the movement.[19] It also reinforced a powerful hate narrative against Islam among populations already susceptible to such ideas.

Gendered disinformation has focused on women political leaders and female public figures, and has targeted those who mistrust female leaders, as exemplified in disinformation campaigns against Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović,

15 Janne Mende, 'Are human rights western – And why does it matter? A perspective from international political theory', *Journal of International Political Theory*, Volume 17, Issue 1, (2021): 38–57.

16 'Russia Trolling the West – Winter is coming: Time to move to Russia', 29 July 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=zUOpz352Uxk.

17 Jacqueline Ryan Vickery et al., 'The persistence of misogyny: From the streets, to our screens, to the White House', *Mediating misogyny: Gender, technology, and harassment*, Springer, (2018): 1–27.

18 Samantha Bradshaw et al., 'The gender dimensions of foreign influence operations', *International Journal of Communication*, Volume 15, (2021): 4596–4618.

19 Ellen Barry, 'How Russian Trolls Helped Keep the Women's March Out of Lock Step', *The New York Times*, 18 September 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/18/us/womens-march-russia-trump.html.

former President of Croatia,[20] and Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk.[21] These campaigns rely on misogyny and societal stereotypes, framing women as untrustworthy, unintelligent, emotional/angry/crazy, or sexual. This type of disinformation is designed to reinforce, if not spread, public animosity towards female politicians' track records and personalities, as well as to discourage women from seeking political careers or leadership roles.

In addition, gender, race and religion were instrumentalized as part of the disinformation during the migration crisis of 2015, when it was suggested that brown/black male migrants would attack European white women and girls, as evidenced in the fake rape stories such as the Lisa case.[22] Such disinformation generates emotional reactions[23] that make some people further distrust migrants, as well as political leaders who support immigration.

Conclusions

Understanding the power dynamics between social identity markers enables policymakers, as well as average citizens, to think about different strategies for resisting disinformation, establishing countermeasures, and building resilience. Studies of hybrid threat activities like disinformation benefit from intersectional analyses to help identify political cleavages and lines of conflict in each society that may otherwise be ignored or glossed over, and to better understand how trust, mistrust and distrust develop.

To improve security, it is essential to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of democracies and, above all, to take the threat seriously enough. Building resilience to gendered and intersectional disinformation calls for a comprehensive analytical approach to security, where multiple actors, such as government, civil society, and local influencers, use public dialogue to identify threats and their countermeasures. This will duly increase the potential for societal resilience.

20 The Observers, 'No, that's not the president of Croatia in those viral bikini photos', *France24*, 13 July, 2018, https://observers.france24.com/en/20180713-fake-false-no-not-president-croatia-those-viral-bikini-photos.

21 Nina Jankowicz, 'How disinformation became a new threat to women', *Coda Story*, 11 December, 2017, https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/how-disinformation-became-a-new-threat-to-women/.

22 Stefan Meister, 'The "Lisa case": Germany as a target of Russian disinformation', *NATO Review*, 25 July, 2016, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/07/25/the-lisa-case-germany-as-a-target-of-russian-disinformation/index.html; Judith Szakacs et al., 'The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU', Policy Department for External Relations, Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, (2021).

23 Aiden Hoyle et al., 'Grey matters: Advancing a psychological effects-based approach to countering malign information influence', *New Perspectives*, Volume 29, Issue 2, (2021): 144–164.

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