

NATO and Intersectional Perspectives: Understanding How Disinformation Targets Women and Other Vulnerable Groups

The effects of disinformation are far-reaching, and directly erode the foundations of our capabilities for collective security, political action, and effective strategic leadership. One particularly concerning aspect is the way disinformation relates to the most vulnerable or marginalized groups, and the effective weaponization of information against them.

Sigma European Think Tank organized an expert working group roundtable on gender-based disinformation which took place on 21 October 2022. Several questions were tackled such as:

-  *What is gender-based disinformation?*
-  *What is the role of the online space in amplifying gender-based disinformation targeting vulnerable groups?*
-  *What can we learn from cases of online disinformation campaigns?*
-  *What impact and solutions can we explore in this field?*
-  *How can NATO counter gender-based disinformation and build societal resilience?*

While experts have debated and reflected upon how to fight disinformation at great length within their respective fields, the value of an expert working group is found in the cross-sector, multidisciplinary recommendations from a large set of stakeholders. Hostile states weaponise information to capitalize on social division, and a core part of that is gender as a focal point of cultural debate. Culture- and identity-based narratives represent particularly fertile ground for divisive, polarising disinformation that can effectively create cleavages across large segments of society, and women and other vulnerable groups (including minorities - be they sexual, religious or ethnic) face additional risk when speaking out against disinformation.

With the direct and indirect dangers that disinformation poses by creating or exacerbating divisions from within communities, NATO is interested in identifying intersectional aspects of different vulnerable groups, and promoting an understanding of disinformation that is gendered.

Exploring these concepts is made more challenging due to several factors. Firstly, while some imagine the social media space as a single cohesive bubble, it is in fact a highly diverse ecosystem with each platform representative of a tailored audience, algorithm, and content style. Within each platform further segmentation occurs, based on age, geography, interest community, etc. In practice, if we are not aware of how to correctly map out this ecosystem correctly, we will be unable to identify or address who is active where, what is being talked about, and with whom they are engaging. . This then segments into age and country viewership, and if we are

In addition, it is important to take not just the content that is being spread into account, but how and with what intent it is being spread. We risk focusing on debating the truth of content, or the right to free speech, when disinformation is not an issue of false content - the means - but of



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malicious intent - the ends. Those who spread disinformation are already aware of these concepts, and NATO and allied countries must get up to speed.

In order to comprehensively address such a far-reaching and nuanced threat, it is fundamental to adopt an intersectional approach to understanding gender-based disinformation (the implications of class, race, caste, religion in intensifying cases of abuse). However, intersectionality as a word carries weight and can invoke different reactions based on preconceived notions or contextual biases.. As with concepts or frameworks like “emotional intelligence,” intersectionality is often understood as a very progressively coded word. As such, while intersectionality is vital in the context of the challenge faced, definition and terminology become an unavoidable pre-requisite so as not to alienate more conservative elements of the anti-disinformation community, which undermines NATO's pursuit of a “whole of society” approach to disinformation.

Furthermore, acting to protect vulnerable groups brings with it several key issues. When combating disinformation through the creation of bespoke content targeted at vulnerable groups, one runs the risk of cronifying the exclusion of the vulnerable in question, from society's mainstream discourse. Several such groups have a complex relationship with various institutions, authorities, or particular groups of stakeholders, meaning that campaigns are ineffective unless trust is built.

In a similar vein, while anyone can draft policies that ostensibly serve a given vulnerable group, effective delivery requires the vulnerable groups in question to be engaged and involved in the process as stakeholders, not simply passive subjects. Trust and equity in the process and the policy is essential to support outcomes, and raises an equally essential question: how can trust be built?

Against this background, we open up the conversation on Policy Kitchen. Below follows a brief breakdown of the issues as discussed at the Sigma expert working group meeting in Brussels, segmented by different vulnerable groups.

Women

Women are among the most vulnerable victims of disinformation. They are directly targeted with violent content of a sexualised nature when they speak up politically, and disinformation actors, religious and secular alike, promote narratives that place women at the bottom of the hierarchy of agency. In a display of catch-22 discourse, politically active mothers are shamed for bringing their children to parliament, and childless politicians are bashed for the same fact. Gender roles are so deeply ingrained in our culture, that those who are targeted with disinformation playing on fears of upended values, are prone to be subject to heavily gendered disinformation.

As social media platforms are controlled primarily by men, it's important for the tech sector to assume a greater level of accountability, for example in hiring diversity. Representation matters in a quantifiable way, and helps target bias more effectively. However, tokenism risks rendering

women vulnerable to false empowerment. It is vital that this issue is addressed so that women aren't added to the credit lines, without actually having experiences distilled into policy or outcomes.

Open Questions:

- How do we better genuinely incorporate lived female experiences in the fight against disinformation?
- How do we penetrate conservative discourse bubbles with content that challenges divisive narratives that appropriate traditional gender roles, in a way that does not trigger knee-jerk backlashes or defensive (re)entrenchment?
- How do we better protect this group? How can NATO better tackle disinformation targeting women?

The Elderly

Elderly people are simultaneously more aligned with traditional media, while also being some of the largest consumers of news spread on social media, e.g. through Facebook content. This, combined with a lower general level of digital literacy, renders them vulnerable to failing to identify hallmarks of unreliable content that we imagine "digital native" youths to be more adept at intuitively spotting. For those with experience based primarily on the print media economy, it might well be difficult to relate to an environment in which the end consumer of (dis-)information - the reader - is not the customer, but the product, as platforms sell data to advertisers.

In making these assumptions, however, we risk doing a disservice, selling short the intelligence and adaptability of older generations by pretending that the core of the issue is one of the proverbial old dog being taken advantage of for not being able to learn new tricks. Such attitudes can indeed contribute to the susceptibility of this group, relegating seniors to a dependent rather than proactive position and stripping them of agency at a time in life where questions of decreasing agency begin to loom larger - feeding into and seeming to validate fear-based narratives and expectations. In a similar vein, this coincides with an increasingly global society that is changing - and the change of pace itself seems to be accelerating ever faster. This compounds the intrinsically human fear of being left behind by the ever-pressing onward march of time. Whether it is a particular trend - such as the decline of the nuclear family - or the way in which trends evolve in the public discourse - such as gender or language or both - challenges to established paradigms and familiar touchstones, even if only perceived, contribute to a fear of being dismissed or even left behind.

Open Questions :

- How do we best promote social media literacy among the elderly?
- How do we best address the fear of being made irrelevant?

- How can this group be better engaged with and protected, and what role can NATO play in particular in tackling disinformation targeting the elderly?

Youth

As the elderly are stereotyped as the digitally illiterate generation, there is a risk in assuming a social media awareness in the younger demographic that is not necessarily accurate. If we are to accept the belief that younger people have a more inherent ability to sift out or dismiss untrustworthy content on social media, then it begs the question from where do this group's vulnerabilities arise? It would be incorrect to claim that young people are immune to disinformation, which raises the important point that the underlying drivers of susceptibility can differ, and that the way vulnerabilities are exploited and the potential solutions we might pursue must necessarily differ as well. In this case, one particularly relevant consideration is not digital literacy, but emotional resilience as it applies to social media. The nature of the content and the consequences of disinformation built on more emotional drivers can in this way sidestep the higher assumed levels of base digital literacy, short-circuiting potential pushback based on critical thinking. Looking to the future, failing to do more to protect the younger generation to the perils of disinformation will most probably lead to an intensification of radicalization.

Youth as a group needs a nuanced approach. One has to look at different segments of youth (e.g. adolescents, students, young professionals). From which age is one exposed to disinformation remains a pertinent question. Furthermore, the younger generations use social media, and YouTube/TikTok, more than traditional media, and they consume information in seconds. One needs to look at the characteristics of today's youth among which their appetite for videos (the TikTok generation), instant gratification, fragmented identity (online identity, and offline identity). Exposure and length of exposure need to be considered. NATO has also been creatively engaging with youth lately, including via graphic novel creation and other type of products more appealing to them. Another aspect pertains to how easily youth can be manipulated, and why. Educating youth from an early age on how to read and interrogate information, implicit and complicit bias, could make a difference. Youth need to be empowered and recognized as having agency and ownership. One needs to talk with them, not at them, and include them in the conversation.

Open Questions:

- How do we best promote emotional resilience in youth who live online?
- How can we increase media literacy among young people?
- How do we better protect this group? How can NATO better tackle disinformation targeting youth?



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Minorities

When it comes to various minorities, it's important to note that there are two types of disinformation: the type that serves to "other" or differentiate the minority in the eyes of the majority; and the type that serves to promote a sense of alienation in the outgroup, by instilling a feeling of distance from the majority group. Sigma opted to focus on the disinformation that targets, not discusses, minorities.

Cultural differences and identity issues are the first to be weaponized when sowing discord, and are fueled by a trifecta of the outrage-driven click economy, domestic populism, and foreign destabilizers. The yearning for scapegoats, be they an oppressive in-group or a subversive minority element, derives from deep-seated human predilections.

To build bridges into already existing minority groupings, it's vital to understand that we need to work with established leaders from the communities in question, even if the individual leaders do not have a history of previous engagement or have been critical of institutions. Additionally, it might be difficult to establish what civil society actors are true allies, and which are simply vying for funding and avenues to promote pre-established talking points. On top of that, it's naive to assume that the state is a natural ally of minorities, as incumbent power-holders might be more keen on cynically pacifying minorities, instead of constructively integrating them in mainstream society. It's crucial that a network is established of integrative forces representing in- and out-groups, as well as state and NGO actors that find common ground in building bridges.

Open Questions:

- How do we build bridges between credible NGOs, existing minority group organisations and the government?
- How do we build transnational networks of solidarity between minority leaders promoting integration, allied NGOs and benevolent state actors?
- How do we better protect this group? How can NATO better tackle disinformation targeting minorities?

Socio-economically precarious

While the socio-economically precarious are inherently vulnerable to an assortment of victimizing patterns, it is important to note that the most economically vulnerable - for a range of reasons - often have lower levels of political engagement. In many instances, even in the absence of structural hurdles to political participation, the preoccupation of making ends meet can preclude civic activism or consistent engagement, and obliges reprioritization around essentials. This has the dual consequence of diminishing the immediate (political) impact of targeting the socio-economically precarious - which allows it to go under the radar to a greater extent - while also moving the focus of disinformation narratives to the issues that this audience cannot afford to ignore - like food, shelter, or affordable healthcare.

At the same time, given the essential nature of the issues involved and the sense of scarcity created by socio-economic difficulties, the demographics most immediate to the precarious - the nearly precarious - are particularly vulnerable to fears of losing what they have, and believing that they are only a few challenges away from falling into greater distress.

Of particular note is how this particular group intersects with other factors, as the lack of stability they experience compounds other potential vulnerabilities arising from age, ethnicity, or identity. Extra care must be taken when various vulnerabilities overlap, necessitating a particularly intersectional focus that is mindful of the magnifying effect that disinformation will have across all potential cleavages.

Open Questions:

- How can we better protect the socio-economically precarious, and build their resilience against disinformation?
- What differentiated strategies can we identify for intersectional challenges? How would a socio-economically precarious ethnic minority community differ from generationally defined (e.g. pensioners) facing socio-economic instability?