

Intelligence in Public Media

The Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security

Rubén Arcos, Irena Chiru, and Christina Ivan eds., (Routledge, 2024), 452 pages.

Reviewed by Michael J. Ard

While trying to assess information operations in our so-called post-truth era, intelligence and security professionals will value *The Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security*. The book springs from the initiative of Spanish and Romanian scholars, but includes well-known contributors to US intelligence studies such as James Wirtz, Jan Goldman, and the late Randolph Pherson.

The book makes a useful contribution to the discussion on the complex and vexing subject of disinformation—“false information that is knowingly distributed” (283)—and similar malign government efforts to deceive. With thirty-two entries, it certainly strives to cover all the bases. Fittingly, “The Routledge Handbook” focuses on Russian disinformation activities, but this lends to some repetition. Some articles shy away from a careful analysis of the impact of these disinformation campaigns, which might have presented a fuller picture of their danger. Still, we can infer from several entries that, although disinformation and its associate campaign make for a significant challenge, the impact might fall somewhat short of perpetrators’ expectations.

As intelligence agencies move to counter the threat of foreign-backed disinformation, it is critical for them to understand the nature of these campaigns. “From an intelligence point of view,” writes contributor Veli-Pekka Kivimäki, “the interesting question may not be whether a piece of information is true or not, but why the disinformation exists in the first place.... Does it link to a broader narrative, or fit a longer-term pattern? Questions like these help us better understand the *raison d’être* of a disinformation activity.” (291)

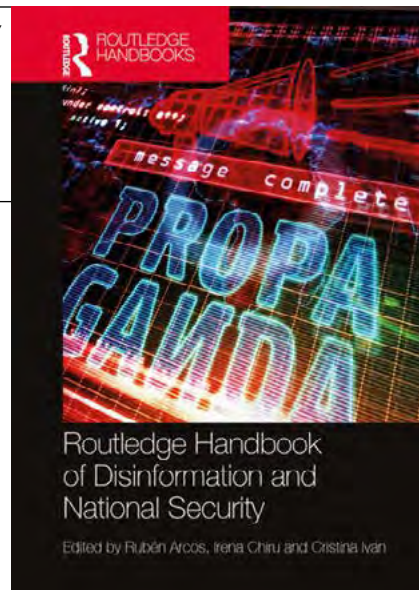
Authoritarian states regard disinformation campaigns as a means of leveling the playing field against the West. Russia’s so-called Gerasimov doctrine in 2013 placed information operations on the same level with kinetic action. “The very rules of war have changed” Gen. Valery Gerasimov wrote enthusiastically. “The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has

grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.” (426)

However, Gerasimov may have been making virtue of a necessity. Analysts James Pamment and Björn Palmertz argue that successful military deterrence by NATO forced Russia to shift to “the lesser harm of information influence.” (24) Nevertheless, they acknowledge that uninhibited information campaigns could become the critical vulnerability for democratic societies. “Resilience against information influence must now be considered among the highest priorities for democratic societies battling hybrid threats.” (26)

The 2016 US presidential election stands as the key inflection point for disinformation campaigns. Fear of these disinformation attacks might have even greater impact than the material effects. Writing about this Russian disinformation operation, scholar Josephine Lukito opines that “Regardless of whether Russia’s attempts were actually successful, actors in the U.S. media system (citizens, journalists, public figures and politicians) inadvertently played into the goals of the IRA’s [Internet Research Agency] active measures tactics.” (127). As Hamlet might have put it, disinformation might be effective or not, “but thinking makes it so.”

Notwithstanding Gerasimov’s optimism, other Russia’s disinformation efforts have delivered indifferent results. Goldman argues that the Russian use of the malware NotPetya in 2017 to disrupt the Ukrainian power grid—which led to widespread contamination of networks in Europe and the United States—was a result of its failed earlier information warfare campaign. (84) Author Adrian



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Tudorache judges that “its political warfare failed on many fronts. Against the expectation of fueling disunity in the West, Russia encountered coherence and unity and the West finally recognized the importance of having a more realist approach regarding Russia.” (52–53)

For instance, Pherson and his collaborators Deanna Labriny and Abby DiOrio believed that the experience in the United States and the United Kingdom during the Brexit voting raised French awareness and helped them mitigate the impact during France’s 2017 presidential election. The poor quality of Russia’s voluminous information, they claim, had little impact on skeptical French voters. (77) This offers a new perspective on the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns. Kivimäki offers this important caveat from deception expert Barton Whaley, that “highly sophisticated deception is rare.” It is more common to encounter cruder and easier-to-detect deception activities. (289)

Simply put, the law of diminishing returns might be having their effect on disinformation campaigns. Since 2016, the United States has had three more federal elections, and the US intelligence community has assessed the foreign influence in each. Reviewing the declassified version of the reports, it appears these persistent disinformation campaigns have fallen well short of their initial impact.

Moreover, governments engaging in information operations against other states risk their own reputation and credibility. Looking back at the history of Soviet active measures, Wirtz notes in 1987 when Gorbachev embarked on his “New Thinking” campaign to present a better image to the West, he suspended the disinformation campaign that HIV was manufactured by US biowarfare specialists. (52) Putin might learn something from his Soviet predecessor. Global attitudes toward Russia are negative for almost three quarters of the respondents, according to one poll. (228) In a backlash probably unforeseen by Moscow, Russian speakers in the Baltic states have become more sympathetic to Ukraine’s plight. (346)

Disinformation and National Security might have included more case studies of recent disinformation campaigns. The Saudi and Emirati disinformation and cyber-attacks on Qatar in 2017 receive only passing mention. China’s role in disinformation was covered in one chapter, and this focused on Beijing’s self-aggrandizing assessment of its own response during the COVID-19

pandemic, not its persistent disinformation campaigns against Taiwan. Likewise, it would have been instructive had the editors added an assessment of the enormous amount of disinformation associated globally with COVID-19, probably the biggest disinformation event in history with much of it perpetuated by authoritarian governments.

Another area that might have been addressed more thoroughly is the periodic difficulty in determining what is disinformation. The definition rests on the intent of the perpetrator to deceive and the facts may be inconclusive. Pherson and two co-authors analyze the alleged Russian disinformation campaign associated with the 2010 crash of the Polish president’s aircraft in Smolensk. (64) But an official inquest ruled the crash an accident, and Poles remain divided on what actually happened. Even habitual purveyors of disinformation may be telling the truth, at least sometimes.

A few articles rely too much speculation. The chapter on deep fakes leans heavily on what impact this malicious technology might be, rather than what it has done so far. “At the international level,” the author warns, “deep fakes can threaten the survival and existence of states and state systems, as well the relations between states.” (181) Certainly deep fakes have been a pernicious nuisance, but so far, we haven’t seen enough to justify this level of alarm.

The contributors offer various measures to counter disinformation. Rubén Arcos and Cristina M. Arribas list the many challenges, among them the speed of dissemination, the fragmentation of the information environment, and political polarization. (401) Probably the best remedy for disinformation is simply more true information. The work of the US Department of State’s Global Engagement Center and the use of “strategic declassification” in the Ukraine conflict is one such example. Kivimäki highlights how open source information countered disinformation in Russia’s 2022 offensive into Ukraine, with its military closely tracked by social media and open commercial imagery. (285)

The role of fact-checkers likewise is important, but as Cris Matei notes, they suffer from limited resources and short response times, to say nothing about those who question their own objectivity. (370). The same holds for mainstream media outlets. “The polls show the erosion of credibility they are suffering. According to the Ipsos

Global Trustworthiness Monitor 2022 only 19% believe the media is trustworthy.” (239) A “whole of society” approach to counter disinformation will need to include more professional journalistic standards.

A few authors dissent from the notion that an educated, critical thinking public might be able to counter disinformation. From a postmodern perspective, communications theorists Hamilton Bean and Bryan C. Taylor doubt “personal vigilance,” as advocated by US federal agencies, will do much to reduce the impact of disinformation. (162) They argue that people spreading “socially mediated disinformation” simply “seek to affirm and perform their social, cultural, and political identities.” (171) Volume co-editor Cristina Ivan raises her own qualms, rhetorically asking “How many of the scholars that produce research on disinformation can actually claim to match the ideal prototype of the informed and responsible citizen?!” (297)

In the end, most authors look to governments to take the lead on the potential solutions. “Government has a responsibility to work with the private sector, universities, think tanks, NGOs, and journalists,” write Pamment and Palmertz, “to improve the public’s media literacy, to provide fact-checking where appropriate, and to inoculate in areas such as public health where disinformation can be countered proactively.” (28) Still, we must consider that some cures to counter disinformation might be worse than the disease. “The consequences of any legislative action,” write Pammert and Palmertz, “must be considered with great care to ensure that they do not violate the values of the democratic society they are implemented to protect.” (104) For his part, Jan Goldman adds that, as intelligence agencies are pressed to enact to enforcement measures, “stakeholders should clarify what constitutes problematic behavior.” (91)



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