

Lecture Notes in Social Networks

Brian Murphy

Foreign
Disinformation
in America and
the U.S. Government's
Ethical Obligations
to Respond

 Springer

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Brian Murphy
Department of Security Studies
Georgetown University
Washington, DC, USA

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Preface

This book is based on a journey. It is a voyage which has taken me well over 10 years and represents a merger of my academic research with practical experiences. This book represents my attempt to try and provide a framework for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers who are attempting to answer some of the most challenging questions facing the United States. What must and should the federal government do to counter foreign-backed disinformation in the homeland? At stake is keeping the free marketplace of ideas free. It is a tough question to appropriately answer. The path to get there is filled with a range of nuanced and challenging problems. As a traveler, I started researching how information on social media was being distorted for political, social, ideological, and military objectives in approximately 2008. Initially, my field of research was related to how emerging terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and later the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) deployed destructive information within in the US homeland. Both groups effectively used slick designs and content to recruit followers, distort the facts behind their brutality, and inspire US citizens to commit acts of violence. The research I was conducting was related to the doctorate I was pursuing at Georgetown University.

All the while, I also remained a practitioner. During the period of my initial research, I held various positions as a special agent within the FBI. As a point of reference, when I started my research I had been in the FBI for approximately 10 years. After about a decade as a street agent assigned to New York City, in 2007 I had been promoted to a supervisor assigned to the FBI's Counterterrorism Division in Northern Virginia. My next several assignments would take me all over the place. From 2009 to 2011, I was an attaché assigned to the US Embassies in Algiers, Tunis, and Niamey. I saw firsthand the awesome power of social media as it played some part in toppling the government in Tunisia. In 2011 I returned to the United States and held counterterrorism positions in Pittsburgh and Chicago. As a senior manager in Chicago, I ran the FBI's largest investigative platforms looking for threats emerging on social media. I also witnessed two disturbing trends materialize. First, those lured to violence online were getting younger and younger. Second, the radicalization process was increasingly one-dimensional. Those gravitating

towards embracing violent ideology were consuming information online and often in isolation. I therefore started an “off-ramping” program to use the best of a community to provide a different path for youth who were starting to seek violence as an answer to their grievance.

In 2015, I returned to FBI HQ as a member of the senior executive service (SES). An SES within the federal government represents the senior leader cadre in each federal organization. I managed several programs for the FBI such as countering violent extremism, identifying behaviors related to active shooters, and counterintelligence. The mission was unpacking the intersection of social media and threats and threat actors. While the various threat vectors I managed in the FBI were different, and so was how social media fit into each one, there were also commonalities. One of which was how foreign-based and US person speech intermixed and became seemingly knotted together. This presented a substantial challenge to executive branch action. What could be done in this environment?

I can still recall participating in a number of federal government programs designed to build solutions for partner nations. I traveled across the globe to participate with allies on behalf of the US government. Meanwhile, attempts to do similar work within the homeland were either aborted before they were started or ran into rough political waters. Progress was stymied most of the time because of political reasons. Excuses were sometimes cloaked with vague references to laws and regulations. Seldom did executive branch officials start from the point of determining what was the ethical decision. Essentially, it was just easier for the federal government to work abroad than within the United States. But did this represent the most appropriate course of action? How could millions of US tax dollars be poured into tackling problems in the other countries when the executive branch did little to nothing within the United States?

For my research, I had begun to deep dive into the field of cognitive information operations. Usually, these information operations were conducted by nation states. From the founding of the United States for hundreds of years thereafter, what I found was federal authorities often affirmatively chose to counter hostile nations who were trying to subvert the domestic free marketplace of ideas. Sometimes, the research revealed the government got it right, at other it went too far, and still at other times it responded to the pendulum of the public appetite for government interference in speech. By the time of the 2016 US presidential election, I had consumed just about every piece of literature available on foreign attempts to manipulate the US public, to include the Cold War era Soviet Active Measure campaigns.

As awareness of just how prolifically the Russian interfered in the 2016 US elections became known, the same question returned. Why was the United States so defenseless? Where was the federal government’s response in the homeland? While nothing really materialized, and many times for good reasons, I delved deeper into what was the government’s ethical responsibility to do something. Was it obligated to act? The answer was clear that it was. The more difficult question to answer was establishing the point at which government intervention began to diminish the public confidence.

In 2018, I transferred from the FBI to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). I assumed the position as the Department's highest ranking career official in charge of intelligence. As a practitioner, while serving as the acting Under Secretary for Intelligence at DHS, I formed the first-ever counter foreign influence center at DHS. I participated in the formation of national-level policy during one of the most challenging periods in US history (2018 to 2020). As I explain in the book, I developed the battle scars to prove it. In 2020, I would become the highest ranking whistleblower in the US history. The bulk of my allegations revolved around the manipulation of intelligence involving Russian covert manipulation of social media within the United States. While this book is not about my experiences as a whistleblower (perhaps it will be the focus of a future work) as a practical matter, it has provided me an unusual experience to draw from. From that understanding, I take a look at the force of both the policy challenges and political aspects of trying to implement programs in the United States. Under my watch, minimal progress was in countering covert information campaigns in the United States. And since my time in government, there has been almost an identical amount of headway made. Among the outcomes of a still defenseless homeland is fertile ground for the Russians to continue to fertilize the existing cleavages in US society. Polarization and chaos were their objectives. And they continue to chase these goals virtually unchecked. My research and past experiences both have led me to try and explain how and why a carefully crafted executive branch intercession is important.

Before turning to the book, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of those in the academic community who have guided my research. I draw particular attention to the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. John Shock (Committee Chair, Georgetown and Bowie State University), Dr. John Kelly (committed cartographer of the social media eco-system and CEO of *Graphika*), and Dr. Charles McNelis (Department Chair, Georgetown University). For this book, I have drawn from my dissertation "The Impact of Social Media Conveyed Russian-Backed Disinformation in a Polarized America: An Examination of the Executive Branch's Ethical Responsibility to Respond."¹

Washington, DC, USA

Brian Murphy

¹Brian J. Murphy, "The Impact of Social Media Conveyed Russian-Backed Disinformation in a Polarized America: An Examination of the Executive Branch's Ethical Responsibility to Respond" (Ph.D., United States – District of Columbia, Georgetown University, 2022), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2760166084/abstract/9EE61E3EE4184D8BPQ/1>

Contents

Introduction	1
Baselining Disinformation	7
1 Disinformation’s Three Criteria	8
1.1 Framework Criteria	16
2 Disinformation Versus Misinformation and Propaganda	20
3 Non-state Actors and Disinformation	22
Disinformation and Democracy	25
1 Illiberal Speech	27
2 Polarization	28
3 Disinformation	30
4 Populism	34
The Ground Swell of Scholarship	37
The Disinformation Problem	45
1 State to State Disinformation	48
2 A Distinctly Russian Version of Disinformation	50
3 Russia’s Utilization of Domestic Disinformation	53
4 The Bigger Schema	57
Disinformation and Behavior	59
1 Disinformation and the Change of Technology	60
2 Disinformation and the News	62
3 Disinformation and Data	64
4 Disinformation and Communication Structures	64
5 RCSMO and State-to-State Relations	67
6 Disinformation and Social Media	68
7 Disinformation, Identity and Polarization	72
8 Disinformation and Business	76

Disinformation and National Power	81
1 Disinformation as an Element of Military Strategy	83
2 Russian Disinformation Objectives	86
3 Countering the Americanization of Russia	90
4 Disinformation and the Whole of Nation	93
5 The American Target. Scope, Scale, and Depth	95
6 Disinformation and Strategic Surprise	97
7 Disinformation's Aftermath	97
8 A Sign of Success	99
9 Beyond Elections	101
The Role of the Executive Branch	103
1 Authorities	106
2 The Discipline of Analysis	109
3 The Pendulum	111
4 Collaboration	112
5 The Executive Branch and Speech	115
6 The Debate over Speech	119
7 All Three Branches	122
Executive Branch Ethical Obligations	125
1 The Role of Ethics	127
2 Ethics and Threat	130
3 Ethics, Frameworks, and Philosophers	133
4 Limits, Ethics and Scoping	139
5 Ethical Frameworks	140
6 Ethics and Legitimacy	142
7 Legitimacy and Balance	148
8 Trust and Legitimacy	150
9 The Minority	151
Executive Branch Solutions	155
1 Best Practices	157
1.1 Sweden	158
1.2 Finland	160
1.3 Lithuania	160
1.4 Estonia	161
2 Domestic Solutions	162
3 Lines of Effort	163
3.1 LOE 1: Collection and Integration of Both Domestic and Foreign Intelligence	164
3.2 LOE 2: The Full Exploitation of Open-Source Intelligence	165
3.3 LOE 3: A Rebalancing in the Education System	173
3.4 LOE 4: Proactively Tagging RCSMO Accounts	176
3.5 LOE 5: Physical Disruption of the Threat	180
3.6 LOE 6: Establishment of an Integrated Center	181

From Portland to January 6th to Election 2028, Assessing the Impact of Russian Disinformation 187

1 Portland 188

2 January 6th 193

3 Portland vs. January 6th 197

4 Election 2028 198

Conclusion 201

Glossary 205

About the Author

Brian Murphy teaches about homeland security and the domestic intelligence architecture underpinning national security at Georgetown University. His area of research and publications are tied to his expertise in national security, policy, law, and intelligence. Dr. Murphy completed over 25 years of federal service in 2021. In his last assignment, he served as both the Principal and Acting Under Security for Intelligence for the Department of Homeland Security. In this capacity, he led the intelligence and analysis activities of more than 250,000 personnel and served on the National Intelligence Council. Prior to that, Dr. Murphy was a special agent with the FBI for over 20 years. Dr. Murphy began his federal service as a member of the Marine Corps. His credentials include a PhD from Georgetown University; MA from Columbia University; and a BA from the College of William and Mary. Dr. Murphy currently works as a senior executive for a threat intelligence company.

Introduction



In 1791 the *Bill of Rights* bestowed upon Americans broad speech guarantees.¹ The bill not only granted each citizen the right to freedom of speech, it also provided equal assurances to other forms of communication, such as that of the press, and for citizens to assemble and petition their government. The same extensive protection would later be codified in an amended *Constitution*.² It is a freedom designed to allow Americans to discover, trade, and debate all manner of ideas. The Founders believed that through a robust exchange of thoughts, foundational elements of a liberal democratic society would be maintained. Furthermore, they believed that the best course of action for the country would prevail over time through freedom of expression and debate. Matching the prominence of these rights is the executive branch's equally broad authority to protect them. The Founders granted robust measures because they were concerned about dangers from foreign adversaries. Among the hazards was the coercive effect of covert influence in America by hostile nations. This is a threat that we now call disinformation. From the conception of government, the executive branch was constitutionally charged and ethically compelled to ensure that speech in the U.S. remained unobstructed from foreign disinformation. Flagging, and under certain circumstances censoring, malicious foreign-backed disinformation circulating within the US is among the proscribed obligations. Thus far, successive executive branches have failed to fulfill their required duty, especially in the social media age. This is startling considering the consequential costs of disinformation to free speech and democracy.

¹“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

²“The Bill of Rights: A Transcription,” National Archives, November 4, 2015, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>

Even the word disinformation presents a problem for the executive branch. The term has become politically charged. This should not be unexpected given the various definitions used for it coupled with the fact that disinformation touches on free speech and preys upon the most divisive issues in a society. The term's usage varies considerably among executive branch agencies, in academia, the press, and across thought leaders. In sum, disinformation has been weaponized by a variety of stakeholders. The very ambiguity of the term is one of the reasons disinformation is effective. But there are three criteria through which content can be accurately evaluated as disinformation or something different. First, the identity of the content originator is intentionally masked. Second, the released information is harmful or destructive content intended to influence an outcome. Finally, the originator has a predetermined political, military, economic, or social objective. Establishing what constitutes disinformation is one of the first steps in countering it and protecting national security.

I assert that a calibrated executive branch response to meet the challenge is constitutionally and ethically required to ensure speech in the U.S. is actually free and to preserve the validity of the social contract between the governed and government. But finding the medium between executive branch overreach and not doing enough is difficult. Going too far or not far enough both have consequences. I will argue that there are three principles governing executive branch intervention against foreign covert speech proliferating in the homeland: The purpose of action must be restorative. By restorative, I mean the aim of the executive branch should be to re-establish the free marketplace of ideas; Next, the executive branch should function as a mechanism for leadership, coordination, preparedness, and resiliency building; Finally, it is the only institution with the mission, resources, and assets to sift through and identify the problem at the necessary speed and scale. These principles can successfully be implemented by a combination of balanced solutions involving a variety of governmental and non-governmental participants. To succeed, it requires a well-defined public strategy outlined in the six accompanying lines of effort: (1). Collection and integration of both domestic and foreign intelligence; (2). The full exploitation of open-source intelligence; (3). Education; (4). Tagging of Russian covert accounts on social media; (5). The physical disruption of RCSMO threats; (6). And the establishment of an integrated national center. Underlining these principles is the recognition that citizens will be trading some level of liberty for security. While such a trade is organic to the social contract, it should never be taken lightly. This work examines the trade's costs and boundaries and then sets parameters for solutions.

Disinformation does not live in isolation. Understanding and countering disinformation starts by placing it in an ever-changing, illiberal speech ecosystem. The environment is nested in an even more complex online ecology. Where legally possible and ethically permissible, the executive branch must move against illiberal speech to maintain a healthy democratic tradition. But not all the pieces of illiberal speech warrant a securitized response from the executive branch. Breaking illiberal speech into its components indicates it is made up of populist rhetoric, polarizing speech, and disinformation. While together they constitute an existential threat to

liberal democracy, only under certain criteria can and should the executive branch intercede. Among the types of illiberal speech, disinformation is arguably the least understood and most challenging to identify and mitigate. It is also the most applicable for government intervention. With disinformation, the fact that the sender of the information is masked makes it particularly problematic to detect but also more susceptible to the application of laws and policy. While also damaging to democracy, populism and polarization present a host of legal and ethical implications that limit executive-branch intercession. The distinguisher between disinformation, and populism, and polarization is the identification of the sender and the sender's intent. With populism and polarization, the sender is often identified, and sometimes the message can be positive and truthful. The laws and ethical principles governing the executive branch have been set up to allow the marketplace of free ideas to serve as the ideological judge of polarization and populism. But because disinformation changes the marketplace of ideas, it was recognized at the nation's founding as a problem to be confronted. This is why most of the authorities and the mandates to address the issue were bestowed on the executive branch from the start.

While disinformation pre-dates America and has been around for time eternal, the rise of social media has brought it to the fore as a force to be reckoned with. Social media as one of the most profound structural changes in human communications. The seismic swing has caused the transmission of ideas to break from the "few to the many" and into the "many to many." Because of social media, disinformation is more destructive than at any point in the past. Still, the government's actions and funding barely address the issue within the homeland. Why would an administration take on domestic disinformation, given it comes with a hornet's nest of political issues? Countering it is tough. Disinformation feeds off divisive preexisting problems, many of which are interconnected to politics. Its twisted content often has some degree of truth, and neutralizing it involves a host of sophisticated legal issues and experimental solutions.

Perhaps in the past decades, the executive branch's decision not to engage on the issue was not as substantial to national security. But due to social media, things have changed, and the executive branch's decision to do almost nothing has made the detrimental outcome from disinformation more acute. In the modern age, disinformation has surreptitiously manipulated the free marketplace of ideas. In so doing, it has also catalyzed the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and undermined government legitimacy. Western philosophy and historical systems analysis has identified the criticality of maintaining trust and legitimacy for the well-being of a liberal democracy. Throughout this book, the abrasive results of disinformation on trust will be detailed. The evidence will demonstrate that trust is a casualty of the half-truths and falsehoods perpetuated by foreign disinformation. The facts will also show that the influence of the free marketplace of ideas is disrupted because of the covert nature of disinformation. As trust deteriorates, so does faith in bedrock institutions and among citizens. As a result, for some, the government is no longer seen as a credible neutral arbiter working for the common good. For others, fellow citizens are now viewed as the "other" in a zero-sum game. And for more and more

people, imposing the will of the popular majority is considered more important than respecting rights.

Additionally, the work will explain the results of a deteriorating legitimacy. Legitimacy is tied to the social contract between the governed and the government. America is founded upon the idea that citizens voluntarily trade liberty to the government for security. We will see disinformation attacks this contract from several directions. First, a government that is not trusted is not an institution where people will willingly continue to invest in the exchange. Alternative forms of government can become attractive. Next, how the executive branch chooses to counter disinformation matters. A powerless, feckless, or overbearing and aggressive government is also not an institution citizens will support. Hanging in the balance is the perspective that the government is working fairly to secure the freedom and liberty enshrined in the *Bill of Rights* and the *Constitution* for all its citizens.

Throughout, it will be acknowledged that disinformation is certainly not the sole or even the leading cause of America's problems. Many existing reasons can help account for why America is becoming more polarized. However, it will be claimed that as a weapon, when disinformation is aimed at the cornerstones of democracy, it has a destructive effect. An adversary nation like Russia is firing disinformation to bring about a weaker U.S. both at home and abroad. Among the stakeholders, the executive branch has *the* role of countering Russian-backed disinformation.

I have chosen to focus primarily on Russia. While other nations are starting to copy Russia, Soviet-driven covert disinformation operations are well accounted for by defectors, files released after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Cold War-era studies. Additionally, a considerable amount of information post the 2016 election has been developed. Thus far, the volume of information available on other hostile nations does not exist in the way it does for Russia. From the quantity of material available, insights into Russia's methods and where counter-efforts could succeed can be derived. For example, there are the 116th Congressional, Robert Mueller Special Counsel, and Director of National Intelligence reports. The Russian war in Ukraine has also spurred investigations. Furthermore, thousands of investigations are drawn up by partner nations, the media, academia, think tanks, and private companies.

I am hopeful my research will spur more inquiry regarding what the role of the executive branch is within the US to counter foreign-backed disinformation. Tied to this are more questions over how the executive branch's responsibility, and the exercise of its authority, are related to legitimacy and the social contract. The discussions so far have been legalistic, binary (the executive branch is all in or out) and interlaced with passion from a political perspective. The ethics discipline has rarely been introduced. As research follows, a challenge that will endure is the intense polarization impacting the US. Research in the field has opportunities that have not yet been flushed out but being clear-eyed about how political forces will receive it must be kept in mind. On the topic of disinformation, I believe I have higher than average levels of fluency in the discussions taking place in the worlds of academia, the executive branch, and industry. While the conversations occur, they are in whispers and are not being taken up in a serious way. Despite the blockers and

challenges, inquiries in this area are essential for US stability. Weighing in the balance are liberty, trust, and legitimacy between the government and the governed.

The work has been broken down into two sections. The first section is made up of chapters one through seven. The intent of section one is to establish what is disinformation and what it is not, explain how disinformation is utilized as a weapon of war, and then assess its impact at the intersection with democracy. Essentially, why does it matter, and what bearing does it have on the functioning of a liberal democracy. In the second section, chapters eight through twelve, the focus shifts to positioning the executive branch as a counter against disinformation. What is the precise role the executive branch can and should play to counter disinformation and maintain legitimacy. Doing too much or too little both have associated negative corollaries. I will offer a multiplicity of solutions which take into account the vast array of complexities associated with free speech and government intervention. To conclude, I will provide several use cases to illustrate why countering disinformation causes difficulties for the executive branch. If the problem were easy to fix, it would have been resolved. When trying to counter disinformation, high-stakes American politics, deep pre-existing points of domestic polarization, and a rapidly changing technological landscape are at play. Identifying and disrupting covert foreign-backed information involves considering the very reason free speech was listed as the First Amendment in the *Bill of Rights* and then the *Constitution*.

Baselining Disinformation



Abstract The ambiguity over the meaning of disinformation and the political nature of the conversation surrounding it has made it more difficult for the executive branch, academia, policymakers, the media, and private industry to gain a common understanding. By applying to a piece of information a framework containing three criteria: First the originator is intentionally masked; second, the released information is harmful or destructive content intended to influence an outcome; and lastly, the originator has a predetermined political, military, economic, or social objective, it is determinable if information is disinformation or something different such as misinformation, a lie, rumor, conspiracy theory, or propaganda. By making such a determination research can be more accurately scoped and classified and policies to counter it more easily developed. In addition to disinformation, several other terms like misinformation, Russian Covert Social Media Accounts, propaganda, illiberal speech, and ethics are also defined and compared.

Keywords Misinformation · Russian covert social media accounts · Disinformation · Propaganda · Illiberal speech · Ethics

To proceed, establishing what each definition means is a must. While this is not unique to research, it is particularly at issue in this topic area. Both the ambiguity over the meaning and the political nature of the conversation surrounding disinformation and related terms has made it more difficult for the executive branch, academia, policymakers, the media, and private industry to gain a common understanding. I have selected to define disinformation and five additional terms, misinformation, propaganda, Russian Covert Social Media Operations, illiberal speech, and ethics, that will be used frequently in this book. Among the concepts I examine, disinformation is the most politically charged. In this chapter, I will argue that by applying a framework containing three criteria, we can determine if a piece of content is disinformation or something different such as misinformation, a lie, rumor, conspiracy theory, or propaganda.

Misinformation: False or misleading information spread unintentionally, by error, or by mistake.¹

Russian Covert Social Media Accounts (RCSMO): Social media personas or websites whose creation is directed by the Russian government, and that fact is specifically masked. The accounts or websites are deliberately designed to appear as non-Russian and spread disinformation.

Propaganda: The systematic dissemination of information for control, especially biased or misleading, promotes a political cause or point of view. All propaganda contains inherent epistemic defects^{2,3}

Illiberal speech: The usage of populist rhetoric, propaganda, and disinformation by anti-democratic people and countries to diminish the institutions of democracy, enhance polarization, and undermine rivals.

Ethics: A rationale for decision-making comprised of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Morality is a part of ethical reasoning. Ethics can be interchangeable with the ancient Greek concept of virtue.⁴

Disinformation: The identity of the content originator is intentionally masked; the released information is harmful or destructive content intended to influence an outcome; and the originator has a predetermined political, military, economic, or social objective.

1 Disinformation's Three Criteria

In many circles within the U.S., the word disinformation has become politically toxic, especially after the failed launch of DHS's Disinformation Governance Board and the release of the "Twitter Files."^{5,6} Former President Trump declared in December of 2022 that if he were reelected to the presidency, he would ban the usage of the term disinformation and misinformation from the government.⁷ It has

¹Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich *Truth Decay, An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2018), 122.

²Howard Campbell. "Narco-Propaganda in the Mexican "Drug War": An Anthropological Perspective." *Latin American Perspectives*, no. 41.2 (2019): 60–77.

³Sarabeth A. Smith, "What's Old Is New Again: Terrorism And the Growing Need To Revisit The Prohibition On Propaganda," *Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce*, no. 37 (2010): 299–388.

⁴John-Stewart Gordon, "Modern Morality and Ancient Ethics," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/anci-mod/> (accessed August 25, 2021).

⁵Stavroula Pabst, "The Way We Discuss 'Disinformation' Is Toxic," *Slate*, May 23, 2022, <https://slate.com/technology/2022/05/disinformation-dhs-board-toxic.html>.

⁶Jill Goldenziel, "The Disinformation Governance Board Is Dead. Here's The Right Way To Fight Disinformation.," *Forbes*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jillgoldenziel/2022/05/18/the-disinformation-governance-board-is-dead-heres-the-right-way-to-fight-disinformation/>

⁷Steven Nelson, "Trump Vows to Ban Feds from ID-Ing Domestic 'Misinformation,'" *New York Post*, December 15, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/12/15/trump-vows-to-ban-feds-from-id-ing-domestic-misinformation-if-elected/>

a similar negative connotation in political discourse, the media, and among some Americans as the phrase “fake news.”⁸ This contrasts sharply with how disinformation was reintroduced into the American vernacular following the 2016 presidential election. As the disinformation concept reemerged from its end of the Cold War hibernation, the mentions initially associated with the term were ones of curiosity.⁹ What was it, where did it come from, and why should people take heed?¹⁰ Much of the early conversations were also focused on whether disinformation mattered.¹¹ During this initial honeymoon period, Americans seemed to presume they knew what disinformation was when they saw it. When accomplished professionals spoke about disinformation, it rarely included an explanation.¹² There was a built-in assumption from the speaker that everyone in the conversation understood the meaning. But since about 2020, the term has become increasingly controversial.¹³ It is now used frequently in the news and by politicians as a weapon to undercut speech one disagrees with.¹⁴ It is also deployed as a boogeyman to describe a sinister effort by elites, or an overzealous government, to infringe upon free speech.¹⁵ George Orwell’s *1984* and his Ministry of Truth are terms thrown around when discussing disinformation. However, none of this should be surprising, considering the meaning of the word disinformation remains ambiguous and poorly defined. At some level, because there are no agreed-upon definitions and criteria to explain it, disinformation is hollow. The term represents anything anyone wants it to mean.

While it may not be necessary or practical to agree on a single definition, having an agreed-upon set of criteria is essential. Without them, the term will remain subjective, trivial, and prone to attack. This matters because first locating and then combating disinformation is critical for national security. The cost of ambiguity leaves open seams and cracks that an adversary will exploit. Because the framework

⁸Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, “Thinking about ‘Information Disorder’: Formats of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Mal-Information,” in *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), 43–54, https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/f_jfnd_handbook_module_2.pdf

⁹“Fake News in 2016: What It Is, What It Wasn’t, How to Help,” *BBC News*, December 30, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-38168792>

¹⁰“Fake News in 2016.”

¹¹David Shimer, *Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 2020).

¹²Barack Obama, “Disinformation Is a Threat to Our Democracy,” *Medium* (blog), April 22, 2022, <https://barackobama.medium.com/my-remarks-on-disinformation-at-stanford-7d7af7ba28af>

¹³Taylor Lorenz, “How the Biden Administration Let Right-Wing Attacks Derail Its Disinformation Efforts,” *Washington Post*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/05/18/disinformation-board-dhs-nina-jankowicz/>

¹⁴Bobby Allyn, “Group Aiming to Defund Disinformation Tries to Drain Fox News of Online Advertising,” *NPR*, June 9, 2022, sec. Technology, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/09/1103690822/group-aiming-to-defund-disinformation-tries-to-drain-fox-news-of-online-advertis>

¹⁵Nicole Sganga, “What Is DHS’ Disinformation Governance Board and Why Is Everyone so Mad about It?,” *CBS News*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-dhs-disinformation-governance-board-and-why-is-everyone-so-mad-about-it/>

is not in place to identify what is and is not disinformation, agencies will remain unsure if they have the authority to intervene. Ambiguity also causes legal and regulatory confusion for civil servants. Often the executive branch organizations remain in limbo when this occurs. The status quo tends to be the default, and in this case, little to no action will be taken. Before further discussing the criteria, disinformation's post-2016 ambiguous history will be established. Triage of the variety of terms and assumptions about the word indicates that lay people and professionals look at the term differently and, in some cases, radically. Disinformation has been defined and talked about in some of the following ways:

Literature:

- *LikeWar*: “clever manipulation and weaponization of falsehood (called *dezinformatsiya*), both to wage ideological battles abroad and to control its [Russia] population abroad.”^{16,17}
- *Thinking about ‘information disorder’: formats of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information*: “Disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie and points to people being actively disinformationed by malicious actors.”¹⁸
- *Countering Russian Disinformation*: “Disinformation is a tool commonly used by a number of states to sow discord, undermine faith in governing institutions, stoke fear and anxiety, and ultimately achieve certain policy goals.”¹⁹
- *Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation | Shaping Europe’s digital future*: “includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to cause public harm intentionally or for profit.”²⁰

Thinktanks:

- Rand Corp: “Intentionally misleading or false information intended to achieve an economic, ideological, or political goal.”²¹

¹⁶Emerson T. Brookings and P.W. Singer, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (New York, NY: First Mariner Books, 2018), P. 103.

¹⁷There is no exact definition for disinformation in *LikeWar*, however the term is introduced and explained on page 103.

¹⁸Wardle and Derakhshan, “Thinking about ‘Information Disorder’: Formats of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Mal-Information.”

¹⁹Joseph Robbins, “Countering Russian Disinformation,” September 23, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/countering-russian-disinformation>

²⁰Madeleine de Cock Buning, “Final Report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation | Shaping Europe’s Digital Future” (European Union, March 12, 2018), <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

²¹Kavanagh and Rich, *Truth Decay, An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, 121.