



European Liberal
Forum

PUBLICATIONS

Policy Paper

November 2021

The Effect of Russian Information Operations

Abstract

Information operations are critical for Russia's strategy against the West. Russia is unlikely to overpower the West through its military strength, but its information operations hold an almost unlimited promise of increasing polarization, and undermining Western unity. Nonetheless, there is a burgeoning belief that information operations are not a major problem due to the lack of measurable effects of them. Correctly understanding how information operations are effective are critical for countering them adequately. This brief aims to contribute to this knowledge by surveying what we know about the effectiveness of information operations and suggesting recommendations on how to improve democracies' information resilience.



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FORES

The Effect of Russian Information Operations

Introduction

There has been a great migration of our public debates from print through television to social media. This has given rise to incredible opportunities for external influence of democratic discourse and an explosion of interest in information operations (often termed disinformation, propaganda, and fake news)¹. The term information operation is chosen in this paper to avoid a presumption of false information, where the most successful operations rather builds on truths and half-truths. Information operations consist of organized information attempts to achieve a specific outcome.

Information operations have surged in importance and frequency. A study of the field disinformation saw that 60% of the studies since 1995 have been published since 2016 and the Russian interference in the US election.² However, we know less about what effect they have. It is difficult, potentially impossible, to infer behavioural change from influence operations. How can one know which individual piece of information that leads to behavioural change? The field of disinformation-studies is at its infancy and suffers from a lack of coherence with different investigations looking at different things with different measurements and concepts.³

That being said, online information operations are a central part of statecraft today. Social media platforms – where the majority of information operations take place – have surged to become among the largest companies in the world today. This has been done through the notion that they are able to influence people in both profound and measurable ways.⁴ This is why Google and Facebook managed to outcompete traditional media in terms of advertising revenue and surged to the top five largest companies in the world. The great digital migration has also become prevalent among strategists. If it is the most effective venue to influence someone, geopolitical conflict will move there too.⁵

1 The term information operation is chosen to avoid a presumption of false information, where the most successful operations rather builds on truths and half-truths. The consist of organized information attempts to achieve a specific outcome.

2 Bateman, J. et al. (2021). [“Measuring the Effects of Influence Operations: Key Findings and Gaps From Empirical Research”](#). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

3 Wanless, A., (2021), [“What’s Working and What Isn’t in Researching Influence Operations?”](#), Lawfare, 22 September.

4 Bernstein, J. (2021). [“Bad News: Selling the Story of Disinformation”](#), Harper’s Magazine, September Issue

5 Jonsson, O. (2020). [Modern Warfare: New Technologies and Enduring Concepts](#), Stockholm: Stockholm Free World Forum

The Russian View of Information Operations

The increasing utility of information operations have permeated Russian strategists' understanding of modern war and how they conduct their grand strategy. The National Security Strategy, which is Russia's overarching document defining its national security, states that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) were used to "interfere in the internal affairs of states, undermine their sovereignty and violate their territorial integrity, posing a threat to international peace and security".⁶ The most important military officer, the Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov, argued that "information resources have become one of the most effective weapons. Their wide use allows in a few days to shake the situation in the country from within".⁷ Colonel General Zarudnitsky, head of the military academy and previous head of the Main Operations Directorate, saw that "undoubtedly, the psychological weapon is the weapon of tomorrow".⁸

These views have manifested themselves in Russian strategy towards the West in recent years, particularly used in online information operations. The Russian interference in the US 2016 presidential election consisted of a number of measures, including the penetration of the Democratic National Committee's database.⁹ Nonetheless, a simple hack was not novel nor very interesting, but it was rather the consequent information operations involving the hacked content that managed to impact the national US debate. This underlines and emphasises Russian strategists' views on how information weapons are increasingly becoming more important relative to military means. Also it enabled an impact (albeit unsure how big) on the US domestic situation that military means would have had a hard time doing.¹⁰

The (In)Effectiveness of Information Operations

There has been a burgeoning notion that the effects of information operations are overstated or simply incorrect.¹¹ Brendan Nyhan and colleagues found through an investigation of web data that Trump supporters were the most likely to visit "fake news"-portals, but that these portals were a small part of their information diet, and that they were an even smaller subset of the population¹². This led

6 President of the Russian Federation, (2021), "[Strategiya natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii](#) (National security strategy of the Russian Federation)". Decree 400. July 2.

7 Gerasimov, V., (2016). "Po opytu Sirii" [Based on the experiences from Syria]. *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer* 9 (624).

8 Zarudnitskiy, V.B. (2021). "Kharakter i sodержaniye voyennykh konfliktov v sovremennykh usloviyakh i obozrimoi perspektive (Character and content of armed conflicts in modern conditions and near term perspective)". *Voennaya Mysl'*, No.1, p.38.

9 Mueller III, R. S. (2019). "[Report On the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election](#)". U.S. Department of Justice.

10 For a review of the impact, see Jamieson, K. H. (2020). *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*. Oxford University Press.

11 Ingram, M. (2019). "[Researchers Say Fears about 'Fake News' are Exaggerated](#)", *Columbia Journalism Review*, February 7.

12 Guess, A. M., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2020). "Exposure to Untrustworthy Websites in the 2016 US

them to argue that the impact of “fake news” is overstated. Similarly, The New Yorker also published a critical piece discussing whether Russian meddling in the 2016 US Presidential elections were as dangerous as we think.¹³ Levya and Beckett found “no main effect of exposure to [digital fake news] on participants’ candidate evaluations or vote choice” and that they could at worst reinforce negative dispositions.¹⁴

One of most notable studies so far on the effects of Russian information operations investigated 1,239 Democratic and Republican accounts for a one month-period. The study analysed how Russian operations from the Internet Research Agency (most commonly known as the Russian troll farm) influenced political attitudes and behaviour. The key conclusion from the researchers were “no evidence that interaction with IRA accounts substantially impacted 6 distinctive measures of political attitudes and behaviours over a 1-mo period”.¹⁵ While the authors caveated their findings in a number of ways – and critically to investigate already declared Democrats and Republicans – the study reinforced the view that information operations were an overrated problem. It is unclear how a likely a smoking gun-type of evidence would be presented in interacting with junk articles and in particular, if they are only running for a month.

It is critical to contrast the above views with longitudinal studies and systemic studies. If you extend the timeline, there are indeed strong effects from long-term information exposure in changing voter behaviour. For instance, Peisakhin and Rozenas find that the long-term presence and information operations of pro-Russian television substantially increased average electoral support for pro-Russian candidates in the presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine in 2014.¹⁶ Another study shows how Americans exposed to negative images of Ukraine from Russian media also saw an increasingly negative view of Ukraine, and an approval drop by over 10%.¹⁷

Looking beyond the interaction with individual articles or tweets, the Computational Propaganda research project at Oxford University analysed the impact of “junk news” in Michigan during the 2016 US Presidential election. They found in particular that “junk news” vastly outperformed professional news and that the most successful pieces of content were junk news with “extremist, sensationalist, conspiratorial [and] masked commentary”.¹⁸ That is to say, not

Election”. *Nature Human Behavior*, 4(5), 472–480

13 Yaffa, J. (2020) [“Is Russian Meddling as Dangerous as We Think?”](#), The New Yorker, September 7.

14 Levya, R., & Beckett, C. (2020). “Testing and unpacking the effects of digital fake news: on presidential candidate evaluations and voter support”. *AI and Society*, 35(4), 969–980.

15 Bail, C. A., Guay, B., Maloney, E., Combs, A., Hillygus, D. S., Merhout, F., Freelon, D., & Volfovsky, A. (2020). Assessing the Russian Internet Research Agency’s impact on the political attitudes and behaviors of American Twitter users in late 2017. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 117(1), 243–250.

16 Peisakhin, L. & Rozenas, A. (2018). “Electoral Effects of Biased Media: Russian Television in Ukraine”, *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (3): 535–550.

17 Fisher, A. (2020). “Demonizing the Enemy: The Influence of Russian State-Sponsored Media on American Audiences,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 36(4), 281–296.

18 Howard, P. N., Bolsover, G., Kollanyi, B., Bradshaw, S., & Neudert, L.-M. (2017). [“Junk News and Bots during the U.S. Election: What Were Michigan Voters Sharing Over Twitter?”](#) The Computational Propaganda Project Algorithms, Automation and Digital Politics, 1(March), 321–324.

only were the information environment filled with “junk news”, but they also had a much higher degree of interaction. Another study also showed how the use of social media was found to lead to information overload which was likely to contribute to information avoidance.¹⁹ This supports the view the sheer amount of disinformation or junk content can contribute to deteriorating the state of the information system.

Tenove and McKay sought to illustrate how the proliferation of influence operations affected open societies built on a deliberative democratic process, i.e., a process built on transparent and reasonable discussion. They found in particular that modern disinformation could “contribute to the system-level anti-deliberative properties of epistemic cynicism, techno-affective polarization, and pervasive inauthenticity”.²⁰ This would more specifically “undermine a polity’s capacity to engage in communication characterized by the use of facts and logic, moral respect, and democratic inclusion.”

This view agrees very well with a study of Sweden using both focus group discussions and surveys regarding what citizens themselves feared from influence operations. It showed that respondents worried mostly about the exacerbation of polarisation within society and the undermining of democracy.²¹ Indeed, Bennet and Livingston also found that “the spread of disinformation can be traced to growing legitimacy problems in many democracies”.²²

Policy Implications

Gauging the effectiveness of information operations is a precondition for devising a strategy to counter them. If they are believed to be ineffective, there is a risk for complacency about them. Moreover, it can also be a strategy to choose to ignore it and hope that the strength of a democratic debate can counter such influence by itself. Nonetheless, such strategy is risky as it entails an overreliance by the individuals capacity to decode narratives and on “media as objective independent actors that serve as safeguards of democracy”.²³

Oppositely, if too much weight is given to information operations, a too heavy response could restrict the freedom of speech or enable government censorship.²⁴ Current research suggests that information operations have a particularly strong effect on the systemic level and even though particular articles or post are less interesting. Less prosaically, there is indeed a sense that the quality of our public

19 Soroya, S. H., Farooq, A., Mahmood, K., Isoaho, J., & Zara, S. e. (2021). “From Information Seeking to Information Avoidance: Understanding the Health Information Behavior during a Global Health Crisis”. *Information Processing and Management*, 58(2), 1-16

20 McKay, S., & Tenove, C. (2021). “Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy” *Political Research Quarterly*, 74(3), 703-717.

21 Wagnsson, C. (2020). “What is at stake in the information sphere? Anxieties about malign information influence among ordinary Swedes”. *European Security*, 29(4), 397–415.

22 Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 122–139.

23 Hellman, M., & Wagnsson, C. (2017). “How can European states respond to Russian information warfare? An analytical framework”. *European Security*, 26(2), 153–170.

24 See for instance Bjola, C. (2018). “The Ethics of Countering Digital Propaganda”. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 32(3), 305-315.

debates is deteriorating along with our ability to arrive at common understandings. Indeed, we see an increasing political polarization with a hollowing out of the middle in the political spectrum.²⁵

Russian strategists have taken information operations to their core, and in particular the long-term effect can give them decisive political gains in the Russian neighbourhood or towards the EU and NATO. The studies above illustrate the systemic impact and how information operations can poison the lifeblood of democratic societies, the free exchange of ideas, premised on the free flow of information. As information operations have increasingly managed to saturate the news environment and outperform professional news, increase information avoidance, and generated epistemic cynicism, the quality of democratic politics will deteriorate.

While there is no silver bullet that will come close to solving the information-operations problems as it is essentially about solving information flows of a whole society, below I suggest some policy recommendations to decrease the vulnerability of information operations.

Governance measures

- Lawmakers and governments should support a range of measures that aim for the long-term improvement of the information system, such as **increasing media literacy, supporting fact-checking initiatives and monitoring foreign information operations.**
- The social media-companies are currently treated as platforms without responsibility for what is published on their webpages. Moreover, inflammatory content is encouraged as it generates the key currency of social media: engagement. Lawmakers should – along with the proposed EU Digital Services Act – **increase the demands of content moderation on social media-platforms.**
- Governments should **improve the protection of data privacy** which protects individuals and decreases the opportunities to use micro-targeting for information operations.

Social Media

- Measures should be taken to **decrease the production of junk news** by for instance using digital-identity verification to reduce fake accounts. Social media-companies should strengthen their Know Your Customer-protocols to this end.
- The primary concern of **social media-platforms is to decrease the spread** of junk news and or false news.²⁶ This can be done through flagging mechanisms with swift analysis of suspected pieces of content, and twisting the News Feed-algorithm to give priority to trusted sources.
- Social media-platforms should collaborate closely with **fact-checking initiatives and authorities monitoring foreign-information operations.**

²⁵ Muñiz, M., 2019, "A New Social Contract for the Digital Age", in Work in the Age of Data, BBVA Openmind, No.12.

²⁶ Matthews, M. et al. (2021). "Understanding and Defending Against Russia's Malign and Subversive Information Efforts in Europe", RAND Corporation, Research Report.

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ISBN: 9782390670216

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