



## **MALIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN NARRATIVE WARFARE**

**Date:** July 21, 2022

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On July 21, 2022, John Daniele, the Managing Director of DNC Cybersecurity and President of Progressive World Federalists, presented on *Malign Influence Operations in Narrative Warfare*. Following the presentation, a question-and-answer period ensued wherein questions were collected from the audience and CASIS-Vancouver executives. The major points discussed throughout the event included how malign influence manipulates public opinion and causes social disruption; the key tools used in this form of persuasion; the online network effect of operations that involve fake accounts and state-sponsored trolling; and possible solutions to malign influence operations.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

#### **Presentation**

During the presentation, Mr. Daniele emphasized the consequences of the spread of malign influence by domestic and nation-state actors within its online and offline contexts, as well as how the effects could be mitigated at various societal levels. Mr. Daniele also discussed why regulation alone is not the best way to address malign influence narrative and what he believes is the best approach.

#### **Question & Answer Period**

During the question-and-answer period, Mr. Daniele explained the boundary between malign narratives and non-malign narratives; how malign influence impacts the growth of right-wing extremism in North America; and the relationship between trolling, malign influence, and the online network effect.

## BACKGROUND

### Presentation

Mr. Daniele began his presentation by stating that it is necessary to understand malign influence and what it entails so that Canada's democratic foundation and values can remain resilient against hostile actors that seek to undermine them. In addition to threats from hostile states, domestic groups and criminal organizations have begun to rely on malign influence for their own objectives. Based on this, it has become increasingly important for Canada to strengthen its resilience against information campaigns that seek to manipulate, deceive, and/or coerce individuals using tools such as disinformation, weaponized narratives, and socially subversive messages that appeal to emotion rather than logic.

Mr. Daniele emphasized that understanding the contemporary basis of malign influence involves learning from history and how it has impacted targets in the past. Currently, campaigns involving malign influence can be hosted over online social networking websites. However, as shown by Aleksandr Dugin, who set into play the earliest influence operations based upon his work involving the Fourth Political Theory, malign influence does not have to be exclusively online. This theory was developed by Dugin as an alternative to Western Liberalism, which he described as constraining in a freedom and globally subversive of other ideologies and posited that a new ideology that challenged the status quo arising from postmodern liberalism was required. This theory forms the backbone to the Kremlin's geopolitical operations that involve malign influence. Its impact is seen through the deployment of persuasive narratives that rely on minimizing the truthfulness of facts, or the observable phenomena, and aims to leverage core values and beliefs in the targeted audience. By leveraging core values and beliefs, malign narratives give targets a more experiential phenomena that allows them to challenge observable phenomena through various interpretations of facts.

Mr. Daniele noted that this methodology was observed during the Pamphlet Wars of England in the 1600, which relied on effectively using key tools such as weaponized narratives, disinformation/misinformation, and the amplification of socially subversive messages to promote a utopian ideal within targeted audiences. This was exemplary in having a massive impact on shaping the course of history in terms of inspiring the foundation of the United States. Mr. Daniele pointed out that these same tools are being used today to a great degree by hostile states, along with domestic actors and criminal groups in their own malign influence campaigns, leading to several concerns, especially in the aftermath of the 2016 election.

The first concern is that the hybrid goals (political, social, and financial) of these groups are creating a hostile environment in which malign influence thrives. Mr. Daniele stated that through the nexus of these goals, malign influence operators can significantly enhance their ability to fracture social cohesion which is one of the real-world consequences of malign influence. This is exemplified by malign influence operations conducted not only online but also offline. Online activities, in particular, provide operators with the benefit of an online network effect, which allows them to extend their reach across other networks and have their messages resonate with a greater number of people. This enables them to have a significant real-world impact compared to operations carried out solely offline. According to Mr. Daniele, only 20-40 social media accounts are required to achieve the online network effect.

Another concern is that successful exploitation by malign influence operators fracturing social cohesion and aggravating schisms in society can disrupt democratic decision-making processes at the local and municipal levels by domestic bad actors. If left unchecked over time, the impact of malign influence can eventually cause citizens to lose confidence in democratic norms and ideals or the concept of democracy itself. This would eventually lead to changes in behavior that significantly align with the long-term objectives of these hostile states. Mr. Daniele highlighted that influenced changes in behavior by malign influence operators can be characterized as any action or inaction that make it easy for malign influence actors to manipulate electoral outcomes. Thus, an approach by the whole society is required to address the systematic nature of malign influence operations.

In terms of solutions, however, regulation alone may not be a significant solution to addressing these narratives as it does not prevent the effects that have already occurred over online networks. While it encourages social media companies to take responsibility, this approach simply forces them to play whack-a-mole by deleting content as it arises, leading to a disregard of the emotional impact the content has already had on targets. Overall, the best way to address the issue, according to Mr. Daniele, is through a three-pronged approach that involves 1) detecting targeted messaging and distinguishing them from organic messaging; 2) attributing targeted messages to a malign influence infrastructure and the threat actor(s) involved; and 3) responding with counter narratives that rely on emotional impact and match competing narratives at scale.

### **Question & Answer Period**

During the question-and-answer period, Mr. Daniele clarified that understanding malign influence means knowing how to identify it from other forms of persuasion and realizing how it helps achieve the objectives of hostile state and domestic group actors. Mr. Daniele explained that while drawing a line between manipulative content based on malign narratives and non-manipulative content was dependent on the use of coercion and manipulation to persuade targets, it is possible for that line to become blurred since many legitimate groups use socially coercive messaging within the realm of democratic activity. This means that hostile groups could easily create legitimate groups with legitimate grievances with the goal of using these groups as proxies to create strife and division in society. To deal with the latter, Mr. Daniele stated that it is important to not only to identify the groups but to understand whether such groups are using coercive messaging with a malevolent purpose.

Regarding how malign narratives have impacted the growth of the far-right in North America, Mr. Daniele noted that these groups have devoted many resources to their malign influence campaigns, which have relied on promoting traditional gender roles to appeal to socially conservative factions. In addition, he explained that the successful use of malign influence has led the far-right to normalize their ideas across a wide spectrum of society.

Mr. Daniele then addressed the linkage of malign influence to the online network effect and stated that in the context of pro and anti-ISIS tweets, a small number of fake accounts (20-40) are more than enough to generate an online network effect. Furthermore, that explains how ISIS can continue their recruitment efforts despite the crackdown on their online campaigns.

Finally, Mr. Daniele addressed the last question by confirming that state sponsored trolling can also be used in conjunction with malign narratives and how states use trolling is different to common trolling. Mr. Daniele stated that trolling is a defensive technique to counter opposing viewpoints, and rather than using artificial intelligence, online trolling operations utilize real operators that coordinate their activities online 24/7. This makes it difficult to counter them with fact checking and automated scripts because of the sheer scale of the operations.

## KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

### Presentation

- Malign influence is a form of persuasion that involves the use of manipulation, deception, and coercion to achieve strategic objectives. The key tools of the trade may include weaponized narratives, disinformation, and amplification of socially subversive messages.
- A state-sponsored influence operation can be conducted with the goal of creating social fractures across an entire society, while those carried out by democratic actors and criminal groups are low key and target specific groups to achieve political, social, and financial ends.
- The real-world consequences of malign influence include 1) the fracturing of social cohesion between targeted groups; 2) the ability to exploit vulnerable groups that have become influenced by malign narratives through changes in their sentiments, beliefs, and behaviors; and 3) disruption of democratic processes.
- Traditional strategies involving content moderation, de-platforming, and regulation may not be effective if they are not integrated into a whole-of-society approach.
- The best way to address malign influence operations involves 1) detecting targeted messaging; 2) attributing targeted messages to a malign influence infrastructure and the threat actor(s) involved; and 3) responding with counter narratives that match competing narratives at scale.

### Question & Answer Period

- The line between manipulative content based on malign narratives and non-manipulative content can be easily blurred because many legitimate groups use socially coercive messaging within the realm of democratic activity.
- The far-right in North America has had great success in influencing socially conservative populations using malign narratives that promote a functionalist point of view as well as traditional norms and behaviors.
- The online network effect can be achieved with a small number of fake accounts that seed, amplify, and propagate malign narratives that promote engagement, allowing them to be spread over social networks to a great degree.
- State sponsored trolling is used by hostile states to control the narrative. Such operations have the capacity to run 24/7 with multiple malign influence

operators managing it in shifts, and possibly from different geographic locations.



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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

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