

Fact or fallacy? Fake news and the military

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Propaganda and disinformation are not new concepts but the speed and reach of social media in the 'fake news' era has lent new potency to the threat and has forced militaries to grapple with the challenges and opportunities posed by modern editing technologies and mass communication tools. *Gerrard Cowan reports*

Fake news can pose significant challenges to militaries: for example, commercially available tools could enable adversaries to manipulate a photo or video to create a false impression that soldiers have carried out a particular action, which may undermine their position in a local community. This presents obvious operational challenges and could increase dangers to personnel.

Colonel Joshua Major is the commander of Canada's Task Force – Latvia, placing him on one of the 'front lines' of the fake news battle from a military perspective. Col Major explained that he prefers the term 'disinformation' to 'fake news' because the scourge of false stories labelled as fake news are simply the latest episode in what has long been a challenge for militaries. Such stories, the colonel noted, are often supported by manipulated images and videos that are transmitted through social media or online news sites.



Fake news or disinformation is generally aimed at targeted groups of individuals with the purpose of communicating a particular message to them. Although in many cases it is easy to identify a piece of disinformation by the quality of a video or image, consumer technology is becoming more advanced, enabling unskilled users to manipulate visual media. (KLH49/iStock/Getty Images Plus)

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“It is a concern,” he said, “because it has the ability to affect the perceptions of a population or a targeted group within a population, and give them an understanding of a situation that’s not factual or correct”.

Col Major told *Jane’s* that he has not been surprised by the use of online disinformation that has been encountered during the Task Force – Latvia mission, including the use of doctored images and even videogame footage to support a fake story. He confirmed that the task force was aware of the potential dangers and prepared to deal with the challenge. Similar disinformation tactics have been used across the Baltics, in Poland, and beyond, he noted, with individual examples varying greatly in sophistication and quality. According to Col Major, some images and videos “verge on the ridiculous” and are easily recognised as being false by the casual observer.

However, he warned that there is also a much more pernicious, subtle use of disinformation, combining some elements that may be authentic but taking them out of context, changing the location, or taking other measures to create a message that is fundamentally false. “Nuggets of truth might be thrown into a [false] story, perhaps with the context being changed, in order to make it more believable,” the colonel explained.

In these instances, the majority of the story may be factually correct, in terms of numbers, dates, places, and other information. However, Col Major said, it is “spun in such a way that the message is untrue in the end ... that is the real challenge in this space: being able to understand what is real and what is fake. And it’s becoming increasingly difficult to do so”.

Col Major described how fake news or disinformation is generally aimed at targeted groups of individuals with the purpose of communicating a particular message to them. Although he said he believes the majority of people are unlikely to be influenced by such effects, particularly when the image or video is poor quality, there are people who are “borderline”, meaning they may already be susceptible to, or agree with, the message the propagandists are conveying. In these cases the use of fake news can serve to reinforce pre-existing beliefs. According to Col Major, this can have a real effect: for example, if a manipulated piece of media claims that Canadian or other soldiers have attacked a local person, it could affect the perception of personnel in that area, which “may have an operational impact in certain areas,” he emphasised.

In such a scenario, “our first duty is to make sure we get in there and provide an accurate description of what actually happened”, he said, with Task Force – Latvia seeking to respond to potentially dangerous instances of disinformation. The aim, he highlighted, is to be completely transparent.

Col Major said troops understand and expect the threats that can arise from disinformation, so their own morale is not likely to be affected, even if members of the task force are the targets of such an attack. “Troops get it,” he said. “They know there will be some fake news and disinformation put out there about them. They understand that and they just get on with the work.”

Social media

Meanwhile, according to Ewan Lawson, senior research fellow for military influence at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the social media age has transformed the disinformation landscape. Lawson, a former Royal Air Force (RAF) officer described how false stories, spreading rapidly through social media, could undermine public confidence in a force.

“You can see how it’s easy to do that, whether you’re a state actor or a non-state actor,” Lawson noted. Moreover, he added that the threat is not limited to Eastern Europe’s border with Russia. For

example, he pointed to some rural populations in Afghanistan, which do not yet have access to social media, but “they perhaps will in the future, and the ability to put out a false story that could cause a reaction against troops is not insignificant, and needs to be considered”.

Another issue that Lawson highlighted is that a false story can jeopardise relations with a local population, rendering them unwilling to provide information on adversary movements. The solution to this, he argued, is for militaries to “get ahead of the game, as difficult as it might sound”, and use intelligence and other resources to learn where such stories are coming from, anticipate possible attacks, and be prepared to get out their own messages.

A further issue to be considered, according to Lawson, is that social media can enable adversaries to track the movements of allied formations through reports from “citizen journalists” and others. This demonstrates how social media can be used as an intelligence tool. However, it works both ways, he noted, because it also provides opportunities for militaries in this area and is not solely a threat.

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