



DISINFORMATION AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Singapore's small size, hyper-connectivity and multi-religious society make us a vulnerable target for disinformation and influence campaigns.

In particular, foreign interference and hostile information campaigns are threats that may disrupt our country's stability, social harmony, and our way of life.

✓ Singaporeans alone should decide our own domestic politics.

We should be more discerning to comments that

- artificially amplify certain views to manipulate public opinion, or
- stir up discord amongst the different racial or religious communities in Singapore.

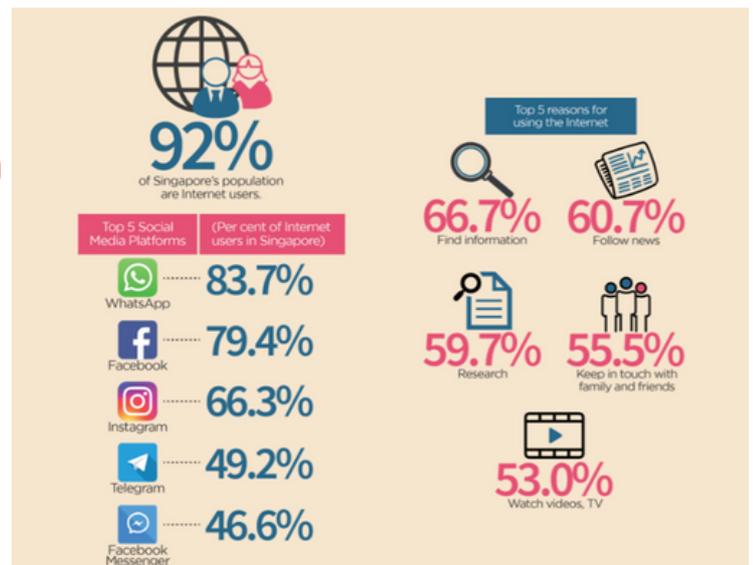
We are our own first line of defence.

- Be aware of current affairs and tactics used to spread fake news about Singapore.
- Use social media responsibly such as verifying information before reacting to or sharing them.

Take personal pride in being Singaporean. Understand our history, culture and the principles that have helped Singapore succeed, and stand up for our national interest when the time calls for it.

WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT DISINFORMATION AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS?

A majority of Singapore's population spend more than 7 hours online daily, mainly to look for information and news.



Source: We are Social Singapore Country Report 2022

In recent years, there has been an increase in the spread of falsehoods and disinformation online.



Actors who wish to harm Singapore may make use of falsehoods and disinformation to undermine Singapore's political sovereignty and national security.



UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS

DISINFORMATION

Fabricated and falsified content that purposefully aims to mislead and deceive. Disinformation is not limited to fake news, and can include deceptive advertisements, doctored documents and manipulated websites.



INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS

Operations conducted by individuals or state actors, where they attempt to shape public opinions of a target country, in an organised and coordinated manner to achieve specific outcomes or effects, such as to being favourable to the state's interest.



FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

Attempts by foreign actors to manipulate domestic politics through covert and deceptive means to undermine political sovereignty and harm social cohesion.



HOSTILE INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS (HICS)

Deliberate attempts by foreign actors, often secretive and coordinated, to create and spread information so as to manipulate public opinion and harm a country's interests.

The tactics may range from destabilising the target country through inciting or inflaming social tensions, manipulating public opinions on sensitive issues, or undermining the public's trust in the country's institutions.



FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AND HICS AROUND THE WORLD

Globally, there have been quite a number of cases of foreign interference in countries such as Czech Republic, Netherlands, United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and Ukraine. In particular, cases of cyber-enabled foreign interference in elections globally increased from seven between 2011 and 2015, to 41 between 2016 and 2020. Secretive and sophisticated tactics, including the use of disinformation and influence campaigns, have been used to exploit sensitive issues and fault-lines to fracture social cohesion and influence election outcomes.



EXAMPLES OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN THE WORLD

RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT 2022 -

Disinformation against Ukraine and in support of Russia, has reportedly been rife during the conflict.

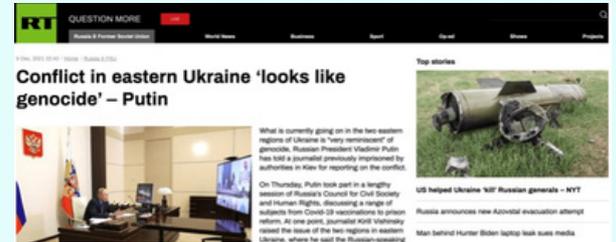
The information campaign against Ukraine includes narratives that seem to be targeted at gaining the support of Russian speakers in Ukraine, as well as to place pressure on Ukraine's government.

There have been claims that the US was providing biological weapons to Ukraine. Russian state-controlled media have accused the Ukrainian government of committing genocide in eastern Ukraine against the Russian-speaking population, ostensibly to incite hatred and fear of Ukrainians and to galvanise support for Russia's military operations in Ukraine.

Russia makes claims of US-backed biological weapon plot at UN

The Guardian, 11 Mar 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/11/russia-un-claims-us-backed-biological-weapon-plot-kremlin-foreign-fighters-ukraine>



RT, 9 Dec 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/542741-genocide-in-donbass-putin/>

UNITED STATES (US) PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS (2016, 2020)

In 2016, Russia's HIC against the US was funded by the Russian oligarch, Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin, via the Internet Research Agency (IRA). It aimed to sow discord amongst the Americans with regard to the American political system.

Since 2014, the IRA operated social media accounts and group pages that impersonated U.S. organisations. These accounts and group pages posted falsehoods and disinformation about the presidential candidates, and on divisive socio-political issues such as race and immigration. The HIC operations included paying for and circulating advertisements on social media such as Facebook, to amplify the IRA's reach and viewpoints.

The National Intelligence Council reported that in 2020, Russia and Iran tried to influence the US Presidential election outcome. Russia pushed narratives that made use of unsubstantiated allegations against US President Joe Biden to undermine his candidacy. Iran carried out multi-pronged HICs aimed at undercutting former US President Donald Trump's re-election prospects, as well as undermining the US public's confidence in US institutions and the electoral process.

Russia-linked posts 'reached 126m Facebook users in US'

© 31 October 2017

BBC, 31 Oct 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41812369>

Facebook uncovers 'Russian-funded' misinformation campaign

Clare Lee
North America technology reporter

BBC, 7 Sep 2017.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-41182519>



First Draft, 31 Oct 2016.

<https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/video-alleging-us-election-fraud-fake/>

Iranians sanctioned and charged for alleged cyber-based bids to influence 2020 US elections

CNN, 18 Nov 2021.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/18/politics/iran-2020-us-elections/index.html>

Russia and Iran tried to interfere with 2020 election, U.S. intelligence agencies say

CNBC, 16 Mar 2021.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/16/russia-and-iran-trying-to-interfere-with-2020-election-us-intelligence-agencies-say.html>

2016 BREXIT REFERENDUM AND 2017 UNITED KINGDOM GENERAL ELECTIONS

During Brexit, several studies found that fake social media accounts and online trolls have been used to propagate messages in support of the Leave campaign. More than 150,000 foreign-linked accounts tweeted over 45,000 pro-Brexit messages in the last 48 hours of the campaign.

In addition, during the 2017 UK General Election, a false BBC article was circulated, claiming that the elections would be held over two days, and instructed supporters of selected parties to vote on the real election day, and supporters of other parties to vote on the fake election day.

Russia used hundreds of fake accounts to tweet about Brexit, data shows

Researchers find that accounts run from a St Petersburg troll farm tried to sow discord between Britons over the referendum

The Guardian 14 Nov 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexit-tweets>



First Draft, 21 Jun 2017.

<https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/misinfo-types-uk-election/>

ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA (2014)

Russia targeted their HIC tactics on pro-Russian groups in Ukraine and the Ukrainian Armed Forces. It pushed out emotive narratives through news articles and commentaries that falsely portrayed the Ukrainian government as a fascist, racist and xenophobic junta.

The HIC worsened tensions amongst the different communities in Ukraine and Ukrainian soldiers, undermining their trust in and will to fight for their country. The HICs also discredited Ukraine's standing in other European Union (EU) countries.



Barricade against protesters in Ukraine, 2014.

Image: Creative Commons, Sasha Maksymenko

SINGAPORE AS A TARGET FOR DISINFORMATION AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS

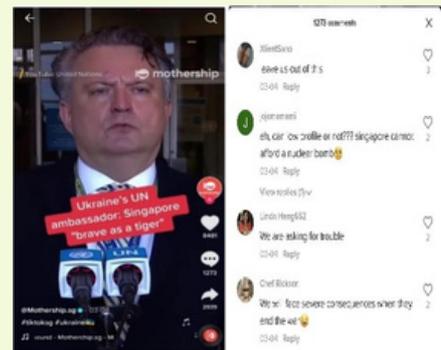
In Singapore, we are most concerned with foreign interference and HICs.

At the Second Reading of Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill on 4 Oct 2021, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, K. Shanmugam said that foreign interference is one of Singapore's most serious threats.

Singapore is vulnerable to and has been a target for disinformation and influence campaigns, as well as foreign influence and HICs, in the past.

2022 - Local media reported anonymous TikTok accounts attempted to sway Singaporeans' opinion over Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The accounts sought to convey a misleading impression of local opposition to Singapore's position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

In written replies to two parliamentary questions, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, K. Shanmugam said that while the government had not detected a coordinated HIC targeted specifically at Singapore, some social media accounts appeared to have been involved in local online discussions about the conflict and had characteristics that suggested that they might be inauthentic.



Images: Mothership TikTok

2018 - There was a spike in online comments critical of Singapore when Singapore was having maritime and airspace disputes with Malaysia. The anonymous accounts were also behind about 40 percent of the comments related to heavy traffic congestion at land checkpoints posted on the social media pages of alternative media outlets. While the identity of the account owners and whether foreign actors are coordinating them remain unclear, they sought to create an impression of opposition to Singapore's position at a time of heightened bilateral difficulties.



Image: RSS Independence (left) watching over a Malaysian government vessel in Singapore waters off Tuas

1970s - Local newspapers, Eastern Sun and the Singapore Herald, received funding from foreign sources and in return, ran articles that sought to undermine nascent nation-building efforts. For example, the Singapore Herald published articles against national service. The Eastern Sun and the Singapore Herald were shut down eventually.



THE NEED TO GUARD AGAINST DISINFORMATION AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS TARGETING SINGAPORE

Singapore's small size, hyper-connectivity, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society make us a vulnerable target for disinformation and influence campaigns. At the Second Reading of Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill on 4 Oct 2021, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, K. Shanmugam said that subversion, through the use of foreign interference, is one of the most serious threats that Singapore faces but our population are not really aware of this.

Actors who wish to harm Singapore can try to exacerbate communal tensions through disinformation and influence campaigns.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE THREATS?

ERODE TRUST AND COHESION IN SOCIETY



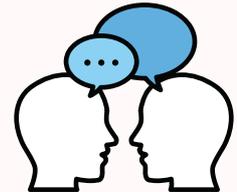
Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-religious society. We have worked hard to preserve social harmony and create common space between different groups in our society. Disinformation targeted at particular segments of society, through the use of specific languages and channels, can whip up communal tensions.

UNDERMINE CONFIDENCE AND TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS



Public institutions rely on trust and legitimacy to implement policies effectively and deliver services. If Singaporeans lose confidence and trust in these institutions, it will undermine the ability of the Government to serve our people well and effectively.

POSSIBLE SUBVERSION OR SUBJUGATION BY A STATE ACTOR



As a key strategic node for international finance, trade, travel and communications, Singapore is an attractive target. What Singapore says and the position that Singapore takes on global and regional issues matter. We cannot allow others to define our interests and positions for us.

PROTECTING OURSELVES AGAINST DISINFORMATION AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS

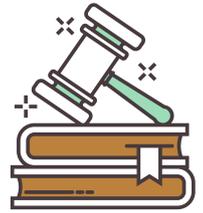
We have seen how information can be easily weaponised by hostile actors, at a low cost, and with anonymity. No countries, whether big or small, are immune to disinformation and influence campaigns. Many of the countries have learnt hard lessons and are taking action to combat disinformation and influence campaigns, and in particular, foreign interference and HICs.

Singapore has likewise taken steps to protect ourselves against disinformation and influence campaigns.



1

ENHANCED LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO COUNTER HICS



The new legislations will enable the government to act swiftly and effectively to disrupt and counter false, misleading and inauthentic information and narratives spread by foreign actors, and pre-emptively expose clandestine foreign interference campaigns.

Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA)

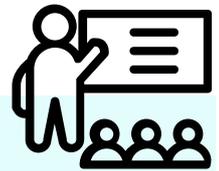
Passed on 8 May 2019, POFMA seeks to safeguard against the spread of falsehoods via electronic means and online platforms.

Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA)

Passed on 4 Oct 2021, FICA aims to strengthen Singapore's ability to prevent, detect and disrupt foreign interference in its domestic politics conducted through HICs and the use of local proxies.

2

EDUCATE SINGAPOREANS ON THE THREAT OF DISINFORMATION AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS



S.U.R.E Campaign

Rolled out in 2013, NLB sets out to help Singaporeans to better discern fake news and falsehoods. S.U.R.E stands for Source, Understand, Research and Evaluate – the four concepts that we should keep in mind when assessing the reliability of news (<https://sure.nlb.gov.sg/about-us/sure-campaign/>)

Factually

Government agencies provide real-time updates on their websites and social media outlets. The government's official website, Factually, www.gov.sg/factually clarifies common misperceptions of government policies, or inaccurate assertions on matters of public concern that can harm Singapore's social fabric.



At the individual level, **we are our own first line of defence**. Hence, we need to be aware of the threat of disinformation and influence campaigns. We must be sceptical of and be able to discern falsehoods, and detect foreign actors and their attempts to interfere in our politics. When these actors try to sow discord within our society, we must stand together as one people.

Stay informed of current affairs regarding Singapore via reliable sources, and be aware of the fake news and disinformation about Singapore and the tactics used.



Use social media responsibly by verifying the information read online and conducting fact checks before reacting to or sharing them.



Take personal pride in being Singaporeans. Understand our history, culture and the principles that have helped Singapore succeed, and stand up for our national interest when the time calls for it.

