

# The Risks of Exaggerating Foreign Influence Operations and Disinformation | Centre for International Governance Innovation

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In recent years, concerns over foreign interference from “bad actors” have increased, and in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, governments around the world, social media companies and civil society alike have been on the lookout for such attempts to degrade the integrity of our elections or, more vaguely, to “sow discord.” From pseudonymous trolls and botnets to outrage-inducing, hyper-partisan content, it seems that week after week, there is news that online accounts are pushing narratives in the interest of Russia, Iran or China. The Global Engagement Center (GEC), a division of the US State Department, for example, has alleged that Russia is operating an “ecosystem” of humans and bots to amplify conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 in a bid to “sow discord and undermine U.S. institutions and alliances.” Senator Elizabeth Warren even released a detailed plan to fight disinformation as part of her presidential campaign, citing “foreign actors” as the main threat. Scholars and journalists are also on the hunt. Indeed, plenty of ink has been spilled on the ills of “weaponized social media” and the next generation of “active measures.”

However, despite all the fears of mass-targeted influence operations from foreign adversaries, it remains unclear whether they have much impact at all.

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