

Anticipating cognitive intrusions: Framing the phenomenon





Hybrid CoE Strategic Analyses address timely questions concerning hybrid threats and can serve as an opening for a theme that requires further research. They aim to identify gaps in knowledge and understanding, explain processes behind a phenomenon, and highlight trends and future challenges.

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats
tel. +358 400 253800 www.hybridcoe.fi

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Hybrid CoE's mission is to strengthen its Participating States' security by providing expertise and training for countering hybrid threats, and by enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in this respect. The Centre is an autonomous hub for practitioners and experts, located in Helsinki, Finland.

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This Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis offers an original framework for considering the dynamics whereby liberal democratic governance can be undermined following changes in the cognitive domain. It defines cognitive intrusion as the deliberate manipulation of individual and collective mental processes to promote political violence within a liberal democratic society. Such manipulation relies to a great extent on leveraging the culture of misinformation to create disinformation, stoking negative emotions of anger and resentment to circumvent regular channels of political expression and democratic debate.

Framing cognitive intrusion

Cognitive intrusions trigger emotional and psychological *dispositions* into modes of political expression and *action*. In other words, a cognitive intrusion may inflame resentment towards perceived “political correctness” to incite a group of people to engage in violence against a designated enemy. Dispositions consist of enduring traits or characteristics affecting individual or collective behaviours. This Strategic Analysis frames those intrusions as cognitive because they leverage mental processes, the role of information, as well as perceptions in decision-making and behaviour-shaping. Cognitive intrusions need to be framed in order to better anticipate and recognize them. Foreign interference could take the form of cognitive intrusions in severing public opinion’s attachment to liberal democratic governance.

Anticipating cognitive intrusions is particularly relevant at a time when democracies face a renewed threat of ochlocracy or “mob rule”.¹ Resentment, rage or anger are powerful emotional mobilization levers. Political mobilization

resting on forceful emotions of rage and anger is a legitimate political expression lever in itself. However, there is a fine line between stoking anger to create political mobilization and stoking anger to incite hatred and violence. Framing cognitive intrusion treads this fine line as it precisely builds on the seams and vulnerabilities of democratic societies. It remains necessary to anticipate triggers that hybrid threat actors could use in steering individuals and groups towards untamed and impulsive violence that would seek to undo democracy. This Strategic Analysis focuses on the type of intimidation and violence that deliberately undercuts mediation and the channelling of legitimate political emotions. It (1) underlines that the culture of misinformation is a fertile context for cognitive intrusion; (2) frames the strategy of cognitive intrusion as a disorientation of public opinion by leveraging emotions into untamed violence; and lastly (3) emphasizes the role of violence in undoing the democratic system of mediation and channels of political emotions.

¹ ‘Political theorists have been worrying about mob rule for 2000 years’, *The Economist*, 16 January, 2021.

Context: liberal democracy, misinformation, and anger

Hybrid threat actors can leverage the growing and miring culture of *misinformation* to conduct *disinformation* operations. Misinformation refers to the contextual, non-intentional production and diffusion of pieces of information which are false or misleading, and which therefore apply extremely low standards of accuracy and diligent verification, as opposed to high standards and ethics of journalism;² while disinformation refers to the intentional production and diffusion of misleading, false or truncated pieces of information pursuant to a political objective. One danger of widespread misinformation is that the political discussion at large would be based for the most part on misconceptions and prejudices instead of solid facts and accurate knowledge. Although public opinion in democracy has never been immune to misconceptions and errors of judgement, the generalization of misinformation gives prejudices a more salient influence upon it. It also delegitimizes authoritative or expert sources in the construction of knowledge. Medical and health misinformation aptly exemplifies this culture and has been shown to produce detrimental political effects.³ This culture of misinformation cannot be separated from the trend of liberal democratic governance increasingly being threatened by authoritarian, illiberal

ideas, and coup attempts. While misinformation and disinformation differ in terms of the notion of deliberate intent, cognitive intrusion goes further than either of them as the deliberate manipulation of not only information but also of mental processes and representations that form a larger whole of cognitive dimensions.

In this context of misinformation and endogenous threats to liberal democratic systems, hybrid threat actions should be understood as manoeuvres aiming to discredit liberal democratic governance by targeting its core foundations, constitutive values, and distinctive norms.⁴ Accusations of weaponization and prosecutorial partiality against the US Federal Judiciary in former President Donald Trump's classified documents case are a good example of deliberate disinformation about the role of an independent judicial system and prosecution. *The Washington Post* also reported on deliberate fear-mongering directed at individual citizens to induce a sense of threat against their personal safety on the part of the federal government.⁵ Such fear-mongering taps into conspiratorial thinking and a deeply individual self-defence mentality against "big government".

Ideally, liberal democracy relies not only on the democratic nature of its procedures and the effectiveness of its governance, but also and most importantly on the solidity of

2 NPR, 'NPR Ethics Handbook', 7 July, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/ethics/>.

3 Rose Bernard, Gemma Bowsher, Richard Sullivan, and Fawzia Gibson-Fall, 'Disinformation and Epidemics: Anticipating the Next Phase of Biowarfare', *Health Secur* 19(1), (2021): 3–12.

4 Rainer Jungwirth, Hanna Smith, Etienne Wilkomm, Jukka Savolainen, Marina Alonso Villota, Maxime Lebrun, Aleksi Aho, and Giorgios Giannopoulos, 'Hybrid Threats: A Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem' (The European Commission's Joint Research Centre and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2023).

5 Jesus Rodriguez, 'In the MAGA mirror, Trump's legal peril looks like a personal threat', *The Washington Post*, 13 June, 2023.

popular attachment to a series of key values and norms. Separation of powers, pluralism, individual rights and freedoms, majoritarian decision-making, representative politics, and deliberation form some of the core aspects of political liberalism. Policy outcomes should ideally be weighed through reason and fact-based discussion. The core values and norms that can be targeted by hybrid threat actors precisely correspond to political liberalism. Beyond the democratic nature of decisions and the capacity of democratic governance to deliver expedient policy, the solidity of contemporary democracies in the Euro-Atlantic area rests on their attachment to political liberalism, which can be threatened by stoking a violent “mob rule” type of mobilization.

One benefit of framing what cognitive intrusion denotes would be to improve the quality of the fight against information manipulation. The international agenda on democratic resilience to information manipulation largely focuses on how information operations manifest. Responses focus heavily on the content and vectors of information. More attention should be devoted to the intellectual, psychological and emotional impact factors of information operations. Cognitive intrusion practices can find ways to undermine the values and norms critical to political liberalism by exploiting the culture of misinformation and crafting disinformation. It is particularly relevant when democratic regimes face democratic regression;⁶ and even an ochlocratic undertow, which refers to a perverted version of the wisdom of the crowd, not guided by reason and collective knowledge

but intimidating democratic governance in pursuit of prejudices and anti-liberal ideals – such as judiciary independence as in the example above.

Strategy: disorienting public opinion with emotion

It is fair to assume that the success of information operations relies on a logic of reflexive control that could take hold in soliciting rage and feelings of anger.⁷ Initially conceptualized in Soviet deceptive tactics, reflexive control refers to a manipulative strategy to make a target adopt a behaviour or take a decision which is contrary to its best interests. It appeals to thinking and cognitive reflexes, getting individuals and groups to behave in a certain way or to believe something.

The interdisciplinary field of cognitive science provides a rich analytical resource to account for the mental processes that influence or determine the main cognitive functions at individual and collective levels. Cognitive science provides insights into the triggering role of violent emotions in information processing and decision-making at individual and collective levels – engaging individuals based on indignation, fear, anxiety, prejudices, insults, and racist or sexist controversy in a way that aims at circumventing and subverting the civil and democratic conflict mediation channels. One example of the ways in which such practices could mobilize physical and virtual violence against the institutions of liberal democracy, or civic freedoms such as the freedom of the press, can be found in the hate networks mobilized against Brazilian

6 Larry Diamond, ‘Democratic regression in comparative perspective: scope, methods, and causes’, *Democratization*, Volume 28, Issue 1, (2021): 22–42.

7 Vladimir Lefebvre, and Victorina D Lefebvre, *Reflexive Control: the Soviet concept of influencing an adversary’s decision making process* (Englewood: Science Applications, 1984).

journalists during the 2022 presidential election. Reporters Without Borders reported that journalists were harassed online every three seconds on average.⁸ For instance, Brazilian journalist Amanda Klein faced notable harassment after voicing criticism towards then President Jair Bolsonaro in September 2022. One of Bolsonaro's keywords was taken as a rallying hashtag against Amanda Klein with deeply misogynistic and sexist violence. Bolsonaro's expression can be seen as the trigger that legitimized and unleashed a swarm of online harassers.⁹ This produces a chilling effect on press freedom, one of the key institutions in liberal democracies.

The safeguards of democratic governance depend in large part on a set of *social* cognitive attitudes of citizens: tolerance for disagreement, empathy, openness to discussion, and acceptance of diverging opinions. Intruding into those complex social cognitive processes through a set of intellectual, psychological and emotional manipulation techniques can gravely endanger societal consensus on deliberative politics. Stoking violent anger creates disorientation and confusion as to what should replace the rejected system. Cognitive intrusion aims at confusing and disorienting audiences based on their cognitive reflexes, biases and prejudices.

Consequence: promoting destabilizing violence

Anticipating cognitive intrusion aims at capturing the violent translation logic of pre-existing dispositions within a given audience that can be triggered by potential hybrid threat actors. The historical adoption of fascist beliefs could be considered an illustration of the consequences of cognitive intrusion and destabilizing violence. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critical theory of propaganda showed how promoting fascism required leveraging individuals' profound and unconscious needs in making them reach the conclusion that supporting fascism would be a reasonable and self-serving individual strategy.¹⁰ Their study of the levers of fascism for mobilizing the masses highlighted mechanisms that turned prejudices into pseudo-rational judgements, leading to destructive political attitudes. Adopting fascism requires individuals to come to their own conclusion that anti-democratic attitudes are in their best interests while validating their prejudices. The insinuation of latent or expressed violence in individuals' relation to politics was instrumental in undoing liberal democratic governance. Fostering violence within thought and representations as a means to cut through the perceived inefficiency of deliberative politics has historically been a key driver of authoritarianism. The ways

8 Reporters Without Borders, 'Journalism facing hate networks in Brazil: online attacks against the media during the 2022 elections' (2023), <https://rsf.org/en/journalist-was-harassed-online-every-three-seconds-during-brazil-s-election-campaign>.

9 G1. Bolsonaro ataca jornalista Amanda Klein após pergunta sobre rachadinha e compra de imóveis com dinheiro vivo: 'Seu marido vota em mim', 6 September, 2022, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2022/09/06/bolsonaro-ataca-jornalista-amanda-klein-apos-pergunta-sobre-rachadinha-e-compra-de-imoveis-com-dinheiro-vivo-seu-marido-vota-em-mim.ghtml>.

10 Theodor W Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noeri and Edmund Jephcott, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

in which discursive, psychological and emotional violence can permeate the frames of thought, representations and language are key in exploring and anticipating cognitive intrusions.

The promotion of anti-system violence by triggering emotional and psychological dispositions should be anticipated as a consequence of cognitive intrusion. Hybrid threat actors seek to discredit and invalidate liberal democratic governance to the benefit of authoritarian systems. While not a result of foreign interference, calls by former President Donald Trump to his supporters on 6 January, 2021 to "fight like hell" since "we will not take it anymore" were performative triggers to something that could have undone liberal democratic governance.¹¹ Former President Trump's speech that day triggered many of the emotional and psychological dimensions of anger, humiliation, indignation and rage in which his paranoid style of politics flourished.¹² Similarly, the rise of the Five Star Movement in Italy has been accompanied by regular solicitation of violent dispositions by encouraging the online harassment of critical journalists, reviving a politics of "squadristism",¹³ which can be considered an online revival of the Italian fascists' historical tradition of punitive expeditions against journalists and other critics of the rise of fascism in the 1920s.

Conclusions

The concept of cognitive intrusion can help deepen understanding of how hybrid threat actors may seek to mobilize emotional and psychological dispositions into violent anti-system expression and action in order to diminish public trust in democratic governance. This practice could be enabled by leveraging a rampant culture of misinformation, aimed at disorienting public opinion away from liberal democratic standards, and by fostering a culture of violence in speech, in actions, and in expectations that would be diametrically opposed to liberal democratic governance. The concept of cognitive intrusion is useful for understanding how adversaries may leverage political choice, mobilization, and voter behaviour. It may also serve as a frame for understanding the adversarial perspective in grasping the intellectual, psychological and emotional individual and collective triggers that could become levers of foreign interference in deceiving and coercing liberal democracies.

¹¹ 'Select Committee to investigate the January 6th attack on the United States Capitol' [Final Report], (House of Representatives, Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2022).

¹² Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', *Harper's Magazine* (1964).

¹³ Darren Loucaides, 'In Italy, Five Star Movement's war on journalism is picking up pace', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 13 June, 2019, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/italy-five-star-movement.php>.

Author

Mr Maxime Lebrun is Deputy Director of the Research and Analysis Function of Hybrid CoE. He has previously worked as a Lecturer in War and Conflict Studies and Acting Department Director for Political Studies at the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, and a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the International Centre for Defence and Security in Tallinn, Estonia. He holds a master's degree in International Relations from Sciences Po Lyon with a specialization in strategic, military and security studies from Sciences Po Aix-en-Provence.

