

The Weekly

September 6, 2024

IN THIS EDITION:

Disinformation, long used as a weapon of influence by Russia, has been adopted by China and Iran in yet another example of their collective aim to weaken democratic societies.

This week, disinformation was again in the headlines as the US departments of Justice, State, and Treasury announced coordinated efforts to thwart the latest disinformation threat from Russia. This included an indictment against two “RT” (formerly Russia Today) employees, seizing over 30 internet domains being leveraged by Russian state interests, and issuing sanctions and visa restrictions against Russian instigators. While some of the latest disinformation content aimed to influence voters during the upcoming US election, other material was designed to shape the way Americans perceive Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and more generally to sow internal divisions by targeting sensitive topics like religion and race.

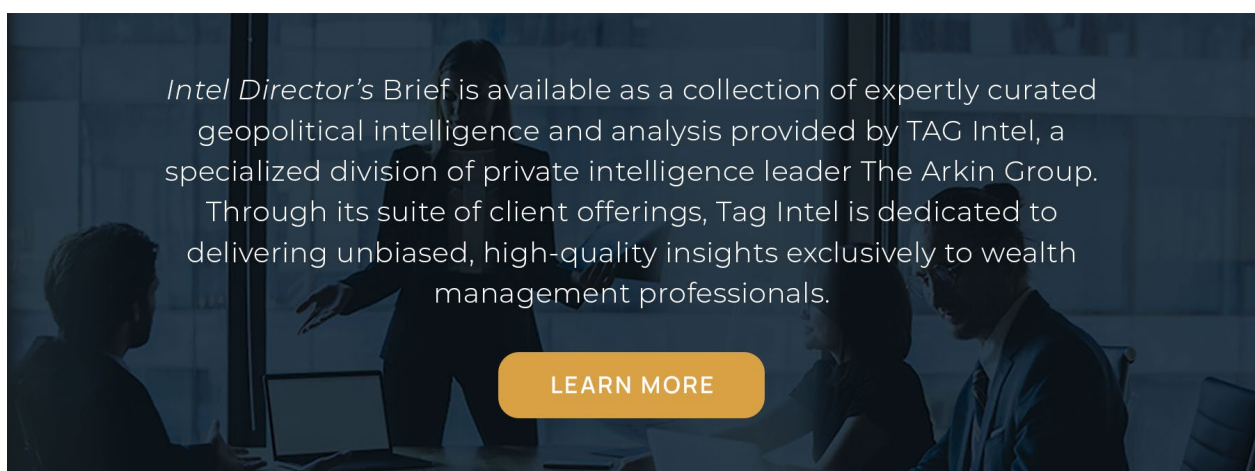
Russia has a lot of experience propagating material that aims to deepen divisions within US society. During the Cold War, the KGB regularly tried to incite American racial tensions by targeting the KKK, Jewish people, and black organizations - often pinning them against one another. More recently, a US Senate Intelligence Committee Report on 2016 election interference revealed how “No single group of Americans was targeted by IRA (Russia’s Internet Research Agency) operatives more than African-Americans”, and Russia also tried to further enflame tensions regarding the Black Lives Matter movement by creating and sharing divisive and pervasive media output.

Now, Russia’s latest friend Iran seems to have been taking a lesson from the Kremlin. In late August, US Intelligence officials confirmed that Iran was behind a hack of President Trump’s campaign and that through social engineering Iran has “sought access to individuals with direct access to the presidential campaigns of both political parties.” Indeed, in line with Russia’s strategy to light fires at every opportunity and set the larger field aflame, Iran has also been trying to undermine the Vice President Harris campaign. For example, one Iranian front website, “Savannah Time” reportedly posed as a conservative alt-weekly, characterizing Harris as a proponent of “Communist-Style price controls.”

Like Russia, however, Iran isn't only interested in influencing the US election. It's also interested in broader goals like undermining US support for Israel- using websites and social media to embolden protests in American cities. China is likewise using social media to sow divisions and amplify hot button issues- often focusing less on one US candidate and more on general efforts to destabilize American society. And like Russia, China's disinformation campaign also incorporates issues of importance to Beijing- like Taiwan.

These days, disinformation from US adversaries is a mash-up of topics that share one goal: to undermine American democracy. Disinformation erodes trust in political processes, increases polarization, inhibits voters' ability to make informed decisions, and undermines the quality of democracy. Further, limiting the spread of disinformation is itself politically fraught and has implications for freedom of expression and other essential aspects of democratic societies. We're seeing this discussion play out right now in Brazil, where the Brazilian leadership has banned X due to the company's refusal to remove disinformation surrounding Brazil's last election and aftermath.

Access to information and freedom of the press are fundamental components of any democracy, and yet it's these freedoms that make us most vulnerable to an onslaught of disinformation. As a democracy, however, we're disinclined to resort to similar tactics and so far, we've been unwilling to respond in-kind. In the coming months, we can expect to see more examples of disinformation campaigns surface around the US election. But we should recognize that this is part of a larger effort by our adversaries to try to dismantle the fundamental pillars of free society- and our response will need to navigate a careful balance so that we don't lose any freedom in the process of upholding it



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