

Week 9: Research Essay
The Weaponization of Information

Kjersti Søberg
PS 515: Comparative Foreign Policy
August 4, 2024

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do state-sponsored disinformation campaigns in the United States and Russia impact democratic processes, international relations, and global security, and what are the implications for countering such campaigns?

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH QUESTION IMPORTANT/RELEVANT TODAY?

In exploring the importance/relevance of this research question, three primary thoughts come to mind. First, it is extremely timely in the wake of the 2016 US election and the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, social media is a primary source of information for the public and regulations are ever-changing. Lastly, there is a significant gap in existing research given the complexity of the matter. These gaps exist not just because of the evolving nature of social media, but because of limitations in data from both the US and Russia. This research question is important because it has the potential to inform policy decisions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of misinformation on democratic processes.

THEORETICAL ARGUMENTS

In assessing theoretical arguments around my research question, I think it is necessary to explore various other questions involving social media. However, in exploring these arguments, they must be approached from different angles. When considering this research from a political science perspective, there are various questions that need to be answered. For instance, how does social media impact public opinion and political behavior? How do political actors or the

government use social media to communicate with the public? Does social media influence democratic processes differently than that of an authoritarian state like Russia? To comprehensively assess this research question, it must also consider social psychology theories as well like cognitive dissonance and persuasion. For this, I would aim to uncover how people reconcile inconsistencies between their beliefs and the information they encounter on social media while also assessing how persuasive messaging can be. Lastly, it would be necessary to explore communication theories based on how public policy is shaped through social media. Ultimately, a multidisciplinary approach would be best to comprehensively explore theoretical arguments. Assessing the broader perspective of the interplay of political science, social psychology, and communication studies is necessary to comprehensively assess my research question. Without it, various gaps would remain.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several key scholarly sources that I have used in my preliminary research to address my question. The first is by Eveleth et. al titled, “A Bibliometric Analysis of Disinformation through Social Media.” This article was published in the *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies* and explores how users' perceptions of the benefits of social media affect their trust in information obtained from social media.¹ This is relevant to my research as its key findings indicate that users' trust in social media information is positively influenced by their perceived benefits of using social media. Ergo, understanding the factors

¹ Daniel M. Eveleth, Robert W. Stone, and Lori J. Baker-Eveleth, “A Bibliometric Analysis of Disinformation through Social Media,” *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, Volume 14, Issue 4, Article No: e202445, 2022.

influencing users' perceptions of social media benefits is crucial for comprehending how trust in platform-derived information is formed and potentially manipulated. This addresses my first question of how social media impacts public opinion and assesses it from a psychological perspective. It does not, however, address how policy is shaped by it. For this, I have started my research with both Bou-Karroum et al.'s article² titled "Using Media to Impact Health Policy-making: An Integrative Systematic Review" and Grossman's "Media and Policy Making in the Digital Age."³ Both address policymaking practices due to social media from different perspectives. Bou-Karroum et al.'s conclusion is particularly poignant in my research as it states,

There is currently a lack of reliable evidence to guide decisions on the use of media interventions to influence health policy-making. Additional and better-designed, conducted, and reported primary research is needed to better understand the effects of media interventions, particularly social media, on health policy-making processes, and the circumstances under which media interventions are successful.⁴

Despite this article focusing solely on health policymaking, it is an indication that the broader field of media's influence on policy is still in its nascent stages, particularly regarding the role of social media. This provides an opportunity for further exploration into how social media shapes policy decisions, specifically within the context of foreign affairs. Grossman's article has similar conclusions, as it argues that current research on the complex relationship between media and policymaking is fragmented and lacks a comprehensive understanding. He states, "Our understanding of the relationship between media and policy making [SIC] remains limited, as

² L. Bou-Karroum, El-Jardali, F., Hemadi, N., Faraj, Y., Ojha, U., Shahrouf, M., Darzi, A., Ali, M., Doumit, C., Langlois, E. V., Melki, J., AbouHaidar, G. H., & Akl, E. A., "Using media to impact health policy-making: an integrative systematic review," *Implementation Science: IS*, 12(1), 52, 2017.

³ Emiliano Grossman, "Media and Policy Making in the Digital Age," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Volume 25, 2022.

⁴ Bou-Karroum et al. 2017.

separate research agendas look at parts of the puzzle in public policy, political communication, and related fields.”⁵

I understand that my research on Russia’s information ecosystem may be limited given the country's strict media controls and limited access to reliable data. However, by focusing on publicly available information, such as open-source intelligence and social media analysis, I aim to provide valuable insights into its propaganda apparatus and its influence on domestic and international audiences. For this, I am starting my research with NATO’s “Russian intelligence operations shifting tactics not goals” by Dr. Galeotti. I believe this particular article is pertinent to my research as NATO offers a unique, external perspective on Russia's information warfare capabilities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I recognize that one of my biggest hurdles in researching this question will be the lack of scholarship in this exact space. In my preliminary research, I have found information specifically on social media and its effects, how it can be weaponized, and other area-specific topics. This is true both for the differences in the US’s and Russia’s use of social media and in how it shapes public opinion. However, with regard to foreign policy, this area will be more complex. This is particularly true due to the fact that data regarding my research takes time to both gather as well as to analyze and policymaking is not quick. Moreover, data and research will continue to evolve. Therefore, I will need to conduct my research with mixed methodologies where I will need to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research to

⁵ Grossman 2022, 443.

triangulate a substantive answer. My quantitative must involve understanding underlying factors and motivations behind social media influencing the general population. It also would need to assess various actors – whether nefarious or not – and their intentions. My qualitative research would involve analyzing any large datasets of social media content to identify patterns or trends. I have already seen this done in peer-reviewed studies revolving around media on COVID-19 as well as the 2016 elections. These two topics will indicate how policy is shaped by social media and are solid use-case studies that will add value to my topic.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

In the contemporary digital landscape, disinformation has emerged as a formidable threat, undermining the integrity of democratic institutions and global security. Disinformation, defined as false information deliberately created and disseminated with the intent to deceive, mislead, or manipulate public opinion, stands in stark contrast to unintentionally spreading misinformation. Its creation with the specific purpose of causing harm, influencing political processes, sowing discord, or undermining trust in institutions highlights its potency as a tool in information warfare. Disinformation is a global concern, transcending national boundaries and impacting societies worldwide. The prevalence of these phenomena has been exacerbated by the advent of digital technologies, which have enabled the rapid spread and amplification of false information.⁶ Countries and their policymakers are grappling with the challenge of combating this modern challenge. The interconnectedness of the digital landscape means that disinformation

⁶ P.W. Singer and Emerson Brooking, *Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media*, 2019, 24.

originating in one country can have far-reaching consequences, affecting global security and the stability of democratic institutions.

While methodologies and platforms have evolved, disinformation campaigns are not a new phenomenon.⁷ During the Cold War, the Soviet Union targeted the US with disinformation campaigns aimed at exploiting domestic tensions and spreading false narratives.⁸ Today, similar tactics are being employed by Russia, leveraging modern technology to disseminate disinformation more effectively and on a larger scale.⁹ Disinformation is often seen as a tool of state power, wielded to shape public opinion and advance national interests both domestically and internationally. The scale of these operations is significant, with state-sponsored media outlets playing key roles in disseminating false, government-aligned narratives.¹⁰ But the question remains: how do state-sponsored disinformation campaigns in the United States and Russia impact democratic processes, international relations, and global security, and what are the implications for countering such campaigns?

My initial research indicates that this is a reasonably nascent field that requires both more time and data to fully understand. This is due to the fact that the relationship between social media and policymaking has “long been neglected.”¹¹ Grossman aptly stated,

It has been covered by separate research agendas in political communication and policy studies, and also – indirectly – in political behavior. Most of the research on media and politics has historically focused on media effects on voters, looking almost exclusively at electoral campaigns. Over time, other aspects of this relationship came to be identified and investigated. Over time, other aspects of this relationship came to be identified and investigated. Studies have looked at the watchdog role of media, at the capacity of

⁷ Philip H. J. Davies and Kristian C. Gustafson, *Intelligence Elsewhere: Spies and Espionage Outside the Anglosphere*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013, 97.

⁸ Calder Walton, “What’s Old Is New Again: Cold War Lessons for Countering Disinformation” *Texas National Security Review*, 2022.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Disarming Disinformation: Our Shared Responsibility.” Press Release, 2024.

¹¹ Grossman 2022, 444.

governments to dominate the public agenda, and at media influence during political crises or natural disasters. But we lack a more general understanding of how media may influence policy making [SIC] processes.¹²

This research question and area of study has implications for foreign policy literature for many reasons. Mainly, disinformation is a new form of warfare as it can be used to shape public opinion and ultimately shape foreign policy. This opens up avenues for exploring how disinformation fits into traditional concepts of warfare, such as deterrence, escalation, and diplomacy.

¹² Ibid.

Bibliography

- Bateman, Jon, and Dean Jackson. 2024. "Countering Disinformation Effectively." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC.
https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Carnegie_Countering_Disinformation_Effectively.pdf.
- Betts, Richard K. 2007. *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.bellevue.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=224617&site=eds-live>.
- Bou-Karroum, L., El-Jardali, F., Hemadi, N., Faraj, Y., Ojha, U., Shahrour, M., Darzi, A., Ali, M., Doumit, C., Langlois, E. V., Melki, J., AbouHaidar, G. H., & Akl, E. A. 2017. Using media to impact health policy-making: an integrative systematic review. *Implementation Science: IS*, 12(1), 52. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-017-0581-0>.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5395744/#:~:text=Media%20can%20also%20influence%20how,a%20communicating%20text%20%5B12%5D..>
- Davies, Philip H. J., and Kristian C. Gustafson. 2013. *Intelligence Elsewhere: Spies and Espionage Outside the Anglosphere*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
<https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.bellevue.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=575822&site=eds-live>.
- Eveleth, Daniel M., Robert W. Stone, and Lori J. Baker-Eveleth. 2022. A Bibliometric Analysis of Disinformation through Social Media. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, Volume 14, Issue 4, Article No: e202445.
<https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/12545>.
- Galeotti, Mark. 2019. "Russian intelligence operations shifting tactics not goals," NATO Review. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/04/26/russian-intelligence-operations-shifting-tactics-not-goals/index.html>.
- Grossman, Emiliano. 2022. Media and Policy Making in the Digital Age. *Annual Review of Political Science*, Volume 25. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-103422>.
<https://www.annualreviews.org/docserver/fulltext/polisci/25/1/annurev-polisci-051120-103422.pdf?expires=1722647287&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=9E0695FF4479EBE6B6CDE78E889FADCD>.
- The Heritage Foundation. 2017. "Russian Information Warfare: An Advancing Front of Disinformation and Propaganda." <https://www.heritage.org/europe/event/russian-information-warfare-advancing-front-disinformation-and-propaganda>.
- Nela, A., & Parruca, E. 2023. Impact of Social Media Disinformation and of Fake News Overexposure on the Actual Capacities and the Psychological Wellbeing During the

Covid-19 Pandemic: a Systemic Literature Review. *Global Psychotherapist*, 3(1), 126–132. <https://doi.org/10.52982/lkj191>.

Singer, P. W., and Emerson T. Brooking. 2019. *Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media*. Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

U.S. Department of State. 2024. “Disarming Disinformation: Our Shared Responsibility.” Press Release. <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/>.

Walton, Calder. 2022. “What’s Old Is New Again: Cold War Lessons for Countering Disinformation.” *Texas National Security Review*. <https://tnsr.org/2022/09/whats-old-is-new-again-cold-war-lessons-for-countering-disinformation/>.