



DEADLY DISINFORMATION: LGBTQ CONTAGION NARRATIVES AS RADICALIZING DISINFORMATION IN RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Date: November 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 November 21, 2022, Dr. Sophia Moskalenko presented on *Deadly Disinformation: LGBTQ Contagion Narratives as Radicalizing Disinformation in Russian Propaganda* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the historical uses of disinformation and how it relates to modern disinformation, the three categories which disinformation aims to target, and the disinformation campaign in Russia.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Dr. Moskalenko highlighted the similarities between historical and modern disinformation campaigns, as well as how quickly disinformation can spread, even when disproven. Dr. Moskalenko stated that campaigns tend to target three categories: the “essence” of the target, how the target attacks and changes the children of a community, and emasculation. Dr. Moskalenko highlighted Russia's disinformation campaign targeting the LGBTQ+ community, noting how each of the three categories were present in the campaign, as well as the effects the campaign had on support for Vladimir Putin, the war in Ukraine, and mistrust of Western powers and NATO.

Question & Answer Period

Dr. Moskalenko discussed the relationship between grassroots-level and large-scale disinformation campaigns, how government and academics can work together to address radicalization through disinformation, and the importance of building resiliency within the population to counter foreign disinformation campaigns.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Moskalenko stated that even if disinformation can be disproven quickly, it still can reach a wide audience. Those spreading disinformation often cite sources from members of a group, or have top secret clearance, as an attempt to legitimize their claims. An example of this is *The Witch's Hammer*, a book detailing how to identify witches and the practices of witches, claiming to have interviews with witches. Though this had been almost immediately disproven, the disinformation in the book was used as justification in many witch trials resulting in the execution of women. Dr. Moskalenko then discussed a more modern example: QAnon. QAnon claimed to possess high-level government clearance in order to promote false narratives, resulting in over 10 million American citizens believing the associated narratives to be true.

Dr. Moskalenko detailed the 3 categories disinformation narratives tend to target: children, the essence of the target of the disinformation, and emasculation. Dr. Moskalenko stated that disinformation narratives utilize children as a way to illustrate how a particular community is under attack by outside forces. Children are often viewed as the future of their community, and false narratives suggest that there are outside forces attempting to change the children, essentially ending that community. Disinformation can also target a particular community to demonize them, claiming that their essence is evil, and cannot be redeemable. This was the approach used by the Nazis as justification for the Holocaust. Lastly, disinformation campaigns can be utilized to emasculate men. Dr. Moskalenko stated that studies have proven that men with fragile masculinity are more likely to be physically aggressive and to support wars and authoritarian leaders.

Dr. Moskalenko then discussed the disinformation campaign in Russia, which targeted the LGBTQ+ community as a way to gain support. The disinformation campaign framed being LGBTQ+ as a contagious disease brought by the West, who are intentionally targeting children. Dr. Moskalenko further stated that Russian news agencies reported on finding “LGBTQ+ conversion centers” in occupied Ukraine, with pamphlets promoting children to “convert” to LGBTQ+.

and proof that these centers were operated by NATO. This disinformation campaign employed all three categories of disinformation in order to gain support for Vladimir Putin as leader, the invasion of Ukraine, and distrust of the West and NATO.

Question & Answer Period

Regarding the difference between grassroots and large-scale, state sponsored disinformation campaigns, Dr. Moskalenko stated that both need each other to succeed, and generally work together in a cycle. Grassroot-level disinformation creates the narratives that the large-scale campaigns centralize and spread, which then is used by grassroots-level organizations to spread and use as justification for potential political violence.

Discussing what a collaboration between academics and organizations to combat disinformation could look like, Dr. Moskalenko stated that research can demonstrate how lives are guided on social media platforms by good and bad actors. Dr. Moskalenko expressed that there is an opportunity for government and researchers to work together to understand the risk certain disinformation campaigns have on certain populations—and to conduct outreach, prevention, and resiliency—before an individual reaches radicalization and is entrenched in the views promoted by the disinformation campaign.

As to whether Western countries were at a disadvantage when dealing with authoritarian regimes and their willingness to produce disinformation, Dr. Moskalenko stated it to be two different sides: supply and demand. Authoritarian regimes do not have an issue producing disinformation, and are unlikely to stop, leaving governments to focus on their populations to ensure that they do not fall victim to these campaigns. Dr. Moskalenko highlighted a study which found that Canadian and American citizens spread and are engaged with Russian disinformation 19 times more than eastern European countries, most likely as a result of not being familiar with disinformation. Dr. Moskalenko suggested increased media literacy and critical thinking education as a way to build resilience to state-sponsored disinformation campaigns.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Historical and modern disinformation campaigns have similarities, such as false claims of top-secret clearance or sources within a group.

- Disinformation often targets three categories: the “essence” of the target group, the children of a community, and emasculating members of a community.
- Emasculation is a particularly dangerous category, as men with fragile masculinity are more supportive of authoritarian leaders, wars, and more physically aggressive.
- Russia’s disinformation campaign targeting the LGBTQ+ narrative is effective in gaining support while simultaneously causing a distrust of the West.

Question & Answer Period

- Grassroot and large-scale disinformation campaigns work together to create, centralize, and spread disinformation.
- Governments can work with researchers to better understand how disinformation can affect certain populations, and potentially intervene before an individual is radicalized by the disinformation.
- Authoritarian regimes will most likely continue disinformation campaigns; governments need to focus on building resiliency within their own population to counter.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© (SOPHIA MOSKALENKO, 2023)

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

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>

The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare
Volume 5, Issue 3