



Disinformation Ink Spots

A Framework to Combat Authoritarian Disinformation Campaigns

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The Ink-Spot Disinformation is a strategic framework for authoritarian disinformation campaigns that provides a deeper foundation for U.S. defense and deterrence. Modern authoritarian disinformation campaigns, enabled by new technologies, identify key individuals and groups in the United States to create a network of influential “ink spots.” Hostile regimes use these ink spots to exploit liberal democratic weaknesses, undermining U.S. policy and democracy. The United States should launch counter-offensive disinformation campaigns against regimes that engage in Ink-Spot Disinformation to increase the cost of these campaigns.

Technology and the New Information Warfare

Modern information warfare combines traditional practices and objectives with new technologies.

- *Established Disinformation Practices.* During the Cold War, the Soviet Union sought to sow discord against the United States by engaging in ideological-psychological warfare. Soviet influence operations, dubbed “active measures,” included written and oral disinformation, forging fake war plans, manipulating foreign media, and establishing front organizations to spread messages of influence. For example, by repeating false information through radio services or newspapers and manipulating narratives, active measures successfully created echo chambers of repeated messaging. Traditional active measures often deceived individuals but were traceable, expensive, and limited in scope, making them largely unsuccessful in altering policy decisions.
- *New Technologies.* Using modern precision targeting and data collecting technologies, disinformation campaigns can more easily identify specific targets and operate undetected, strengthening the psychological impact and capabilities of traditional active measures. For example, surveillance systems increase data collection and social media bots ease target identification. Combined with traditional active measures, these technologies increase the effectiveness of current disinformation warfare.

Strategy of New Information Warfare

Current disinformation campaigns focus on two types of targets, or “ink spots”, in liberal democracies.

- *Traditional Top-Down Targeting.* Using this strategy, developed under Soviet active measures, regimes focus on corporations and corrupt politicians to acquire data and political influence. State-run corporations in the attacking country form partnerships with target country corporations which lobby the target government and expand the patronage network. The attacking regime coopts influential individuals with campaign financing, political favors, and blackmail in order to gain political influence in the target government.
- *Emergent Bottom-Up Targeting.* Enabled by new technology, modern disinformation campaigns identify and cultivate influential individuals or small groups within democracies. These targets are actors that either feel marginalized or are co-ethnic groups that seek to change the status quo. In contrast to top-down targeting, bottom-up targeting is cheaper, less traceable, and easier to influence.

Ink-Spot Disinformation: Connecting the Spots

Ink-Spot Disinformation campaigns operate through an identify-cultivate-link strategy.

- *Identify.* Disinformation campaigns identify potential individuals and social networks, or ink spots, that are susceptible to messages of influence. The regime may buy or steal micro-targeting advertisement data, single out disenfranchised or politically mobile fringe organizations, or track engagement with radical influencers. In most cases, the ink spots are unknowingly targeted and fortified by the authoritarian regime, particularly when the regime deploys fake news.
- *Cultivate.* Disinformation campaigns cultivate these ink spots with repeated messaging to harden and shape their pre-existing beliefs and encourage them to continue promoting the desired change to the status quo. The aggressor may also cultivate the ink spot by running targeted campaign ads or donating to the previously identified influencers, political organizations, and identity groups. The cultivation stage strengthens and shapes the intensity of belief within an identity group. Disinformation ink spots gradually stain the societal landscape as more people become convinced of the messages of influence and engage in political activity to engage the status quo.
- *Link.* Disinformation campaigns create a network of sympathetic ink spots. The regime may directly link ink spots by encouraging further recruitment of individuals to identity groups or connecting like-minded politicians with identity groups, thereby eliminating the collective action problem. Through the natural flow of information, smaller marginalized-identity groups indirectly link with other ink spots over shared experiences or similar

ideologies. As the message of influence reaches a successively larger audience, more individuals interact with the ink spots, allowing the influence narrative to grow.

The goal of these campaigns is to gain enough political influence within the target society to enact change and create a network that the attacking regime can continually tap into for different influence campaigns. Susceptible ink spots have already been identified and fortified, making the ink spots more vulnerable to different influence messages over time. Ink spots act as hubs for networks of illiberalism within liberal democratic societies and as foundations for a permanent front against the target government.

To mount effective campaigns, Ink-Spot Disinformation exploits inherent liberal democratic vulnerabilities. Many such vulnerabilities have been discussed individually. This paper identifies a checklist of vulnerabilities including structural or tactical conditions that constrain government defenses and social or economic conditions that make society more susceptible to targeting.

Policy Recommendation: Ink-Spot Deterrence

The United States should increase the costs of Ink-Spot Disinformation by engaging in counter-offensive disinformation against attacking regimes. Other proposed solutions have emphasized internal defensive solutions to mitigate liberal democratic vulnerabilities, but retroactive measures are not sufficient. The high expense of traditional disinformation was a major reason the Soviet Union failed to export the active measures model broadly during the Cold War. The United States should raise the cost of the new disinformation model to deter authoritarian information warfare.

Counter-offensive campaigns should mimic Ink-Spot Disinformation by targeting authoritarian vulnerabilities, which include institutional, tactical, societal and economic weaknesses. These inherent vulnerabilities provide opportunities for the United States to operate an offensive disinformation campaign, which will incentivize attacking regimes to negotiate a “cease-fire” of disinformation attacks. In addition, the threat of US-led counteroffensives will deter emerging Ink-Spot Disinformation campaigns by smaller regimes. Counter-offensive campaigns should differ from authoritarian ones by avoiding strategies that threaten domestic populations or provoke general chaos in authoritarian states.

Conclusion

Ink-Spot Disinformation campaigns are based on target identification and exploiting inherent weaknesses within liberal democratic society. Authoritarian regimes identify susceptible populations with top-down and bottom-up strategies, then cultivate and link these ink spots to form a permanent network. Bottom-up targeting and new technologies have decreased the cost of disinformation. By targeting inherent authoritarian weaknesses, counter-offensive disinformation campaigns can raise the cost and limit the scope of Ink-Spot Disinformation at home.