

DISINFORMATION TACTIC SPOTLIGHT

USING “AUTHORITATIVE” SOURCES

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OVERVIEW

The Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (GP) seeks to understand and counter Russian state-sponsored or state-adjacent disinformation across Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) threats, in support of GP Member efforts. As part of this effort, the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security (JHCHS) analyzed over 300 news media items from the EUvsDisinfo Database to identify common narratives, tactics, and themes associated with pro-Kremlin CBRN disinformation.

Tactic Spotlight: One commonly used disinformation tactic is referencing "authoritative" sources to provide a false appearance of legitimacy or expert backing. However, these sources may be fake, taken out of context, paid by/part of the originator of the disinformation, or have expertise in a separate area all together. This tactic also creates false equivalency when experts counter or pre-bunk disinformation.

Using “authoritative” sources: Biological weapons

In news media items containing disinformation about biological weapons, "authoritative" sources were frequently referenced or quoted to lend support to false allegations of biological weapons development or use. Many sources provided commentary or shared "evidence" in support of the claim that the US and other Western nations were developing biological weapons in overseas laboratories. In some cases, quotes or commentary were taken out of context or misconstrued to fit this false narrative. Statements by Victoria Nuland about the existence of peaceful biological facilities in Ukraine, for example, were used as "evidence" of the US' alleged nefarious activities.

Disinfo excerpt: “The recognition and statement by US Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland regarding American biological laboratories in Ukraine may be a signal for the start of biological terrorist attacks against Russia, says Professor Gennady Onishchenko.” (Sputnik Armenia, 2022)

The following "authoritative" sources were referenced in disinformation about biological weapons:

- Subject-matter experts such as epidemiologists and virologists (occasionally misquoted or out of context)
- Journalists and researchers (without relevant expertise or who may be sponsored by the Russian government)
- Government officials and agencies from Russia and other post-Soviet countries or breakaway regions
- US government officials whose statements were misconstrued or taken out of context
- UN agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF

Using “authoritative” sources: Radiological and nuclear weapons

Pro-Kremlin news media outlets often quoted “authoritative” sources to bolster allegations of radiological and nuclear weapons use by Ukrainian and Western opposition. This includes allegations that Kiev is preparing false flag operations, with support from Western states, involving dirty bombs and attacks on nuclear power plants. “Authoritative” sources are also referenced alongside narratives about radioactive threats associated with WMD use, and their harmful impacts on human health.

The following “authoritative” sources were referenced in disinformation about radiological and nuclear threats:

- Military, political, and scientific experts (often misquoted or out of context)
- Government officials and agencies, such as presidents and foreign ministry officials
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (often out of context)
- Non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations and officials, such as UN and NATO representatives

Disinfo excerpt: “Kyiv intends to stage a monstrous provocation with a “dirty bomb” and accuse Russia of using weapons of mass destruction - official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” (Sputnik Armenia, 2022)

EXAMPLES

Using “authoritative” sources: Chemical weapons

When spreading disinformation on chemical weapons, news media outlets often quoted official sources and anonymous, unverifiable insider sources to enhance the credibility of false allegations. These allegations include claims of Ukraine deploying chemical weapons (especially against the Russian military) and plots of anti-Russia chemical weapons provocations, as well as claims casting doubt on evidence around the poisonings of Alexei Navalny and Sergei & Yulia Skripal.

The following "authoritative" sources were referenced in disinformation about chemical weapons:

- Subject matter experts, such as doctors and laboratory scientists (possibly misquoted or out of context), and anonymous sources (without relevant expertise)
- Government officials, including Russian ambassadors and official spokespeople for Russia
- Government agencies, including the Russian Ministry of Defense and Russian security services
- Anonymous and unspecified sources from Ukrainian ministries allegedly revealing insider information

Disinfo excerpt: *“This is not the first time that Ukrainian terrorists have defiantly flouted international conventions banning chemical weapons. Last summer, the Russian Ministry of Defense reported the use of chemical weapons by the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the vicinity of the village of Vasilyevka, Zaporozhye region, against our military.”*
(Analytical Service of Donbass, 2023)

Research has demonstrated that individuals are more likely to believe information when it comes from a source that is perceived to be credible.¹ Purveyors of disinformation take advantage of this phenomenon by referencing "authoritative" sources, thereby endowing their false claims with spurious credibility.² This tactic is insidious because it mimics credible news coverage, making it sometimes difficult to differentiate between legitimate news coverage and disinformation campaigns. In these cases, people may believe they are well-informed when they are in fact being deliberately misled. By misquoting or misinterpreting statements from legitimate sources, this tactic may also erode trust in institutions and agencies that provide reliable, factual information about CBRN threats (such as the WHO and IAEA).

Improving awareness of this disinformation tactic and increasing information and media literacy is important in countering disinformation about WMDs. Information consumers, from members of the public to policymakers, should be encouraged to check the reputation of news media outlets and the sources they quote or reference, especially to screen for whether they have a history of sharing false claims. Source-based debunking (correcting false information by drawing attention to dubious information sources) may be valuable in these situations, as well as encouraging validation of information from multiple different sources,³ although expansive disinformation campaigns using multiple sources may make this difficult.

1. Traberg CS, van der Linden S. Birds of a feather are persuaded together: Perceived source credibility mediates the effect of political bias on misinformation susceptibility. *Personal Individ Differ.* 2022;185:111269. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2021.111269
2. CISA. Tactics of Disinformation. https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/tactics-of-disinformation_508.pdf
3. Newristics. Source Credibility Bias. Newristics. <https://newristics.com/heuristic-hacks/source-credibility-bias>