

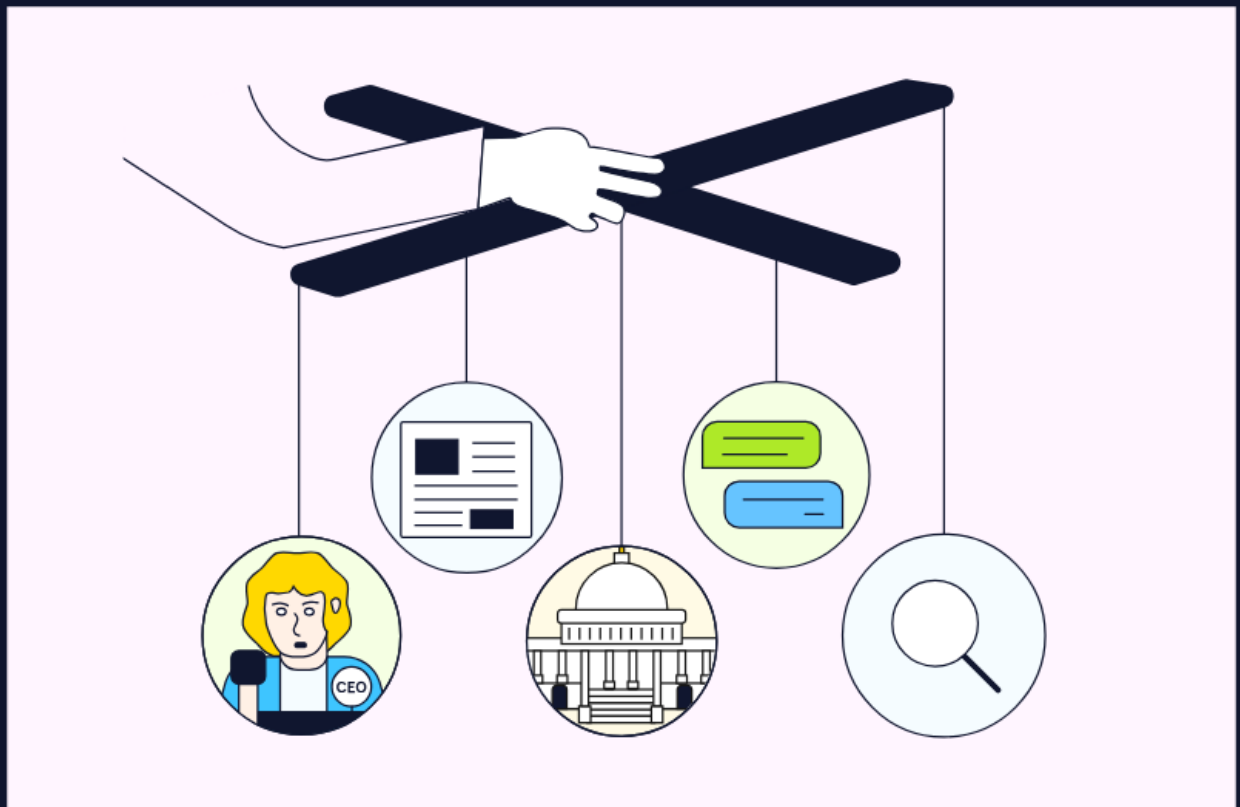
# Influence Campaigns

Learn about how hybrid threats use Influence Campaigns to alter public opinion on a massive scale.

## What we'll be learning

When we think of attacks in the context of [cybersecurity](#), we usually think of things like malware, data breaches, or targeted hacks going after a single organization, but this isn't necessarily the case.

In this article, we will be learning about **influence campaigns**, which seek to shift public opinion on social issues, often on a massive scale. We will also learn about how influence campaigns work, who conducts them and why, and how they can be combined with more traditional [hacking](#) by Hybrid Threats.



## What are influence campaigns?

Influence campaigns are large-scale campaigns that seek to shift public opinion. Such campaigns are usually carried out in bad faith and often seek to

push a false narrative. These campaigns are often carried out by groups with high levels of capability, up to and including nation-state actors.

Why are influence campaigns used?

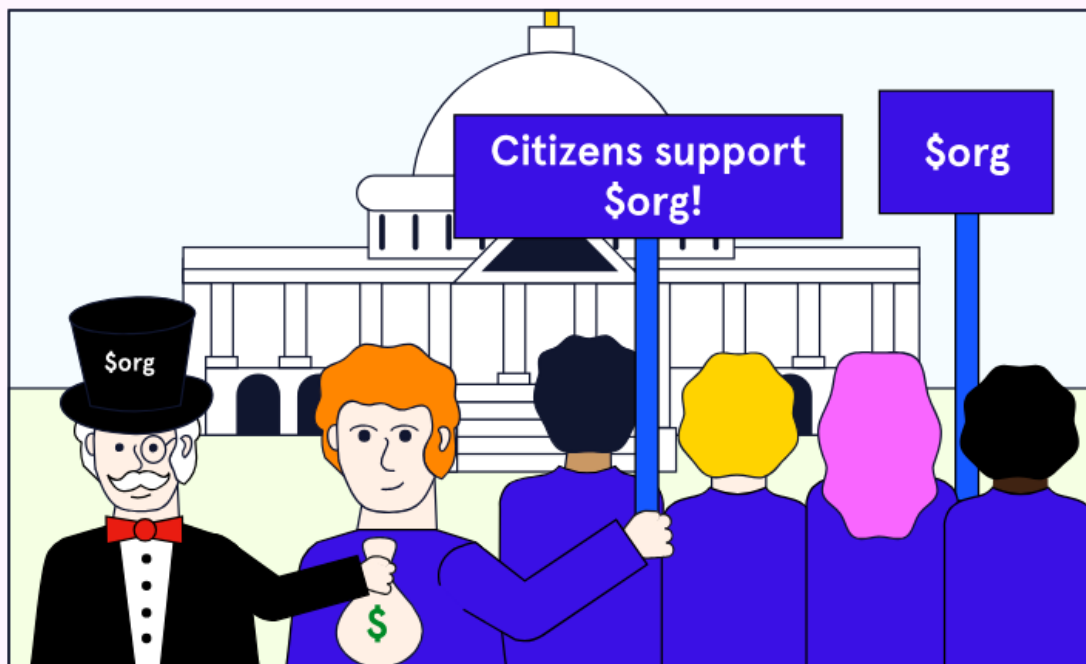
*"The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting." ~ Sun Tzu*

Suppose you run a business, and your business has a deep rivalry with a competing business. There are plenty of ways you might try to gain an advantage over your rival business, with varying degrees of ethicality and legality. Hiring someone to hack into their network and sabotage their systems is highly illegal, and your business would likely come under suspicion when the attack is discovered. However, hiring someone to investigate their business and publish a report on shady or unethical business practices is far less illegal, and any attempt by the competitor to blame you for the report would likely be seen as an attempt to distract from the findings of the report.

This is the strength of influence campaigns. They seek to operate below a threshold to trigger an aggressive response. This applies as much to adversarial nation-states as it does to rival businesses. Openly attacking an adversary is likely to result in consequences, but secretly turning public opinion against them is harder to prove and harder to retaliate against.

One common use of influence campaigns is to interfere with elections, which highlights one of the difficulties of dealing with influence campaigns. It is often difficult to attribute an influence campaign to a given group solidly. Additionally, it can be challenging to admit that we have been manipulated. It is easier to deny the possibility that we have fallen victim to an influence campaign than take an objective look at the situation. One example we know for sure is Cambridge Analytica. This company worked to influence elections in Australia, India, Kenya, Malta, Mexico, the UK, and the US.

Companies can also use influence campaigns for promotional purposes or ward off bad press. Again, the strength of influence campaigns is that they are difficult to prove. It is not impossible to run across a social media account that seems very vocal about praising the virtues of a specific product or brand, but proving that account is operating on the instructions of the company that owns that product or brand is challenging.



## How do influence campaigns work?

### Social media manipulation

Social media has made it much easier to influence large numbers of people. In addition to being an easily-accessible online space where people interact, they also provide targeted advertising services. These services allow groups running influence campaigns to target those they wish to influence more effectively. Techniques such as Astroturfing, where an influence campaign is disguised as a grass-roots movement, are used to influence public opinion by making it appear that other members of the public are presenting the opinion.

### In combination with other tactics

Influence campaigns can be part of more extensive campaigns which use other techniques such as espionage and hacking. Such campaigns usually have an overall goal and use a combination of techniques to work towards it. In these cases, the influence campaign may be less about accomplishing the goal directly and more about providing distraction or cover for other, more aggressive techniques. They may also paint a target organization as an enemy, potentially meaning that the public will see more direct actions against the target as justified or morally correct.

## Conclusion

Influence campaigns represent a dangerous new paradigm in cybersecurity. They are secretive and deniable, difficult to attribute, and severely influence public opinion. Influence campaigns are also used in so-called "hybrid warfare," where traditional warfare techniques are combined with hacking and the previously mentioned influence campaigns.

Being aware of the dangers posed by influence campaigns is crucial for businesses and governments.