



UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

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Disinformation in the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Domain

INTRODUCTION

1. In the information age, disinformation in media and social media networks can easily proliferate and amplify to become a threat to national security. Through the spread of fabricated content or carefully planned campaigns to sow confusion and chaos, malicious actors often target contentious domains, through which disinformation campaigns can take root and have the greatest impact. An example is the Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear (CBRN) domain.
2. CBRN disinformation has been in the spotlight in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent nuclear accidents. The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) defines disinformation in the CBRN domain as “intentionally misleading and deceptive information about CBRN threats that can potentially cause serious political, financial and physical harm to governments, international organisations, the scientific community, academia, industry and the population at large.” As CBRN threats may involve substances which are not easily understood by the layman, this makes them a suitable topic for disinformation as it is more difficult to verify, explain and debunk.

CBRN Disinformation Campaigns

Objectives of CBRN Disinformation Campaigns

3. UNICRI identified three strategic objectives for CBRN disinformation: (a) jeopardise the trust and credibility of institutions operating in CBRN risk mitigation, (b) incite fear, hatred and violence through the dissemination of radical narratives, and (c) obtain financial benefits.

4. One method of eroding trust and credibility of state organisations is to fabricate and spread false stories through the re-contextualising of information. UNICRI shared the example, where a document ([Figure 1](#)) from the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) summarising the results of a 2021 tabletop exercise was shared on social media ([Figure 2](#)) as “evidence” that the monkeypox outbreak was planned. While the NTI tabletop exercise did take place, and had a scenario where terrorists planned an attack with an unusual strain of monkeypox, it does not suggest that the 2022 monkeypox outbreak in several countries was premeditated. As explained by NTI, “the fact that several countries are currently experiencing an outbreak of monkeypox is purely a coincidence”. Such disinformation can have unintended consequences, including damaging bilateral and multilateral relationships between countries.

Figure 1: Cover of an NTI paper for a tabletop exercise that was falsely used as “evidence” that the monkeypox outbreak was planned.



Source: Yassif, J. M., O’Prey, K.P., Isaac, C. R. (November 2021), *Strengthening Global Systems to Prevent and Respond to High-Consequence Biological Threats*, NTI Paper

Figure 2: Example of a social media post suggesting the monkeypox outbreak was planned



Source: Telegram, channel “Covid Red Pills”, posted on 20 May 2022.

5. CBRN disinformation can also stir up pre-existing social tensions that may have been dormant for some time. The COVID-19 pandemic was one such example. Europe had been plagued by the rise of the far right and anti-immigration movements prior to the pandemic. The challenges brought on by COVID-19 reignited the debate on immigration. This provided an opportunity for far-right parties in Europe to blame immigrants on the rising infection numbers, and then link it to the plight of locals, who are struggling with the rising cost of living and the lack of adequate healthcare facilities. These social conditions, though pre-existing within the society, were made worse by the effects of the pandemic.

6. Financial benefits are another key motivator for CBRN disinformation. CBRN disinformation can be exploited to mislead people into paying a premium for counterfeit or substandard personal protective equipment, medicine and vaccines, or to hoard large amounts of food. *Operation Pangea*, launched by Interpol uncovered “2000 online links advertising items related to COVID-19”. This included counterfeit surgical masks, which accounted for the bulk of the cases. An Interpol operation uncovered USD 4 million worth of counterfeit medicine and other pharmaceuticals in Mozambique (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Counterfeited medicine and other pharmaceuticals seized during an Interpol operation in Mozambique



Source: Interpol, 19 Mar 2020

COUNTER MEASURES FOR CBRN DISINFORMATION

Pre-bunking and Debunking

7. ‘Pre-bunking’ is a counter measure where one anticipates and proactively address possible false or misleading information before it spreads widely to reduce the negative effects. It involves pre-emptive efforts to provide accurate information, raise awareness about potential false information and equip people with the tools to critically evaluate the content they encounter. This approach aims to inoculate individuals by empowering them with the necessary knowledge and critical thinking skills to minimise the likelihood that they will be swayed by false narratives.

8. Another counter measure to address CBRN disinformation is debunking. UNICRI put forth a three-step process to debunk disinformation, in [Figure 4](#).

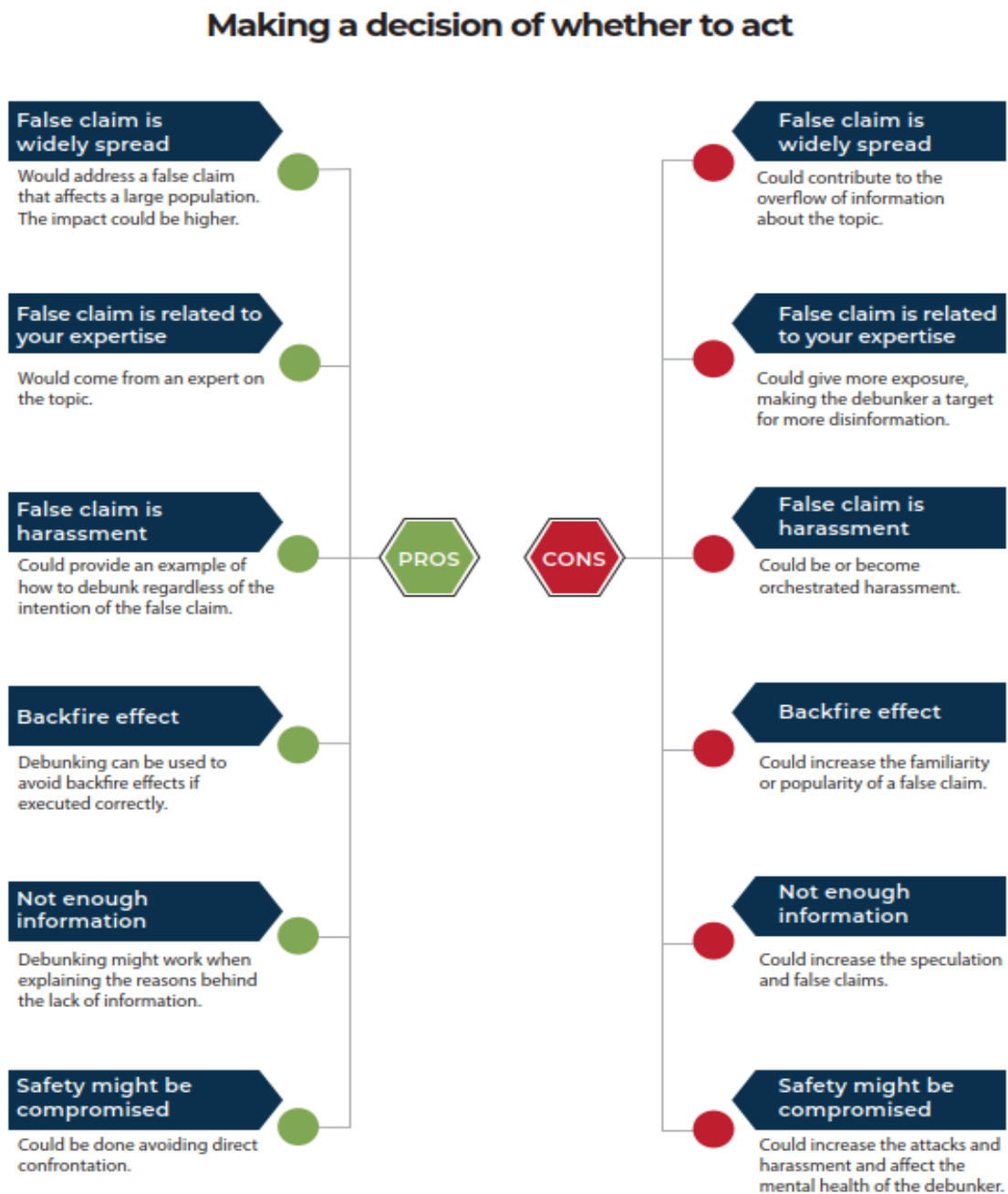
Figure 4: The Debunking three-step process



Source: UNICRI handbook to combat CBRN disinformation

9. The three-step debunking process includes (a) analysing the disinformation, (b) deciding whether it justifies the time and resources to debunk the false claim and (c) planning and execution of debunking. UNICRI summarises in [Figure 5](#) the main elements to consider when deciding whether to debunk a false claim or not.

Figure 5: Factors to consider when making a decision on whether to act



Source: UNICRI handbook to combat CBRN disinformation

Institutional Resilience and Access to Knowledge

10. CBRN disinformation campaigns can also be mitigated by ensuring institutional resilience in organisations that safeguard CBRN capabilities. Organisations should take steps to develop the ability to

mount quick responses to disinformation campaigns. It is important to deny malicious actors the chance to control the narrative and allow the proliferation of false claims.

11. In addition to institutional resilience, it is vital to share knowledge and ensure citizens have access to knowledge and information on the CBRN domain and their potential threats, to significantly reduce the chances of disinformation campaigns creating a foothold in public discourse. The aim is to provide clear, undeniable and reassuring information to the public, to assuage any concerns of misuse, accidental discharge or unsafe practices.

EFFORTS TO PROMOTE COOPERATION ON CBRN THREATS WITHIN ASEAN

12. ASEAN has taken steps to boost awareness and promote cooperation on the threats within the CBR domain. The Network of ASEAN Chemical, Biological and Radiological (CBR) Defence Experts was established by the 12th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) in 2018 to strengthen regional counter terrorism preparedness and cooperation against CBR threats. The Network has undertaken a number of efforts including (a) discussions on harmonising CBR sampling and analysis reporting protocols; (b) development in vaccines and therapeutics development.

13. More recently, the Network collaborated with UNICRI and the European Union Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Risk Mitigation Centres of Excellence Initiative (EU CBRN CoE) to host a meeting on "Countering CBR Disinformation" that was held in Singapore from 14 to 15 December 2023. The meeting brought together policy makers and CBR defence experts from ASEAN Member States, to discuss the challenges of disinformation in the context of CBR threats and their implications on militaries and defence establishments. The Network also conducted a table-top exercise (TTX) focusing on analysing, detecting and debunking disinformation. The TTX helped participants to better understand how disinformation can affect the government's responses to CBR incident,

and enhanced awareness on the risks and strategies to combat such threats.

CONCLUSION

14. As reported by UNICRI, CBRN disinformation has become a serious new challenge. A successful strategy to combat disinformation requires a combination of different actions from governments, educational institutions, the media industry and technology companies. This includes the monitoring of disinformation, the debunking of false information and conspiracy theories, investment in technological tools to identify false news, media literacy, education, the adoption of adequate legal instruments without violating basic human rights and freedoms, and the training of law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies to investigate and prosecute crimes connected to disinformation.

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CONTACT DETAILS

All reports can be retrieved from our website at www.acice-asean.org/resource/.

For any queries and/or clarifications, please contact ACICE at ACICE@defence.gov.sg.

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[Link: <https://unicri.it/sites/default/files/2020-11/SM%20misuse.pdf>]
4. UNICRI Handbook to Combat CBRN Disinformation [Link: <https://unicri.it/Publication/Hanbook-to-combat-disinformation>]