INTERNATIONAL COUNTER-DISINFORMATION RESEARCH AGENDA

Opportunities for University and Think-tank Research and Analysis

INTERNATIONAL
WORKING
GROUP

Global
Engagement
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As part of the U.S. government and partner nations' efforts to counter disinformation, we seek to bridge the space between academia and government to enable evidence-based, data-driven, and research-informed solutions to disinformation.

This research agenda was developed in Spring 2022 by a U.S. Department of State Global Engagement Center-led international working group of over 40 members across nine U.S. Federal Government agencies and over 10 partner nations and governmental organizations. The working group's goal was to identify key short- to medium-term research needs, topics, and ideas related to countering disinformation to share with university and think-tank-based researchers. The aim is to inspire critical counter-disinformation-related research, conversations, and collaborations.

Methodology:
Members of the international working group, comprised of governmental practitioners and researchers, were selected for their understanding of their national or governmental organizations' counter-disinformation-related research needs. They used their subject matter expertise and understanding of their nation's or governmental organization's priorities and knowledge gaps to identify the core research needs, categories, and survey questions used to develop this list of priority research areas. The survey was shared with key governmental counter-disinformation practitioners through snow-ball sampling. Over 150 key governmental practitioners from the following nations' governments and governmental organizations shared research priorities and knowledge gaps: **Australia, Canada, Estonia, European Union, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Latvia, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States of America.**

For the survey, respondents ranked priorities or provided responses on a 5-point Likert scale. The responses were weighted to ensure equity between U.S. and international responses. The following report reflects working group representatives' insights and the weighted scores, though differences in strategic priorities and gaps are noted if they are significant.

A detailed visual summary of the working group process can be found on the last page of this report.

Please note:

- We acknowledge the ambitious nature of a process to develop an international counter-disinformation research agenda and the limitations of any such effort. Our hope is that this report will inspire further information exchanges and promote research-driven counter-disinformation efforts.

- This list does not represent every research priority; we encourage interested researchers to consult with their nation's governmental organizations which work on countering disinformation for additional information.

- At this time, these research topics are unfunded and subject to revision. However, we encourage you to reach out to your nation's governmental organizations working on countering disinformation to learn about possible future funding and to explore possible models of collaboration (e.g., curriculum/course design, academic seminars, graduate student-led research collaborations, and information exchange opportunities).

- We encourage a written addendum of ethical and legal considerations for all ensuing collaborations.

- We encourage multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder collaborations.

- We welcome submissions of research previously conducted on these topics.

- This document replaces the Top 10 U.S. Government Counter-Disinformation Topics which was released in 2020.

- The survey launch unintentionally coincided with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which may have influenced some survey responses.

- Respondents' interest in particular technologies (e.g., such as fact-checking) should not be considered validation of each technology.

- In this survey, we define disinformation as the intentional creation and dissemination of false information with the intent to manipulate the policies, behaviors, or opinions of those who receive it.

The following research questions and topics are listed in the order they were prioritized by working group representatives and survey respondents:

1 REGIONAL PRIORITIES

What are emerging disinformation trends in Russia, Eastern Asia, Eastern Europe, non-region specific/globally, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific?

Please note:

> Respondents were asked to identify regional priorities for counter-disinformation research; the United Nations geoscheme was used with some adjustments for clarity.

> U.S. representatives identified the following regions as research priorities: Eastern Asia, Russia, Eastern Europe, non-region specific/global, and Middle East.

> International representatives identified the following: Russia, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, non-region specific/global, Northern Europe, and the Indo-Pacific.

2 PRODUCERS AND DISSEMINATORS OF DISINFORMATION

What are the emerging disinformation tactics, tools, technologies, strategies, and patterns used by Russia, China, and anti-government/anti-authority violent extremists?
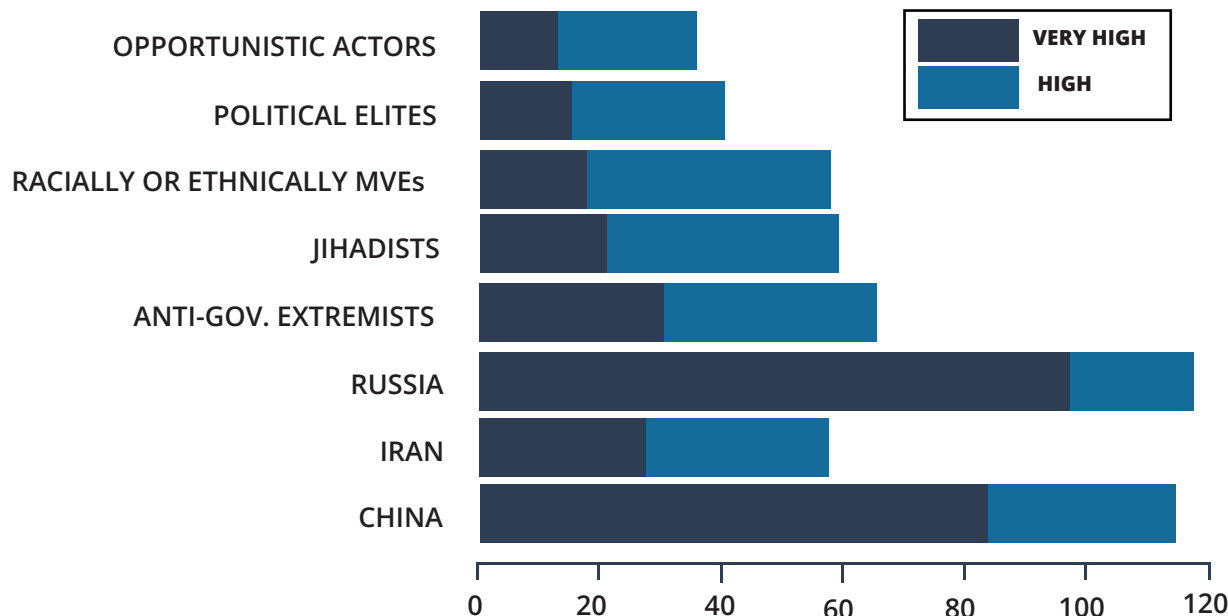

Table: Producers of Disinformation rated Very High or High Priorities

Please note:

> When comparing survey responses, state-actors were identified as a higher research priority than non-state actors. We also acknowledge that the distinction is not always clear.

3 PRIORITY LANGUAGES

What are the emerging disinformation trends in English, Russian, Mandarin, Ukrainian, and Polish language spaces?

Please note:
> The following additional languages have also been identified as priorities: Arabic, Farsi, French, Germanic languages, Portuguese, Slavic languages, Spanish, and Turkic languages.

4 AUDIENCES

How does disinformation affect the following audience groups: 30-64 year-olds; 15-29 year-olds; and populations living in fragile states, conflict zones and conflict prone societies?

Please note:
> The following were also noted as relevant audiences for further counter-disinformation research: diaspora communities; belief systems or ideologies; and minority communities.

5 DISINFORMATION SPREADING METHODS AND TACTICS

When are audiences susceptible to shifts in messaging or changes in opinions (e.g., cognitive or psychological opening or critical points for idea formulation)?

How do disinformation producers coordinate to amplify content?

What tactics do disinformation spreaders use to evade detection?

6 DISTRUST, HATE, AND VIOLENCE

How can disinformation escalate conflict and violence?

What are the most effective strategies for debunking conspiracy theories?

7 TECHNOLOGIES

How can governments and civil society better leverage at-scale or real-time detection technologies, open-source resource technologies, and fact-checking technologies for counter-disinformation efforts?

Please note:
> This question asked respondents to choose the top three technologies for further research; this table shows how many respondents ranked each technology as first, second, third, and the totals.

	First	Second	Third	Total
At-scale or real-time detection	22	23	10	55
OSINT/Open-Source Research technologies	30	11	12	53
Fact-checking technologies	15	14	7	36
Disinformation originator indexing	8	15	12	35
No-cost/low-cost exportable technologies publicly available for civil society organizations	8	7	19	34
Intersection between disinformation and cyber attacks	10	11	11	32
Algorithmic content filtering	11	9	6	26
Detection of automated synthetic content generation	1	8	14	23
Deepfakes detection	1	4	10	15
Content authentication/ validation ("watermarking"/ block-chain)	1	4	3	8
Block-chain based or decentralized crypto-based networks	0	0	1	1

8 ASSESSING THE IMPACTS/EFFECTS OF DISINFORMATION

Time period:
What are the impacts and effects of disinformation in the short term (1 year or less) and medium term (1-3 years)?

Impact on society:
How do disinformation and propaganda undermine democratic processes, institutions, or values?

What do we know about the impacts of disinformation at a societal level, including institutions, elections, corruption, civic engagement (e.g., a meta-analysis of societal impacts)?

Impact on individuals:
To what extent does disinformation change opinion or behavior (offline or online)?

Which types of disinformation narratives trigger behavioral shifts?

9 SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS AND ASSESSING THEIR IMPACTS/EFFECTS

Civil Society & Governmental Actions:
How can governments and civil society build resilience to disinformation by (re)building trust in democratic institutions (government, media, public health, etc.)?

How can civil society build resilience to disinformation through a whole of society approach?

Please note:
U.S. representatives also identified the following research priorities:

> How can governments and civil society work most effectively with technology companies to counter disinformation?

> How can governments and civil society raise the cost on disinformation disseminators?

> How can governments and civil society work most effectively with media companies to counter disinformation?

> How can governments use improved governance-related solutions to counter disinformation?

Messaging:
What new research insights exist about the use of awareness raising activities (e.g., through public awareness campaigns) for countering disinformation?

What new research insights exist about the use of "pre-bunking" and "inoculation theory" for countering disinformation?

Tools:
What new research insights exist about the effectiveness of digital and media literacy as a tool for countering disinformation?

How can we identify the most harmful disinformation content?

What effect does the labeling of disinformation have on countering disinformation?

What new research insights exist about fact-checking to counter disinformation?

10 COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORMS

The following communications platforms are priorities for further counter-disinformation research:

When compared to other communications platforms, such as traditional media and encrypted messaging platforms, social media/social networking are a larger research priority.

The following social media platforms are a priority for further research: Twitter, Facebook/Meta, YouTube, and TikTok.

The following encrypted messaging platforms are a priority for further research: Telegram and WhatsApp.

When compared to other categories of traditional media, state-run media platforms are a research priority.

Process for Developing the International Counter-Disinformation Research Agenda

STEP 1
1st meeting of US and international governmental stakeholder Working Group to discuss research priorities and survey questions

STEP 2
GEC develops draft survey & 2nd Working Group meeting takes place to confirm questions

STEP 3
Working Group disseminates survey to relevant governmental practitioners

STEP 4
GEC analyzes survey data and develops draft Research Agenda

STEP 5
3rd Working Group meeting to finalize Research Agenda

STEP 6
Research Agenda is disseminated to university and think-tank stakeholders

STEP 7
Researchers are better informed about global governmental community's counter-disinformation research needs

STEP 8
Researchers conduct funded and/or pro-bono research - simultaneously building educators' and students' capacity

STEP 9
Researchers present findings to governmental stakeholders

STEP 10
Findings are integrated into governmental counter-disinformation decision-making, strategic planning, and programs.

GEC Mission & Mandate:

"To direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and foreign nonstate propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations."

- SEC 1284, NDAA, FY 2019

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