

## *Combatting Chemical Weapon Disinformation*

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### **Introduction**

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction poses serious concerns for global peace and security. There are growing concerns over the manner chemical weapons are being deployed in conflicts like in Syria where it has been used persistently (Koblentz, 2019). It has also been used in attacks by presumably state agents on dissidents giving cause for even more concern like in Britain in 2018 (Vale, Marrs, & Maynard, 2018), and most recently in Russia in 2020 (Masterson, 2020). Chemical weapons are chemicals with toxic properties deployed to cause wilful harm or death through their toxic properties. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is the international body tasked with eradicating chemical weapons. In its quest to carry out mandated duties, it has been met with coordinated disinformation. Disinformation is information that is designed to be deliberately misleading or deceptive (Jack, 2017). The level and effectiveness of disinformation in recent times is to such an extent it could be deemed a threat to global peace (Stewart, 2021).

The method of disinformation dissemination varies and ranges from Nations-led initiatives to groups and individuals acting in both covert and overt manners to disinform. Covert manners involve some form of disguise using bots, trolls for example, and disguising as citizens expressing their legitimate opinions with no ulterior motives. Overt disinformation is usually executed by government-backed media as has been the case in Russia (Wilson & Starbird, 2020). However, both manners of disinformation easily become embedded in each other, and with the activities of unwitting users who propagate the disinformation even further (Starbird, Arif, & Wilson, 2019).

The wide reach, ease of use, and design of social media make it the tool of choice for disinformation. The revenue base of social media is dependent on content getting the most clicks which are then optimized. This characteristic or design algorithm of social media, therefore, makes it particularly vulnerable to disinformation which is usually conveyed sensationally. Sensational content generates high levels of attention and ranges from conspiracy theories, distortion of facts to plain lies (Nemr & Gangware, 2019). Social media, therefore, becomes a very useful tool for disinformers who capitalize on its business models reliant on engagement to generate revenue. Tools like Botnets are deployed to accelerate the message which the algorithms read as high activity giving it more visibility much more beyond the reach of authentic information.

## **Principal perpetrators of chemical weapon misinformation**

State and non-state agents have been known to use chemical weapons. Within the last decade, chemical weapons have been used in Malaysia, Iraq, Great Britain, Syria, and Northern Ireland. Specifically, States like Russia and North Korea have also been known to target dissidents with chemical weapons. All these confirmed cases of chemical weapon use have been met with intense attempts by state actors to discredit the evidence, deceive the public and divert attention. The end goal is to sow division and influence politics by preying on citizens' emotions.

The first known non-state use of chemical weapons is the Tamil Tigers' assault on East Kiran in 1990 (Hoffman, 2009). Terrorist groups like ISIL have also used chemical weapons (Strack, 2017). The threat of non-state agents is concerning given the rise of extremism globally. Despite the ban by the international community on chemical weapon use after the first world war, it continues to be used to cause harm.

The most disinformation among state actors has been linked to Russia. While Russia is a veteran in disinformation propaganda stemming from the 'active measures' program in the Soviet era (Fedchenko, 2016), the changing times and evolution of technology have seen it use social media and the internet very actively for disinformation purposes. State actors are actively involved in chemical weapon disinformation and have an arsenal of internet tools they deploy to divert attention in the aftermath of attacks and label them as fake for their various political goals.

## What needs to be done?

The nature of disinformation in contemporary times is a problem that requires a mix of strategies to tackle given the propagation of various disinformation tools and tactics. Some of these strategies are outlined below:

### 1. *Transparency:*

Transparency could be the most important tool to fight disinformation in this era. Governments must take steps to be more transparent to citizens. Declassifying reports as soon as possible with detailed evidence after the occurrence of chemical attacks is important. This will limit the opportunity for the disinformation actors to capitalize on the paucity of information to spread conspiracies. Transparency to the public is very important because the more knowledge people have on something, the less likely are they to be deceived through disinformation. The pros and cons of information classification in the aftermath of events must be weighed with the cost of disinformation which is quite high. The need to preserve State secrets may come to the fore as a counter-argument against declassification but in the present age we live in, disinformation can best be countered by facts. Sensitive information can be redacted to protect individuals who may be named in reports.

### 2. *Social media oversight:*

As disinformation is mainly carried out via social media, the main battleground for tackling disinformation will also be social media. Monitoring the principal platforms involves researching trends to be ready to counter disinformation. The nature of disinformation requires direct action from Tech companies as key mediators between social media and the masses. Tech companies have the most important role, much more than other institutions or governments can achieve on their own. Government co-operation with tech companies then becomes necessary as this would foster information-sharing, design, and roll-out of specific solutions in line with the nature of disinformation threat. A trend that has been observed in the aftermath of chemical attacks is the speedy activation of bots and the creation of new accounts (Nemr & Gangware, 2019). Tech companies can put controls in place concerning this trend by not allowing this mass activation or by putting in place a multi-level authentication system. Multi-level authentication can also be carried out for new accounts being created in the wake of polemic events to act as a form of deterrence and checkmate this move. As technology is ever-evolving, disinformation tactics will also change and there is a need to be ahead of the curve via research. A deeper understanding of the mix of factors including human and tech-

nological is important to counter disinformation. Digital intelligence will enable predictive communication which will help prepare and educate the populace.

### **3. Education:**

Education could be the most impactful way governments can be involved. Chemical weapons are a subject most members of the public know little about. The majority of the populace does not understand what a chemical weapon or attack is/means or what the symptoms are, making it easier to disinform people. Incorporating disarmament education including chemical weapons in the traditional school curriculum would provide the needed education. Knowledge is power and a knowledgeable populace will be more immune to threats of disinformation. Understanding trends will help the populace to quickly decipher disinformation and counter them.

Critical thinking is another skill that should form a core part of education from the elementary level. The payoff would be a large number of citizens who can ask difficult questions, connect the dots between information and be able to discern and filter disinformation. Introducing critical thinking in the elementary curriculum also means the educators themselves have to be well-grounded in the skills and undergo training as may be applicable. Such knowledge would have a positive ripple effect whereby citizens themselves would become skilled and involved in countering disinformation in a citizen science manner. Fact-checking is now available on some social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter but given the time lag between fact-checking and disinformation potentially spreading like wildfire, citizens who ask questions and have the skills to also fact-check information would be a very effective and efficient counter-disinformation tool. In this way, the citizens who are the target of disinformation become a shield.

### **4. Building synergy through stakeholder co-operation:**

Enhancing synergy among the different relevant stakeholders by establishing a wide-range working group comprising tech companies, academic institutions, media, civil society, and policymakers can help in fighting disinformation. While these groups all have individual roles to play, establishing a working group will enhance integration among them and encourage constant brainstorming and quicker deployment of ideas and solutions. This group could work together to create tools able to track disinformation empirically. They can then push back strategically.

## **5. Sanctions:**

A disincentive for disinformation may also necessitate enacting laws that would make people personally liable for spreading disinformation. Such laws would not be meant to interfere with free speech but would put on individuals the additional responsibility to deter from spreading disinformation. The onus would then be on the people to verify information before disseminating further.

## **Conclusion**

The dynamism and evolution of means of disinformation necessitate proactiveness. Being ahead of the curve becomes necessary to counter disinformation. Counter actions must be active and dynamic to counter false narratives. There is a need for a well-informed populace on the art of disinformation. This way, the citizens can decipher disinformation when they come across it and nip it in the bud by reporting them and not disseminating it further. Just as we need antivirus and firewalls to protect against computer viruses, disinformation is a virus that spreads quickly and requires active tools and measures to stop. Fighting against disinformation needs more than mere verbal commitment but must be action-backed.

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