Protecting Servicemembers from MDM

A comprehensive response

In the current social media environment, we are all regularly being exposed to foreign adversary efforts to influence and persuade us—including mis-/dis-/mal-information (MDM). The propagation of MDM and the efforts to influence US servicemembers are national security threats that can have deleterious effects on military readiness, order, and discipline [1].

Combating MDM is complex and requires a substantial and coordinated response. To aid such efforts, this research examines a set of evidence-based interventions that have been shown to successfully increase resilience to influence, persuasion, and MDM: inoculation, debunking and fact-checking, and media literacy. Specifically, it looks at factors relevant to designing a program for protecting servicemembers from malign foreign influence, offers best practices related to each intervention, and recommends a course of action for those designing programs to protect servicemembers. We completed this analysis as a follow-up effort to an earlier report that reviewed the literature on these interventions—including a brief history of each technique, a description of how each one works, and a summary of the state of research on each technique [2].

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.

Recommended course of action

To evaluate whether the interventions we analyzed were appropriate for the military, we considered four factors: the structure of the intervention (e.g., scalability, length of time required for training, neutrality of the content), the longevity of the effects, whether the intervention was preventative or reactive, and the flexibility of the intervention to function in both a steady-state and a crisis environment.

We found that none of the interventions met all of these criteria. However, the Department of Defense (DOD) could combine the three interventions—inoculation, debunking and fact-checking, and media literacy—into a scalable and durable training program that ensures all servicemembers have a baseline degree of resilience to influence. Such a training program would also serve as a DOD mechanism for responding to an MDM campaign or crisis.

To enact this training program, we recommend that DOD take the following actions:

- Identify and deploy an already-existing media literacy program.
- Work with academic experts to adapt an already-existing inoculation intervention.
- Have DOD communications personnel (both those who are engaged in public-facing communication and those who are engaged in communicating to the force itself) engage in debunking and fact-checking when appropriate.

Our full report provides guidance to inform decision-makers—including policy-makers, leaders, public health officials, and public affairs officers—on when to use a specific type of intervention. It also provides best practices for how to design the interventions (e.g., how to build a fact-check), as well as language for how to describe these trainings and interventions to those who will receive them. The table on the next page briefly summarizes our analysis.

Intervention	Structure	Longevity	Prevention	Flexibility
Inoculation	This technique-based inoculation is neutral and scalable; very short trainings have been shown to be effective; precedent indicates that the intervention has already been used with military populations.	Literature suggests a potential longevity of 7 to 90 days with regular boosters; even so, this training is a good complement to more intensive in-person media literacy training because it can be easily implemented (e.g., in a 5- to 10-minute online game).	This preventative approach provides servicemembers with the skills necessary to protect themselves from MDM.	As a preventative approach, this is a poor mechanism for responding to a crisis.
Debunking and Fact-Checking	Comprehensive application is not possible given how servicemembers consume information; the issue-based nature of the content means it may be perceived as non-neutral.	Not applicable because debunking and fact-checking do not teach counter-MDM skills.	This responsive approach can be used in steady-state or crisis environments.	This responsive and flexible approach can be used in both steady-state and crisis environments.
Media Literacy	Media literacy training is neutral; scalability may be challenging because in-person training appears to be the most effective.	Literature suggests a potential longevity of 2 years with boosters; as a result, this intervention will provide a solid foundation for those whose deployment cycles preclude regular inoculation training.	This preventative approach provides servicemembers with the skills necessary to protect themselves from MDM.	As a preventative approach, this is a poor mechanism for responding to a crisis.

Legend: Green indicates that the intervention is appropriate for the military, yellow indicates that the intervention has limited value for the military, and red indicates that the intervention is not appropriate for the military.

References

[1] Butler, Matthew. "Misinformation in the Military Community and the Next National Security Strategy." Strategy Bridge. Apr. 14, 2021. Accessed Nov. 1, 2022. https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2021/4/14/misinformation-military-community-next-nss.
[2] McBride, Megan K., Pamela G. Faber, Kaia Haney, Patricia J. Kannapel, Samuel Plapinger, and Heather M. K. Wolters. *Evidence-Based Techniques for Countering Mis-/Dis-/Mal-information: A Primer*. CNA. 2023.

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