CogSec Ecosystem Assessment

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# Introduction

Cognitive security landscapes – information, risk, and response – vary widely across countries, demographics, and topic areas. Customer response and coordination capabilities also vary widely, from large offices with several staff assigned to CogSec, to small offices with one communications person doing everything including CogSec activities.

This note gives a framework for assessing the cogsec situation and response capacity in a country. They cover both misinformation and disinformation, but can be adapted to suit the situation and group(s) being interacted with.

# Background Research

Before talking to a customer, it’s useful to do a desk survey to help frame the conversation. Offices that are already responding to incidents will probably have most of this information to hand during discussions; others might appreciate having a template to work from and adjust.

## Literature Survey

Looking at each country: which platforms are used, where is the disinformation turning up.

Different countries have different social media and media use profiles. We need to look at each of the countries on our list, to see:

* a) where people are putting information and misinfo; where people are sharing it, where people are looking for it – and which search terms they’re using (look at googlesearch for each country plus words for vaccine, covid etc)
* b) which social media platforms, websites etc dominate online
* c) what offline information sharing looks like

Information landscape

* What’s the population size? Demographic profile?
* How many people are online, on phones, on social media. Which social media?
* What are people searching for online
* Are they looking mainly internally, or at other countries’ outputs?

Risk analysis

* Is this country in existing known disinfo groups and sites
* What’s the chatter like here around known disinformation narratives
* Are there networks of disinfo sites here yet?
* What are the hot-topic issues that disinfo could use?
* Who are the major influencers?

Response landscape

* Which groups are actively responding to misinformation?
* What do those groups do?
* Are those groups coordinated, either amongst themselves, or via a coordinating body (UN agency, government agency, media organisation etc)
* More sensitive questions are around partnering: are there sources of friction amongst responders, are government agencies compromised etc.

Big questions

* How many people are online
* What are they looking at and for?
* What are the main sources of information and disinformation
* What’s from inside the country vs what’s coming in from outside (e.g. from other countries)

Useful references for desk surveys:

* Desk: Information landscaping:
  + **Hootsuite** country by country social media maps. The hootsuite list for countries is useful, but doesn’t necessarily show the reality of information and disinformation behaviours for each country.
  + Reuters digital news report
* Desk: Disinformation landscape, response landscape:
  + **Oxford Internet Institute’s (OII)** country by country yearbooks: [2019](https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/Case-Studies-Collated-NOV-2019-1.pdf), [2020](https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2021/03/Case-Studies_FINAL.pdf). Doesn’t cover every country. (“The Global Cyber Troops Inventory uses a three-pronged methodological approach to identifying instances of social media manipulation by government actors. This involves (1) a content analysis of news article reporting; (2) a secondary literature review; and (3) expert consultations. More information about the approach can be found in Bradshaw and Howard (2017, 2018).”)
  + **Newsguard, etc** keep lists of known disinformation and junk news sites - check for county-specific domains, language, GIS references <Action SJ: make longer list of sites>
* Talking to people
  + **Existing in-country disinformation teams**: see lists made above. Look at sites for health disinfo, maybe talk to them?
  + Country offices.

## Tool-based investigation

Run a set of commonly-used tools on social media sources and online searches, to get a sense of the three landscapes in this country.

* Check the infodemic data sources listed in doc “IDM data sources.xls” for artifacts and narratives relevant to this country. Investigate any domains, groups, and other artifacts found in this search (both positive and negative – e.g. this can also be a good way to identify infodemic response groups that we don’t know about).
* Check outputs from the response groups identified above: look for potential search terms and places to search for infodemic materials.
* Create a set of search terms and queries (“dorks”) to help look for information on the platforms identified above. Useful dorks include covid19, vaccine, and other terms associated with health measures.
* Run a general google search using the search terms, narrowing it down to the country using its countryname (in English and local languages), its main languages, locations, and the URL site code for that country (e.g. “vaccine site:.uk” will show UK registered sites containing the word vaccine).
* Run the search dorks on each platform identified above

# Interviews

## Background Explanations

**What we’re trying to do: “**Assess the use of social networks in this country, trends in misinformation / disinformation, and the government's/private sector response. The assessment requires:

1. An analysis of the use of social networks in country as they contribute to media and disinformation: internet penetration and use; platforms used; languages used; demographic considerations; target groups; sources of messages (anonymous/famous people) etc.

2. The analysis of cases of disinformation and misinformation observed during previous events. Identify the actors involved, the regions concerned, and the consequences observed.

3. An assessment of past government/media practices in responding to cases of disinformation and misinformation. Identify the consequences on the targeted problem and incorporate learnings into a recommendation for mitigation tactics specific to the current event.”

## Short interview: suggested questions

* Where do people get their news in country
* What information sources do people use - offline and online
* Which languages do people use with each other - offline and online
* How do people connect to each other online?
  + Which social media do they use
  + Which messaging apps - and are they 1:1 or in groups
* Have you seen any misinformation or disinformation?
  + Which channels is it on - social media, URLs etc
  + Are there well-known disinformation or fake news “influencers”? Where do they output information?

## Long interview: Suggested questions

### Introduction

We’re working on tools and processes to improve responses to an infodemic. We’re contextualising that to this country. This meeting is part of our assessment of country disinformation and responses to it.

Anything we build has to fit into the existing environment. So I’m interested in the information environment in country, disinformation in country, and how groups and people manage disinformation in country, including its identification, verification, and response.

To start, tell us about your organisation, and how it communicates with the general public

### Environment

* Where do people get their news in country
  + What information sources do people use - offline and online
* Which social media sites do people use most?
* How do people find material?
  + Hashtags?
  + Country name?
  + Following influencers?
  + Traditional news organisations online?
* How do people connect to each other online?
  + Which social media do they use
  + Which messaging apps do they use? (e.g. SMS, Whatsapp, Telegram etc)
  + If messaging apps are used, are there public groups on the messaging apps?
* Which languages do people use with each other - offline and online
* Who are the online influencers?

### Disinformation

* Have you seen any misinformation or hate speech?
* Where does misinformation come from?
  + Is it in radio, newspapers, on TV?
  + Is it online? If so, which channels is it on - social media, URLs etc
  + Are there well-known disinformation or fake news “influencers”? Where do they output information?
* Does disinformation appear to be well-structured?
  + Are there fake news sites and accounts in country? Are there networks of them?

### Disinformation Response

We’re looking for skills and evidence in 3 areas:

* Identification - finding potential disinformation
* Factchecking - assessing identified information though cross-checking, reverse search etc.
* Response - combatting disinformation through counter-messaging, debunking etc

Our big questions are:

* Does your organisation do any of these things?
* Who else is doing this work in the country (or in neighbouring countries, if their techniques could be useful here)?
* What do disinformation, misinformation and hate speech look like in country.

For both your area of interest, and in general:

* Identification
  + Are there any misinformation tiplines in the country already?
* Factchecking
  + Which information sources do people use for factchecking?
* Response
  + If you see disinformation, what do you do in response?
  + Who is responding to disinformation? How?
  + Do debunking pages exist already?
* Process
  + How quickly do you go from finding disinformation, to responding to it?
  + If I was a member of the public looking for help on misinformation, where would I look?
  + Do you use identification, fact checking, or response tools? If so, which ones?
* Actors’ capacity:
  + How many staff at secretarial level? How many members?
  + Existing initiatives ongoing? How many staffs involved?
  + Budget sources and timelines?
  + Interactions with other stakeholders in this field?

## 

## Questions for specific sectors

### Health-Specific

General

* Which misinformation narratives have you seen around health?
* Who counters these narratives?
* How?

Stages

* Origin
* Spread
* Containment
* Vaccination

For a slow start: have you seen these narratives?

* **Origins:** this came from lab,
* **Cures:** X cures this
* **PPE:** masks are dangerous, contain X
* **Vaccination:** vaccinations are killing people,
* **Languages**: spreading disinformation in a language and/or demographic that isn’t being tracked, or reported in.

### Election-specific

General

* Which misinformation narratives have you seen around elections?
* Who counters these narratives?
* How?

Stages

* Voter registration
* Campaigning
* Voting and polling stations
* Vote counting
* Win declarations

For a slow start: have you seen these narratives?

* **Voter suppression**: None of the parties care about your demographic, so don’t vote
* **How to vote**: e.g. listing the wrong methods (‘text this phone number’), or downplaying valid methods like mail-in voting
* **Polling stations**: Which polling stations are open and/or closed, voting machines are switching votes,
* **Voter fraud**: people are voting twice, non-voters (children, immigrants etc) are voting, dead people are voting,
* **Vote counting**: opposition votes are being thrown away or replaced, ballot stuffing (extra votes are being created), who you voted for isn’t private information,
* **Winners**: a different candidate won,
* **Languages**: spreading disinformation in a language and/or demographic that isn’t being tracked, or reported in.

### Blogger questions

* Role
  + They're good routes for corrections. Are they interested in this - do they do this?
  + Do they self-correct, e.g. disinformation blogs. Do BOZ promote individual bloggers and sites?
* Disinformation
  + "everyone is on youtube" - are there in-country bloggers on youtube? Where do you post?
  + Have you seen this: a story starts on a blog, then shares on facebook or twitter - also have these accounts.
  + Which blogs?
  + Also get info on spread from blogs to whatsapp groups.

### Media questions

* Do people try to fake your members’ websites, broadcasts, social media accounts?
* How many stations are licensed? un licensed?
* How do people report on disinfo?
* Do people trust the traditional media?

### Disinformation Response team - short questions

* What’s the misinfo landscape
* Who are you working with
* Which tools etc?