



Information Warfare Watch No. 22

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Related Categories: Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; China; Russia; Israel

DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND WEAPONIZED DISINFORMATION

In its latest assessment to Congress on worldwide threats facing the United States, the U.S. intelligence community focused extensively on the threat posed by "digital authoritarianism" and one of the most potent tools used by authoritarian regimes to promote their global objectives: disinformation. "Efforts by Russia, China, and other countries to promote authoritarianism and spread disinformation is helping fuel a larger competition between democratic and authoritarian forms of government," the Annual Threat Assessment issued publicly by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on March 8th outlined. "This competition exploits global information flows to gain influence and impacts nearly all countries, contributing to democratic backsliding, threats of political instability, and violent societal conflict through misinformation and disinformation."

Moreover, the U.S. intelligence community anticipates the situation to get considerably worse in the future. "Globally, foreign states' malicious use of digital information and communication technologies will become more pervasive, automated, targeted, and complex during the next few years, further threatening to distort publicly available information and probably outpace efforts to protect digital freedoms," the report warns. "Many foreign governments have become adept at the tools of digital repression, employing censorship, misinformation and disinformation, mass surveillance, and invasive spyware to suppress freedom... Digital repression is occurring against the backdrop of broader digital influence operations that many autocrats are conducting globally to try to shape how foreign publics view their regimes, create social and political upheavals in some democracies, shift policies, and sway voters' perspectives and preferences." (ODNI, March 8, 2023)

ISRAEL'S UPGRADED PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

For years, the State of Israel has struggled with hasbara, as its public relations and public diplomacy activities are colloquially known. Despite persistent efforts by its diplomats to explain policy and contextualize government decisions, the country has suffered from consistently negative coverage in an often hostile global press. Now, however, the Israeli government is working to harness new technologies to help it more effectively and persuasively communicate with the world. To that end, back in March, Amb. David Saranga, who heads the Israeli Foreign Ministry's digital bureau, broke new ground when he released an outreach message employing generative artificial intelligence (AI) software. The capability allowed Saranga's video message, which was posted to social media platform Twitter, to simultaneously appear in eight different languages: Arabic, Chinese Mandarin, Persian, Greek, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian and Turkish.

The new capability represents a game changer for Israeli public diplomacy, which tends to be constrained by tight budgets and the country's small size. "We understand that there is a revolution right now, that the entire digital sphere is changing," Saranga subsequently told *The Times of Israel*. "And therefore, we are encouraging our people – and when I say our people I mean the embassies and the diplomats and so on and so forth – to dive into the AI world in order to see how we can use it for the public." (*The Times of Israel*, March 28, 2023)

CHINA, TIKTOK AND COGNITIVE WARFARE

For months now, the U.S. government has been hotly debating what to do about TikTok, the massively popular Chinese social media app that is used by an estimated 150 million Americans. Many have backed banning the app outright, citing the fact that its parent company, ByteDance, could be subject to the PRC's National Security Law, which compels the disclosure of sensitive data at the Chinese government's request. Others, however, have opposed such a step, citing potential discontent among young voters and other reasons. Largely undiscussed, however, is the question of how the Chinese government itself sees TikTok and other similar apps – and how they might be used in the future.

Here, experts say, there's reason for serious concern. "Translated Chinese military reports suggest that warfare is shifting from destroying bodies to paralyzing and controlling the opponent's mind. Making the Biden administration's call for TikTok's Chinese owners to sell their stakes in the app or face a US ban just the start of a protracted Whac-A-Mole game in a broader strategy to combat cognitive warfare – with the human mind as the battlefield," writes Nita Farahany of Duke University. "While a TikTok ban may take out the first and fattest mole, it fails to contend with the wider shift to cognitive warfare as the sixth domain of military operations under way, which includes China's influence campaigns on TikTok, a mass collection of personal and biometric data from American citizens and their race to develop weapons that could one day directly assault or disable human minds. We ignore this broader context at our peril." (*The Guardian*, March 25, 2023)