Commentary

To Resist Disinformation, Learn to Think Like an Intelligence Analyst

Preston Golson and Matthew F. Ferraro

The devious and sophisticated disinformation campaign[1] Russia waged during last year's presidential election is a direct challenge to our citizenry's ability to think critically, separate bad data from good, and avoid conspiratorial conceits.

It is an understandable challenge. Our social media feeds tend to be tailor-made to affirm our preconceptions. We usually have friend groups that share our opinions and post news stories that encourage them. Recommender algorithms suggest content based on our past selections, thus reassuring our predispositions. And, when most information sources appear equally legitimate on a smartphone screen, it is difficult to separate honest news from deliberate deception.

The surest guardian against deception rests between our ears—in our abilities to resist confirmation bias, think independently, and assess information with rational detachment. When it comes to clear thinking, there just isn't an app for that.

America's adversaries know all this and will turn information against us. For example, as detailed in press accounts and the US Department of Justice's 16 February 2018 indictment of 16 Russian organizations and persons, scores of full-time employees faked news articles, social media posts, and comments on mainstream websites with the intention of influencing public opinion within Russia and abroad.[2] During the run-up to the 2016 US election, Russian social media bots reportedly helped drive mainstream media coverage of false stories and even influenced American stock prices.[3]

The bad news is that these challenges are only going to get worse. Soon, technology will allow information forgers to produce fake news of a sophistication that will test the dispassionate faculties of us all. According to a recent report by Harvard University's Belfer Center, "in the near future," even amateurs will be able "to generate photo-realistic HD video, audio, and document forgeries—at scale" and share them just as easily as fictional tweets ricochet around the world today.[4]

Technological fixes from Silicon Valley may help stem some digital disinformation. But the surest guardian against deception rests between our ears—in our abilities to resist confirmation bias, think independently, and assess information with rational detachment. When it comes to clear thinking, there just isn't an app for that.

The good news is that critical thinking is a skill that can be taught like any other. And we know how. US intelligence agencies have been teaching analytical literacy successfully for decades to young officers charged with understanding global threats. Now, the front lines in this war against disinformation extend to the phones of all Americans. The skills that were once the province of a select few must become the ingrained habits of the many.

To that end, everyday citizens could benefit from the kind of analytic techniques that the CIA has honed for generations. For example, intelligence officers are taught "tradecraft"— structured analytic techniques[5] designed to "challenge, refine, and challenge again" the mental models through which we all intuitively sift abundant information.[6] Mental models save time but can confirm preconceptions even in the face of new evidence—the antithesis of worthy analysis. To surmount these mind-set challenges, analysts learn to identify relevant, credible information. They are taught to "pierce the shroud of secrecy—and sometimes deception—that state and nonstate actors use to mislead."[7] They remain vigilant against fabricated evidence or false flags meant to divert their attention. From reliable information, they analyze competing hypotheses, draw reasonable inferences, and reach

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conclusions. Well-trained analysts then attack their own underlying assumptions and conclusions through purposeful contrarian techniques. And analysts remain well aware of their own fallibility.

Schools and academia should consider ways such rigorous analysis could be brought into curriculums. Ideally, just like every student learns the scientific method in STEM classes, every civics student should learn intelligence analysis techniques. The intelligence agencies could lead the promotion of this kind of thinking, but the impact of this initiative may be even greater if it were led by a nonpartisan NGO unaffiliated with the government. Such a group should take the initiative and meet the public where it lives: online. It could produce online videos that use well-established analytic techniques to promote critical thinking, without pushing a particular policy or political message. Think of an online Master Class[8] taught by former intelligence analysts or respected elder statesmen and women. The goal would be to encourage Americans to be "self-conscious about their reasoning process," as legendary CIA analyst and educator Richards Heuer, Jr., wrote. "They should think about *how* they make judgments and reach conclusions, not just about the judgments and conclusions themselves."[9]

Does intelligence analysis sometimes come up short? Absolutely. The faulty judgments about Iraq's WMD before the 2003 war are proof of that.[10] But such errors—present in any human endeavor—only bolster the case for teaching good intelligence tradecraft to the public. If the public knew more about how intelligence analysts come to their conclusions, they may have asked different questions in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003. In the years since, the Intelligence Community has recommitted itself to living its values: to fight groupthink, question assumptions, and ensure the credibility of evidence before making conclusions. These are lessons that can help us all defeat foreign propaganda.

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Endnotes

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