

Fear of Influence Operations: Role and Challenges for Researchers

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Abstract

This briefing discusses how Chinese foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) activities are perceived locally by potential target audiences in Okinawa. Such covert influence operations are employed to sway public opinion and affect policy in democratic countries. Enabled by the global reach of social media and digital platforms, these efforts threaten democratic discourse and stability. However, the research discussed here found that the actual impact locally tends to be exaggerated in research and public opinion. To improve our understanding of, and ability to handle FIMI activities it is suggested that research needs to consider four issues. These are 1) the local context the FIMI enters, 2) the level(s) the researcher(s) work on, 3) the origins of narratives used, and 4) the target groups involved. By including these dimensions when examining the impact of influence activities, we can hopefully improve how we handle influence activities in democracies.

Introduction

This research note is based on research the author undertook as a visiting scholar at Hitotsubashi University where he worked with Professor Maiko Ichihara in 2022/23. The purpose of the visit was to explore issues related to Chinese influence activities abroad. Co-ordinated efforts by states and groups to unduly manipulate the views and actions of others using subterfuge has surfaced in the past decade as a potent threat to democracies around the world. Although most commonly associated with Russia, China is also working heavily in this field using its own methods and approaches.¹

These activities have been termed *foreign information manipulation and interference* (FIMI) by the European Union,² a phrase that will be used throughout this research note. The most well-known FIMI example is the Russian targeting of the US elections in 2016. However, everything from fringe conspiracy theorists spreading fake news about Covid-19 vaccines to influencers employed by Chinese actors is chipping away at discourses in democratic countries.³ The idea of surreptitiously influencing others is not new in (international) politics. However, the new communications landscape has given actors a previously unthinkable reach through the frictionless, real-time sharing of information across borders. The ability to target different audiences through social media platforms' automated content selection algorithms, combined with the ability to use different identities that hide the real perpetrator, are also gamechangers here.

This is particularly troublesome in the context of the increasingly aggressive stance taken by non-democracies to achieve their goals at the expense of democracies. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia worked hard to paint Ukraine as a part of Russia, while creating an image of Ukraine today as a Nazi state. Currently Russia has focused on fostering disunity inside and between foreign states to try to reduce their support for Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the most serious such act in recent years, but China's

¹ Sarah Cook, Beijing's Global Megaphone (Freedom House, 2020).

² European External Action Service (EEAS), 1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Towards a Framework for Networked Defence (2023).

³ Kazuki Ichida, "Challenges in Measures against Digital Influence Operations: Why Can't the EU/US Deal with the Methods Used by China, Russia, and Iran?" GGR Issue Briefing, no. 63 (Tokyo: Hitotsubashi University, 2024).

bellicose rhetoric about Taiwan and the annexation of various islands and islets in the China seas also exemplify this change in approach.

Field Site Selection

Having worked on misuse of social media, influence operations, dis- and misinformation and related issues since 2016,⁴ the author was interested in exploring local, real-life experiences of FIMI through social media. After exploring groups such as the ultranationalist Netto-uyoku online groups and general online dis- and misinformation issues, it seemed that the prefecture of Okinawa might be a useful case study. A thorough literature and news review found several reports on Chinese manipulation related to the islands.⁵ Discussions about protests against US bases in Okinawa were frequently found in international media.⁶ Negative sentiments directed at

⁴ Arild Bergh, “Rebel with a Temporary Cause: The Asymmetrical Access to Distrust, Hipness and Intensity as Resources in Cyber-Conflicts,” presented at the XIX ISA World Congress of Sociology, Toronto, July 20, 2018; Arild Bergh, “Massage the Message: Modularising Software for Influence Operation Detection in Social Media,” in 24th ICCRTS, Maryland: CCRP, 2019a; Arild Bergh, “Social Network Centric Warfare: Understanding Influence Operations in Social Media”, FFI-rapport 19/01194 (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2019b); Arild Bergh, “Understanding Influence Operations in Social Media: A Cyber Kill Chain Approach,” *Journal of Information Warfare* 19-4 (2020), pp. 110–131.

⁵ Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media” (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021); Russell Hsiao, “A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Japan,” *China Brief* 19-12 (2019); Mainichi Daily News, “Okinawa Gov.’s ‘China Connection’ Nothing But ‘Fake News,’ But Spreads via Internet,” *Mainichi Daily News* (June 18, 2017); Public Security Intelligence Agency, Annual Report 2016: Review and Prospect of Internal and External Situations (2017).

⁶ Kosuke Takahashi, “In Okinawa, 2 New Sexual Assault Cases Implicating US Soldiers Fuel Public Anger,” *The Diplomat*. (<https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/in-okinawa-2-new-sexual-assault-cases-implicating-us-soldiers-fuel-public-anger> Accessed on 2024-07-11); Anthony Kuhn, “Okinawa’s Peace Movement Struggles as Military Presence on the Islands Grows,” *Connecticut Public*. (<https://www.ctpublic.org/2024-04-09/okinawas-peace-movement-struggles-as-military-presence-on-the-islands-grows> Accessed on 2024-05-15); Maki Sunagawa and Daniel Broudy, “Balloons and Tape as Hate Speech: American and Japanese Rightwing Responses to the Okinawan Anti-Base Movement,” unpublished manuscript; Justin McCurry, “Japan: US Military Base Critic Voted in as Okinawa Governor,” *The Guardian*, October 1, 2018; McCurry, Justin. “The Japanese Hunger Striker Demanding an End to US

the Okinawan population from far right groupings was also reported.⁷ A lengthy French report that evaluated the global footprint of China in terms of influence operations seemed to indicate that the prefecture was manipulated to a large degree by Chinese influence operations.⁸

Although Russia is the country that many people connect with social media manipulation and FIMI, China is also a large actor in this space. Research by Ichihara⁹ ¹⁰ has shown how CCP talking points make their way into Japanese news portals. An ongoing spread of disinformation through Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms has also been documented repeatedly. A network of influencers using many languages is used to promote pro-CCP talking points and data,¹¹ ¹² and more recently reports from Graphika showed that efforts were made to sway the 2024 US election, but “the accounts failed to garner significant traction in authentic online communities”.¹³ Beyond Japan, Taiwan has documented considerable FIMI activities from China, often to discredit politicians who are not pro-China.¹⁴

Bases in Okinawa.” *The Guardian*, May 14, 2022.

⁷ Shin Sugok, “The Recent Merging of Anti-Okinawa and Anti-Korean Hate in the Japanese Mass Media,” *Asia-Pacific Journal-Japan Focus* 17-2 (2019).

⁸ Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *Chinese Influence Operations – A Machiavellian Moment* (France: Institute for Strategic Research of the French Ministry for the Armed Forces, 2021).

⁹ Maiko Ichihara, “Influence Activities of Domestic Actors on the Internet: Disinformation and Information Manipulation in Japan” in *Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy in Asia: Country Cases* (Asia Democracy Research Network, 2020).

¹⁰ Timothy Niven and Maiko Ichihara, “To Influence Japan, China Tries Subtlety,” *American Purpose*. (<https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/to-influence-japan-china-tries-subtlety/> Accessed on 2022-05-12)

¹¹ Fergus Ryan, Daria Impiombato, and Hsi-Ting Pai, Policy Brief: “Frontier Influencers: The New Face of China’s Propaganda” (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2022).

¹² Colin Eide, Lili Turner, Nirit Hinkis, and Clint Watts, “‘The One Like One Share Initiative’: How China Deploys Social Media Influencers to Spread Its Message,” Miburo. (<https://miburo.substack.com/p/the-one-like-one-share-initiative> Accessed on 2022-06-02)

¹³ The Graphika Team, *The #Americans* (Graphika, 2024).

¹⁴ Brian Hioe, “Taiwan Confronts China’s Disinformation Behemoth Ahead of Vote,” *Coda Story*. (<https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/taiwan-election-disinformation-china/> Accessed on 2024-01-08)

Figure 1: Example of evolution in Chinese influence efforts, from coarse attacks on Hong Kong democracy activists, via aggressive influencers to friendly and less pushy female influencers



News reports and research has often focused on Okinawa's geographical position and historical ties to China, as will be examined below. This research note suggests that with regard to FIMI, where aggressive states have the ability to try to manipulate other countries' population through information operations, it is worth paying attention to sensitive borderlands as a distinct population segment that can experience information manipulation. The term sensitive borderlands is used here to denote regions that will be central to the defense of a country in an armed conflict but in peace time find themselves on the geopolitical periphery of that country. These are regions that through neglect in everyday politics feel left behind, yet they will have considerable demands put on them in a physical conflict with other states. As non-democratic actors have shown themselves adept at exploiting divisions between different groups in democratic states, it could also be conceivable that local actors find their negativity towards the central government "weaponized" to exacerbate differences that could benefit the instigator of an influence operation.

Research Methods

Given this background it was decided to use Okinawa as a field site for the research. The approach used was qualitative research with a grounded theory framework. When using this framework, rather than posit a research question to prove or disprove through data collection, data is collected first and through an iterative analysis one arrives at findings and can theorize them.

The actual fieldwork, implemented as semi-structured interviews, was undertaken on the main island of Okinawa in October 2022, followed by fieldwork on the smaller, southern Miyako Island in February 2023. Twenty-six people in Okinawa and Miyako Island were interviewed, ranging from peace activists to military wives, and from media people representing the local elite to fishermen. To all these actors I was an outsider. Coming as I did from a small country in Europe, informants would not connect me to any of the large actors involved in Okinawa, such as the Japanese government, China, or local US bases. In addition, I met with more than a dozen researchers and journalists in Tokyo before and after to contextualize the overall research.

Okinawa, Background and Context

Figure 2: The island chain of Okinawa, within the East China Sea



Source: Images made by en:user:Jpatokal based on PD rendering from demis.nl map server, [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/), via Wikimedia Commons.

The Okinawa prefecture in Japan is an island chain south of the Japanese mainland. It is positioned between China and the Pacific Ocean and stretches from Japan to Taiwan. This geographical position is what makes it important in the broader geopolitical context.

For some 500 years, until 1879, the island chain was the independent kingdom of Ryukyu. During this period, it was a tributary state of China but increasingly had to accommodate Japanese interests. In 1879 Japan annexed the kingdom and incorporated it into Japan, where today it is a prefecture.

Okinawa has an uneasy relationship with the rest of Japan. It has generally been treated quite negatively, both politically (local concerns generally ignored) and culturally (with many mainlanders having negative attitudes toward the population). In the Second World War Okinawa was to all intents and purposes sacrificed to try and save the mainland in massive battles between Japan and the USA that saw a large number of civilians perish.¹⁵ Afterwards the islands were controlled by the victor of the war, the USA, until 1972 when control was transferred back to Japan.

Extensive US military bases were established on Okinawa after 1945. Most of these are still in use and are managed directly by US forces. This has raised a number of problematic issues for the local population through the loss of land, lack of local control, and cases of violence against locals by US military personnel, sometimes with horrific results.¹⁶ At times this has solidified local political collaboration to work against the military presence, such as the All-Okinawa coalition that emerged in 2010. Although the younger generation is less concerned with the so-called base issue, there are practical, everyday issues around their outsized presence that cause worries, whether accidents from military activities in everyday life or the possibility of being a first-strike target in a future war between larger powers.

The geopolitical situation today is that Japan, like European democracies, depend on the US as the implicit guarantor in case of armed conflict. Hence it needs to accommodate US military requirements. China, for its part, is focused on obtaining control over Taiwan, which it claims as its own. At the same time, it is increasingly expansionist in its attitude to the surrounding waterways and neighboring countries.

The US point of view is that it needs to maintain a presence of armed

¹⁵ George Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People*, vol. 1 (Tuttle Publishing, 2000).

¹⁶ Akemi Johnson, *Night in the American Village: Women in the Shadow of the U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2019).

forces in the Okinawa region to counter potential military moves by China. This is in response to changes over the past 10–15 years where an increasingly assertive China engages in so-called grey zone tactics. In the grey zone, conflicts are kept below the threshold of war, but still involve physical force combined with diplomatic and economic pressure, information operations, and propaganda. Using these tactics, China has laid claim to numerous islands and reefs in the South and East China Sea to extend its direct control of shipping lanes. This has created conflicts with many neighboring countries. For example, China's claim to the Senkaku Islands, which have been administered by Japan since 1895, flared into physical attacks in 2010 and has been a bone of contention between the two countries ever since.

This brief sketch of the current situation shows that Okinawa has an important physical position for Japan overall in terms of a possible defense against China, while it is also peripheral in everyday politics. As such it is a sensitive borderland that would be an ideal target for FIMI.

Local Experiences of FIMI: Relevant Findings

The full analysis of the data collected in Okinawa prefecture is still in process. Furthermore, the research there was part of a comparative study. A complementary study from Finnmark, a county (i.e., prefecture) in Norway that is a similarly sensitive borderland to Russia in the far north, is currently in process. This research note will therefore not go into results in detail. Instead, it will summarize some findings and discuss these with regard to the mismatch between the situation on the ground and the reports and news examined when selecting the field site. This will lead to a discussion on the need for new research methods to deal with FIMI in the future.

As discussed earlier, there are considerable China-controlled FIMI activities going on in the information domain, focused on “telling China's story well” as Xi Jinping has exhorted Chinese media to do. However, when exploring these issues on the ground in Okinawa and Miyako Island little proof was found of a wholesale adoption of Chinese talking points, as fears about FIMI would imply.

The first divergence from the assumption that local opinions would or could be swayed by Chinese influence operations was the fact that the use of social media was low among people in the region. Edited media, such as printed local newspapers, local TV, and radio, was still the main source of news in Okinawa. On Miyako Island few locals spent much time on social

media beyond YouTube, which was primarily used to obtain practical information. A local social media influencer using TikTok, YouTube, and other platforms on a daily basis to promote the island bemoaned the fact that locals rarely used social media. A telling anecdote occurred during interviews on that island. The Covid-19 pandemic had recently ended when the interviews were done. The pandemic was notorious for the amount of disinformation and conspiracy theories that were spread on social media. However, among our interviewees only one person had come across, and believed in, such conspiracy theories: an informant from the main Okinawa island. The local fishermen preferred to get their news from the national broadcaster, NHK, and reported no such views.

In terms of political views that could benefit China in the region, the picture is mixed. A local peace organization had concerns and policies that certainly aligned with Chinese political wishes in the region. The local political and journalistic elite tended to be negative about the heavy US presence in the prefecture and used their platforms to work to reduce this presence in various ways. There is a local independence movement, albeit with little support among voters. However, if Okinawa ever reverted to an independent country and there were no US bases there, this would certainly benefit Chinese goals in the region.

It should be noted that the political views of these informants were formed long before China started engaging in FIMI activities on social media. Their perspectives were responses to local issues, and although the changes they want could benefit China, one should be careful about assuming that locals are simply puppets reacting to FIMI efforts, although such efforts could be used to strengthen existing views. Online funding efforts by the peace organization did have a donation from a Chinese United Front entity; academics had been invited to China to talk about Okinawan independence from an academic perspective and there were twin-city projects initiated. But scratching the surface showed these efforts to be thin: twinning projects were not followed up due to Chinese bureaucracy, the academic talk mentioned took place as one of dozens of talks in a large conference, and so on.

When it comes to China's goal of being perceived positively – for its anti-democracy stands to be overlooked or to avoid backlash for its aggressive behavior toward neighboring countries – there were similarly no signs of large impact. On Miyako Island the locals, particularly informants working in the fishing industry, were very negative about China, mainly because of the conflict around the Senkaku islands where the locals were

now unable to fish. Chinese tourism also faced some backlash, as discussions in local papers focused on there being too many tourists, and there were rumors about Chinese-owned shops benefiting more than the locals. An informant who worked in the tourism industry on the Okinawa main island was likewise not very positive about the tourists she worked with.

In sum, a key finding in this fieldwork was that too little is known about the actual effects of FIMI on the ground. Furthermore, FIMI reports and news, when discussing possible impact, often assume that deployment of content created to manipulate a population automatically will have *some* effect. However, as the cost of creating and deploying content is negligible, we are likely to see a lot of deployment without engagement. What can researchers do to improve our knowledge in this field and thereby help democracies counter FIMI efforts from non-democratic actors?

FIMI, the Cottage Industry of Worries and Research Improvements

The purpose of this research note is not to imply that one can simply ignore FIMI efforts that target democracies, whether in the context of a crisis or to undermine democratic norms generally. FIMI has had measurable effects in some areas, such as the increase in negative attitudes to Covid-19 and other vaccinations. Democratic norms and activities are also vulnerable to online dis- and misinformation, as seen in several elections around the world.¹⁷ At the same time several large social media platforms, namely Facebook and X/Twitter, have drastically cut fact-checking and moderation initiatives,¹⁸ making it even easier for dis- and misinformation efforts to spread. And authoritarian states will most certainly engage in, and extend the use of, FIMI. Thus in the last US election one could observe that China extended its FIMI efforts with antisemitic narratives.¹⁹

However, research that merely reports on the appearance of FIMI and

¹⁷ Sarah Rainsford, "Romania Hit by Major Election Influence Campaign and Russian Cyber-Attacks," BBC News. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgq18w507dko> Accessed on 2024-12-05)

¹⁸ Steven Lee Myers and Nico Grant, "Combating Disinformation Wanes at Social Media Giants," *The New York Times* (February 14, 2023).

¹⁹ Jeremy B. Merrill, Aaron Schaffer, and Naomi Nix, "A Firehose of Antisemitic Disinformation from China Is Pointing at Two Republican Legislators," *Washington Post* (October 10, 2024).

(implicitly) overestimates the potential impact, risks helping FIMI actors. As others have pointed out, Russia need not succeed with its FIMI approaches to have a negative effect in democracies. When such FIMI activities become public knowledge, it can make us suspicious of opinions that differ from ours, corrections of fake news from fact-checking organizations, and so on.

Non-contextualized reports about content found online can therefore increase the problems related to FIMI, rather than help alleviate them. Such reports, focused on online output from FIMI actors in isolation, have become something of a “cottage industry of worries”.²⁰

A key role for researchers should instead be to provide high quality information that reduces unnecessary worry and identifies where democracies need to focus their energy to combat FIMI. In other words, one needs to use research approaches that handle real-life complexity.

As a preliminary step in that direction, this paper suggests that researchers need to consider the following high-level issues: the *local context* the FIMI enters into, the *level(s)* their research works on, the *origins of narratives* used, and the *target groups* involved.

The *local context* that the FIMI activities enter into concerns two things: the information environment that locals engage with and local perceptions of the issues that the FIMI actors use in their narratives. How much attention do locals actually pay to the social media platforms used by FIMI activities? And what role do these platforms have? Are they used for entertainment or as a way of finding information the locals use for sense-making? It will not always be possible to do deep research, as discussed in this research note, but it is possible to spend some time to explore context. For instance, despite disinformation on X/Twitter often being discussed in Norwegian press, it is fairly irrelevant as only 8–9 percent of the population use X/Twitter. Furthermore, a divisive topic that either is of little interest to the people targeted, or is one where they have very strong opinions, will

²⁰ Ceren Budak, Brendan Nyhan, David M. Rothschild, Emily Thorson, and Duncan J. Watts, “Misunderstanding the Harms of Online Misinformation,” *Nature* 630, no. 8015 (2024): 45–53. doi: 10.1038/s41586-024-07417-w; Benjamin Strick, “Uncovering A Pro-Chinese Government Information Operation on Twitter and Facebook: Analysis of the #MilesGuo Bot Network,” Bellingcat. (<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/05/05/uncovering-a-pro-chinese-government-information-operation-on-twitter-and-facebook-analysis-of-the-milesguo-bot-network/> Accessed on 2022-06-24); Benjamin Strick, *Analysis of the Pro-China Propaganda Network Targeting International Narratives* (Centre for Information Resilience, 2021).

likely have little effect in real life.

Furthermore, researchers should consider the *level(s)* that their research works on when analyzing FIMI activities, and the effect it can have on their analysis. If one works at the level of international politics it is easy, but ultimately a fallacy, to collate all FIMI output from a given actor and assume it has an effect throughout the targeted country. It is also problematic to take for granted that there is a high level of co-ordination between different FIMI actors in a country. The response will be very distinctive in different communities, and diverse FIMI actors from one country may have a range of motivations and goals for their influence efforts. Assumptions from working at a high level of abstraction can then produce narratives that make the adversary seem more powerful/successful than it really is. Counter wise, examining how small groups, such as vaccine conspiracy theorists, embrace disinformation spread by FIMI activities may miss out the societal implications of this. Thus it is important to contextualize FIMI threats across the macro, meso, and micro levels to better understand the actual potential impact on a democratic society.

The term *origins of narratives* refers to the observation that FIMI actors may attach their output to an issue that they deem to be sensitive and useful to achieve their goals. An example from this research note is the issue of Okinawan independence. In English sources it has been raised as a topic by a few Chinese actors, such as generals and academics.²¹ Western news reports on this imply that Chinese-led FIMI activities have an effect locally. A more nuanced view is that, as in many sensitive borderlands, there is a small independence movement, but with little impact in real life. It has emerged out of local concerns and represents a democratic choice. Researchers need to bear in mind that an overlap of topics and narratives between FIMI output and what local media and population discuss is not same as success for FIMI. Any causality must be tested for and established separately.

Finally, given the low cost of producing online content that is freely and automatically distributed by social media platforms, it is important to focus on receivers and not senders of content from FIMI operations. The concept of *target groups* is common in advertising and communications generally. In FIMI this may be members of a particular Facebook group, a

²¹ Gordon G. Chang, "Now China Wants Okinawa, Site of U.S. Bases in Japan," *The Daily Beast*, December 31, 2015; Jane Perlez, "Calls Grow in China to Press Claim for Okinawa," *The New York Times* (June 13, 2013).

demographic entity such as Internet users between 70 and 80 years old, or people who share a world view that a FIMI operation tries to reach with a particular narrative. An important issue would therefore be to evaluate what impact a successful manipulation of a given group could have in real life. Take an FIMI operation trying to stop the election of a particular politician in a sensitive borderland. If it had success persuading younger people (who tend to be less active voters) or the population of the country's capital, then this is less of a problem than if it found a receptive audience among older people in the sensitive borderland area.

These four suggestions need to be operationalized in specific research methods. However, it is beyond the scope of this research note to make methodological recommendations. One could use big data analysis, focus groups, individual interviews, and a range of other social sciences research methods. However, the important point here is to not just extrapolate online appearances of FIMI content and make assumptions about impact, but to evaluate the FIMI aspect in the bigger picture of democratic societies' everyday communications and politics.

Conclusion

The role of researchers in the field of foreign information manipulation and interference should be considered in relation to other actors in this field. For instance, fact checkers tend to merely verify if certain news stories are true or false whereas official intelligence services tend to focus on threats in isolation and social media platforms tend to underplay any issues arising on their platforms. In the author's experience, researchers can provide a valuable middle ground as information providers to local politicians and businesses who may need to interact with countries that use FIMI as a tool of statecraft.

However, to fulfil this important role, researchers need to provide more contextualized and validated information about potential threats facing different actors in democratic countries. Researchers should provide information that helps us create a situational awareness that is relevant for different people's and organizations' areas of concern, rather than focusing on online FIMI content in isolation. Doing otherwise risks presenting Russia, China, and other FIMI actors as unstoppable machines with superbly crafted influence operations that always reach their intended targets when, as we have seen, in-depth research may suggest otherwise.

Arild Bergh profile

Dr. Arild Bergh is a principal scientist in the Total Defense division at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI). He has a Ph. D. in sociology from the University of Exeter. Prior to this, he worked for 20 years as a programmer in the UK. These complementary skills are used to research socio-technical security issues that may affect Norway. Currently he works on cyber-social propaganda, influence operations and dis- and misinformation in digital domains such as social media, particularly in the context of national crises and total defense. The research is focused on understanding how malign actors manipulate social media platforms, what they achieve and how democracies can detect and tackle such activities.