



CREATIVE STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH DISINFORMATION

Date: November 13, 2023

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KEY EVENTS

On November 13, 2023, Randolph H. Pherson presented on *Creative Strategies for Dealing with Disinformation* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The key points discussed were the analytical vulnerabilities that cause readers to fall victim to disinformation, strategies for countering disinformation, and the importance of reframing public perceptions of intelligence analysis.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Pherson presented on the different types of cognitive pitfalls that readers, including analysts, tend to be susceptible to; discussing solutions to harden resilience against disinformation and its ability to manipulate perceptions and leverage cognitive biases. The exploitative nature of disinformation strategies rely on exploiting psychological vulnerabilities pertaining to three key categories: cognitive biases, misapplied heuristics, and intuitive traps. Employing Structured Analytic Techniques (SATs), using indicators, generating alternative and constructive scenarios, and leveraging foresight analysis can help combat disinformation.

BACKGROUND

Mr. Pherson stated that preferences for different sources along with significant analytical vulnerabilities could lead one to fall victim to disinformation narratives, as the power of digital disinformation relies on exploiting a reader's internal bias towards the truth—meaning that the general population tends to presume that those we communicate with are inherently honest. Truth Default Theory portends, however, that this presumption of honesty can make us vulnerable to deceit, and perpetrators of disinformation use cognitive biases, misapplied heuristics, and intuitive traps to manipulate readers' perceptions.

Cognitive biases such as confirmation bias and vividness bias are very powerful tools in manipulation, as the perpetrator can employ one to gain a person's attention and then build from this base through other narratives. Intuitive traps such as pattern presumption and overinterpretation are also powerful methods to manipulate readers, as individuals who generalize patterns based on selective attention—such as anti-vaccine activists during COVID-19—can be vulnerable to such traps. Mr. Pherson stated that these categorical methods form the essential elements for many disinformation strategies.

To counter the impact of disinformation strategies, Mr. Pherson suggested utilizing an analytical toolkit of SATs, indicators, alternative and constructive scenarios, and foresight analysis to harden resilience to disinformation. SATs such as Key Assumption Checks (KAC), Analysis of Competing Hypotheses (ACH), and Structured Self-Critique (SSC) are techniques that are particularly useful in countering disinformation. KAC can be used to challenge the validity of theoretical assumptions that make up one's theory in the possibility of a conspiracy. ACH is used to further vet the theory by drawing attention to inconsistent data that can invalidate the theory or scenario being examined. Finally, SSC, a pre-mortem technique, critically examines weaknesses in the evidence and logic. Mr. Pherson stated that the effect of these techniques is greater when used amongst members of the intelligence community rather than one's local community, as intelligence members are better able to discern the purpose behind these techniques without getting emotionally involved. The goal of these techniques is to put the individual in a better position to assess their biases question their positions.

Indicators can be used to dispel falsehoods while the development and propagation of alternative and constructive scenarios can be a remedy for destructive conspiracy-driven scenarios. To challenge the latter, propagators of a conspiracy theory or related hypothesis should develop a list of indicators that best indicate the plausibility of their theory. If, after six months, none of the indicators occur it suggests that the hypothesis is disproven and should be scrutinized. Mr. Pherson suggested that this can be a better strategy than fact-checking, as individuals who believe in theories derived from disinformation have difficulty processing distinctive arguments or information—sharing facts is unlikely to convince them. He contended that a more fruitful strategy could be to develop and propagate scenarios that focus on positive narratives and eschew debate over contentious issues.

When dealing with disinformation, Mr. Pherson suggested that analysis by the intelligence community should favour descriptive and estimative analyses in

order to maintain objectivity, as this tends to support constructive solutions to in comparison to evaluative and explanatory analysis, as the latter are more likely to inflame debate and could lead to an analyst being perceived as a propagandist. Mr. Pherson proposed the use of forecast analysis workshops to help engage decision makers, intelligence analysts, and academics on how future events with global implications are likely to evolve.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Perpetrators of disinformation take advantage of the internal bias present within humans to presume the honesty of the person with whom we are communicating with. This is known as Truth Default Theory.
- Cognitive vulnerabilities fall into three main categories: cognitive biases, misapplied heuristics, and intuitive traps. Significant biases included in these categories are the confirmation and vividness biases, pattern presumption, and overinterpretation of small samples.
- The analyst toolkit for countering disinformation strategies includes Structured Analytic Techniques (in the form of Key Assumption Checks, Analysis of Competing Hypotheses, and Structured Self Critique); indicators for dispelling falsehoods; alternative and constructive scenarios to mitigate false narratives; and forecast analysis based on current events.
- Intelligence analysts should favour on using descriptive and estimative analyses over evaluative and explanatory analyses when dealing with disinformation. The former tend to support constructive solutions and scenarios that can arise from current events, while the latter are more likely to inflame debate and potentially lead to an analyst being perceived as a propagandist.

FURTHER READING

- Pherson, R.H., Ranta, M.P., & Cannon, C. (2020). Strategies for combating the scourge of digital disinformation. *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 34(2), 316-341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1789425>
- Pherson, R.H. (2022). The Tradecraft of Warning: Warning Intelligence in the 21st Century. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 4(3), 198–203. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v4i3.4188>
- Pherson, R.H. (2023). STRENGTHENING ANALYSIS AND CRITICAL THINKING IN TIMES OF GEOPOLITICAL UNCERTAINTY. *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, 5(3), 141–144. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v5i3.5184>



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