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Government disinformation in war and conflict

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Rhys Crilley and Precious N. Chatterje-Doody

Abstract

Lies, uncertainty, and disinformation have long been a prominent part of war and conflict. As Clausewitz notes in *On War*, a 'great part of the information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by far the greatest part is of a doubtful character'. Recent developments in global communication – such as the rise of social media and the proliferation of state-funded international broadcasters – give credence to this claim. In the ongoing conflict in Syria, for example, contrasting and conflicting reports of the same events circulate instantaneously online. Where one source might describe an event as the state-sanctioned murder of peaceful protesters, another will report it as a successful military operation to stop terrorists. In light of how recent wars and conflicts seem marked by novel forms of disinformation, this chapter introduces the concepts of propaganda, framing, strategic narrative, and discourse to help make sense of government disinformation in war. We then reflect on what is novel about contemporary practices of government disinformation in war and conflict, before exploring the limitations of current research and suggesting potential new directions for research.

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Introduction

'The first casualty when war comes,' wrote US Senator Hiram Johnson in 1917, 'is truth' (Knightley 2004), and research has shown that through the ages, war and conflict have always been marked by the use of lies, propaganda, and what we now often refer to as mis- or dis-information (Taylor 2003).[1] The Trojan Horse is perhaps the most infamous early tale of deception during wartime, and regardless of its veracity, it suggests that disinformation was on the minds of those who lived and waged war in ancient times. From these early days of history, through the city states, empires, and countries that followed, to the high-tech globalized societies of today, political authorities have sought to harness disinformation to win conflicts. With this in mind, this chapter provides an insight into government disinformation in war and conflict. We begin by setting out why government disinformation matters for the study of conflict and war, before introducing the concepts of propaganda, framing, strategic narrative, and discourse to help make sense of government disinformation in war. We then reflect on what exactly may be novel about contemporary practices of government disinformation in war and conflict. Finally, we explore the limitations of current research and suggest potential new directions for research.

Disinformation Matters in War and Conflict

In what is considered one of the foundational texts for understanding modern war and conflict, Clausewitz notes that a 'great part of the information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by far the greatest part is of a doubtful character' (Clausewitz 2017, 46). Yet, despite claims like this in such influential texts, and despite the prominent examples of disinformation in wars and conflicts throughout history, scholars have often treated information and communication as though they are peripheral to the study of conflict. In this line of 'realist' thinking, 'the supreme importance of the military instrument lies in the fact that the ultima ratio of power in international relations is war' (Carr 2016, 102). Power is viewed simply in terms of having the material resources and capabilities to wage war, win battles, and to use threats of violence to get others to do what they otherwise would not (Schmidt 2005, 528). Despite having an appealing simplicity, such realist approaches are rarely useful for understanding the complexity of global politics (Ashley 1984; Cohn 1987; Enloe 2000), nor are they helpful in understanding how governments attempt to wield power by influencing perceptions – for example through the use of disinformation. Given that traditional approaches to war do not provide us with sufficient conceptual and analytical tools to make sense of disinformation in war, we now introduce four (ultimately overlapping and

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[1] We understand the difference between mis- and dis-information to be largely one of intent; where misinformation is that which is inaccurate due to error, whereas disinformation refers to purposefully deliberate falsehoods used to deceive others. For this purpose, we refer to disinformation throughout this chapter, however we recognise that there can be overlap between the two terms, not least because it is often impossible to infer someone's 'true' intentions.

interlinked) concepts and their associated bodies of scholarship that can help us to understand government disinformation in war.

Propaganda

Following the World Wars of the early 20th century, a new field of study was built around the concept of propaganda (Bernays 2004; Lasswell 2013; Lippman 2010). This was understood to be 'the technique of influencing human action through the manipulation of representations' (Lasswell 2013 [1934], 13). At the time it was recognised that this could involve lying, but optimists viewed it as something that would largely be grounded in the truth. Authors such as Bernays viewed it as a predominantly positive tool that could be used to help shape public opinion for the better, viewing propaganda as 'necessary to orderly life' (Bernays 2004 [1928], 39) in democracies. Despite Bernays' founding vision to be 'a propagandist for propaganda' the term propaganda is now widely regarded as something morally questionable, socially destructive, and politically negative. Even Bernays' contemporaries saw propaganda as 'the defilement of the human soul' (Ponsonby 2010 [1926], 18).

More recent scholarship defines propaganda as 'the deliberate manipulation of representations… with the intention of producing any effect in the audience… that is desired by the propagandist' (Briant 2014, 9). Such scholarship provides an important grounding for the study of government disinformation in war. In particular, it provides rich accounts of the history of propaganda (Taylor 2003) as well as insights into the contemporary disinformation practices of governments in the digital age (Bjola and Pamment 2018, Briant 2014). The research on propaganda demonstrates that government disinformation in war has a rich and bloody history, and that governments have historically sought to lie and mislead their adversaries. The concept of propaganda then can be useful, but it is limited by normative 'baggage' (Taylor 2003, 2). Indeed, the negative connotations of propaganda are so strong as to immediately delegitimise those accused of engaging in it – even if proponents of the concept believe that 'what we really need is more propaganda not less. We need more attempts to influence our opinions and to arouse our active participation in social and political processes' (Taylor 1992).

Even when conceptualised as a positive addition to a state's wartime toolkit, the concept of propaganda is perhaps too broad to provide specific analytical utility to explain how and why government disinformation in war happens or is effective. It is intuitive, perhaps, that governments will lie during wars so that they may beat their adversaries and win victories, but what explains how that disinformation circulates widely in countries that now have free and fair media?

Various explanations have been offered. Some point towards the shared ideological views of government officials and media elites who are oriented around making profits from audiences who are more likely to accept patriotic coverage of wars rather than critical reporting (Herman and Chomsky 1995). Related to this is the role of national patriotism where journalists 'rally around the flag' as national populations have been found to support their leaders during times of national crisis such as wars and conflicts (Stahl, 2010). Other factors include how journalists are reliant on official sources for their reporting (Bennett, 1990) and are thereby faithful to governments so as to ensure their access to information. Further relevant factors in the digital age include the rapidity of information flow in the contemporary news environment, which commercially incentivises the production of high speed, low quality 'churnalism' that prioritises sensationalist social media trend reporting over investigative reporting (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019, 84-85), or neglects due diligence in verifying the claims of state-backed sources (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2018, 10-11). In addition, digital factors enable governments to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, using social media to communicate directly with audiences (O'Hagan 2013). For these reasons, propaganda – or government disinformation in war - can circulate widely, even domestically in societies that are supposedly predisposed to valuing journalistic objectivity, facts, and the truth.

Framing and Strategic Narratives

Alongside propaganda, two other concepts – framing and strategic narrative - have recently gained traction in the study of political communication and may help us understand government disinformation during war. Both of these analytical concepts provide a structured way of making sense of disinformation. Framing, for example, 'entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution' (Entman 2003, 417). In this way, framing is reliant 'on selection, exclusion and emphasis as a communicator chooses which information to include, which to omit and which to highlight through placement, repetition or association with culturally significant symbols' (Manor and Crilley 2018, 371). Studies suggest that frames consist of four key constituent parts. First, they involve a definition of a problem. Second, they identify the cause of that problem. Third, they provide a moral evaluation of those involved, and fourth, they offer a solution. To illustrate this with an example, consider how, throughout the War on Terror, the Bush administration consistently framed the events of 9/11 as a problem of global terrorism caused by radical Islamists who were 'evil' and could only be stopped through a global 'War on Terror'. This frame cascaded down from the Bush Administration, played out in news coverage, and shaped how people understood what was happening and what should be done in response to it - such as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Entman 2003; Tumber and Palmer 2004).

The concept of strategic narrative has recently become popular as a way of understanding how political actors communicate and what effects these communications have in

contemporary global politics. Strategic narratives are seen as 'a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate' (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 2). They are defined as 'representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives… they articulate end states and suggest how to get there (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 5). Subsequently, proponents of strategic narrative theory focus on studying the component parts of narratives: actors, actions, agency, purpose, and scene. Studies to date have demonstrated the utility of using strategic narrative to understand disinformation during war, including how state governments use social media to deploy strategic narratives that provide overly simplistic dichotomies of conflicts that dehumanise other people (Manor and Crilley 2018) and may persist despite attempts to refute disinformation in the digital sphere (Khaldarova and Pantti 2016; Szostek 2018).

Strategic narrative approaches are distinct from framing theory as strategic narratives involve a focus on temporality – where narratives often have a beginning, middle and end - and a sense of causality that links together the elements of the narrative in a coherent plot. Even so, the difference between the two approaches can be exaggerated. While both approaches provide a structured way of analysing government disinformation in war they share similar limitations. Specifically, both suffer some limitations in making sense of the digital disinformation nowadays deployed by governments that is visual, involves the use of humour, memes and multiple layers of interpretation and meaning, is personalised, and directed at specific individuals and audiences through participatory social media platforms (Merrin 2018). This is even more significant given indications that disinformation that incorporates visual as well as textual components is more likely to be believed (Hameleers et al 2020).

Discourse

A final concept that can help students of government disinformation during war is that of discourse. Discourse is a rather broad concept that it is no simple matter to concisely define. Some refer to discourse as 'systems of signification' (Milliken 1999, 229) that enable us to make sense of the world, or as 'a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way and, therefore, delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it' (Epstein 2005, 2). Influenced by poststructural philosophers like Foucault, discourse theorists explore how meanings are constructed through written and spoken language and other forms of communication such as visual media and popular culture. In doing so, discourse analysis pays attention to the interconnectedness of power and knowledge, explores how identities are constructed and positioned in relation to each other (often through dichotomies such as us/them, good/evil, natural/unnatural), how meanings are naturalised as facts, and how these things make certain political outcomes (such as war and conflict) possible.

Discourse theorists often come under scrutiny given the supposed ways in which they have been seen to undermine claims about objectivity and truth – especially in the age of 'post-truth' politics where postmodernism is seen as a harbinger and foundation for fake news, lies, and disinformation. However, these claims are generally unwarranted and grounded in poor understandings of what postmodern philosophers were arguing. Postmodern approaches to discourse do not demand that we reject 'facts' and they do not advocate for politicians to lie. Rather, the aim of discourse analysis is 'to recognise how particular ideas and practices gain the status of 'facts' or 'common sense' knowledge as a result of the way in which they are represented, abstracted or interpreted' (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2018, 2). It is to understand the ways in which '"truths" are mobilized and meted out' (Epstein 2005, 13).

An approach that places its attention not on the validity of truth claims, but rather on the ways in which they are mobilised may seem like an odd approach for the study of disinformation – particularly in times of war when the stakes are high. But, on the contrary, attention to discourse can reveal important dynamics that may be overlooked by other approaches to propaganda, framing, or strategic narrative. This is best illustrated through an example. Jean Baudrillard's collection of essays about the First Gulf War – *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995) – are often ridiculed on the grounds that the Gulf War did, of course, take place. As war was waged, lives were lost, and so it may seem irresponsible – it may even seem like disinformation itself - to claim that it did not take place. However, this is not the point of Baudrillard's work at all, which does indeed recognise, and is astutely aware of, the human cost of the war. Instead, what Baudrillard is claiming with his provocatively titled analysis is that the overly sanitised representation of the Gulf War – with a focus on precision missiles affixed with cameras, war reporting where no casualties are shown, and computer simulations of what is happening in the desert – serve to limit how audiences comprehend the war and the armed violence being used against other people in far-away places.

Subsequently, approaches interested in propaganda, framing, or strategic narrative, may be interested in looking at how specific instances of disinformation are deployed by governments at war, or in evaluating the truthfulness of certain claims made by governments in conflicts. But an attention to discourse can reveal how 'facts', accurate information, the ways in which they are communicated, as well as the representation of an entire war – such as Baudrilliard's analysis of Western coverage of the Gulf War, or other studies of more recent conflicts (Butler 2010; Der Derian 2009; Stahl 2010) - can themselves approximate disinformation. Moreover, a broader approach to discourse can reveal aspects of disinformation that may be overlooked by studies of strategic narrative. For example, recent work on the Russian state-funded international broadcaster, RT, has found that its coverage of the Syrian conflict does not provide a clear strategic narrative that fits with the foreign policy goals of the Russian government – rather, it is much more reactionary and attempts to seize discourse and shape meanings as events unfold on the ground (Dajani et al. 2019). Ultimately, however, there are overlaps between the approaches identified here, and

scholars often work with several of these concepts to understand government disinformation during war.

The Novelty of Today's Government Disinformation During War

While disinformation has always been a feature of war, its form and reach have evolved to best fit with prevailing conditions. Nowadays, the particularities of a saturated real-time interactive global media environment work to shape the nature of conflict disinformation, not least because long-standing institutional bulwarks against disinformation have been eroded in the internet age (Lazer et al 2018). So, too, does the increasingly visible public debate about the threat that such disinformation poses: disinformation is now itself a securitised issue. The prevailing environment has been referred to variously in recent years as the 'post-truth age' and an 'age of political uncertainty' (Surowiec and Manor eds forthcoming). It is an age in which people are increasingly amenable to placing their trust in 'alternative' sources rather than in established sources of political and institutional authority (Coleman 2018). Add to this the vast number of commercial and state-funded 'alternative' news providers in operation, and the environment in which disinformation is circulated becomes exponentially more complex and multidirectional, with often unclear relationships between the different actors.

One of the most obvious results of this change is an instant ability to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of news and information. It is now the norm for states, defence ministries, embassies and militaries to engage directly with publics via social media (Crilley 2016; Kuntsman and Stein 2015). Throughout the Syrian conflict for example, many states and political actors sought to use social media to communicate with different audiences and Russia's Defence Ministry has come under scrutiny for releasing many questionable statements. These included the sharing of a video ostensibly showing the 'undamaged and fully operational' marketplace of a town recently reported as being bombed. Russia's Embassy in Syria followed this with a tweet subsequently alleging that the 'White Helmets' had faked the bombing, and it's account was temporarily suspended by Twitter for violating their rules.

Sometimes, however, disinformation campaigns are more opportunistic. After a controversial US Politician insinuated that the 2017 Khan Sheikhoun Sarin attack may have been a 'false flag' operation, coordinated activity from sources previously linked to Russian information campaigns emerged around the #Syriahoax hashtag (Hindman and Barash 2018, 39-40). Similarly, disinformation is often articulated by actors at one remove: Russia's international broadcasters, RT and Sputnik, frequently repeat their scepticism of the White Helmets organisation across their broadcast content and multiplatform online outputs, often using 'independent' voices such as freelance journalists, academics and high-profile celebrities to

give legitimacy to the charges made (RT 2018b; Sputnik 2018). Such guests tend to disseminate their controversial claims across a particular range of fringe news outlets online, including *Dissident Voice*, *21st Century Wire* and *Alternative View*. When presenting their views to Russia's international broadcasters, it is not uncommon for these guests to engage in complex conspiracy theorising, or to project the charge of 'disinformation' at the opposing side (RT 2018a; RT 2020; Sputnik 2018). For the media outlets concerned, this offers a degree of plausible deniability: a network that accurately reports what an external figure has said can be represented as fulfilling all its journalistic obligations. If the claim itself contains disinformation, the network can argue that it has merely reported, rather than endorsed it.

However, this low entry-cost, fragmented media market is vital to understanding how disinformation operates online. This is because an individual's likelihood of believing a falsehood to which they have been exposed increases in line with repeated exposure (Pennycook et al 2018a), and news consumers are often unmotivated to critically assess the news that they are consuming (Pennycook et al 2018b). As these processes demonstrate, it is not necessarily obvious whether the states involved generated particular claims or whether state-aligned actors merely reproduce externally-circulating disinformation that suits their sponsors' preferred framing of a conflict. Either way, it appears that audiences having prior awareness of the affiliation and/or intentions of actors like RT does not influence whether the actors' specific claims have an impact upon them (Fisher 2020). What is more, audiences no longer passively consume disinformation, but play a role in its production and re-circulation. Liking, sharing, or commenting on particular social media posts can disseminate them amongst social networks and also increase their effect due to the 'implicit endorsement that comes with sharing' (Lazer et al 2020,3).

Perhaps one of the clearest conclusions from this real-time feedback is how conducive affective and emotive representations are to the viral spread of particular stories and claims. That is to say, stories are most likely to spread rapidly when told from an immediate, or urgent perspective, such as those of an eye-witness (Andén-Papadopoulos 2013). Furthermore, news markets are structured around the knowledge that users tend to share items presented in an emotive way (Bakir and McStay 2017), even though they may not have read beyond the headline (Dafonte-Gomez 2018), and the business model of most social networks is built upon complex statistical models that predict and maximise audience engagement in order to drive advertising revenue (Bakshy et al 2015). When it comes to media content about war, it is precisely these affective and emotive stimuli – so easy to combine in online multimedia offerings - to which audiences are most likely to relate (Solomon 2014).

Aside from as eye-witnesses, the role of fellow individuals as media consumers and producers is also crucial in understanding the spread of disinformation about war and conflict today. For instance, fellow-citizens are often perceived as more trustworthy or reliable than official sources, and their online comments can influence how subsequent viewers assess particular

online artefacts. However, it is difficult to reliably ascertain whether particular sources are themselves state-sponsored, independent, or operating in a grey space in-between. For example, it is a relatively simple matter to use 'astroturfing' techniques to create the impression that comments deriving from managed groups of social media accounts represent 'ordinary citizens acting independently'. Such comments often disseminate and amplify disinformation. Their impact on political social media discussions beyond their own network of information operatives is debatable (Keller et al 2020), but there is evidence that their discussions have power to change individuals' opinions about some of the issues they discuss, as well as increasing uncertainty about them – even when those individuals are aware that commenters may not be genuine (Zerback et al 2020).

Today, disinformation efforts in war need not necessarily be convincing in isolation, nor stand up particularly well to scrutiny, as media research has shown that at crucial times, false stories are more widely shared than accurate news (Silverman 2016) and are widely believed (Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016). What is more, it can be hard to reverse the overall impact of these rapid reactions, since the mere appearance of fake news and debates about it can set the media agenda (Vargo et al 2017), yet repeated exposure to falsehoods (even as part of a retraction) has been associated with increased belief in them (Pennycook et al 2018a; Swire et al 2017). Given these issues, we now turn to discussing new directions for research on government disinformation during war.

New Directions for Research

If the novelty of the contemporary disinformation environment lies primarily in the ways in which its structure influences the formation and spread of disinformation, then it is clear that any effective response to the contemporary challenge of disinformation about war requires genuine engagement with the mechanisms that govern this environment. Without an overarching vision of how contemporary disinformation operates, activities that may seem intuitively commendable (including some fact-checking) could have counterproductive consequences (Swire et al 2017). That is not to say that detailed investigations into the spread of particular disinformation campaigns should not be undertaken. Whilst rigorous research into disinformation activities should be 'encouraged and improved, published and cited', their findings should not be blindly extrapolated from specific cases of disinformation campaigning to characterise network activity more generally, or even to characterise particular information campaigns as a whole (Benkler et al 2018, 265).

Interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial for addressing disinformation in the current age, so that computational data about disinformation's spread can be contextualised within analyses of its wider dissemination, and acceptance. After all, evidence of the volume of discussion alone is a poor indicator of spread, because disinformation campaigners tend to self-amplify within their own networks (Keller et al 2020); and even evidence of spread provides no

evidence of any effect. So, for a better understanding of contemporary government disinformation in war, it is crucial to conduct further research into *if* and *how* disinformation appeals and *to whom.* It is not enough to investigate the prevalence of specific disinformation about war and conflict: significant levels of interdisciplinary collaboration are necessary to tease apart how media market dynamics, journalistic practice, individual and group psychology and social media platform logics intersect.

The media systems of most developed democracies are as resilient to foreign disinformation, trolls and bots as they are to other falsities (Benkler et al 2018, 267). The problem is, however, that the prevailing context is one in which these safeguards as a whole have been eroded (Pennycook and Rand 2020). Time pressures and market trends reward the rapid reproduction of unverified information, and the dissemination of disinformation about war and military capacity can sometimes occur as a side-effect of this process (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2018, 10-11). Confronting this kind of trend demands further research into industry expectations and the communities of journalistic practice that sustain them.

It is vital to conduct further study into the factors that make disinformation appeal to different audiences. When it comes to media content about war and conflict, the act of spectatorship can create a powerful link between the viewer and the viewed (Sylvester 2013, 13), and the stimulation of emotions is related to the reasoning process (Lisle 2017). This being the case, there is some evidence that it is the affective or emotive stimuli in representations of war and conflict to which audiences are most likely to relate, and the visual imagery of the online news environment encodes such stimuli in multiple sensory layers (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020). The same research gives a preliminary indication of a potentially gendered, militaristic dimension to the acceptance of conflict disinformation, whilst other research has shown (ex-)military personnel networks being targeted by conspiratorial interest groups across multiple social networks (Gallacher et al 2017). It would therefore seem prudent to expand the research agenda on the link between disinformation, emotions, and visual representations of war and conflict. For, if 'seeing is believing', then such imagery has the potential to convey rapid support for disinformation claims – as with the videos purporting that Syrian attacks have been faked.

Future research needs to be interdisciplinary. It will need to include technical analyses aimed at detecting the increasingly sophisticated 'deepfakes' in circulation online, which will have to be consistently updated in response to the refinement of faking techniques, artificial intelligence and other technologies. Yet, such research must be informed by research into audiences – for, disinformation is only impactful if the audiences it is aimed at accept, believe, or feel emotionally attached to it. Only with such analyses can successful counter-disinformation strategies be developed (Swire et al 2017). These are crucial matters demanding further investigation in order to build up a complex picture of the effects of disinformation over time. There is unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all solution.

The final area in which significant further research is necessary is the cyclical nature of the contemporary disinformation ecosystem. For, just as Western politicians and media highlight and criticise the circulation of contentious claims between Russian officials, media outlets and fringe communities, so, too, do Russian politicians and media outlets seize upon the circulation of questionable claims in the Western political and media spheres. These dynamics can entrench many of the problems – such as the fixing of identities, preconceptions and prejudices, as well as dehumanisation through othering – that drive disinformation, reduce critical awareness of it, and decrease trust in establishment sources (Coleman 2018). Similarly, any attempts to identify, analyse and counter disinformation must themselves be maximally transparent and accurate. If this is not the case, then they risk not only feeding into the mirroring of 'disinformation' activities and the further erosion of trust, but from a practical perspective, impeding the effective countering of the disinformation with which they engage (Hutchings and Tolz 2020).

In sum, government disinformation in war has a long history and can be made sense of through a variety of perspectives and concepts. Whether studied through the lens of propaganda, framing, strategic narratives, or discourse, we now need to account for the contemporary dynamics of digital communication when studying disinformation during war. As the realm of information has itself become a battleground for states and other political actors (Merrin 2018; Singer and Brookings 2018), the study of disinformation in war is now more important than ever before.

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