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State-Sponsored Disinformation Campaigns

Foreign government adversaries are launching disinformation campaigns against the United States on the Internet, social media platforms, and state-sponsored media with the goal of undermining public confidence in government institutions and to fuel divisions within American society. Moscow's use of disinformation campaigns is not new—during the Cold War, the Soviet Union engaged in multiple campaigns designed to sway public opinion about the United States and discredit US policies. However, with the Internet these false stories spread more rapidly and globally. While Russia's activities receive the most coverage, China, Iran, and Venezuela also have used online influence campaigns to influence public perceptions and spread alternative narratives.

- The purpose of disinformation campaigns is to intentionally create and propagate various narratives, counter-narratives, and anti-narratives to influence a population. Russia, for example, spread inaccurate and distorted information intending to exploit and amplify existing political or social divides focusing on political and societal issues including racial divisions, LGBTQ rights, gun control, and immigration.
- Actors engaging in disinformation campaigns use social media platforms—like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Redditt, and 4chan—as well as, state-sponsored media—such as Russia's RT and Sputnik—to reach a wide audience. By creating thousands of fake accounts, buying ads, and posting content on divisive issues, state actors are able to create the illusion of a large activist following and lure the public to engage with the campaign.
- In January, Twitter removed 418 accounts linked to Russia, 2,617 accounts linked to Iran, and 1,960 accounts linked to Venezuela; Facebook removed 783 pages, groups, and accounts tied to Iran, and 364 pages and accounts linked to Russia.



Twitter removed accounts linked to Venezuela that were targeting a Venezuelan audience based in the US on behalf of the Venezuelan leader.



Facebook and Twitter removed hundreds of Iranian-linked pages for “engaging in inauthentic behavior” on topics including the US role in Syria and Yemen and Israeli-Palestinian relations



China has manipulated traditional US media outlets with the goal of influencing public opinion on issues like risks of a trade war with Beijing and the US elections.

This is the NTIC's first product in a series focused on state-sponsored disinformation at the UNCLASSIFIED level. Be on the lookout for future products including how Russia has utilized the internet to spread disinformation in the United States and how it can be detected. Check out this publication and more at ncrintel.org.