

Counter-MDM Interventions

Protecting servicemembers

The US has long been worried about foreign efforts to use persuasion and influence against US servicemembers, but the recent weaponization of social media has given this topic urgency. Unfortunately, protecting oneself from mis-/dis-/mal-information (MDM) is more complicated than it might seem. Being savvy about the media landscape is not sufficient, nor is knowing that you are being exposed to MDM. This content works by exploiting normal psychological mechanisms that people use in their day-to-day lives [1]. As an analogy, keeping your front door locked at night is a great first step in protecting your home, but it won't stop a burglar who breaks in through your dryer vent (i.e., something that you didn't think of as a vulnerability).

In promising news, an increasingly robust body of research has explored how to effectively protect against mis-/dis-/mal-information (MDM). In this analysis, we conducted a full review of the literature on these interventions: inoculation, debunking, fact-checking, and media literacy. We provided a brief history of each technique, a description of how each one works, and a summary of the state of research on each technique. In the tables below, we define each intervention type and briefly summarize our findings.

Importantly, this research is not designed to change people's strongly held positions, or even people's lightly held opinions. The goal is narrow and specific: help people sift the true from the false, and protect people from being manipulated by systems and actors aspiring to hack their brains.

Evidence-based interventions

Inoculation is the practice of exposing individuals to persuasive messages containing weakened arguments that threaten an attitude or belief in order to "inoculate" them against stronger persuasive messages and attacks on this attitude or belief in the future. Inoculation builds resilience to manipulation.

- Inoculation works if people:
 - have imperfect knowledge of a topic
 - have imperfect knowledge of the techniques of manipulation
 - care that they are being manipulated

- Inoculations can be designed to:
 - target MDM on a specific topic
 - target the techniques used by the creators of MDM

- Inoculations may be more effective when they actively engage the user

- Inoculations can be given before or after exposure to MDM (i.e., prophylactic vs. therapeutic inoculation)

- Inoculations that cite consensus information may be more effective

- Inoculation is potentially useful as a component of a training program designed to teach US servicemembers how to protect themselves from MDM

Debunking is the use of a concise correction to MDM that demonstrates that the prior message or messaging campaign was inaccurate.

- Debunking can correct specific instances of inaccurate information, but it cannot protect people from influence in general
- Debunking messages appear to be more effective when they:
 - cite high-credibility sources (i.e., sources that have expertise and that are trustworthy)

- contain detailed corrective information, which is more effective than simple corrections
- express stronger corrections (i.e., those containing more information)
- The tone of the correction (e.g., uncivil, neutral, affirmational) does not appear to change the effect of the correction
- The format of the correction (e.g., truth first, myth first) does not appear to change the effect of the correction

Fact-checking is a journalistic practice designed to reject clearly false claims with empirical evidence from neutral or unimpeachable sources.

- Fact-checking can correct specific instances of inaccurate information, but it cannot protect people from influence in general
- Fact-checking is best when integrated into the consumption of news
- Fact-checking is a potentially powerful tool for Department of Defense (DOD) personnel with communications responsibilities

Media literacy is an individual's ability to critically assess a piece of content. It includes the skills required to evaluate a piece of content, as well as an understanding of the structures that produced that content.

- In-person media literacy training has been found to be effective across a range of topics, behaviors, and outcomes
- Online media literacy training has been shown to positively affect media use in multiple ways:
 - increase trust in media
 - increase the ability to differentiate real from fake headlines
 - lower people's belief that MDM is accurate
- Online news media literacy training may be limited in its ability to counter MDM, but it has been shown to:
 - improve self-perceptions of media literacy
 - effectively reinforce lessons learned from in-person trainings
 - improve the quality of the news that people share online

Conclusion

We completed this analysis as a precursor to a more ambitious project that evaluates the appropriateness of these interventions for the military. More specific guidance—in the form of an assessment of applicability to military populations, a list of best practices, and recommendations for near-term implementation—can be found in the companion report [2].

References

- [1] Wolters, Heather, Kasey Stricklin, Neil Carey, and Megan K. McBride. *The Psychology of (Dis) information: A Primer on Key Psychological Mechanisms*. CNA. 2021.
- [2] McBride, Megan K., Pamela G. Faber, Kaia Haney, Patricia J. Kannapel, Samuel Plapinger, and Heather M. K. Wolters. *Protecting Servicemembers from Foreign Influence: A Counter-MDM Toolkit*. CNA. 2023.

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