Centre for
Information
Resilience

The Centre for Information Resilience

Understanding and countering identity-based Disinformation:
An exploration of the evidence base and TTPs

June 2024

1 Executive summary

This research seeks to further the understanding of identity-based disinformation (IBD) and analyse the tools, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) adopted by state and non-state actors who strategically use IBD in their domestic and foreign influence campaigns.

The Centre for Information Resilience (CIR) collected a sample of data (including examples of IBD from OSINT research and subject-matter reports) and identified the underlying TTPs and narratives that actors in five different countries use: Afghanistan, China, Iran, Russia, and the United Kingdom (UK)/the United States (US).

Key findings:
- Malign state and non-state actors from China, Iran, and Russia use IBD as a tactic in their authoritarian toolkit to further foreign influence campaigns. Both state and non-state actors from these countries seek to foment societal tensions in Western countries, target, shame, and silence publicly active women (including journalists and female politicians), and increase 'in-group' and 'out-group' distinctions in societies.
- State and non-state actors in the case studies related to Afghanistan and the UK/US also use IBD within campaigns targeting domestic populations. Similar tactics to those adopted by malign state and non-state actors are used, with harmful and malicious narratives being deployed against women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and racial/ethnic and religious minorities.
- Online violence can cause offline violence, demonstrating that the online and offline spheres are interconnected. IBD amplified online can normalise violence directed at those who are targeted (women, LGBTQIA+ members, ethnic/racial and religious minorities). The report analyses three case studies in which evidence of online IBD has had offline repercussions.

The report includes policy and programming recommendations that can be used by policymakers to understand IBD and better counter the many tactics used by state and non-state actors in spreading it. CIR suggests the following:
- **Commission further research focused on identity-based disinformation,** including: the provision of costly scraping tools to enhance research; longitudinal studies; studies on specific state actors, country or regional contexts, AI/deepfakes/manipulated images, and domestic actors.
- **Include IBD in other research:** Grantmakers should encourage grantees conducting research on disinformation to identify and analyse IBD in their work.
- **Publication of findings:** Research should be made public whenever possible to educate the public and policymakers, expose authoritarian governments' malicious campaigns, and identify lapses in terms of service enforcement.
- **Support staff:** Governments concerned about the effects of IBD should ensure they have policies in place to support staff—particularly, but not only, those in high-profile public positions—if they are targeted by online hate.
- **Non-research programming:** Communications and community-based programming to build support for and integration of marginalised communities in politics and public life.

Table of Contents

2 Introduction

Increased attention on the concept of disinformation has resulted in an emergent literature that has enriched the global understanding of the domestic and foreign implications of disinformation. The following report aims to contribute to that growing scholarship by highlighting the role that identity plays within the disinformation landscape, through **identity-based disinformation (IBD)**. The study will:

1) briefly outline the current understanding of IBD;
2) provide key concepts and definitions;
3) outline the research design;
4) provide an in-depth discussion of the study's findings;
5) offer future policy and research recommendations.

Existing studies have analysed the crucial intersections between identity, 'social differentiation,' and disinformation.[1] The concepts of disinformation and identity have independently garnered criticism within their respective fields for being conceptually challenging. Consequently, scholars have debated the complexity and nuances of placing these concepts in dialogue with one another.

This report builds on the framework proposed by the National Democratic Institute:

1) **Actor:** the source of disinformation;
2) **Mode of Dissemination:** the dissemination and amplification of disinformation (and the role of technology and digital spaces);
3) **Interpreter:** the audience and reception/consumption of disinformation;
4) **Risk:** the outcomes and consequences of disinformation.

Existing studies have predominantly focused on the targeting of women through gendered disinformation, with subsequent findings providing foundational understandings of IBD. The following report specifically builds on the following contributions from the literature on gendered disinformation:

1) Both **foreign** and **domestic** malign actors use IBD;
2) **Digital technologies** and **social media** are an **amplification tool** of IBD;
3) IBD is a **strategic weapon** within **socio-political and cultural warfare**; [2]
4) Audiences **reproduce** IBD and create **source ambiguity**; [3]
5) IBD is **'parasitic'** and shapes **political discourse**; [4]
6) IBD has **concrete consequences** on the society in which it emerges;
7) IBD may use **partial truths** or manipulated truth rather than inherently false information;[5]

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[1] Eddy (23 January 2023) Centre for Information, Technology, & Public Life, Available at: https://citap.pubpub.org
[2] Diaz Ruiz and Nilsson (2022) Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Judson *et al.* (October 2020) Demos, Available at: https://demos.co.uk
[5] See footnote 2.

8) **Cultural, historical, and symbolic context** are used to make IBD more evocative and pervasive within a given society/context;

9) IBD is often **intersectional,** targeting multiple aspects of an individual's identity;[6]

10) IBD may also **target audiences** based on their identity (i.e. Christian communities in the US).[7]

Studies have repeatedly determined that gendered disinformation is intersectional and have urged the importance of increased studies into IBD more broadly. The following report will build on these recommendations, analysing the diverse targets of IBD. As such, the following concepts and definitions will be introduced in the following section:

1) Gendered disinformation
2) LGBTQIA+ disinformation
3) Racial/Ethnic disinformation
4) Religious disinformation

This report analyses these four types of IBD across several cases and contexts and the tools, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) demonstrated across these cases. Finally, the report outlines in-depth case studies to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the various types, TTPs, and actors. Specifically, the following five cases of IBD will be highlighted:

1) Afghanistan
2) China
3) Iran
4) Russia
5) Western countries (US/UK)

To avoid possible re-traumatising of women who faced online abuse, CIR has blurred all instances of abuse that show the target's face or show incendiary language directed at the individual. CIR has also redacted certain links due to privacy concerns and to avoid amplifying harmful content. Upon request, CIR can share any relevant data.

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[6] Jankowicz *et al.* (January 2021) Wilson Center, Available at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org
[7] Gaskins (21 October 2021) The London School of Economics, Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk

3 Methodology

3.1 Definitions

CIR relied on the following definitions to classify cases it catalogued in this research. Some of the definitions have been created by CIR for the purpose of this report, while others have been adopted from previous subject-matter reports:

- **Disinformation:** CIR defines disinformation as false or misleading information spread with malign intent.

- **Identity-based disinformation (IBD):** While there is no widely agreed upon definition of IBD, CIR developed the following definition to guide its research: a form of disinformation that uses misleading or false allegations relating to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, religion, and other identity-based characteristics to undermine, silence, and/or repress marginalised communities and thereby weaken democracies.

Identity-based disinformation has the following subsets:

- **Gendered disinformation.** Gendered disinformation is described as "a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere."[8]
    - Targets: include female human rights defenders, journalists, politicians, and academics who are visibly public.[9]
    - Purpose: by sharing gendered disinformation on these targets, state actors seek to undermine, discredit, shame, and silence women who are visibly public, as well as trying to deter them from becoming politicians or from taking on leadership roles.

- **Sexualised/LGBTQIA+ disinformation:** described as "disinformation against people on the grounds of their gender and social constructs, including their gender identity and/or gender expression as well as disinformation against people on the grounds of sexual orientation-which often has gendered dimensions and weaponizes gendered stereotypes in similar ways."[10]
    - Targets: members of the LGBTQIA+ community.
    - Purpose: this type of IBD seeks to undermine, shame, attack, and single out members of the community.

- **Racial/ethnic disinformation:** includes "*othering narratives* that alienate and marginalise non-white or non-dominant groups; *essentializing narratives* that create generalising tropes of marginalised groups; and *authenticating narratives* that call

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[8] *Ibid.*
[9] Internet Governance Forum (2021) Available at: https://intgovforum.org [accessed 19 July 2024]
[10] *Ibid.*

upon people to prove or undermine their claims to be part of certain groups."[11] (Further studies might include caste as part of this sub-group, or expand it to its own sub-group. This study did not include caste as part of its dataset).

- ○ <u>Target</u>: racial and ethnic minorities.
- ○ <u>Purpose</u>: this type of IBD seeks to undermine, marginalise, and threaten ethnic and racial minorities.

- **Religious disinformation.** This subset of IBD targets certain religious groups and religious believers, by using similar *othering, essentialising and authenticating* narratives. Religious IBD also uses morality and moral arguments as well as cultural and historical elements as a tool to target religious minorities.
    - ○ Target: religious minorities.
    - ○ Purpose: this type of IBD is used to undermine, threaten, and marginalise religious groups and believers.

Additionally, this report examines IBD used by both malign state and non-state actors, as well as domestic state and non-state actors. For the purpose of the report, these sub-distinctions are defined as follows:

- state actors: government officials, politicians, official state social media accounts, etc.;
- non-state actors: journalists, media, influencers, political commentators, etc.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The aim of this three-month pilot project was to identify a *sample* or *snapshot* of the types of identity-based disinformation that malign state actors, non-state actors, and others in the information environment use to undermine marginalised communities. Due to the restrictions on large-scale data scraping that social media companies have placed on researchers (further discussed in section 3.3.), this project was unable to capture all instances of IBD during the collection period.

Given the time, capacity, and sourcing restrictions this project faced, data collection proceeded as follows:

- CIR conducted a wide-ranging literature review looking at the state of the understanding of IBD;
- Over 160 examples of IBD were collected from open-source research and previous CIR-related projects on IBD and subject-matter reports. CIR investigators catalogued instances of IBD in a database, noting the following classifiers:
    - ○ Date or approximate date
    - ○ Description of incident
    - ○ Targeted country or region
    - ○ Target audience
    - ○ Country of incident
    - ○ Perpetrator
    - ○ Is the perpetrator state or non-state?

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[11] Reddi *et al.* (July 2021) New Media & Society, Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com

- ○ Is the perpetrator carrying out a domestic or foreign campaign?
    - ○ Primary identity affected
    - ○ Secondary identity affected
    - ○ Evidence of related offline violence?
    - ○ Notable tools, techniques, and procedures (TTPs)
    - ○ Source (link, where possible/available)
- Using the same classifiers, CIR investigators also catalogued contemporaneous instances of IBD identified during the collection period (between September – November 2023).

The database then informed the analysis, policy, and programming recommendations presented in the following sections.

3.3 Research limitations

The findings in this report should be regarded as a sample of the wider patterns of IDB spread online by state and non-state actors. They are also likely to underestimate the scale and severity of the problem as a result of:

- **Data collection limitations**. Since Elon Musk's takeover of X (formerly Twitter), the [platform](#) has become increasingly hostile towards data scraping, whether the official API or a third-party scraping tool is being used. X completely shut off access to data to researchers and academics, who could not pay for full API access from 30 June 2023. Academic access has been removed as an option, meaning that only the paid version of the API is available.

- **Possible content takedowns**. While CIR found many examples of IBD from state and non-state actor accounts, some publicly available posts, particularly the most egregious, will likely have been removed before researchers could archive and analyse them.

- **Systemisation of data analysis:** Given the scope and budget of the project, the systemisation of data analysis and qualitative coding was limited. Using a more advanced qualitative coding system, as well as more rigorous data tracking/analysis systems (NVivo, Atlas.ti, ext) may have aided in the research process.

- **Data collection on other social media platforms**. The examples included in the database came from subject-matter reports, websites of state-affiliated media channels and posts on X. Due to the short programme timeframe, CIR researchers were not able to investigate other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Telegram.

4 Tools, Techniques, and Procedures used by state and non-state actors

The following section looks at the most common TTPs used by state and non-state actors in domestic and foreign IBD campaigns online. Below is a list of the most common TTPs with examples from different countries.

- **Mockery and humour.** In posts shared by threat actors, mockery and humour are used to undermine the narratives shared by other countries.
    - [Pro-PRC influencers](), for example, use mockery and humour to undermine the narratives that Western countries share on the Uyghur population in Xinjiang.
    - Humour is also used by [domestic threat actors]() who claim that the "great replacement"[12] is already occurring in countries like the UK and the US.

- **Denial and distraction (whataboutism).** Tactic used by certain actors to dismiss any information and/or narrative that is not in line with their own.
    - For example, [Chinese government]() accounts use this tactic to deflect attention away from issues in Xinjiang by denying the mistreatment of the Uyghur population as well as by focusing on human rights abuses in other countries, including the UK, US, and Canada.
    - Russia has used this tactic to undermine Ukraine and [advance]() its justifications for invading the country.

- **Visual content.** Government officials and state-affiliated media channels belonging to other actors tend to include visual images in line with the content they promote. This varies from infographics (used to highlight and strengthen certain narratives) to cartoon-like images (used in some cases alongside humorous posts to promote anti-Western narratives).
    - On X, [Chinese government officials]() have used infographics in posts when talking about the Uyghur population in Xinjiang.

- **Use of international influencers for visibility purposes.** Foreign threat actors might use international influencers (individuals who create overtly political content, sharing narratives that are in line with those shared by threat actors) to target a wider audience and make their narratives more mainstream. Audiences are more prone to follow and believe in a certain narrative if it is spread by an influential individual rather than a government official or a media channel.
    - Pro-PRC international influencers (identified by CIR in previous research) who lived or are still living in China share content on their social media channels praising China and its government.
    - Russia is also known to use proxies and/or influencers that share pro-Kremlin narratives. For example, [Jackson Hinkle]() (an American commentator and social

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[12] The Great Replacement Theory, popularised by Renaud Camus, was created to denounce the "replacement" and "contamination" of the white population by non-white communities. Additional information can be found from Counter Extremism Project (2023) Available at: https://www.counterextremism.com [accessed 19 July 2024]

media influencer) regularly spreads conspiracy theories on X, in addition to sharing pro-Kremlin narratives.

- **'Us' vs. 'them' rhetoric.** This tactic is also known as "out-grouping" and consists of deeming an individual or group as the 'other'. Those labelled as 'other', which is usually a religious, racial or ethnic minority, are considered to be part of the 'out-group', which differs from the 'in-group' (the religious, racial or ethnic majority). To further emphasise the distinction between 'in-group' and 'out-group', language such as 'them', 'theirs', 'us', and 'ours' is often used.
    - This tactic is often used by domestic threat actors in the US to amplify anti-immigration narratives by differentiating immigrants as the out-group.

- **Fomenting and exacerbating wedge issues and tensions in countries.** Foreign threat actors use this tactic to influence a country's decision-making processes, by spreading narratives that increase tensions in societies. Threat actors use this tactic in a domestic and foreign context, usually alongside racial, ethnic, and religious disinformation.
    - For example, in [Bangladesh](), religious disinformation targeting Buddhist and Hindu communities was spread to exacerbate local tensions.
    - In the US, Russia [launched]() a disinformation campaign targeting Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian-American activist and one of the founders of the Women's March Movement. By creating amplifier accounts that spread fabricated narratives on Sarsour, Russia tried to inflame racial and ethnic tensions in the US.
    - Accounts affiliated with Iran spread unverified videos claiming a large-scale migration of Afghans into the country and then blaming them for security and economic issues.

- **Use of the English language to attract an international audience.** The use of the English language in posts indicates the intent to reach a broader, more international audience. By using the English language, threat actors seek to normalise their narratives and make them mainstream.
    - Most government officials, governmental institutions, and state-affiliated media channels tend to use the English language in their social media posts. Russian government-affiliated channels have accounts in both Russian and English, while Chinese government-affiliated ones mainly share posts in English.

- **Spreading and amplifying conspiracy theories.** Threat actor accounts sometimes spread and amplify conspiracy theories online. Conspiracy theories place blame on a specific actor (usually seen as an enemy or the 'out-group'), ultimately reinforcing a sense of in-group identity; justify and promote the use of violence, usually against the perceived out-group; and are used to radicalise and recruit individuals to certain groups.
    - [Domestic threat actors]() in the US have used them to amplify the idea of an ongoing 'great replacement' of "white people" by immigrants, or by [sharing]() misleading and harmful theories targeting the LGBTQIA+ community.

- **Manipulated imagery.** Threat actors regularly share posts with missing context and/or information to advance their narratives. Images of women that at times had been manipulated, were shared alongside incorrect and harmful information.
  - Russia has frequently edited and/or [manipulated](#) images of female politicians alongside sharing incorrect or incomplete information on the women. This technique is generally used by threat actors to undermine, slut-shame, and discredit female politicians.
  - A Georgian pro-Kremlin TV channel [shared](#) misleading and factually incorrect information on a British school introducing students to naked men.

- **Doxxing,** or the act of publicly leaking a person's private and confidential information online, without the person's consent, is used to undermine, shame, and silence individuals that might be challenging the state's narratives.
  - For example, [women](#) who oppose the governing military junta in Myanmar are frequently doxxed online. This tactic appears to be linked to offline violence and arrests targeting women in Myanmar.

- **Hate speech and abuse.** Identity-based disinformation and hate speech and abuse online are interconnected. Accounts that spread IBD may also spread hate speech and abuse against targets.
  - [Pro-Taliban and low-ranking Taliban accounts](#) spread gendered disinformation, hate speech, and abuse targeting politically active Afghan women who speak out against the Taliban's policies on women.

- **Psychological warfare.** This tactic involves the "planned use of propaganda and other psychological operations to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviour of opposition groups,"[13] as well as minorities.
  - This type of tactic is frequently used by Iranian state and non-state actors who seek to spread gendered IBD targeting Iranian women.

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[13] Rand corporation (2023) Available at: https://www.rand.org/ [accessed 19 July 2024]

5 State and non-state actors' use of IBD

The following section will analyse examples of IBD coming from five state and non-state actors. Each section will:

1) Briefly introduce and summarise the findings, noting key trends, tactics, or patterns;
2) Discuss the forms and targets of IBD observed, highlighting specific examples.

Each section will highlight the use of IBD by both state and non-state actors, understood within the report as the following:

1) state: government officials, politicians, official state social media accounts, etc.;
2) non-state: journalists, media, influencers, political commentators.

5.1 Afghanistan

An investigation by CIR's [Afghan Witness](#) (AW) project examined instances of gendered hate speech and abuse targeting politically engaged Afghan women in the Dari/Farsi and Pashto information environment. The investigation, which consisted of a qualitative and quantitative report, analysed the quantity of posts and the narratives used to target Afghan women; identified the perpetrators who spread the majority of abuse online; and noted the techniques adopted to undermine and discredit politically engaged Afghan women.
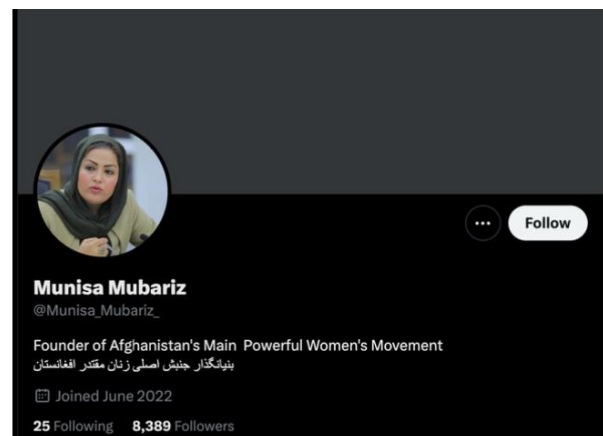
Gendered IBD

Low-ranking Taliban and pro-Taliban accounts on X share gendered disinformation and hate speech targeting Afghan women who are journalists, women's rights activists, and who worked for the former government. In one example, a post shared by Afghan women's rights activist Tamana Zaryab Paryani, received sexualised and gendered hate speech and abuse (figure 1), falsely accusing Paryani of being a prostitute and/or spy for Western forces.

Figure 1: Screenshot of a comment containing sexualised and gendered disinformation on Tamana Paryani, a women's rights activist from Afghanistan. The comment reads: "Shut up, you Western prostitute. You were selling your body every night and day in Bagram[14]. You prostitute now speak. The followers of Ahmad Ezak[15] are either an asshole or prostitute."

Perpetrators also spread false and/or inflammatory information about Afghan women; discredit the sources that Afghan women use in their content; and create fake accounts which are then used to spread disinformation. For example, an impersonator account was created to discredit and diminish Munisa Mubariz, an Afghan women's rights activist. The account used Mubariz's profile picture and username but was spreading disinformation targeting other political groups and/or individuals. Figures 2 and 3 show Munisa Mubariz's real and fake X accounts.

Figures 2 and 3: Screenshots of the fake X account of Munisa Mubariz (left) and the real one (right). The most noticeable differences are the number of followers and account description.

Gendered and racial/ethnic IBD

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[14] Accounts that used the term "Bagram" – referring to the Bagram Air Base that was the largest US military base in Afghanistan - do so to accuse women of being affiliated with Western forces.
[15] Derogatory term used for non-binary people.

In some cases in the report, there was a cross-over between gendered and racial/ethnic IBD, with some politically engaged Afghan women receiving sexualised and gendered hate speech and abuse because of their specific ethnic/racial group. The report noted that among women from different ethnic minorities, Hazara women received most of the online hate speech and abuse. Perpetrators spread disinformation against their targets by making use of certain ethnic and derogatory slurs.

Saleha Soadat, a journalist and ethnic Hazara, was, for example, targeted with sexualised hate speech and ethnic slurs in the comment section. The perpetrator calls her a "Hazara-e-mosh khor", which is a derogatory term used against Hazaras that can be translated to "Hazara mouse eater".
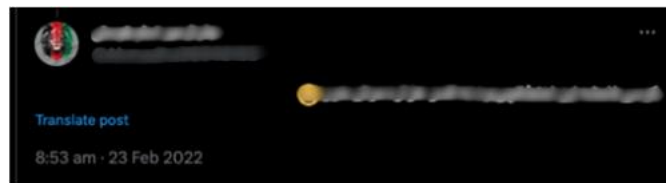

Figure 4: Screenshot of a comment to a post by Saleha Soadat that reads: "You cunt, whore, that wasn't an officer, it was a kidnapper, Hazara-e-mosh khor".

5.2 China

In gathering instances of IBD for this project's research, CIR researchers noted that the People's Republic of China (PRC) carries out both domestic and foreign IBD campaigns. The PRC uses most of the TTPs listed in section 4 with the aim of attracting a wider and more international audience; shining a positive light on China and official policies, successes, and overall efforts of the government; and debunking the 'lies' that the West spreads about China. Most of the campaigns that the PRC carries out relate to the racial/ethnic and religious forms of IBD. Most of the content shared relates to the Uyghur population and the denial of reported human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Gendered IBD

In terms of gendered IBD, a study carried out by the Wilson Center described how in China, state and non-state accounts, created impersonator accounts targeting Leta Hong Fincher, an American journalist and scholar.[16] Hong Fincher had condemned a video promoting mixed-race marriage in Xinjiang province that had been shared by the Chinese state-affiliated People's Daily. Hong Fincher was targeted with gendered and sexualised narratives and abuse for speaking out against the Chinese government, including claims that she was against mixed-race marriage, fake impersonator accounts created in her name, and fake reviews about her books.

The creation of impersonator accounts is a useful tactic for malign state actors to undermine and discredit women online. These accounts usually copy the profile pictures and usernames from women's real profiles but use the account to spread disinformation.

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[16] Jankowicz *et al.*, 2021.

Racial/ethnic & religious IBD

Uyghur population

When covering the Uyghur population, pro-PRC actors (such as government officials, state-affiliated media channels, and international influencers) share content claiming to debunk the alleged lies spread by the West. This is usually done by discussing and showing the "real situation" of the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. The main tactic used by the Chinese government is to deflect attention away from issues in Xinjiang by denying the mistreatment of the Uyghur population as well as by focusing on and denouncing human rights abuses in other countries (such as the UK, the US, and Canada).

In Figure 5, journalist Li Jingjing of China's state-owned and operated CGTN shares a post debunking the alleged 'lies' the West is spreading about Xinjiang Province. Li does so by sharing an infographic that allegedly proves that the Uyghur population is "growing faster than other ethnic groups". In the caption, she denounces the West's human rights violations over the years, especially in Muslim countries. Figure 6 shows a post shared by government official Zhao Lijian comparing the lives of Muslims in China and the US. By using infographics and captions in English, Zhao tries to simplify pro-PRC narratives and reach a broader and more international audience. The posts exemplify the PRC's goals of detracting attention from human rights abuses in China by portraying the alleged quality of life experienced by Muslims and ethnic minorities in China and highlighting US human rights abuses in Muslim countries.

Figures 5 and 6: Screenshot (left) of a post shared by Li Jingjing, a CGTN journalist, debunking the West's alleged lies on the Uyghur population in Xinjiang; screenshot (right) of a post by Lijian Zhao, a government official, on the treatment of Muslims in China vs in the US.

Global Times, a Chinese state-run media outlet, sought to use whataboutism to polarise and disrupt criticism and debate of China's human rights record in Xinjiang in a Canadian context. A Global Times article with the headline "China urges Canada to reflect on its own human rights abuses, stop hyping Xinjiang-related topics" reported on Canada's alleged human rights abuses against its Indigenous Peoples, specifically in the context of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia.[17] The article proceeded to highlight Canada's "hypocrisy and double standards" when talking about human rights abuses.

5.3 Iran

Although Iran's disinformation campaigns might be less sophisticated than those of other malign states, such as Russia and China, both Iranian state and non-state accounts and media channels spread IBD targeting Iranian women, ethnic minorities in the country, and religious minorities abroad.

Gendered IBD

One of the main TTPs used by Iranian state and non-state actors is to spread false and harmful narratives to undermine, shame, silence, and damage the reputation of high-profile Iranian women who live outside Iran and are active in media, human rights, and women's rights. Iranian state and non-state actors persistently repurpose the same narratives while targeting different Iranian women.

In September 2011, fabricated claims that Pouneh Ghodoussi, a female BBC Persian presenter, had been raped by a male supervisor were disseminated and amplified by hardline Iranian media channels (figure 7). As a consequence, Ghodoussi was questioned about the rape and shamed on live TV. Similarly, in November 2015, another female BBC Persian presenter, Nafiseh Kuhnavard was targeted in similar circumstances. Hardline Iranian website, Raja News, disseminated disinformation against Kuhnavard claiming she had multiple sexual relationships with her male superiors in return for a promotion.

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[17] The Kamloops Indian Residential School was one of the largest Indian residential schools in Canada. The school was run by the government and the Catholic Church and attended by thousands of indigenous children. In 2021, an anthropologist surveyed the area of the school with ground-penetrating radar and concluded the presence of probable remains of over 200 children. Newton (June 2021) CNN, Available at: https://edition.cnn.com

Figure 7: Screenshot of an article shared by hardline Iranian media spreading gendered IBD targeting female BBC Persian presenter, Pouneh Ghodoussi.

It is noteworthy that plausibility and providing evidence, including fabricated evidence, do not seem to be the primary concern of the perpetrators of these narratives. The narratives are typically very vulgar, and even somewhat implausible, seeking to create a strong and lasting negative psychological impact on the target audience's perception of the individual. While the primary target audience might be Iranian domestic audiences, the Iranian diaspora is consistently exposed to such content through social media amplification.

In 2014, state-run Islamic Republic of Iran News Network (IRINN) broadcast a report falsely claiming that Masih Alinejad, a female Iranian women's rights and media activist who, at the time was, based in the UK, had "taken her clothes off on the street under the influence of psychedelic drugs", after which she was "raped by three men on the street in front of her son". The false news was further amplified by various unattributed social media accounts as well as multiple hardline Iranian news websites. As late as 2020 it continued to occasionally circulate and resurface on social media, providing a space for unattributed social media accounts to level attacks against Alinejad online.
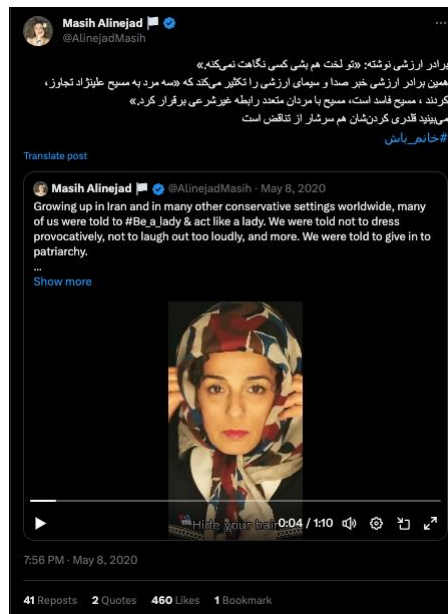
Figure 8: Screenshot of a post shared by Masih Alinejad mentioning the false rape story circulated by hardline Iranian media.

On top of trying to silence and shame women, Iranian state and non-state actors also seek to create a hostile environment for women who would like to become journalists or take an active role in Iranian women's issues and/or Iranian human rights issues outside of Iran. This type of IBD has an impact on the lives of many Iranian women outside Iran, with most of them having to face questions that require them to justify themselves and/or worry about their professional reputation. In addition, their families, who might still live in Iran, might be targeted by the government and could face repercussions.

Racial and ethnic IBD

One of the examples collected mentioned how ethnic disinformation targeting Afghans in Iran was spread by unattributed accounts on social media. The aim of this type of IBD was to exploit existing grievances by manipulating images and videos and further exacerbating tensions in society.

Multiple videos circulated online claiming to show large groups of Afghans entering Iran (figure 9). Some of these clips were a compilation of different unrelated videos that seem to have been specifically edited and narrated to incite anti-Afghan sentiments (figure 10). While the perpetrators of this campaign are unknown, it resulted in increased violence and real-world hardship for the Afghan migrant community in Iran. On top of a significant rise in anti-Afghan sentiment in the country, this campaign also led to a wave of violent attacks on Afghans.

Figures 9 and 10: Screenshot (left) of a post shared by an account claiming to show large groups of Afghans in Iran. The caption reads: "Invasion of Afghans [in] Isfahan and playing with water. Shame on Iran"; screenshot (right) of an account sharing a post with a video compilation of various unrelated videos, promoting the idea that Afghans are entering Iran.

State-backed disinformation in response to the recent 'women, life, freedom' protests demonstrated an intersection between gendered and ethnic IBD. The protests broke out following the killing of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman who was arrested for allegedly violating the country's strict dress code for women with her purported non-compliance with the hijab regulations. The Iranian regime used disinformation as a key tactic to undermine the national/global success of the movement and the challenges it posed to the government's strategic interests. Gendered disinformation was primarily used to delegitimise female activists. Disinformation also targeted ethnic groups (Iran's Arabs, Azeris, Baha'i, Baluchis, Kurds, and Turkmen), as well as specific regions (Kurdistan, Khuzestan, and Baluchistan). Ethnic IBD "allowed the regime to discredit and divide the protesters and justify its use of extreme violence in suppressing them."[18] Reports show that the use of IBD in relation to the movement has continued in the past year following the initial protests.

Religious IBD

According to the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency Iran and Russia carried out a joint disinformation campaign targeting Sweden, spreading religious (and racial) IBD against Muslims living in the country.

During 2023, several Quran burnings were reported in Sweden. The first occurred in January when Rasmus Paludan, a conservative Danish-Swedish politician, set fire to a copy of the Quran outside the Turkish embassy in Sweden. Later, in June and again in July 2023, Salwan Momika and Salwan Najem, both Iraqi immigrants who are living in Sweden, burned copies of the Quran. Although the Swedish government condemned and denounced the burnings,

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[18] Hassaniyan (November 2022) The Washington Institute, Available at: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org

negative attitudes towards Sweden increased, with protests being carried out calling the country out for being anti-Islam.

In an attempt to disrupt Sweden's NATO membership process and exacerbate tensions in the country, Russia and Iran spread false claims about the Quran burnings. The pro-Kremlin news outlets RT and Sputnik published articles in Arabic claiming that the Swedish government supported the burning of the Quran. Iranian officials accused Sweden of Islamophobia and also amplified content to incite religious sensitivities within Sweden's ethnic minorities.

The aim of the disinformation campaign was to exacerbate societal division within Sweden and spread the narrative that Sweden supports Islamophobia. Swedish officials believed that this campaign sought to foment tensions between the West and the Middle East.

5.4 Russia

CIR researchers noticed that Russia has carried out more foreign IBD campaigns than domestic ones. Foreign disinformation campaigns have targeted several countries including, but not limited to the US, UK, Sweden, Georgia, Germany, and Finland. Its domestic campaigns have targeted Ukraine and are used to justify its invasion of Ukraine and undermine the Ukrainian army.

Gendered IBD

Russia has frequently edited and/or manipulated images of female politicians, alongside spreading incorrect and harmful information. Kremlin-affiliated media outlets and social media accounts disseminated a manipulated image of Annalena Baerbock, Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and claimed that she was once a professional prostitute (figure 11). By sharing a manipulated image and false information on Baerbock, pro-Kremlin accounts sought to undermine women's roles as politicians, spread animosity towards them, and discourage women from taking on political roles.

Figure 11: Screenshot of an article with a manipulated image claiming that Annalena Baerbock, Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs, was once a professional prostitute.

Additionally, an online disinformation campaign was [carried out](#) against Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk, which consisted in the dissemination of false information -- with a fake post created claiming that she would run naked down Kyiv's main street if Ukraine lost a key battle -- and manipulated images showing a naked woman with the claim that it was Zalishchuk. In another example, a [manipulated](#) image of Finnish Prime Minister, Sanna Marin, consuming drugs was posted on Georgian- and Russian-language social networks (figure 12).
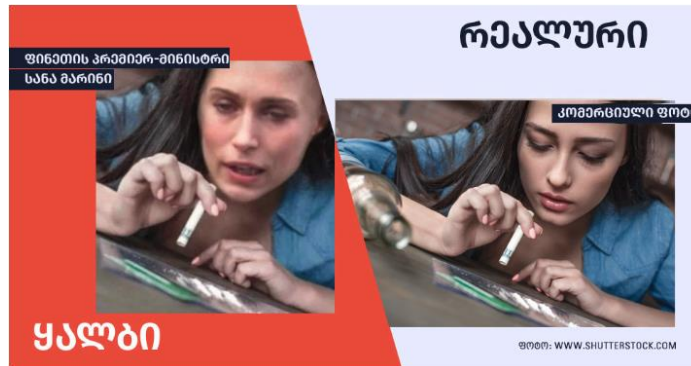

Figure 12: Image from the mythdetector website, featuring the original image and the manipulated version with Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin.

LGBTQIA+ IBD

Identity-based disinformation targeting the LGBTQIA+ community has been used by both state and non-state Russian actors in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Content spread with this type of IBD usually consists of claims that the Ukrainian army is made up mostly of homosexuals who are "fighting for homosexuality". These types of narratives seek to undermine Ukraine's efforts in the conflict as well as amplify homophobic content. Russian journalist/propagandist, [Olga Skabeyeva](#), has claimed in several panels and discussions that Ukraine is fighting for "homosexuality", for "satanism", and that the [military](#) is not fighting and "dying for their homeland" but for the "rights of gays".

In February 2023, images of a pink tank with the claim that "feminists in Europe raised money for a tank to send to Ukraine but painted it pink and chopped off the barrel" were spread by [Russian state and non-state accounts in Georgia](#). The image (figure 13) was originally taken at the Manchester 2007 pride parade. The context collapse and photomanipulation were used by Russian state and non-state actors to spread disinformation on Ukraine and the reasons for its fighting, once again repurposing the narrative that Ukraine is fighting for gay rights and homosexuality.

Figure 13: Image from the mythdetector website, featuring the fake and original version of the pink tank image that was used to spread disinformation about Ukraine.

A report from the EU Parliament outlining foreign-backed LGBTQIA+ disinformation found that Russia was a key perpetrator of these tactics in the West. In addition, the report noted that these campaigns were aided by other actors with similar 'ideological agendas.' It found that Russia used IBD to push strategic anti-Western sentiments, using several of the following themes:

1) "LGBTI+ as 'colonialism' by the West";
2) "LGBTI+ as a 'threat to child safety': paedophilia and sex education promoting unnatural sexuality and gender expressions";
3) "Negative othering";
4) "Opposing a 'Gender Ideology'";
5) "Hetero Activism and protecting the 'natural' family's rights";
6) "Restoring the 'natural' order as ordained by God".[19]

Racial and Ethnic IBD

Foreign campaigns
Following a terror attack in Westminster in 2017, Russian-linked Twitter accounts spread anti-Muslim narratives. According to a BBC report, examples of these narratives included comments such as: "another day, another Muslim terrorist attack. Retweet if you think that Islam needs to be banned!". By spreading narratives against the Muslim community in the UK, Russia was aiming to amplify tensions in society and increase xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments in particular.

When the *Sun*, a populist British tabloid, published an article confronting Russia about its involvement in spreading hate against Muslims after the Westminster attack, the Russian Embassy in UK shared a post on X denouncing the Sun for its "false" accusations (figure 14).

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[19] Strand and Svensson (July 2021) EU Parliament, Available at: https://dspace.ceid.org.tr

Figure 14: Screenshot of a post by Russia's Embassy in UK attacking the Sun for its false claims.

Some of the foreign campaigns carried out by Russian state and non-state actors included both gendered and racial/ethnic IBD. In 2016, for example, Russian media channels shared a false story of a 13-year-old Russian-German girl who had reportedly been raped by Arab immigrants. Given the social tensions in Europe, especially after the wave of immigration from North Africa and the Middle East in that year, this type of disinformation sought to exacerbate societal tensions as well as also sow division and distrust of immigrants in Germany. In an example from 2022, Russian amplifier accounts spread the narrative that Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian-American activist, was a "Jew-hating Muslim" intent on imposing Sharia (Islamic law) in the US. By spreading Islamophobic content, Russian state and non-state actors sought to sow divisions in society and amplify societal tensions in the US.

Domestic campaigns

Russian state and non-state accounts have shared posts containing disinformation to undermine the Ukrainian army and further justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine. An article was published by Russia Today (RT), a Russian state-affiliated news television network, with the caption "[Russian President Vladimir] Putin warns of genocide". The article then mentions that thousands of ethnic Russians have been killed in eastern Ukraine, constituting a genocide.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs shared a post on X (figure 15) claiming that Ukraine, and the West supporting it, was "physically annihilating ethnic Russians".
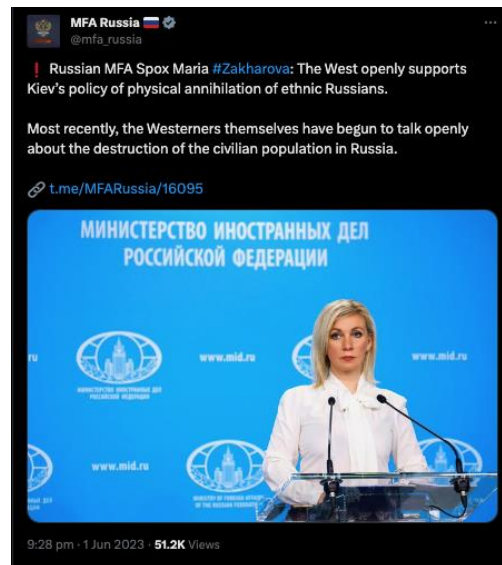
Figure 15: Screenshot of a post shared by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claiming that Ukraine and the West are annihilating ethnic Russians.

Russia has also used religious/ethnic disinformation to strengthen anti-Western sentiments. A study on articles published by the Russian media agency, Sputnik, found that disinformation portrayed Sweden in 'decline' using "culturalized, ethnicized, and racialized narratives" around national identity and immigration. The study also found that racial/ethnic disinformation was often combined with gendered, religious, and LGBTQIA+ disinformation.

Religious IBD

Rather than attack religious believers, as religious IBD does in some cases, Russia has used the Orthodox Church and religion more generally as a tool of disinformation. Religion is used to foster an in-group or *'us,'* creating an echo chamber ripe with *groupthink*.[20] In doing so, Russia has created an ideal audience for strategic disinformation campaigns -- one who may even reproduce and reinforce these narratives for them.

When disinformation was heightened during Covid-19, the Moscow Patriarchate was seen to have an attitude of enablement towards both the state and state-run media.[21] More direct manifestations of religious disinformation are highlighted in a Georgetown University report:

> *"reactionary political groups and fundamentalist monks have…taken the lead on producing conspiracy theories, highlighting the multiplicity of Orthodox Christian-based perceptions of the world and the complex continuum between the Russian Orthodox Church's official positions and those of its many dissenters."[22]*

President Putin specifically has placed special emphasis on connecting Russian identity to the Orthodox Church.[23] Religious disinformation has aided in meeting his strategic goals: "Putin's

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[20] Groupthink can be understood as an identity-based psychological phenomenon that solidifies group identifications, increases pressures for conformity, and alters bias and information reception.
[21] Laruelle and Grek (December 2021) Georgetown University, Available at: https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] Hart and Hinck (31 August 2023) Air University, Available at: https://www.airuniversity.af.edu

usage of the Orthodox faith and its connection to Russian history acts as a central component of his domestic and international efforts to return Russia to glory by promoting domestic cohesion, justifying malign foreign policy actions, and generating cultural friction within and amongst his Western rivals."[24]

This religious disinformation intentionally portrays the *Russian Orthodox 'us'* in direct opposition to the *Western Christian 'them.'* These narratives are used in both domestic and foreign landscapes:[25]

1) Domestic: Using religious disinformation to justify legislation that is anti-LGBTQIA+ and repression of free speech as a means to *protect* Russia's religious identity from the West;
2) Foreign: Using religious disinformation to justify the invasion of Ukraine as a *moral crusade.*

An extensive study into *narrative 2* was conducted by [Detector Media](#), tracing Russia's religious disinformation campaign in light of its invasion of Ukraine. The study observed a coordinated Russian-backed campaign across a number of social media sites including Telegram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. The campaign used *'us versus them'* techniques to juxtapose Russia and Ukraine on religious grounds, presenting Ukraine as immoral and 'satanist.' More importantly, narratives attributed Ukraine with the intentions, capability, and actions to threaten and harm the Russian Orthodox church and its community, the so-called *'us'*.

5.5 West (UK, US)

State and non-state actors in the West have amplified IBD online targeting female politicians, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, racial/ethnic minorities, and religious groups. Most of the examples below come from right-wing politicians and/or far-right extremist accounts.

Gendered IBD

The American right-wing, both mainstream and fringe, has used gendered IBD as a tool to demonstrate the perceived 'culture war' from the left.

An example of this in the American context involves Fox News broadcaster [Laura Ingraham](#) who accuses feminists of 'waging a war against men.' A clip of Ingraham describes men and masculinity as under threat and places the blame on women and women's rights movements specifically (figure 16). Comments under the video demonstrate the reception and reproduction of these sexist and misogynistic narratives.
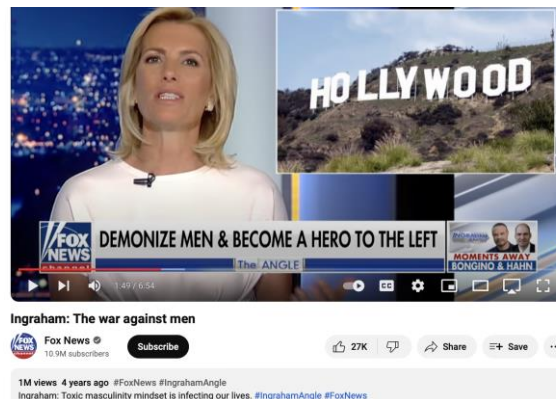
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[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.*

Figure 16: Screenshot of a clip from Laura Ingraham's Fox News segment in which she shares gendered disinformation.

The example is mirrored by another with a video from right-wing political influencer Ben Shapiro, in which he says feminists are ruining marriage. Once again, women and women's rights are accused of placing certain identities and values under threat. These narratives are present in other of Shapiro's videos as well as in the social media content of other right-wing influencers (i.e. Jordan Peterson, Alex Jones, Joe Rogan, etc.).

Further, a Wilson Center study described how female politicians in the US and New Zealand (such as Kamala Harris, Gretchen Whitmer, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortes, Illhan Omar, and Jacinda Ardern) were all targeted with different types of IBD, including gendered, racial/ethnic and sexualised disinformation.[26]

In efforts to undermine, shame, and humiliate female politicians, narratives accusing them of having scandalous sexual pasts and of "sleeping their way to the top" were frequently shared. Some female politicians were also targeted with the narrative that they are secretly transgender women. This type of narrative has a dual purpose: 1) shame and attack the LGBTQIA+ community by spreading transphobic narratives and 2) undermine female politicians by claiming that they are deceiving the population with their secrets. Posts using this narrative were shared alongside fake images or videos showing "proof" of the subjects' gender deception.

The Wilson Center study also mentioned how some female politicians, in particular, Ilhan Omar, were targeted with racial/ethnic *and* gendered disinformation. Posts and manipulated images targeting Omar sought to emphasise 'us vs. them' distinctions, portraying her as a "dangerous foreign other".

LGBTQIA+ IBD

The Human Rights Campaign reported that the transphobic legislation which has been proposed by right-wing politicians in the United States has led to the rise in LGBTQIA+ disinformation in the country. More broadly, Christian fundamentalist groups in the West have been seen to spread LGBTQIA+ disinformation.[27]

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[26] Jankowicz *et al.,* January 2021.
[27] EU DisinfoLab (21 October 2021) Available at: https://www.disinfo.eu [accessed 19 July 2024]

False and malicious narratives against the LGBTQIA+ community are spread by several non-state accounts on social media. For example, Stew Peters, an American far-right conspiracy theorist and radio show host,[28] has shared several posts containing IBD targeting members of this community, including claims that members of the LGBTQIA+ community are paedophiles who are grooming younger generations and that their actions are "satanic". In another post, Peters claims that "[LGBTQIA+ activists] went into professional medicine and psychology to advance their political and social agendas" (figure 17).

Figure 17: Screenshot of a post shared by Stew Peters targeting the LGBTQIA+ community with IBD.

Racial/Ethnic IBD

Racism against African-Americans
In the wake of the 2020 George Floyd/Black Lives Matter Protests, racial disinformation in the United States was rampant. Across numerous political spaces, the use of racial stereotypes and scapegoating was frequent.

Social media posts (figure 18) from former President Donald Trump, in which he discussed the Black Lives Matter Protests[29] show him using racially coded language and stereotypes, combined with generally negative language including 'thugs,' 'criminals,' 'anarchist,' looters.' His posts use generalised language to depict a threatening 'them' who would harm the collective 'us.' It is also important to note that many of the racial stereotypes Trump is using mirror those used to target African-Americans in the War on Drugs and Black Civil Rights/Liberation movements of the 60s and 70s.[30]

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[28] Stew Peters has over 490K followers on X and his posts receive a lot of engagement, with most of his posts receiving thousands and millions of views. ADL (June 2023) Available at: https://www.adl.org [accessed 19 July 2024]
[29] Trump Twitter Archive, Available at: https://www.thetrumparchive.com [accessed 19 July 2024]
[30] Lassiter (2015) Watermark Silverchair, Available at: https://watermark.silverchair.com

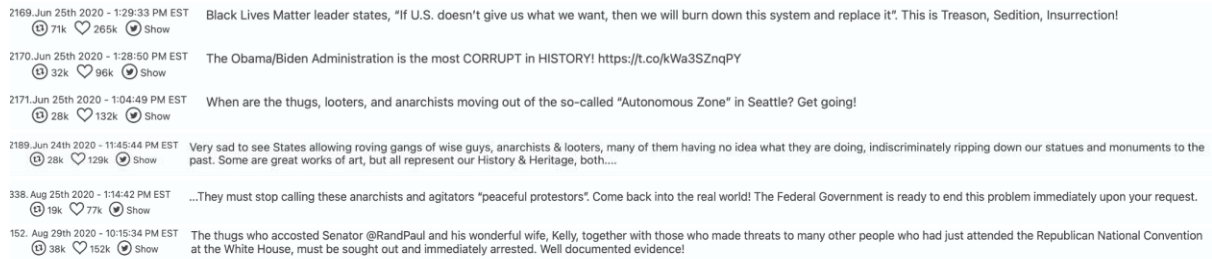| 2169.Jun 25th 2020 - 1:29:33 PM EST | Black Lives Matter leader states, "If U.S. doesn't give us what we want, then we will burn down this system and replace it". This is Treason, Sedition, Insurrection! |
71k ♡ 265k ⊙ Show	
2170.Jun 25th 2020 - 1:28:50 PM EST	The Obama/Biden Administration is the most CORRUPT in HISTORY! https://t.co/kWa3SZnqPY
32k ♡ 96k ⊙ Show	
2171.Jun 25th 2020 - 1:04:49 PM EST	When are the thugs, looters, and anarchists moving out of the so-called "Autonomous Zone" in Seattle? Get going!
28k ♡ 132k ⊙ Show	
2189.Jun 24th 2020 - 11:45:44 PM EST	Very sad to see States allowing roving gangs of wise guys, anarchists & looters, many of them having no idea what they are doing, indiscriminately ripping down our statues and monuments to the past. Some are great works of art, but all represent our History & Heritage, both....
28k ♡ 129k ⊙ Show	
338. Aug 25th 2020 - 1:14:42 PM EST	...They must stop calling these anarchists and agitators "peaceful protestors". Come back into the real world! The Federal Government is ready to end this problem immediately upon your request.
19k ♡ 77k ⊙ Show	
152. Aug 29th 2020 - 10:15:34 PM EST	The thugs who accosted Senator @RandPaul and his wonderful wife, Kelly, together with those who made threats to many other people who had just attended the Republican National Convention at the White House, must be sought out and immediately arrested. Well documented evidence!
38k ♡ 152k ⊙ Show	

Figure 18: Screenshot of different tweets from former President Donald Trump between 1 June 2020 and 1 September 2020.

Former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson has also been observed spreading racial IBD (figure 19). In the video, he uses racially coded language targeting African-Americans. He then makes several false claims that depict the target as threatening. Such examples include claiming that protesters have turned America into a 'murderous hellscape,' also using generalised moral language stating: 'the mob wants victory, but more than that, it wants the total humiliation of its enemies.' He goes on to state: "we have watched as mobs of violent cretins have burned our cities, defaced our monuments, beaten old women in the streets, shot police officers, and stolen everything in sight."
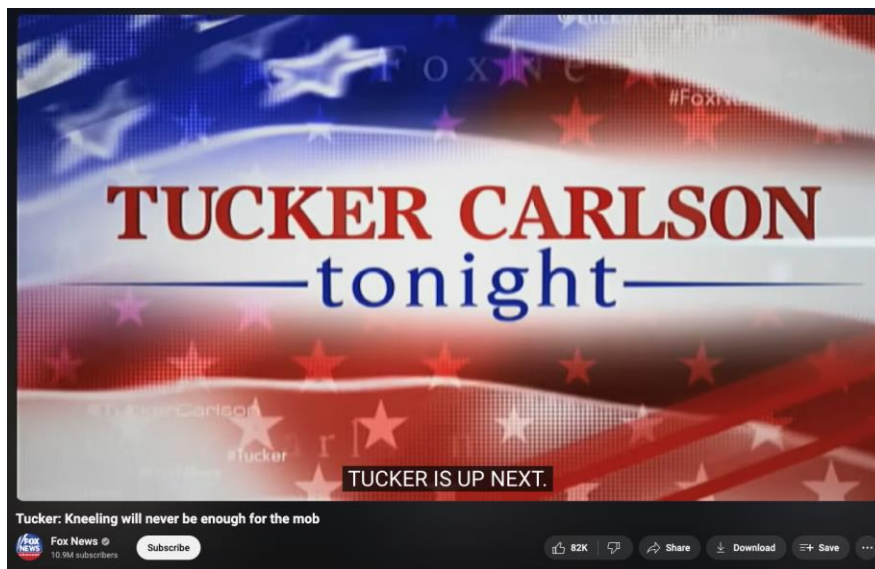

Figure 19: Screenshot of a clip from former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson in which he spreads racial disinformation.

There have also been reports of more advanced tactics used to hinder racial justice movements in the US. These include the use of digital blackface and fake hashtags to misrepresent and confuse activists.[31]

Great replacement theory and claims of a 'white genocide'
Many of the narratives spread in Western countries targeting racial and ethnic minorities refer to the great replacement theory. This conspiracy theory, alongside the idea of an "ongoing white genocide", is frequently shared by non-state accounts on social media with the aim of amplifying societal tensions, of furthering the distinctions between the 'in-group' and the 'out-

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[31] Tessi (5 February 2022) ABC News, Available at: https://abcnews.go.com

group', and of marginalising racial/ethnic minorities in Western countries. Figures 20 and 21 illustrate the type of posts that are shared by accounts that claim that the great replacement is real.

Figures 20 and 21: Screenshot (left) of a post shared by an X user claiming that the great replacement is already occurring in the UK; screenshot (right) of a post shared by a member of Britain First on the great replacement theory and how it is real, especially in the streets of Toronto, Canada.

Racial/ethnic and religious IBD

State and non-state actors in the West, in particular the US, have amplified and promoted anti-Muslim and antisemitic narratives. This is more noticeable following the start of the conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

A Human Rights First study noted how far-right extremists in the US have spread disinformation online to "denigrate Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian communities and revive age-old antisemitic conspiracies."[32] The study mentions that former President Donald Trump "falsely suggested that Hamas militants were pouring over the southern U.S. border"[33] and how white supremacists Nick Fuentes and Stew Peters "are leveraging the conflict to further antisemitic tropes that Jews control the world."

An April 2024 Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) report examined how accounts on X profited from spreading antisemitic and anti-Muslim content.[34] CCDH analysed posts that contained both antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred coming from ten accounts on X. The research showed that: "actors have been able to exploit the Israel-Gaza conflict to grow their followings and disseminate hateful messages." It also looked at how X is profiting from these actors through advertising revenues and "supporting them by providing monetization opportunities."[35] The actors analysed by CCDH have all shared posts that "play into old

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[32] Human Rights First (December 2023) Available at: https://humanrightsfirst.org [accessed 19 July 2024]
[33] Uribe and Sherman (October 2023) PolitiFact, Available at: https://www.politifact.com
[34] Center for Countering Digital hate (April 2024) Available at: https://counterhate.com [accessed 19 July 2024]
[35] *Ibid.*

antisemitic tropes of Jewish people being greedy" or "of controlling the world; posts denying the Holocaust; antisemitic and anti-Muslim posts that evoked the great replacement theory; and anti-Palestinian posts that included dehumanising content depicting Palestinians as rats."

6 From online disinformation to offline abuse

Although IBD takes place online, it normalises violence offline.[36] People may be more willing to accept violence towards certain individuals and groups based on their identity. They may even be driven to act more directly, increasing the threat of hate crimes, physical threats, and violence. Extreme examples have been documented in several conflicts and genocides, whereas identity-based disinformation has been a driving force in the targeting of different groups. Some widely documented examples include: ethnic targeting in Rwanda and religious/ethnic targeting in Bosnia.

Researchers are also documenting the violent consequences of identity-based disinformation in recent conflicts. In Russia and Ukraine, for example, IBD has been used to justify and increase support of violence. Russia has used disinformation to target several aspects of Ukrainian identity. Religious disinformation portraying Ukrainians as threatening and immoral is outlined in the report. Studies have shown that these campaigns have been used to improve public opinion regarding the invasion of Ukraine and the use of violence towards Ukrainians.[37]

The following section examines three case studies that demonstrate how the offline and online worlds are interconnected. The first case study describes the offline repercussions that politically engaged Afghan women face as a consequence of the online abuse they receive; the second case study looks at the offline violence that is directed at female politicians following online disinformation campaigns targeting them; and the third case study describes the violence that was carried out against Chechens after Russian state and non-state actors spread disinformation.

6.1 Case study 1: politically engaged Afghan women

The AW investigation looks at the offline impact that online gendered hate speech and abuse can have on politically engaged Afghan women. The women interviewed for the qualitative portion of the investigation all emphasised how the online and offline spheres are interconnected. All the interviewees mentioned how gendered hate speech and disinformation have impacted their professional lives, their mental health, their personal and family relationships, and their physical safety.

For fear of being targeted and harassed, and to avoid further abuse online, Afghan women have limited their online participation by avoiding and minimising online interactions; going through periods of silence and then reappearing online; and self-censoring their content. One journalist interviewed for the report, mentioned the repercussions minimising her online interactions had on her professional career, saying she had less access to online sources and information compared to her male counterparts, who were quite active online.

In addition to this, Afghan women in the diaspora have minimised their real-life interactions with Afghan communities abroad and have avoided appearing in large gatherings for fear of threats to their physical safety. The interviewees also mentioned that they worried about

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[36] EU DisinfoLab (October 2021) Available at: https://www.disinfo.eu [accessed 19 July 2024]
[37] Ruiz and Nilsson, 2022.

repercussions on their family members, with fears of offline violence being directed at them as well.

6.2 Case study 2: Female politicians

An [EU DisinfoLab](#) report provided examples of how female politicians who were targeted with disinformation campaigns online, were also the target of offline abuse. The report mentioned how "online space may increase and amplify rather than simply mirror offline violence against women."[38]

In 2020, for example, 13 men from the [Wolverine Watchmen](#) paramilitary group planned to kidnap US Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Due to her policies on Covid-19 and lockdowns, Michigan's Governor Whitmer was targeted with criticism and gendered disinformation from far-right groups online. One of the first offline consequences of this online campaign against her were the protests in April 2020. Thousands of protestors, with some carrying arms, "besieged the Michigan state capitol to demonstrate against Whitmer's stay at home orders", calling for her to be "locked up".[39] Following the protests, in the summer of 2020 members of the paramilitary group planned to kidnap and execute the Governor. The plot, which was thwarted, is a clear example of how online campaigns can lead to offline violence.

The report also mentioned examples of offline violence in Libya, with two women -- activist lawyer Hanan al-Barassi and congresswoman Siham Sergiwa -- being targeted with gendered disinformation and then facing offline violence. Al-Barassi was assassinated after becoming the victim of gendered disinformation following her fight against corruption, and Sergiwa was kidnapped and is presumed dead.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, Scottish MP Carol Monaghan was forced to take extreme measures in response to online abuse. According to the [BBC](#), Monaghan received frequent online abuse, but after receiving a detailed death threat, was forced to move to a safe house, fearing for her safety.

6.3 Case study 3: Chechnya and Russia

Russia historically used religious and ethnic/racial IBD in relation to Chechnya. Russian disinformation stereotyped, dehumanised, and scapegoated Chechens and justified violence against them. An in-depth study published in the journal [Development](#), summarises these tactics, saying:

> *"In the public discourse, war-making against the Chechens could be used to combat several perceived ills simultaneously, such as fending off the spectre of separatism; fighting the threat allegedly rising from Islamic fundamentalism; dealing with organised crime that was widely seen as having a hotbed in Chechnya, and of course targeting a group of people traditionally seen with scepticism and suspicion by Russians."* [40]

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[38] EU DisinfoLab (October 2021) Available at: https://www.disinfo.eu
[39] Gabbatt (October 2020) The Guardian, Available at: https://www.theguardian.com
[40] Petterson (2009) Spring Link, Available at: https://link.springer.com

The use of IBD in Chechnya also aided Vladimir Putin's individual strategic goals. Whereas public perception may have previously viewed him as an aggressor, Chechnya shifted his image to "perceived saviour" from the "perceived ills of society."[41] Furthermore, the use of IBD in the Chechnya case seems to mirror many of the tactics being used in Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

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[41] *Ibid.*

7 Conclusion

With this report, CIR aimed to develop an understanding of IBD by providing key concepts and definitions; collect and analyse a sample of data consisting of examples coming from both OSINT research and subject-matter reports; shed light on the tools, techniques and procedures used by state and non-state actors; and analyse country-specific examples of IBD.

The findings from the report suggest that malign state and non-state actors connected to China, Iran and Russia use IBD as a tactic in their authoritarian toolkit, especially for their foreign influence campaigns.

- Chinese state and non-state accounts share content mostly in the English language, with the aim of reaching a broader and more international audience and mainstreaming pro-PRC narratives.
- Iranian state and non-state media spread IBD targeting Iranian women, with the intent of shaming and silencing them as well as damaging their reputation.
- Russian state and non-state actors carry out sophisticated disinformation campaigns targeting female politicians, racial/ethnic and religious minorities, and the LGBTQIA+ community, with the aim of exacerbating societal tensions within different countries.

IBD is also used by the other state and non-state actors investigated in the report, including Afghanistan and some Western countries.

- In Afghanistan, disinformation and hate speech are spread against politically engaged Afghan women by pro-Taliban and low-ranking Taliban accounts, with the intent of shaming, silencing, and undermining them.
- State, typically individual fringe politicians and parties, and non-state accounts from Western countries use IBD to target female politicians, ethnic/racial minorities, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. False and malicious narratives are spread against these targets to marginalise, threaten, and undermine them.

The report also included three case studies to show how interconnected the online and offline spheres are. The type of violence and abuse that targets receive online can at times have offline consequences. The three case studies looked at:

- The offline consequences that politically engaged Afghan women must face due to the abuse they receive online.
- The violence that female politicians receive after they have been targets of gendered disinformation campaigns online.
- The racial/ethnic IBD that was spread by Russia against Chechnya, ultimately justifying violent actions against Chechens.

8 Policy and programming recommendations

There are a number of negative implications of IBD, highlighting the importance of policymakers in addressing it. Therefore, it is critical that policymakers begin mainstreaming identity as part of their counter-disinformation strategies. Based on this research and literature review, CIR recommends the following policy and programming actions:

- **Commission further research focused on identity-based disinformation.** CIR's extensive literature review exposed that while the existing body of work focuses on individual IBD tactics (such as gender or sexuality), there are few studies that consider IBD as a whole. It is critical for policymakers to take this broad view, given that malign state actors will employ several IBD tactics at once, and that individuals who represent multiple marginalised identities face compounded abuse.[42] Future research might be organised with the following ideas in mind:

  - *Provision of data collection tools:* As social media platforms continue to restrict access to their content via APIs, sufficient funding should be given to research organisations to support their subscription to tools that allow this access. In cases where manual collection and analysis are required, sufficient support should be given to organisations to support an expanded pool of researchers to share this burden.

  - *Longitudinal studies:* This analysis has presented a snapshot of cases of IBD in autumn 2023 and several historical examples. To fully understand this tactic, policymakers should consider commissioning a longitudinal study with a large-N dataset to better understand the in-depth TTPs used in IBD.

  - *Specific State Actors:* Policymakers should commission specific reports understanding how specific state actors utilise IBD; the tactics of adversaries like Iran, China, and Russia are likely to differ significantly. Additionally, comparing the use of IBD in foreign and domestic contexts for these actors could be illuminating, identifying individual political motivations in each country that contribute to their use of IBD abroad.

  - *Specific Country or Regional Contexts:* IBD is not only the domain of foreign state actors. This research demonstrates how governments use IBD to undermine the democratic participation of their own citizens, or others in their region. More research should be commissioned on the use of IBD in authoritarian states or countries in democratic decline.

  - *AI, Deep Fakes, and Manipulated Images:* This research noted several instances across its small sample size in which manipulated imagery was utilised to undermine targets. Generally, these images were not created using generative AI, but rudimentary editing techniques, eg 'cheap fakes.' However, the threat of deep fakes against marginalised identities, particularly women, is

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[42] Jankowicz et al, 2021.

growing as AI is democratised. A future study could conduct a robust review of the state of deep fakes as used within IBD and make predictions for the future.

○ ***Domestic threat actors:*** several examples from the database included mentions of far-right conspiracy theorists and/or extremists spreading IBD. These actors use IBD to further amplify societal tensions and strengthen 'in-group' and 'out-group' distinctions. Further research could be carried out exploring the effects that these types of narratives have on the population; whether these actors use IBD to recruit and radicalise individuals to their groups; and if IBD is used to mobilise individuals to take violent action against women, racial/ethnic and religious minorities and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

● **Include IBD in other research:** Grantmakers should encourage grantees conducting research on disinformation to identify and analyse IBD in their work. As noted before, IBD tactics are often studied in isolation as a "special interest" issue, when in reality they are intrinsic to many disinformation campaigns. Identifying IBD tactics can assist policymakers and the general public to recognise, refute, and respond to these misleading, false, and incendiary narratives.

● **Publication of findings:** In order to educate the public and policymakers, expose the malicious campaigns of authoritarian governments, and identify lapses in terms of service enforcement concerning hate speech, harassment, threats, and violence against marginalised communities, policymakers commissioning research on IBD should publicise it wherever possible. This also contributes to transparency around counter-disinformation work, demystifying it for the public.

● **Support staff:** governments concerned about the effects of IBD should ensure they have policies in place to support staff—particularly, but not only, those in high-profile public positions—if they are targeted by online hate. These might include: ensuring the staff member's personal information such as address and phone number is proactively scrubbed from the internet using anti-doxxing services; providing online safety audits and training; supporting staff if they raise stalking, harassment, or other legal claims with law enforcement; assigning someone to take over the staff member's social media and other online profiles while the harassment is occurring; if doxxing occurs, moving the staff member and immediate family to safe housing; and providing psychological and legal support, where necessary and requested.

● **Non-research programming:** Ultimately, malign actors use IBD to repress critics at home and abroad. When considering projects beyond research, programmes might include:

○ ***Communications campaigns that seek to undermine stereotypes about targets of IBD.*** Informed by polling, these social media campaigns could be targeted toward specific countries and the platforms on which communities that engage with and support IBD are most active. They might show, for instance:

■ *A loving mother takes care of her young child, works in public service, and contributes to her community. At the end of the video, she tells the audience: "I'm a mother, a worker, and a citizen. I'm also gay, and campaigns like [show campaign] are seeking to drive us apart. I'm just looking to live my life; don't let them."*

These campaigns would not seek to change the opinions of those set in their ways, but rather prevent vulnerable audiences from falling victim to IBD.

▪ In 2013, Pantene [published] a digital ad called "*Labels Against Women*", exposing gender bias double standards. The ad looked at how men and women exhibiting similar behaviours are labelled differently in society.

▪ Australia's national [campaign] called "*Racism. It Stops With Me*" seeks to "provide tools and resources to help people and organisations learn about racism and take action to create change."

○ ***Actions that demystify the 'others' targeted by IBD***, whether gender, sexual, religious, or other minorities, by, for example, organising community engagement programmes between groups or cultural diplomacy activities highlighting marginalised groups (gay men's choruses, contributions of a religious or ethnic minority to science, etc).

■ The British High Commission and Multiple Action Research Group (MARG) [partnered] to host an event that "highlighted the experiences and talents of the LGBTQIA people to a wider audience, raising awareness of the issues faced by the community." The event "brought together people from all walks of life, a diverse group of men, women and transgender persons from different professional, educational and cultural backgrounds."

■ The EU [carried out] a campaign called "#EndGenderStereotypes" to raise awareness and challenge the role gender stereotypes play in society.

■ Creation of a publicly available database with constant monitoring of online IBD-related incidents to raise awareness of those who are targeted with IBD and further understand the narratives shared by state and non-state actors. This database could have similar characteristics to CIR's Witness Projects, such as Eyes on Russia or Afghan Witness.

● Publishing explainers or articles on IBD-related topics as done by some organisations such as [the Institute for Strategic Dialogue] (ISD), the [Center for Countering Digital Hate] (CCDH), and [Media Matters].

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