Perspectives for Influence Operations Investigators | Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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As public urgency swells around online influence operations, professionals from sectors including academia, private industry, and the nonprofit space have rushed to fill gaps in capacity. They bring with them assumptions and approaches from diverse fields like cybersecurity, counterextremism, and offline investigations. As a result, the space is bustling, but it lacks consistent, widely articulated standards and best practices to guide and evaluate its work.

In a 2020 community survey by the Partnership for Countering Influence Operations (PCIO), a third of respondents noted the lack of shared standards as an important concern. PCIO's Influence Operations Researchers' Guild exists in part to address this issue. Investigative standards serve a dual purpose. First, they provide commonality: standards are widely followed practices for minimizing mistakes and improving results. Second, they represent expectations that, if not met, open the investigative process up to critique. For these reasons, a field with shared standards should be able to produce more reliable investigations and more readily identify flawed ones.

Because of the high level of public and policymaker interest in this topic, wrong or overblown conclusions carry significant risk of false alarms, botched policy, and wasted resources. If organic content is wrongfully labeled part of an operation, authentic individuals may be censored erroneously—with political consequences. In the realm of international affairs, incorrect attributions of online operations to foreign states could lead policymakers to pursue sanctions or other retaliatory actions under mistaken pretenses. In election contexts, incorrect accusations could shift public debate in advance of voting or damage trust in the results. The stakes are real and can be high. (The false identification of a suspect in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing is an early example of the harm that can come from open-

> source investigations done poorly.)
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