



# Information Warfare Watch No. 3

June 24, 2021 Ilan I. Berman

**Related Categories:** Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; China; Iran; Russia; Taiwan

## RUSSIA'S WEB OF DISINFORMATION

At his mid-June summit with Vladimir Putin, President Biden raised a number of critical issues with the Russian leader, ranging from cyberwarfare to human rights. One thing that wasn't discussed during the meeting, however, was the question of disinformation - and Russia's ongoing role in promoting "fake news" and divisive narratives in the United States. Yet the topic is a critical one, because recent years have seen the Kremlin erect a massive disinformation campaign aimed at the U.S. and other Western nations. This effort involves multiple institutions (from the notorious Internet Research Agency to more obscure ones, such as Canada's Global Research website) and the promotion of narratives ranging from false data about the efficacy of Western vaccines to sensationalized accounts of social and racial strife.

The goal of these efforts, observers say, is to undermine trust in democratic institutions. "They are constantly exploring, looking, poking, prodding — not just systems but also the American public — looking for ways to cast doubt, to divide us along racial lines, along political lines, along whatever societal divisions we already have in existence," notes Matthew Masterson of the Stanford Internet Observatory. "That's hybrid warfare in the 21st century." (*Financial Times*, June 15, 2021)

## TEHRAN'S ANTI-SEMITIC TROPES

Moscow, moreover, is not alone. U.S. intelligence officials say that the Islamic Republic of Iran is stepping up its disinformation efforts directed at the American public, focusing in particular on promoting racist and anti-Semitic tropes via social media. "It's a significant level of activity," one official has told *TIME* magazine. "It's active enough that we're tracking it." The assessment echoes the estimates of Jewish communal groups such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which have registered an uptick of hate speech and incitement via social media in the wake of last month's war between Israel and Hamas. "You've seen tons of misinformation," says ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt. "Many of them have been Tweets associated with troll armies of the Islamic Republic of Iran." (*TIME*, June 9, 2021)

## CHINESE DISINFORMATION TARGETS TAIWAN'S TECH SECTOR

Taiwan continues to face an onslaught of coronavirus-related fake news emanating from China. The latest target of the PRC's disinformation campaign appears to be the island's tech sector. Taiwan's Investigation Bureau has found foreign origin social media accounts on platforms like Facebook and Twitter promoting narratives suggesting that leading industrial companies and technology firms (among them the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company) are now suffering from widespread infections in their workforce. (*Taiwan News*, June 2, 2021)

## BEIJING'S FAKE CHEERING SECTION

Just how popular is the People's Republic of China's global narrative? In recent years, China's so-called "wolf warrior diplomacy" has focused on aggressive rebuttals to unfavorable news coverage on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, to much apparent international acclaim. But a great deal of that support appears to be fabricated. A months-long investigation by the Associated Press and Oxford University's Oxford Internet Institute has found that the reach and resonance of China's online ripostes and narratives is being amplified by an "army" of fake accounts, which retweet and repost the pronouncements of Chinese officials and policymakers without disclosing their official roles.

The finding is far from insignificant. As the Associated Press notes, "[t]his fiction of popularity can boost the status of China's messengers, creating a mirage of broad support. It can also distort platform algorithms, which are designed to boost the distribution of popular posts, potentially exposing more genuine users to Chinese government propaganda. While individual fake accounts may not seem impactful on their own, over time and at scale, such networks can distort the information environment, deepening the reach and authenticity of China's messaging." (Associated Press, May 28, 2021)

## **WASHINGTON TAKES AIM AT IRANIAN PROPAGANDA**

Even as it continues its negotiations with the Iranian government over possible reentry into the 2015 nuclear deal, the Biden administration is taking steps to curtail Iran's malicious online presence. In late June, the U.S. government seized dozens of websites connected to the disinformation efforts of the Iranian government or its assorted proxy groups. "Pursuant to court orders, the United States seized 33 websites used by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU) and three websites operated by Kata'ib Hizballah (KH), in violation of U.S. sanctions," the Justice Department announced in an official statement. The effort, according to the agency, is a response to "components of the government of Iran, disguised as news organizations or media outlets, [which had] targeted the United States to subvert U.S. democratic processes." (*CNN*, June 23, 2021)