



Russian information operations outside of the Western information environment

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Authors: Jonathan Morley-Davies, Jem Thomas, Graham Baines

Contributors: Albany Associates, Albany Insight, Mindset, Asad al-Shadhir, Justin Arenstein, Giorgio Bertolin, William Born, Aldu Cornelissen, Paulin Devanlay, Modibo Diallo, Dr Mark Duerksen, Moustafa Fetouri, Kyle Findlay, Professor Iginio Gagliardone, Patrick Gathara, Lieutenant-Colonel Bonnie Golbeck, Stephen Harley, Mathias Hamburger Holm, Commander Tobi Horton, Dzvinka Kachur, Jānis Karlsbergs, Dr Hassan Khannenje, Tessa Knight, Markuss Kozlinskis, Chris Larter, Kenneth Kambo, Dr Ahmed Naimat, Linda Ngari, Lassane Ouedraogo, Toms Ratfelders, Dr Pierre Razoux, Dr Jazz Rowa, Sophie Sacilotto, Yukai Zeng

Project Manager: Mário Nicolini

Copy Editor: Monika Hanley

Design: Una Grants

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NATO STRATCOM COE

11b Kalnciema iela,

Riga, LV1048, Latvia

stratcomcoe.org

[@stratcomcoe](https://www.instagram.com/stratcomcoe)

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Executive summary

Introduction

In February 2023, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) held an event ‘How to Lose the Information War’ detailing the Kremlin’s failed efforts to decisively sway Western populations to its narrative in the initial phase of its war of aggression in Ukraine. But while the Western community’s resilience to Kremlin narratives has been strong, the invasion has exposed deep rifts in perspectives between the West and the Multi-aligned Community (previously known as the Global South)¹ that the Kremlin aims to exploit through Information Influence Operations (IIOs).

The March 2022 UN vote condemning the Kremlin’s war of aggression in Ukraine had 35 abstentions, 17 of them from African states. Multiple statespeople and diplomats outside the Western environment have either hesitated to condemn the Kremlin or espoused its talking points. Afrobarometer found that in 24 of 30 African countries, approval of authoritarian governance has risen since 2014. On average, across 36 countries, more Africans (53%) would be willing to consider a military government than would rule it out (42%) “if elected officials abused their power” demonstrating a developing disillusionment that removing corrupt elected officials can be done through democratic institutions.² Furthermore, just 38% expressed satisfaction with “democracy”, the lowest share since at least 2014, and in the Africa Youth Survey, just 39% of respondents said that Africans should emulate “Western democracy”.³

Meanwhile, there has been a 41% rise in Russian Embassy social media followers from February 2022 – March 2023 and the embassies have increased their messaging output.⁴ *RT Arabic* has seen 10 million more users since

the invasion, and the frequency with which *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik Arabic* published on social media platforms increased by 30-35% and 80% respectively.⁵

This report, drawing from research, qualitative and quantitative data, Key Insight Interviews (KIIs), digital tools, and Russian information and deception doctrine, explores the Kremlin’s IIOs in non-Western environments using five selected countries as case studies: Egypt, Mali, Kenya, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates. The initial set of countries were selected based on their international importance and to represent a cross-section of critical national issues pertinent to Russian information operations, which include food insecurity (Egypt, Mali, Kenya), energy security (UAE), trade and investment relationship with Russia (Mali, Egypt, UAE), military aspects (Mali), and political relevance to the West and Ukraine. The political regime of the countries concerned and stability of governments was also considered.

Central to understanding and explaining the process and potential threat of these operations has been the Theory of Reflexive Control (TORC), a Soviet era methodical framework for shaping perceptions via information inputs based on a cultural and psychological profile or ‘model’ of the target and disseminated via propaganda, *maskirovka* (masquerade, i.e., deception), and *provokatsiya* (provocation, such as false-flag attacks and hoaxes) to create voluntary decision-making (a ‘reflexive action’) that is favourable to the practitioner (see Annex A for the full description). Despite being the subject of increased scrutiny in the West since the Crimea Crisis of 2014, it has rarely been used as a guiding framework to analyse ongoing Russian IIOs. This report adapts the

existing framework to provide clarity to an intentionally complex and obscure process. Each country report uses the TORC to provide a clarifying overview of Kremlin IIOs and their

potential outcomes. Full analysis is provided in Annex A.

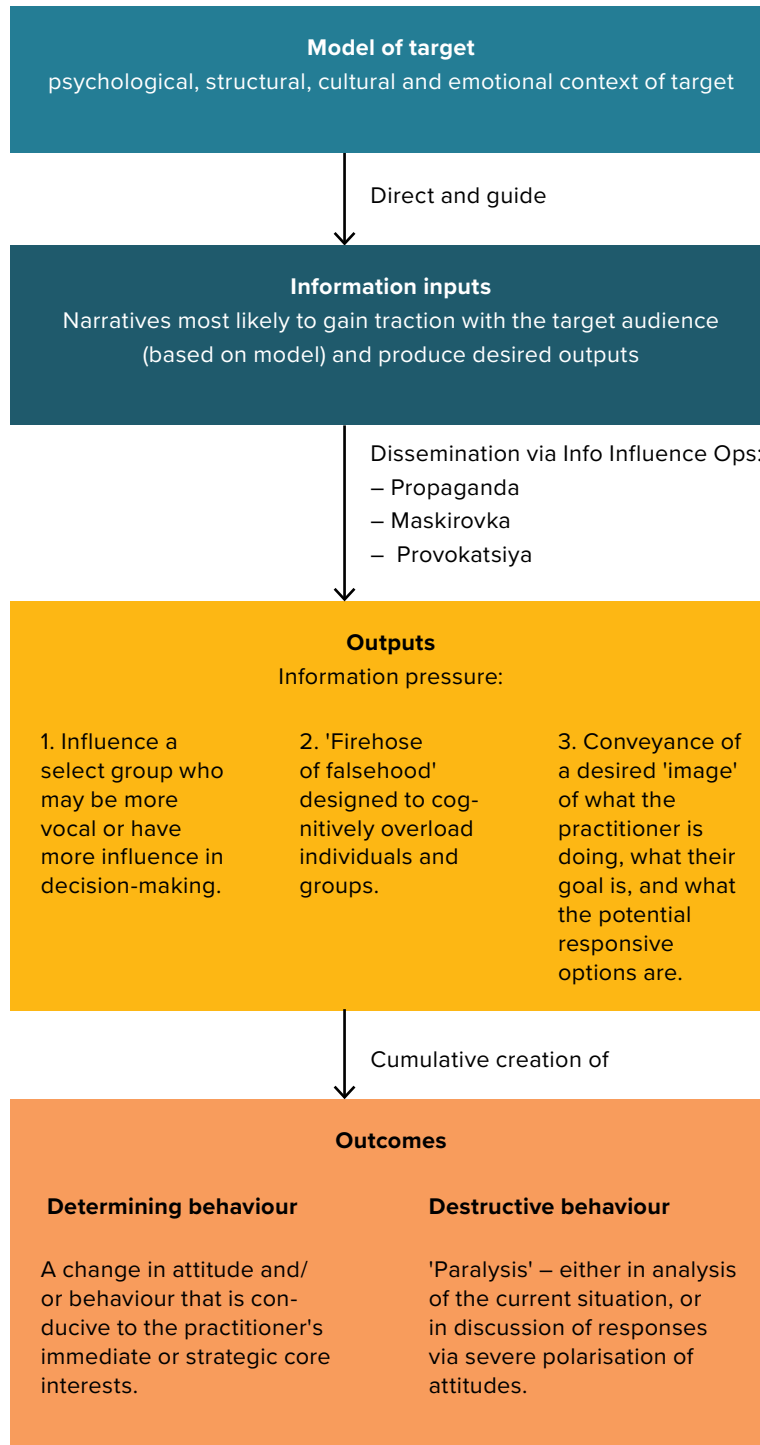


Fig. 1. Theory of Reflexive Control Framework

Findings

The reach and penetration of Kremlin narratives varied across the five countries. But there was significant traction among individual themes that are cause for concern.

The historical memory of colonialism — and the Soviet Union’s perceived role in combatting it — remains a powerful force in the Multi-aligned Community. The Soviet Union is often conflated with the modern-day Kremlin, and that anti-colonial legacy cultivates a nostalgia that works to the Kremlin’s narrative advantage by allowing it to frame itself as an anti-imperialist power. In its framing, it continues to champion this cause, with NATO as the new colonial power and universal values as a method of neo-colonial control.

This has been reinforced by a narrative vacuum around NATO that has been filled by negative perceptions stemming from its engagements in the Middle East at the beginning of the 21st Century and Libya in 2011 in line with NATO interventions in those respective areas and time periods. Both engagements are perceived by local populations as the origin of local instability, a perception which is being amplified by organic dis/mis/mal-information and Kremlin IIOs to cultivate negative sentiment against NATO and the West. This further legitimises Kremlin narratives in Ukraine and wider dis/mis/mal-information narratives regarding the West.

The colonialism narrative has been further leveraged to exploit the grievance of perceived hypocrisy by the West. Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Israel-Palestine conflict were cited by multiple interviewees as examples of failings by the West that contributed to disillusionment with Western democratic narratives and concepts of universal norms. While these are legitimate criticisms, pro-Kremlin and anti-Western actors leverage them through ‘whataboutism’ to deflect criticism of the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine and beyond. At the same time, encouraging scepticism of the West has reinforced the concept of the West

being inherently untrustworthy. Consequently, Kremlin messaging suggesting atrocities committed by itself or its allies are ‘false-flags’ and disinformation surrounding fictional biological warfare laboratories or ‘biolabs’ in Ukraine, has found traction in the Multi-aligned Community.⁶

The Kremlin also seeks to burnish its own image through three key narratives: strength, salvation and sovereignty.

1. Firstly, that it is a defender of “traditional values” against the “moral decadence” of the West (primarily Western defence of LGBTQ+ rights). This has appealed to more traditional cultures, with South Africa largely considered the exception due to the perceived centrality of human rights and equality to its values among the five states.
2. Secondly, the Kremlin has leaned on faith-based narratives; either to incite Islamic hatred against the West or use the Russian Orthodox Church as a tool of influence to enhance the Kremlin’s desired image as a natural ally and further the central narrative of the Kremlin as a check against the imposition of Western values on the rest of the world.
3. Thirdly, in contrast to the West, the Kremlin holds itself up as a benevolent partner that provides ‘no strings attached’ aid, thereby encouraging ‘decoupling’ from the West. This is more accurately described as ‘no values attached’, in that the aid comes without any expectations or concerns about alignment with universal values and norms like human rights. As this report demonstrates, in reality the trade-off is rhetorical alignment with the Kremlin and neutrality towards its violations of international norms and universal values.

These factors have contributed to an apathy towards Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Both the literature review and Key Insight Interviews (KIIs) suggested that many concerns were focused on the impacts to food and energy security that were driving up the cost of living. However, perceptions on the causes of the conflict were mixed. Although audiences in Kenya and South Africa generally condemned Russia's invasion, others within those states and the remaining countries saw it as the fault of NATO's "expansion" driven by the US. Consequently, large numbers blamed the West for the food and energy crises and were sympathetic to Kremlin narratives around sanctions being the cause of the food and energy crises and the Black Sea Grain Initiative being a ruse to provide for Western states over others. Furthermore, Western condemnation of neutrality was likely to lead to entrenchment of these views due to perceptions of Western disinterest in conflicts outside of the West (especially on the African continent).

These themes were further reflected in the digital analysis — with the overarching themes of Western hypocrisy and anti-establishmentarianism/neo-colonialism being the most prominent, and pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content outweighing pro-Western or pro-norms content. Overt content was frequently accompanied with links and invitations to closed groups on Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp. Access to these platforms lay outside the project's capabilities, but qualitative research indicated that these were key areas of dissemination and indoctrination through closing off their communities to rival viewpoints.

Although pro-Kremlin content was prevalent across all platforms, 'X' (formerly Twitter) was a significant hub. Based on secondary research, this is likely due to its takeover by Elon Musk and the ensuing degradation of its monitoring and safeguarding capabilities.⁷

Both qualitative and quantitative findings identified a range of actors involved in the dissemination and reinforcement of pro-Kremlin narratives ranging from 'official' actors like *RT*, *Sputnik*, and local officials and local media, to more subtle agents of influence

like entrepreneurs of influence, 'useful idiots' and cynics, and sock puppet and bot accounts.

Interviewees agreed that the major target audiences of Kremlin IIOs were the political elites and the youth so as to create a dual prong of influence from the top-down and grassroots levels. This has a second order effect of affecting both present and future discussions about Russia, the West, and the international system which has a third order effect on present and future policy making.

Our findings also demonstrated several common Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) in these operations:

1. State and elite capture.⁸ This further leads to media influence.
2. Astroturfing.⁹
3. Discrediting critics through 'swarming'.¹⁰
4. Edited imagery (including memes,¹¹ deep-fakes,¹² and photoshopped imagery).
5. Outsourcing/franchising.¹³
6. Information laundering.¹⁴
7. Doxing.¹⁵

In contrast, Western strategic communications were deemed to be at a disadvantage both in volume and how they are perceived compared to Kremlin IIOs. There are perceptions of a 'say-do gap' around application of international law and universal norms—with Israel-Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan given as examples of Western failures. Concurrently, limited local language capabilities restrict the capacity of the West to communicate to audiences at a hyper-local level and thus prevent pro-norms messaging from achieving its full potential. In the digital findings, pro-Western content was significantly outweighed by that of an anti-Western and pro-Kremlin ilk.

The main advantages for Western strategic communications were anti-authoritarian voices, lack of Kremlin soft power, and a general acceptance of universal norms like territorial integrity as a positive necessity. Likewise, although the youth were suffering a crisis of confidence in Western-style democracy and the international order, it was asserted

by interviewees that this reflected a desire for change and reform rather than to break away. It was further opined that civil society would be critical in reaching this audience and required significant reinvigoration.

Country summaries

See Annexes B to F for Country Reports in full.

Egypt

Digital analysis highlights a substantial volume of pro-Kremlin content, notably in Arabic, surpassing pro-Western or normative content in volume, actors promoting it, and persuasiveness. Qualitative data reveals a rising distrust of the West, creating opportunities for Kremlin-aligned groups to amplify anti-Western conspiracies and ‘whataboutism’ arguments. Despite this, KIIIs don’t foresee Egypt severing ties with the West due to reliance on US aid and grain from Ukraine. However, Egypt might shift towards positive neutrality and indifference to the Ukraine conflict and Kremlin violations; especially when considering the prominent role Russia plays in its food security alongside Ukraine.

Applying the TORC, Kremlin IIOs aim to cultivate apathy towards the Ukraine conflict or a desire for a swift resolution (even favouring a Kremlin victory) to ease living costs. They also seek to promote conspiratorial thinking, fostering doubt in the West and the concept that there can be any such thing as objective truth, making the population more susceptible to future Kremlin influence operations.

Mali

Qualitative and quantitative analysis highlights prevalent anti-Western sentiment in Mali, aligning with pro-Kremlin views. This stems from disillusionment with Western models, perceived unequal treatment in a neo-colonial system, and distrust in Western

security approaches. Many see aligning with the Kremlin as anti-colonial liberation, reflected online where pro-Kremlin content dominates social media and closed groups, surpassing pro-Western narratives. This shift in sentiment may lead to overtly pro-Kremlin behaviours.

Applying the TORC, Kremlin IIOs aim to bolster support for Kremlin influence, instil hyper-distrust of the West, and hinder objective analysis of the cooperation between the Kremlin and the Malian junta.

Kenya

Kenya maintains a predominantly pro-norms stance but highlights a rising anti-Western sentiment. Engagement with Kremlin-aligned arguments reflects discontent with Western interference, notably by Western institutions like the International Criminal Court (ICC) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), leading to disillusionment with ‘Western solutions.’ While pro-Kremlin content struggles for traction, prevalent anti-Western narratives impact perceptions of universal norms as Western constructs. Both digital and qualitative studies identify the Chinese Communist Party as a significant communicator in Kenya, reinforcing Kremlin IIOs by amplifying anti-Western messages.

Using the TORC, these operations aim to foster apathy towards Kremlin aggression in Ukraine and distrust of Western institutions, encouraging detachment from the West and polarising debates on engagement based on values and interference concerns.

South Africa

A robust free media landscape limits Russia's dominance in shaping narratives, despite concerns over actions affecting media freedom. Concrete evidence of specific Russian influence beyond public diplomacy remains elusive, but localised pockets of influence intertwine with political agendas, rooted in perceptions of Russia's historical role in apartheid-era struggles. Pro-Russian sentiments span political spectrums, notably among elites. Western communication faces challenges due to perceived arrogance and historical events, fostering a disillusionment with the international order, aligning with the Kremlin's narrative for a new 'multilateral' order. Independent media outlets like the Daily Maverick and News24 offer diverse perspectives, emphasising the importance of multiple sources for truth. Digital findings reveal substantial pro-Kremlin content from select influencers rather than widespread dissemination.

Assessment

The key to the Kremlin's success has been the ability to identify, exploit, and exacerbate existing socio-political fault lines and grievances within individual societies, as emphasised in the TORC. These include a disillusionment with Western actors built on a 'say-do gap' that has undermined concepts of universal values and norms and created a perception of norms as a purely Western construct designed to control non-Western states. This is compounded by the critical finding that a narrative vacuum exists around NATO, with most 'first impressions' formed by its interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011. Consequently, perceptions are being formulated by malign actors, including the Kremlin. These issues are further exacerbated by the volume of content put out by the Kremlin at multiple societal levels. These are likely to create cumulative impacts

Utilising the TORC, these IIOs likely aim to cultivate positive neutrality towards Kremlin violations while creating elite-level alignment and polarising debates about engaging with the West.

United Arab Emirates

Our findings indicate that engagement with the Kremlin is perceived as a 'win-win' cooperation among Emiratis and that sanctions go against Emirati interests. Furthermore, perceptions of hypocrisy by the West, pushback against LGBTQ+ (which is actively associated with the West) and a general climate of conspiratorial thinking are actively exploited by Kremlin IIOs to undermine Western interests and cultivate apathy towards its violations of international norms.

Based on the TORC it can be assessed that the aim of these IIOs is to encourage the 'determining behaviour' of further narrative and institutional alignment with the Kremlin, as well as encouraging 'destructive behaviour' of increasing conspiratorial thinking regarding the West to bolster Kremlin narratives and further truth decay in Arab social media.

on perceptions and reactions to voting in international bodies, perceptions and reactions to the cost-of-living crisis, and critical national and international issues.

The risk of respective states voting with the Kremlin in international bodies naturally varied in all five states. In Mali, interviewees agreed it was almost certain that Kremlin influence was shaping the government's voting patterns. But others felt more confident their governments would follow their best interests. However, unchallenged IIOs within the countries made it more likely that the local populations would become less likely to object to further alignment with the Kremlin on issues regarding its violations of norms or other issues that risk undermining the international system.

While criticism of the cost-of-living crisis largely centred on domestic mismanagement, any association of the crisis with the Russian invasion of Ukraine was more likely to lead for calls to end the conflict whatever the cost, rather than calls for a defeat of the Kremlin.

Likewise, while the critical national issues outlined in the research questions were not always framed in a pro-Kremlin narrative (for instance, while there was ample anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and distrust of the West

in Kenya, this did not translate to pro-Kremlin sentiment), many were couched in anti-Western grievances. It is likely this will make cooperation on a range of issues increasingly difficult.

These qualitative findings were reflected in the digital sentiment analysis of thousands of comments and conversations across major platforms.

Conclusions

Pinpointing the exact tactical aim of an adversarial IIO can rarely be done with absolute certainty, especially those of the Kremlin. Kremlin IIOs can be opportunistic even while following a strategic goal, leading to changes of intensity and immediate planned effects according to the environment. Furthermore, the nature of Kremlin security policy that governs its grey-zone operations has always been a challenge to comprehend, even more so after the Kremlin's clampdown and isolation following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. However, based on the findings of this research report, it can be assessed that there are two possible aims and impacts of these IIOs:

1. To create shifts in support for the Kremlin across the case study countries, with Mali, the exemplar, going the way of the Central African Republic toward a 'laboratory for state capture'.¹⁶
2. The maintenance and cultivation of 'positive neutrality/apathy'.

The first of these is not impossible, but unlikely. Qualitative analysis found that the Kremlin suffers from a soft power deficit that will not be ameliorated in the short or medium term. At the same time, hard-headed pragmatism prevents even autocratic states from severing ties with the West completely due to their dependency on Western economic connections and security guarantees that

the Kremlin cannot fill. Therefore, the second option is more likely, as the current status of apathy toward the victor of the war benefits the Kremlin even if it cannot push perceptions towards a pro-Kremlin stance. This is due to calls for the war to end in order to alleviate food insecurity regardless of the victor, and the criticism of the West that the war has created based on perceptions of hypocrisy.

The immediate second order effect for the West is that this will likely prolong the current war of aggression in Ukraine, as the failure to move states from neutrality/apathy prevents the full combined pressure of the international community to bear on the Kremlin in terms of sanctions and diplomatic isolation, thus providing it the diplomatic and logistical power to continue its war.¹⁷ This creates the third order effect of increasing the likelihood of 'Ukraine fatigue' amongst Western audiences. Interest in the war is declining, and the cost-of-living crisis is beginning to dominate political debates. Consequently, there is a realistic possibility it will become difficult to contribute aid to Ukraine with the same levels of support as time goes by.¹⁸

Another likely second order effect is continued international norms segregation/fragmentation. Continued undermining of the 'Western-led International Order' and concepts of universal values and norms, increases the likelihood of a divide of international actors

operating according to their own concepts of norms and values. This creates the third order effects of increasing the likelihood of conflict globally and undermining multilateral cooperation. There are more than 150 territorial disputes across the globe—100 of them in Africa alone.¹⁹ Cultivating apathy to the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine risks other actors following their example, heightening risk of conflicts globally. At the same time, a growing suspicion against institutions perceived as Western-led undermines multilateral cooperation at a time when it is essential in combatting

threats like climate change and terrorism. It also creates a direct threat to the safety of those acting on behalf of these institutions, especially peacekeepers. Secondary source reporting suggests that Germany is increasingly becoming a target of Kremlin IIOs on the continent of Africa.²⁰ Concurrently, pro-Kremlin narratives and profiles have been circulating similar content in Niger and Gabon,²¹ and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.²²

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the root causes of Kremlin IIOs outlined in our findings (disillusionment and proliferation of harmful narratives) will require structural changes both to the international system and the regulation of online media. To a degree, these are under way, but structural progress is likely to be slow. Consequently, the recommendations outlined below will focus on messaging.

In his study of International Human Rights pressure,²³ Jamie Gruffydd-Jones identified several key variables that dictate the successful pressure of a campaign among domestic audiences of the target state:

1. Where the pressure comes from (i.e. who is the messenger)—If the main messenger is a figure from a perceived hostile force, it will convey less authority and credibility. By contrast, 'neutral' or 'positive' figures (e.g. respected domestic public figures) are more likely to encourage greater engagement and acceptance of criticism. This, in turn, links to the necessity of local credible messengers that will be best achieved through the reinvention of civil society.
2. What is under scrutiny: The more sensitive the issue, such as issues of sovereignty, the more pushback from a domestic audience it is likely to receive.

3. The form and presentation of the pressure: Overly combative stances, while understandable, can sometimes be counter-productive by encouraging psychological retrenchment. By contrast, a well laid out, evidence-based approach that is emotionally engaging is shown to better hold audience attention and encourage engagement.

4. Who is implicated: Clearly implicating the prime initiators and implementers of the crime is shown to allow audiences to disassociate themselves from regimes and be more open to criticism of regimes and partners. For example, broad labels of a whole society as having collaborated with the Kremlin are likely to produce backlash due to perceptions of such criticisms as paternalistic and an attack on sovereignty. By contrast, criticisms that target unelected juntas or corrupt leadership are more likely to encourage objective analysis by the populace.

This report has used this framework and the findings of its country reports to establish the following strategic and operational recommendations.

Strategic recommendations

1. Establishment of a NATO entity specifically aimed at engaging with the Multi-aligned Community. Despite existing cooperation between NATO and the African Union, our qualitative research demonstrated a prominent perception was that NATO was, at best, a non-entity or, at worst, perceived as an aggressor due to its perceived role in the collapse of Libya, which influences perceptions of its involvement in countering the current invasion of Ukraine. Challenging this perception is critical to undermining the Kremlin's central narrative that it is fighting a defensive, anti-imperialist war. A recommended solution is the establishment of a NATO entity tasked with establishing partnerships with states and civil-society actors in the Multi-aligned Community. Such engagement could be through mutual capacity building in deterring and resisting malign IIOs and grey-zone threats as well as threats from Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs). The publicising of these efforts could be tailored by local partners according to their perceptions of what their domestic audiences are most likely to respond positively to. Concurrently, a diplomatic branch can act as a forum for dialogue between Western security actors and Multi-aligned Community populations to air regional grievances.

This entity could closely follow the existing model provided by the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)²⁴; a Command-and-Control centre based in the High North that offers 'opt-in' agreements under which every nation can provide capability and expertise as it sees fit, depending on the nature of the task and the partners involved.

It is further recommended that such an entity be led by Eastern European NATO member states. These states contributed to anti-colonial struggles as part of the Soviet Union and did not take part in the colonisation of the Multi-aligned Community. Furthermore, as former Soviet states that were theoretically independent but actually controlled by Russia, they can act as effective and credible

messengers to counter Soviet nostalgia in the Multi-aligned Community as well as push back on the narrative that the Kremlin has never been a colonial power.

2. Connecting universal values to Multi-aligned Community initiatives: Our research demonstrates that the concepts of universal values, norms and institutions are largely viewed as a purely Western construct or are undermined by a perception of 'selective morality' in the application of international finance and justice. The root cause of this is legitimate grievances with the international system that requires reform. To a degree this is already under way, with a permanent representative from the African Union now within the G20 and similar moves under way within the UN Security Council, but this process will be gradual. As an immediate action, reframing universal values in relation to Multi-aligned Community initiatives in public discourse is more likely to inspire greater stakeholder buy-in. For example, the core principles of the non-aligned movement confirmed at the Bandung Conference of 1955,²⁵ and the African Union's initiatives on democratic governance and peace, both align with universal norms of the United Nations Charter while accommodating critical regional contexts. However, despite these being evidence that contradicts the Kremlin's narrative of international institutions and universal values as a cover for Western hegemony, these initiatives and others like them are not emphasised in Western strategic communications and remain undiscussed within the five countries studied.

3. Not just about the message, but also delivery: The Kremlin's IIOs demonstrate a holistic and multi-dimensional nature, and, therefore, counter operations should embrace a similar approach. This will require detailed understanding of the information environment and the innovative use of existing and emerging sources of information and entertainment before they become dominated by adversarial actors. For example, although beyond the

scope of this project, mobile games are a growing industry on the African continent and have already been successfully utilised by the Kremlin and Western actors in Ukraine.²⁶ Such interactive engagement can prove an effective ‘hook’ to bring audiences to a narrative. At the same time, any messaging should also be calibrated to emphasise empowerment and respect rather than lecturing to avoid perceptions of arrogance or paternalism. This will be best achieved through engagement with local voices and civil society (see Operational, paragraph 2.).

4. Reinvigorating civil society: This has been a common phrase in recent literature and was recommended by several Interviewees during our research, but has also been perceived as unrealistic for some of the case study countries due to their authoritarian environments. However, reinvigoration can still be achieved through reinforcing and creating hospitable conditions for indigenous and organic civil society actors. This can be achieved in the following ways:

- There are significant diaspora communities that have cultural insights necessary for designing engaging and compelling counter narratives and maintaining networks within countries to ensure dissemination, active monitoring, evaluation, and improvement.

- Sharing expertise through diaspora and alumni networks of individuals from Asian, African and Latin American backgrounds in NATO Allied and partner countries. This, in turn, will grow the community of interest and ensure the sharing of Western and non-Western methods.
- Providing local actors with the tools and research methods currently denied to them due to lack of funding, such as secure investigative software like LongArm, speech recognition and translation products like Dragon NaturallySpeaking and Speakai, data analysis and visualisation tools provided by the likes of IBM, and monitoring and evaluation tools such as Pulsar, Hootsuite and other developing software for tracking the spread of narratives.
- Similarly, startup funding could be given to individuals and groups to engage in journalistic and civil-society activities and build their own institutions.

Operational recommendations

1. Approach to responding to Kremlin IIOs must be ethical: For the reasons outlined above, the West cannot allow Kremlin IIOs to continue unchecked. However, as outlined in a recent RAND paper, information and influence operations tend to encourage a negative backlash due to their perceived impact on a person’s autonomy as being antithetical to democratic values.²⁷ Further, attempting to ‘fight fire with fire’ is likely to be counterproductive due to it severely damaging the credibility of Western actors (as was demonstrated by rival Russian

and French influence operations in the Central African Republic)²⁸ in exchange for limited benefits, as making the information environment more conducive to disinformation is more likely to benefit adversarial actors via heightening a general lack of trust in which they thrive. The suggestions are to develop and follow ethical frameworks based on necessity, proportionality (i.e., be an appropriate level of volume, tone and intensity to achieve the desired response), and effects; with a focus on avoiding deception or ‘invoking strong negative emotions’ (fear,

anger, guilt) and following principles of do no harm in possible effects.²⁹

2. Investment in local language campaigns: Local languages were a significant information gap but were highlighted in the qualitative research as an avenue of influence for the Kremlin, particularly in states in which they had strong advocates and proxies. Implementing local language campaigns is proven to increase engagements and trust among diverse audiences through authenticity by demonstrating respect for the community's identity and facilitates a more profound understanding of their messages.³⁰ No campaign can be complete without it. The best way to achieve this is likely to be engagement with diaspora communities and reinvigoration of civil society.

3. Meeting audiences in the middle/reaching objectivity as a starting point: A unifying theme across the Interviewees is that the West is viewed with significant distrust due to perceptions of injustice in the international system. Furthermore, behavioural science literature suggests that confronting audiences' beliefs in dis/mis/mal-information narratives outright is more likely to lead to further psychological entrenchment.³¹ Therefore,

efforts to counter Kremlin narratives should mirror the 'Call Russia' campaign that seeks to counter Kremlin narratives among Russian audiences by calling individual members of Russian society and meeting them in the middle on the arguments.³² Acknowledging flaws in the system and acknowledging that we do not know everything undermines perceptions cultivated by the Kremlin that the West ignores concerns outside of its values and views its own system as absolute. Instead, stress the need for reform and how it is already taking place.

4. Drilling deeper: To gain full understanding of the issue will require methods that were outside the scope of this project. Further investment is required to hire on the ground researchers with local contextual knowledge who will be able to fully understand the offline dimensions of Kremlin influence, further ensure the removal of bias from findings and analysis and identify methods that are likely to achieve maximum effects in strategic communications campaigns to promote universal values and international law and counter Kremlin IIO campaigns.

Caveats

1. Balancing legitimacy and empowerment: A major concern with supporting civil society actors dedicated to opposing Kremlin influence is the risk that they may be seen as Western puppets, which could damage their credibility. One way of managing this is through complete transparency—making it clear that content and output is in the hands of local reliable partners even while funding originates from Western partners. Western powers, therefore, appear as visible but relatively silent partners while preserving oversight frameworks over funding to prevent corruption.

2. Meet in the middle while avoiding giving legitimacy to dis/mis/mal-information: When engaging dis/mis/mal-information

narratives, it is critical to respect differing opinions, particularly when Multi-aligned Community audiences criticise the International System. However, it is equally important to push back on any information that is missing critical context or is patently false. Entertaining or engaging it risks legitimising it and furthering its spread. This is a fine balance to strike that requires less of a script and more flexible intuition. Joint programmes like a NATO entity specifically engaging Multi-aligned Community audiences will avail much needed expertise to navigate unfamiliar socio-cultural environments successfully.

METHODOLOGY

The research took the recognised methodology of case study research, analysing “a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context”.³³ These phenomena were significant themes within the selected countries. However, if there were significant political ramifications, the case studies also highlighted these. This approach helped identify the most relevant thematic narratives to address the research questions. All results were validated through triangulation of various sources and methods, including digital data collection and analysis, reviews and cross-referencing with existing research, and Key Insight Interviews (KIIs). Some direct quotes from KIIs have been edited for correct grammar and better understanding.

The research used a mixed-method exploratory sequential design that was empirically

driven and inductively based,³⁴ whereby, for each country, a literature review identified relevant case studies and informed the design of questions for the KIIs, which subsequently informed the quantitative examination of the relevant geographic and temporal digital space by providing on the ground perspective of critical timeframes and events.

This methodology was critically reviewed by the COE community of interest, including through an in-person workshop held in early June 2023, and a period for comment and review later that month. After adjustments, the final methodology was submitted and approved in late June.

Research questions

A Concerning Russia’s information operations:

1. To which audiences is communication targeted?
2. Which Russian narratives resonate in the countries concerned?
3. What current and historical circumstances of those affected countries are likely to create a receptive environment to Russian narratives?
4. Who are the main actors of communication?
5. Can targeted operations be identified?
6. What tactics, techniques and procedures are used in these operations?
7. Are local media manipulated and instrumentalised and how?
8. What are the effects of these operations?

B Concerning Western strategic communications:

1. Which narratives compatible with Western values and interests are

- working in the countries concerned?
2. Which are the most susceptible audiences?
3. Who are the actors of communication, and can be considered as potential allies?

C What are the short- and medium-term (1-3 years) ramifications for Western countries in terms of:

1. Voting in international bodies, including the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly.
2. How have Russia and pro-Russian actors in the region framed the cost-of-living crisis in their favour?
3. How have Russia and pro-Russian actors in the region framed critical national issues in each country?
 - a. Egypt – The cost-of-living crisis.
 - b. Mali – Security and regime stability.
 - c. Kenya – Traditional values and moral decay.

- d. South Africa – The emerging multipolar world order and South Africa’s place within it.
- e. United Arab Emirates – Sanctions and unilateral Western economic measures.

Limitations

As specified in the proposal, the literature review and KIIs were largely conducted in English only. This initially limited the sample pool of potential interviewees to solely English speakers. However, given the limitations on the number of English speakers in Mali, several interviews were conducted in French.

The data collection and analysis used translation software to translate online social media content in the dominant languages of the specific country. However, such translation might have missed certain nuances. Thus, it was highly unlikely that this software produced highly accurate results for large documents or interview transcription. This created an information gap that limited insight and foresight into the issues being studied under this methodology.

The methodology also had limited scope for on-the-ground research beyond KIIs, which limited the ability to monitor oral media beyond secondary source research. It was likely that this impacted the levels of insight into the select countries, all of which typically had limited independent funding in media and a rich oral tradition that translated to the contemporary information environment.

The data collection and analysis were unable to access closed messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram). Preliminary secondary source research indicated that such platforms played a critical role in the sharing of information and the spread of disinformation in the selected countries. Being unable to monitor them left an information gap that could only be filled by on-the-ground researchers who could access these platforms or contact those on them directly.

The list of research questions was extensive. The resources allocated to this research did not allow for a definitive examination of all the research questions. Although the desk research and KIIs attempted to address all the research questions, qualitative reporting required a degree of inference regarding causality, making key assumptions. Where such inferences were made, they were made explicit in the research report.

Literature review

The literature review was conducted in English or used pre-translated sources only, to establish insight into Russian and Western relations with each country and historical grievances within them, existing information environments in each of the select countries, and Russian information operations. This provided important context to inform the research and identified critical information gaps. The literature review was also used to establish definitions that anchored analysis going forward.

In brief, definitions for this methodology are:

■ Information Influence Operations

(IIOs): The organised attempt by one or more actors to achieve a specific effect among a target audience, often using illegitimate and manipulative behaviour. IIOs draw on communicative tactics such as fabrication, false identities, malign rhetoric, symbolism, and technological advantages to exploit vulnerabilities in the information environment.³⁵ Can be applied at a strategic narrative level or a tactical targeted level.

■ **Propaganda:** Information systematically disseminated by an organisation of actors with the purpose of influencing perceptions in favour of the actors' political narrative. Comes in the shades of **White, Grey and Black**. White is favourable facts. Grey is misleading information (or 'cherry-picked') or from a disguised source to increase its authenticity. Black is outright lies or falsehoods usually disseminated from a disguised source.³⁶

■ **Disinformation:** False or misleading information spread intentionally by an actor or actors to influence perceptions. Often, but not always, from a disguised source.³⁷

■ **Misinformation:** False or inaccurate information spread without malicious intent, although its effects can still be harmful.³⁸

■ **Malinformation:** Information based on fact but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate.³⁹

■ **Conspiracy theory:** Information that attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.⁴⁰

Through the literature review, the research methodology was refined through an extensive examination of the Theory of Reflexive Control (TORC. See Annex A)⁴¹, aspects of which form a core methodology for modern Russian information operations. Where such inferences were made, they were made explicit in the research report.

This enhanced our understanding of the Kremlin information tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and how they are scaled from specific events and social groupings up to a national or region-wide level.

The analysis of the TORC and Kremlin TTPs were further informed by existing research on Russian information operations. This included directly translated sources such as Messner's theory of *subversion warfare*, Panarin's theory of *information warfare*, and Dugin's theory of *net-centric warfare*. It also included Western studies of Russian information warfare, including Thomas Rid's *Active Measures* and previous research by the NATO StratCom COE.

Case studies

Case studies were selected to examine, and thus be representative or typical of specific phenomena, namely Russian IIOs. Case studies were chosen via literal replication logic, as in, they were selected to have similar results (with contextual variations) rather than similar study characteristics.⁴²

The selection of the proposed case study themes outlined in Table 1 below has been based on initial discussions at the COE's workshop held in June 2023, secondary source research and digital analysis. With a focus on energy and food security-linked phenomena, we also prioritised themes where we may see

the greatest likelihood of Russian information operations activity and competing narratives.

Country	Themes
Mali	Security and regime stability
Kenya	Traditional values and moral decay
Egypt	Cost of living crisis
South Africa	The multipolar world and South Africa's place in it
United Arab Emirates	Sanctions and unilateral Western economic measures

Table 1: Case Study themes

Key Insight Interviews and qualitative analysis

The KIIs were conducted in English and French and then transcribed for subsequent thematic coding analysis (TCA).⁴² They were limited to five per country, (due to time scarcity) unless there were exceptional circumstances. The selection criteria for potential interviewees included their recent, relevant academic or journalistic output, their political, security communications and/or media specialist knowledge, their local, cultural background and their recent proximity to the geographical area of study. The latter were included as we wished to maximise ground-truth via interviewees with deep and recent experience on the ground, rather than academics far removed from those circumstances, spatially and temporally.

All interviewees were informed of the scope of the research and their consent was requested. Further, their consent to be credited in the final research paper was established. However, for security reasons or otherwise, several interviewees wished to remain anonymous. This will be honoured and a list of those interviewees consenting to being named will be made available separately.

The KIIs were in the format of semi-structured questions given over a period of 45–60 minutes, conducted over VoIP systems (Teams, Zoom). Multi-case study protocol ensured that certain questions were common across all interviews, regardless of case study, with other questions designed for the specific case study context.

Digital data collection and analysis

Our approach has differed for each of the core social media platforms and associated large content and news providers that deliver content engagement. The commonality of cause has been combining the views and reach with their associated output in text, image, and video formats across these platforms into a comparable dataset.

We focused on the time window of 1 January 2022 until 1 September 2023. This covers the build-up of the Ukraine conflict and covering 18 months of the war. All digital media was searched for within the date parameters. For relevance, we used the following parameters: Region, Country, City, Names, Keywords, #HashTags. Once this dataset was established, we sorted by Views, Shares (Posts), Comments and Likes. Our process involved seeking out the source-point and then cascading through the time stamps and collating accounts and organisations that participated in significant engagement.

This has enabled us to centre the analysis around each of the five countries. Our approach uncovered that the largest content metric (be it text, image, or video) was produced mostly outside of each country and amplified inside the country concerned. Unsurprisingly, the largest media companies and social media ‘influencers’ from around the world featured heavily in source material prior to in-country engagement. This approach considers the larger diaspora and interested parties across the wider communities worldwide, as none of these analysed search terms remain isolated within the borderless internet. Material reviewed and analysed within the original source from outside of a country was discovered through the process of targeted search profile terms and subsequent engagement using the parameters described above.

The analysis of all material and the presentation of significant material was based on the following metrics: Views, Shares (posts), Re-edited Posts, Comments, and Likes. This

enabled us to filter out the material that might be seen as interesting, topical, or relevant, but which had no significance in volume and did not engage within the public space. Engagement was our first priority; once the material was extracted, we applied three core data visualisations: (i) Sentiment Analysis (ii) Word Cloud (iii) Emoticon Usage. Visually we have limited this to something that can be readily viewed and understood. We focused on short statements and questions that had garnered a motivational response (engagement) through Comments. These were collected and collated from sources that represented that question or statement. These were then custom analysed through bespoke software and output through a Word Cloud for the Top 100 words, and Parliament Graphs for the Top 10 Emoticons by volume per statement/question.

The approach we have taken has demonstrated that conversations coalesce around a topic that is often personal to the audience, resonates with the individual and is personality driven. Leaders, not countries and their perceived collective personalities, drive the traffic and engagement—Putin before Russia, Zelensky before Ukraine. This played out in the keywords, hashtags and engagement.

Unsurprisingly, humour and subversion receive the strongest engagement. Something that individual large-scale global influencers have understood and exploited to the maximum. The most effective social media asks the question, poses an opinion and often delivers the answer. Controversy drives traffic, ‘clout’ and, therefore, financial gain for all concerned. Outside of the region, media companies and social media influencers drive the conversations. Politically-motivated influencers from another geographical region can, and do, have both immense sway and are often used and amplified for nefarious purposes. The unintended consequences of an ideological viewpoint in one country is being utilised by regimes to support their own narrative elsewhere. This is another definition and an example of the ‘Useful Idiot’.

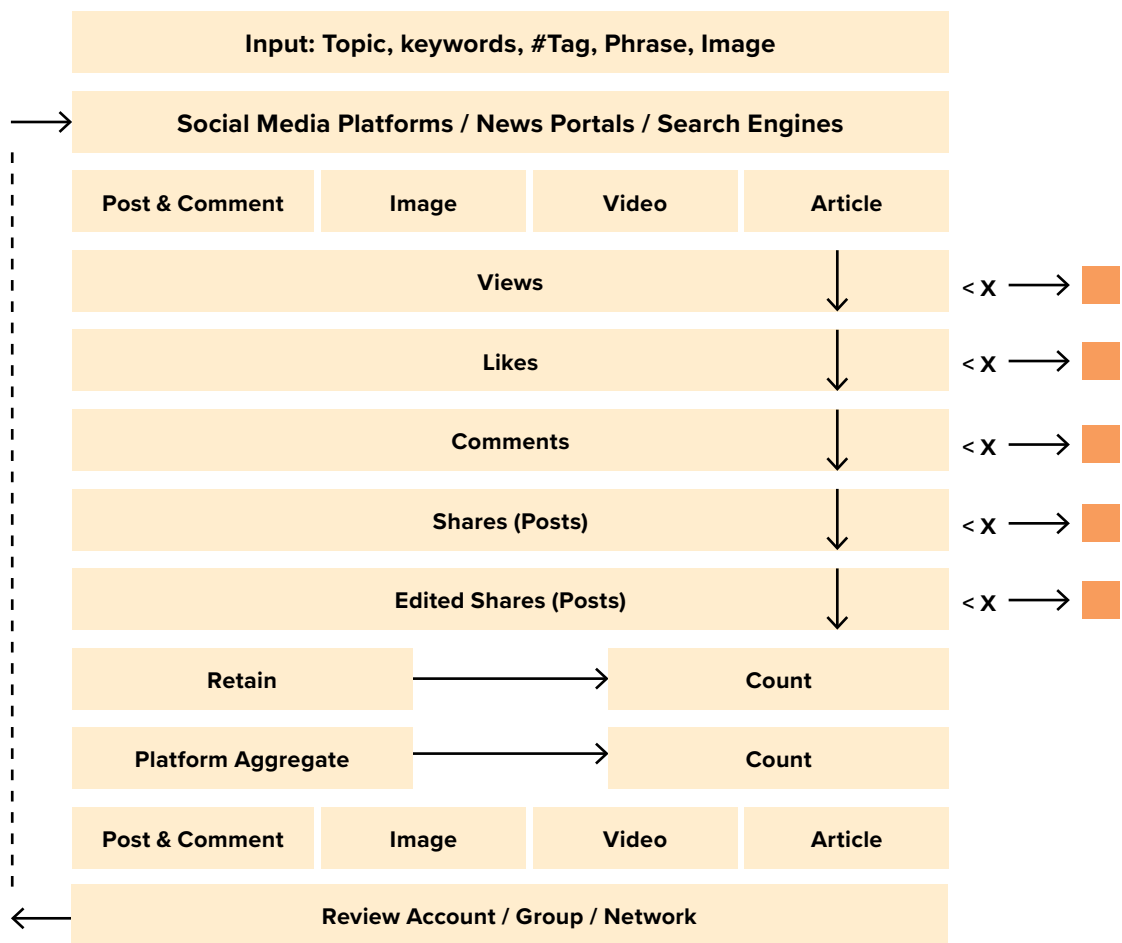


Fig. 2. Digital data scrape process.

The social media platforms vary widely in their suppression of content, accounts of individuals and organisations. With rulesets operating for different countries, often based on national laws and operating requirements and, through other ideological and political policy reasons, are enforced by the source country, mostly driven by the US.

Parliament graphs have been used to display the percentage of Emoticon Usage as a response in-line or as a response to a question, statement or theme posed within social media. Using the full Emoji Unicode TF8 sets, Emoticons and Emojis have been pattern matched and merged to produce a consistent dataset to run. A simple counting metric was used to generate percentage usage for each Emoji within the analysed comments.

The comments were collected against questions or statements that resonated along the same line of enquiry. This data was collected from all the major social media platforms. The Parliament Graphs do not ensure any analysis of weighting that is used within the Sentiment Analysis, this is purely usage. It is clear to all that the standard three Emojis of Grinning Face, Grinning Face with Smiling Eyes, Face with Tears of Joy, are used most heavily. These three represent the universal response to agreement and are often used in an ironic way as a response to a statement. As such, contextualisation is important when analysing for Sentiment. It is also worth noting that both mobile devices and the tools provided by the social media companies to respond within a post use a frequently/most frequently used display for the Emoji used by the

individual responding. This also generates a positive reinforcement loop for most frequently used Emojis. Therefore, it is worth reviewing the smaller percentages on each Parliament Graph to see more 'nuanced' responses to the questions and statements posed. We restricted the displayed datasets to the Top 10 for both display purposes and because the data often

reduced dramatically to an equal weighted number of dozens of minor used Emoticons further down the usage list. The data analysed for each Question, Comment Group consisted of at least 1,000 individual post responses, with some receiving up to 100,000 responses.

ANNEXES

- A: Researching Russian IIOs – Refining the Methodology
- B. Country Report – Egypt
- C. Country Report – Mali
- D. Country Report – Kenya
- E. Country Report – South Africa
- F. Country Report – United Arab Emirates

Endnotes

- 1 Due to the increasing pushback on the term 'Global South', it has become necessary to create a change of terminology as a stop-gap prior to the development of a new term by actors within this community. This report has elected to use the Multi-aligned Community, defined as 'States existing outside of the Western environment who have exhibited a preference for aligning or partnering with chosen states depending on specific spheres or issues.' This term has been chosen due to lack of paternalistic overtones, use of the term in select countries foreign policy statements, and respect for the individual states' agencies. The term 'majority countries' has been avoided due to tendency of malign actors to utilise it as part of their IIOs.
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- 7 According to Newsguard, since Musk's takeover of the platform, there has been a 70% increase in engagement with Kremlin, Iranian and Chinese Communist Party disinformation content. Kann, A. "[State-controlled media experience sudden Twitter gains after announced platform policy change](#)". DFRLab, 21 April 2023
- 8 When the main pillars of the state (policy formulation, implementation and accountability) are turned from the public interest to the benefit of one or more parties' interests. David-Barrett, E. (2023) "[State capture and development: a conceptual framework](#)" in *Journal of International Relations and Development*. Springer
- 9 The practice of publishing opinions or comments on the internet, in the media, etc. or engaging in offline activity (such as demonstrations) that appear to come from ordinary members of the public but actually comes from an interested group, as a way to make it seem that a product, policy, opinion, etc. is very popular or has a lot of public support.
- 10 Utilising sock puppet and bot accounts as well as local voices to drown out dissenting voices by sheer volume of contrasting content. Much of the time this focuses on attacks on the target's personal character or capability.
- 11 Typically an image, that is remixed, copied, and circulated in a shared cultural experience online. See Shifman, L. (2014). [Memes in Digital Culture](#). The MIT Press.
- 12 An image or recording that has been convincingly altered and manipulated to misrepresent someone as doing or saying something that was not actually done or said.

- 13** A process of employing local voices in spreading a narrative in order to enhance authenticity and gain traction. Frequently, these can include entrepreneurs of influence and ‘useful idiots’. The former being those cynically spreading narratives to further their own financial and political goals (even if they do not necessarily believe the narrative) and the latter being vocal members of the information sphere who believe narratives but often do not perform due diligence on what they post.
- 14** When false or deceitful information is legitimised through a network of intermediaries, who gradually apply a set of techniques in order to distort it and obscure the original source.
- 15** The action of finding or publishing private information about someone on the internet without their permission, especially in a way that reveals their name, address, etc, often with a malicious intent.
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