



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## DISINFORMATION WILL CONTINUE TO ROIL WESTERN SOCIETY AND THE 2020 ELECTIONS

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Many actors are involved in shaping the information environment, such as governments with strategic aims or public relations firms with commercial purposes. Given the volume and velocity of information in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, combatting disinformation in the deluge of data may be the West's most daunting civic challenge. Private and public sector responses have been woefully inadequate, and there is no consensus on a solution. There is an understandable hesitancy by governments to regulate speech, and social media giants claim unease with being "[arbiters of truth](#)." Paradoxically, while it is clear that the [abundance of disinformation](#) threatens democratic institutions, such institutions must tread carefully when attempting to counter so as not to undermine public trust, or laws protecting the right to free expression.

The vast global information technology infrastructure eases and facilitates the ability to target, reach, and engage distant audiences in novel and cost-effective ways, and such digital approaches pose the opportunity for malign actors to shape information environments in open societies. External actors such as [Russia](#) and [China](#) have sought to [capitalize on recent social justice events](#) and COVID-19 to [distribute disinformation, amplify conspiracy theories](#), and thereby sow division to weaken the United States and the West, particularly by propagating narratives that governmental institutions are untrustworthy. This is a new face of competition short of war. While armed conflicts between states have [decreased since the 1980s](#), states and proxies are pursuing alternative warfare approaches to achieve strategic objectives without triggering a kinetic response. This ambiguity, where '[proxy forces, covert action, cyber operations, and political manipulation can achieve strategic goals](#)', makes it difficult to identify if an attack has occurred, to measure its effectiveness, and to gauge proportionate responses. It is similarly difficult to determine the actor behind a sophisticated campaign and to ascertain their intent.

Liberal democracies are particularly vulnerable to the manipulation of the information environment thanks to freedoms of the press and of speech in particular. Indeed, these rights undergird the enduring nature of Western societies; such is the nature of a system where public opinion is expected, by design, to influence political decision-making. However, this participation has been accompanied by an increasing distrust of governments (and power generally) since the Vietnam and Watergate era in the United States, and amplified more recently by the fiasco of the incorrect and alarmist WMD assessments justifying the Second Gulf War in the U.S. and in

Europe. This distrust, coupled with a [lack of critical thinking and media literacy skills](#), makes liberal democracies receptive to narratives which challenge governmental information.

### OUTLOOK

While public and commercial researchers learn more about tactics for information shaping and the actors applying them, widely available tools (such as Virtual Private Networks) and more sophisticated misdirection attempts (such as [astroturfing](#)) make attribution a challenge. Moreover, domestic and foreign actors intermingle in a complex symbiosis, easily aligning interests where convenient, in ways that are challenging to disentangle. In light of the complexity and volume of such operations, it can be difficult for governments to react effectively to distortions in the information environment, leaving citizens to fend for themselves and/or leaving tech giants to decide whether to remove content.

Elections are but one aspect of the assault on societal fabric via social media, but unsurprisingly [election security](#) has garnered significant attention. America is [hardly better prepared than in 2016 to deal](#) with the role of disinformation in 2020 because there is no consensus regarding the intent of foreign actors, no way to measure the impact of their information campaigns via counterfactual analysis, appropriate concerns over inhibiting free speech, and the lingering question of whether some politicians turn a blind eye toward meddling that may be done in their favour. As was clear in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, disinformation and hostile manipulation of the information environment featured prominently in the contours of the event, although this is a different question from whether it affected the outcome. Given the scale and velocity of disinformation, and hyper partisanship looking forward to the 2020 U.S. election, there is little reason for optimism.

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