

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Disinformation and Fake News: Old Wine in New Bottles

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

Disinformation, Fake News and Deliberate Online Falsehoods are nothing new. They are all forms of Propaganda. Singapore should be concerned when a Sending State's Strategic Propaganda mechanisms and its Agents of Influence within our shores seek to achieve Information Dominance.

Commentary

AS THE Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods continues its public hearings on the issue, it seems apt to take a step back and consider the whole matter of "Disinformation" and "Fake News" from a wider historical and conceptual perspective.

In reality, these terms have deeper conceptual, historical roots in the much older term "Propaganda". Some scholars suggest that the word "Propaganda" evolved as a result of Pope Gregory XV creating the Committee for the Propagation of the Catholic Faith in Rome in 1622. Hence the origins of the term "Propaganda" were honourable and related to the dissemination of religious ideals.

Changed Concept of Propaganda

Only in the 20th Century, particularly following the excesses of Nazi Propaganda during World War Two, did the current opprobrium associated with the word emerged. The Nazis conceived of Propaganda as the "Big Lie". That is, Hitler's Propaganda czar Josef Goebbels apparently believed that by feeding ordinary people falsehoods – "Disinformation" - enough times, eventually they would come to believe it.

However, in a strict technical sense, Propaganda is any form of mass communication

that is able to influence the thinking and behaviour of a target audience. The Allies during World War Two, for example, conceived of Strategic Propaganda as directed at entire audiences within Target States.

Previously, radio and newspapers – and later television - were seen as Strategic Propaganda mechanisms par excellence. Today, thanks to technological advances, social media platforms on non-private settings, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, could also be said to have potentially strategic impact.

White, Black and Grey Propaganda

While the above examples describe the *mechanisms* of Strategic Propaganda, one must also pay attention to the *doctrine* that govern their use. In World War Two, Allied doctrine identified three categories of Propaganda: The first was White – which involved basically telling the audience the truth via straight reporting by a clearly identified source.

For example, one reason why the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) earned such a global following was its reputation for telling the truth, even bad news, in wartime.

Another approach – favoured by the Nazis – was Black Propaganda or Disinformation. Finally, there was also Grey Propaganda. This was when the information coming out contained facts and deliberate inaccuracies - and the source of it was unclear.

A famous wartime exponent of Black/Grey Propaganda was the British operative Sefton Delmer, who mesmerized Nazi audiences for his deliberately scandalous German-language radio broadcasts, whilst masquerading as a disgruntled senior Nazi officer.

R.H.S. Crossman, the top Allied Propagandist in World War Two and future minister in Prime Minister Harold Wilson's Labour Government of the 1960s, observed that the British found that while Black and Grey Propaganda were “fun”, these merely succeeded in sowing confusion in a target audience. In contrast, White Propaganda was better because once one had established credibility with the target audience one could influence them to act in desired ways.

New Technologies, Same Principles

The principles of Strategic Propaganda remain relevant today, despite technological advances in the mechanisms of its dissemination. States still need to employ Strategic Propaganda to influence other States to behave in desired ways.

Strategic Propaganda mechanisms seeking Information Influence in the postwar era have included such Cold War radio platforms as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, directed at the subjugated peoples of the Soviet bloc.

In more recent times we have encountered the Russia Today television news channel and Sputnik Radio, while recent reports indicate that Beijing is thinking of setting up a huge Voice of China global broadcasting operation, apart from its *Global Times* newspaper.

In fact, Strategic Propaganda by Sending States also includes so-called Agents of Influence (AOI) within Target States throughout the world. These AOI include foreign diplomatic, cultural and educational officials and institutions such as for instance, the British Council, the old US Information Agency, the Saudi-backed World Muslim League and the Chinese-supported Confucius Institutes in universities across the globe.

These Strategic Propaganda mechanisms are actually not unusual and have been part of global diplomatic and cultural intercourse for decades.

The Real Threat: Sending States and Information Dominance

The real problem arises when the goal of the Sending State shifts from mere Information Influence to the more aggressive stance of Information Dominance within the Target State. This happens when the Strategic Propaganda mechanisms mentioned earlier shift from disseminating merely White Propaganda, to employing Black and Grey modes as well.

This comes in the form of spreading Disinformation and Fake News online or in the real world through AOI, with a view to sowing confusion and discord within the Target State.

The Sending State may do this with a view to psychologically weakening the Target State so as to better steer the latter's behaviour in desired ways. Examples of Strategic Propaganda being employed in the Information Dominance mode include reported interference by Russian Strategic Propaganda mechanisms and AOI in the 2016 US presidential elections and in the UK's BREXIT campaign earlier that same year.

Implications

Disinformation and Fake News are thus nothing new. They are Old Wine in New Bottles and should be seen in perspective. Particularly noteworthy are the following:

First, States seeking to influence other States' behaviour through Strategic Propaganda as described are nothing new. Hence we must avoid political overreactions that may damage our international standing.

Second, it is when the Sending State seeks to move from Information Influence to Information Dominance that Countermeasures would be needed. In this regard, two possible Countermeasures appear pertinent.

First, expand the scope of the current SG Secure initiative to include raising awareness of Disinformation and Fake News, either online or via AOI. The Select Committee has recently heard several ideas for building societal resilience against such Black and Grey Propaganda.

These range from measures promoting critical thinking to creating independent fact-checking councils. In an age of increasingly assertive foreign AOI, however, simple

counter-intelligence skills may additionally need to be more widely distributed in the population.

Finally, those loose local coalitions of anti-government Internet trolls, academics, activists and groups who regularly pontificate online and elsewhere about supposed historical government excesses, should exercise vigilance. They may unwittingly be co-opted by AOI of hostile Sending States to undermine Singapore's social cohesion from within. This would be right out of the old Cold War playbook.

As the old saying goes, those who cannot remember the past will be condemned to repeat it.

Kumar Ramakrishna is Associate Professor, Head of Policy Studies and Coordinator of the National Security Studies Program at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg