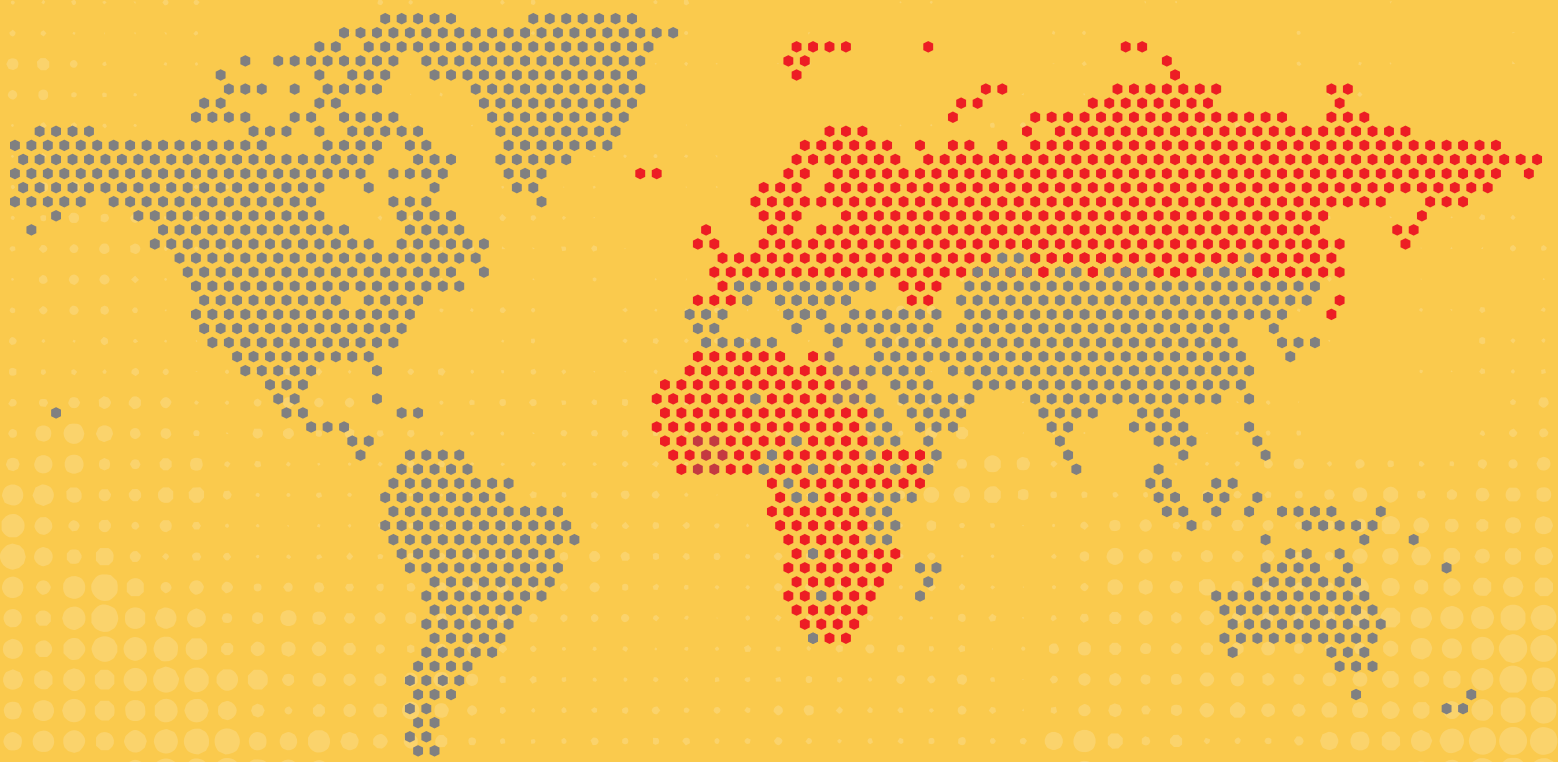




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Episode 5

How Russian Disinformation Campaigns in Africa Are Influencing Public Opinion About the United States



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How Russian Disinformation Campaigns in Africa Are Manipulating Public Opinion and Eroding Western Influence

IDA Ideas host Rhett Moeller spoke to Miriam M. Roday and Sarah A. Daly, researchers in the IDA Systems and Analyses Center, about their opinion piece, “Information Operations: An Understudied Facet of Russian Influence in Africa,” published on the website Foreign Policy News. The coauthors discuss Russian disinformation campaigns being spread via mass media and social media in Africa. These campaigns criticize U.S. and French security assistance efforts and praise Russia’s ability to serve as a mediator and counter-terrorism partner, thereby undermining U.S. influence with allies and partners in Africa.

[Begin transcript]

Rhett Moeller: Hello listeners, I’m Rhett Moeller, and I’m the host of IDA Ideas, a podcast hosted by the Institute for Defense Analyses. Welcome to another episode. As with some of our previous episodes, we’re conducting today’s recording over Zoom so there may be a slight difference in our quality. As always, we’re going to take some time now to talk about more of the interesting work going on at the Institute for Defense Analyses or IDA. Recent months have shown an increase in tensions around the world as various events unfold. Of course, we’re keenly aware of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting diplomatic and military maneuverings that have arisen as a result. But not all of Russia’s global ambitions are so overt. They’re equally at home operating on extended timelines in subtle ways. One key area of interest is an internet-based disinformation campaigns, designed to encourage division and to keep target audiences confused. It’s proven to be an effective tool. For more information you can re-listen to our weaponized tweets episode from October of 2020. And now Russia has identified new opportunities in other parts of the world. They’ve started running similar disinformation operations from Africa, where Western influence is in decline. This troubling trend is the focus of a recent article that appeared on the website “Foreign Policy News” in late December. The title is “Information Operations: An Understudied Facet of Russian Influence in Africa,” and it’s the work of two of our very own researchers who have joined me to talk about it more.

Miriam Roday of IDA’s Joint Advanced Warfighting Division and Sarah Daly of our Intelligence Analyses Division. Can you each take a moment to introduce yourselves and share a bit about your background?

Miriam Roday: Sure. Hi Rhett, my name is Miriam Roday, I’m a research associate in JAWD, and I graduated from Bard College with a degree in global and international studies, and then

ended up at the German Marshall fund. While at IDA, I focus on issues related to disinformation and social media influence campaigns, as well as on Russia and transatlantic security.

Sarah Daly: Hello Rhett, thanks so much for having us. My name is Sarah Daly, I'm a member of the Intelligence Analyses Division's Africa program here at IDA. We study security and geopolitical developments across the continent. I'm also a graduate student in the African Studies Program at Yale, where I focus on endogenous and exogenous drivers of violent extremism in East Africa.

Rhett Moeller: Great, thank you both for joining us today and welcome to the show. Sarah, I'd like to start with you, with everything going on in the world, what makes Russian mis- and dis-information campaigns in Africa such an important point of focus today?

Sarah Daly: I think a great place to start is to discuss why it's important to think about Russian influence in Africa specifically. I think there's a lot of people who would ask why Africa and why now? And there is this tendency particularly in U.S. national security and political discourse to marginalize the relevance and importance of Africa. Yes, Africa has long been in the crosshairs of so-called competition for influence among global powers. Personally, I don't find the great power competition paradigm productive. I think it gives too much credit to Russia and not nearly enough credit to African states and leaders who are also rational and powerful actors. But framing African relations as some sort of zero-sum competition is in part what facilitates actors like Russia to engage an anti-democratic self-interested and exploitative practices on the continent in the first place. And so, as we begin the conversation, it's good to note that you know Africa is a diverse and dynamic continent. It's rich in resources it has growing populations and markets. I believe the population is something like 1.3 billion today, but across the continent, there are also a number of locations and states that are critical to global trade and security. Africa has 54 member states in the United Nations at any given time three sit on the UN Security Council. And so, they constitute the largest regional block in that entire body. So, having strong relations with African states is really imperative to conducting international affairs. When we talk about the relevance to U.S. national security today, Russia intervening in ways that undermine democracy that interfere with our ability to conduct international affairs has really wide-ranging impacts.

Rhett Moeller: So, your response brought some points to mind. Mainly, given the rich differences from country to country across the continent, are there certain countries or areas that are more prone to this sort of activity, and if so, why?

Sarah Daly: Russia is fairly opportunistic when it comes to seeking inroads in Africa. In its client list relationships on the continent, they often use information operations to sort of soften an area or begin official overtures almost like an entry point as part of a broader set of negotiated offerings in their established relationships with African leaders so, you know, an African leader who might stand to benefit from a deal with Russia might be more amenable to it, without the conditions or oversight that might come with, say, a deal from the U.S. or from a multilateral body. In general, countries with weak governance and oversight are going to be more vulnerable to information

operations to sort of off-the-book or on-the-book deals with Russia. And at the end of the day, it's the populations at large that suffer as a result of that corruption and democratic backsliding. In countries that are more autocratic, they can actually more tightly control their information space, and then Russian offerings in the information space can be really effective and so Russia can come in as a partner to stay "Let us amplify your message. Let us help you stay in power." Whatever the carrot might be. And we see that a lot, Russia seeks to build relationships with leaders in countries where it can offer some sort of service, whether that be in terms of information or propaganda, or in the nominally private sector, whether it's in energy or security. There's a lot of exchange going on. And, and in these cases, states with leaders that sort of bend away from democracy, they might have more to gain working with Russia to influence things like election results or public opinion. And so in that sense it's not that there's one certain type of partner nation or one region in Africa that's more permissive for Russian information operations, but rather that the information operations can be adapted to many different environments and situations, basically to tailor to bring about the results that Russia wants in that particular instance, and we've seen that depending on whether it's in North Africa or East Africa or wherever it may be, the information operations change both in form and substance, depending on what Russia is trying to get out of it.

Rhett Moeller: Sarah, since you first composed this report, Sudan has undergone more political upheaval and there have been numerous coups unfolding in both North and West Africa. What role has Russian information operations taken or continue to play in these situations?

Sarah Daly: That's a great and timely question. In 2019 we saw Russian information operations deployed in favor of preserving then-President al Bashir against popular and political opposition, and ultimately, they were not successful. Russia had distributed a memo that has since been leaked basically encouraging Bashir and his military might to crack down on protests, to restrict free media, to tailor public messaging in a way that would be beneficial to him. And while this was ultimately unsuccessful in the face of pretty significant popular support and what we might call more positive viral momentum on social media, Russia continued to manipulate the information space in favor of its own interests, which include gold mines, private security contracts, and most importantly, military basing in Port Sudan. And so, these information operations continue to play a role in the run-up to the October 2021 coup, and actually continue in the aftermath of that we see Russia being very supportive of the coup plotters and, you know, downplaying the coup, advocating for the need to accommodate rather than isolate the military board, and so it's very clear that their information influence operation still continue to try to play a role in the interest of securing their own goals in Sudan, which puts them at odds with a great deal of the rest of the international community.

Rhett Moeller: So, you mentioned a lot of unrest in various places in Africa, especially across North Africa where there have been lots of coups. Is there indication, that Russia had a role in any of those?

Sarah Daly: I think it's hard to say, at this time exactly, what role Russia has played in coups in The Sahel in West Africa, but we can certainly see the extent to which anti-French propaganda,

created by Russia, has had an influence and gained momentum in places in the Sahel. Recent coups in Mali and in Burkina Faso really highlight this dynamic, you know, Western anti-terrorist activities across The Sahel have had collateral impacts on military on civilian populations and this can generate a certain amount of grievance, however, Russia has really amplified narratives of what we'll call "neo-colonialism" and grievance against the role of actors like France or the U.S. in counter-terror activities in this region. And so, while leaders in places like Mali and Burkina did not explicitly endorse pro-Russia sentiment, in the wake of their overthrow, members of the military have called for the expulsion of France, had stated preferences for working with Russia or seeking Russian support, whether it be political or military. So, because Russia doesn't have as many compunctions in working with non-democratic regimes and their involvement or support legitimates and gives staying power to military juntas or other types of non-democratic governments, it sort of puts them at odds with Western powers, with the African Union, with other regional bodies, who don't explicitly support military overthrow. So, in Mali, for example, Russia-linked misinformation contributed to a lot of social unrest and the eventual August 2020 and May 2021 coups and Russian support has in part allowed Mali's interim military leadership to resist oversight, to resist pressure, to abide by transitional agreements and things like that. To answer your question, yes, I think we can absolutely see that there are pretty significant impacts to Russian information operations in places that are already rendered vulnerable by their proximity to pretty intense, violent extremism and international conflict.

Rhett Moeller: Miriam, we've definitely seen all sorts of Russian disinformation operations happening across the continent. Why do you think they've settled on these particular operations? Why are they going about it this way, especially in light of say, China, who's coming in and doing very tangible things like infrastructure projects? There seems to be a similar premise behind the two approaches but a completely different tack.

Miriam Roday: Yeah, that's a great question and a really good point. I think I want to take us back a little further though. Back to the historical roots of this, and emphasize that what we're seeing from Russia today is nothing new, and using propaganda like they do or disinformation to manipulate beliefs or to mislead people, it comes straight out of the Soviet playbook, and it's what we would call "modern reincarnation of active measures."

Rhett Moeller: Can you help us understand what "active measures" means?

Miriam Roday: Yeah, absolutely. So, this is what the Soviets used during the Cold War. It was a more cost-effective way of countering U.S. influence, and it encompassed a broad range of influence activity, so it could be anything from targeted disinformation, to planted forgeries, manipulated truths, but it proved to be something that was extremely effective at undermining the West and democracy at large.

I would say that the biggest difference between then and now is just the instruments of intervention or it's the tools that Russia is using to conduct its campaigns and to amplify its messaging around the world. So, two newer tools that Russia uses to carry out its messaging that I want to highlight

here and that we talk about in our article: the first tool is automated accounts or bots that artificially amplify content to generate the illusion of consensus. And by that, I mean Russia uses bots specifically on Twitter to post a lot of content at a really high volume to make an idea seem popular. And, for social media users, it's easy to think at first glance, oh, this tweet has been liked and reshared 5,000 times, it must be true. When in reality, it may not be and it could very well be manipulated information. The second tool, and we talk about this in our article, is internet trolls. These are essentially Russian operatives that are hired to create fake social media accounts and spread inflammatory and divisive messages, and their goal, what these trolls are actually paid to do, is to flood the information space with Russia's desired narratives and overwhelm audiences to the point where they can't differentiate fact from fiction. And because they're sowing chaos and confusion in cyberspace, this new battlefield, the Russian government can very easily maintain plausible deniability, and that's one of the stronger pieces of these online information campaigns.

Rhett Moeller: That all sounds very interesting Miriam. And so, you've given us the, "what" they're doing. Can you talk to us a bit about how they're going about it, how is Russia approaching information operations in Africa specifically? And how do these campaigns differ from how the Russian's are doing it elsewhere?

Miriam Roday: So, their approach to information operations across Africa is multifaceted and in the article we described this as an ad-hoc blend of private military companies and NGOs that are backed by Russia and a whole host of local agents. So, this could be ordinary citizens on the ground that are recycling narratives that are pro-Russian and anti-Western, but also African politicians that have already been courted by Russian leadership to repeat those messages, and this is usually in exchange for other forms of support. And then of course they make use of local internet trolls, which I described before, and this involves paying Africans to craft fake social media personas that look and sound like real people that are just having conversations about political and social issues online. What we've also seen is that Russia's been able to dominate the information space because they buy local media outlets, and they insert Russian state own TV channels like RT and Sputnik in many African countries. This helps them shape people's views about domestic politics. So, I'd say the biggest benefit here is that they're messaging across multiple channels to advance their foreign policy goals and they're doing this at a low cost with relatively low risk by essentially outsourcing the job to proxies in Africa, which is what allows the Russians to pretty easily evade detection and also to make inroads over the long term. So, we saw this in Mozambique, Sarah I think you can elaborate on that.

Sarah Daly: Definitely. In Mozambique, we can see a really strong example of how Russia deploys a suite of tools to bring about strategic interest, to try to pursue goals, whether they be energy related or security related, really in an effort just to increase the amount of influence they have with their African partners. In 2019, Mozambique was heading into an election year, they had come out of attending the inaugural Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in October. And it's clear that some representatives of Russia had engaged with the then incumbent president Nyusi, he's actually still the president, from the Frelimo party, about collaborating on sort of electioneering on

social media campaigns to support his run in the president election. Now the extent to which the social media campaigns and misinformation, things like false polling data that were created by Russian consultants and organizations on the election in Mozambique. The extent to which these things actually influence voters is somewhat dubious. There are a lot of doubts about the freeness and the fairness of this particular election. But what's not in question is that Russia's involvement appeared to be part of some sort of larger relationship-building exercise between the two countries. After the summit in Sochi, and following the election, Russia announced that it would be forgiving 95% of Mozambique's debt, you know this was a really big deal, Mozambiquan leaders were still dealing with fallout from a large hidden-debt scandal a few years previously. At the same time, Russia also secured the first of several private military contracts from Mozambique from the government to combat Ahlu Sunna Wa-Jamo, now called ISM, an Islamic insurgency in Cabo Delgado in the North of Mozambique. Now that deployment was a bit of a disaster, and the PMC ended up pulling out, but it certainly helps sort of pave the way for other Russian interests in Mozambique, which include things like consideration for naval basing on the Mozambiquan coast, as well as a cooperation agreement between Rosneft and Mozambiquan energy companies related to liquefied natural gas deposits, also off the coast of Northern Mozambique. So, this is kind of a long answer, but the Mozambiquan case I think really demonstrates that Russia was really flexible in how it deployed its information operation campaign to sort of earn trust and support with Mozambiquan leaders who were in a position to award certain types of contracts to build stronger relationships, so that Russia could engage in the activities that wanted to in Mozambique. While what we saw happening in Mozambique was occurring in 2019 and 2020, I wonder, Miriam, if you can sort of pick up on what's happening right now in Eastern Europe.

Miriam Roday: Yeah, absolutely. So, one thing that I think's important to note about Russia's information operations, particularly in Eastern Europe as Sarah said, is that they're used in combination with kinetic or military action. So, if we go as far back as 2014 in Ukraine, when Russia annexed Crimea, they also launched a massive propaganda offensive to influence how the public was perceiving the conflict, and in the past few months we've seen the Russian government and its diplomats spreading false narratives that frame the U.S. as an aggressor. They're doing it on social media and traditional media and they're saying the West is to blame for the conflict when we know that it's Russia that created and is continuing to fuel a crisis in Ukraine. So, this is the same sort of messaging that we see in Africa. Russia is disseminating these narratives that paint the West as exploitative interventionists actors right and Moscow on the other hand is seen as this benevolent partner, that's engaging with Africa on mutually beneficial terms.

Rhett Moeller: All right, and I think the next question that probably comes logically to mind is: is this all achieving the desired end state for Russia? Sarah, do you have any insight onto whether or not their information operations are actually achieving the objectives that they've set forth for themselves.

Sarah Daly: Yes and no. As we've seen in places like Sudan in Mozambique, they really have a variety of objectives and Russian influence in African politics often fall short of changing the

actual outcome of the political contest, but it doesn't mean that they aren't successful at degrading democratic processes, eroding public trust and cohesion, bringing about the chaos that Miriam spoke about earlier. You know, Russia's overt albeit clumsy interference in Madagascar's election, which we didn't get to discuss today, but I really encourage you to go look it up. There is just a wealth of detail and information about all of these case studies, they're very interesting, but they sort of demonstrate the extent to which Russia's information campaigns in Africa are ideologically fluid in service of broader strategic goals, rather than specific political outcomes.

Miriam Roday: That's an excellent point Sarah, and another related idea here is, many people believe that an information operation does its job, so to speak, if a person changes their behavior as a result of consuming that information, but the reality is it's extremely difficult to demonstrate causality here and to say okay, because this person read a tweet that a Russian troll circulated online about a presidential candidate, they changed their mind and decided to vote for someone else. We can't really know for sure that that's what happened, but what we can say is, and this is where social media companies come into play, is the origins of this narrative can be traced back to the Russian government, and we can see the engagement online. They're actually metrics that Facebook and Twitter use that show who was exposed to what and how many times. And then of course you have the third-party observers, often the social media companies themselves that analyze and assess that information campaign.

Rhett Moeller: So, I think that leads to our final takeaway from all of this discussion, and that's understanding that misinformation and disinformation campaigns are a serious and growing concern. These operations are out there, and there is conscious effort behind them. What can we do to combat them? There are maybe several ways of approaching this I think. For instance, how do we hold technology providers accountable? What are some ways we can start to combat this problem?

Miriam Roday: There're a couple points here. The first is that we and we as in the West and our partners, we need to work together to raise public awareness of this threat and to expose Russian information operations as a way to reduce their effectiveness. So, remember that Russia has been able to achieve mass media control and many of these African countries and across Europe, they've been able to shape the citizens' impressions of current events. So, when it comes to social media campaigns, they're able to disseminate narratives and impose them on to the population without them knowing. So, if we can inform citizens that these malign activities are happening, we can, you know, ideally increase societal resilience against it. Another thing sort of related is that local and independent media needs to be strengthened so that citizens have access to factual information, particularly during sensitive times, like in the run up to an election. And the last point I'll make is there needs to be more engagement between the public and private sector and this goes beyond Russia's activities and Africa, it's applicable across the board. There needs to be more information sharing between governments and tech companies, as well as with private researchers, as we try to detect and expose disinformation. I think that Russia's 2016 campaign, which again targeted our presidential election, served as a wakeup call for the United States and for governments around

the world that the online information space is in fact a new battleground, and it proved that there needs to be greater collaboration with the social media companies themselves because that's where the disinformation lives. We could get into a discussion, Rhett, to your question about online content moderation, corporate responsibility to take down manipulated content, but I'll just end by saying I think that the truth is the most powerful tool we have at our disposal, and working with our partners in Africa, and other countries to provide an alternative to Russian disinformation should be a top priority.

Sarah Daly: You know I think we've seen evidence of this in the research on misinformation and disinformation in Africa that the private companies are actually doing a pretty decent job of flagging an outing bad actors on their platforms, you know when they're active, when they're trying to, you know, interfere in elections and things like that. And so, we need to look for ways to empower these companies to do more. One of the reasons why Russia is able to exploit information environments in Africa is specifically because we've been observing democratic backsliding. The U.S., given the extent of our security engagements on the continent, our interest in promoting democracy at home and abroad, really should have a more vested interest in preserving and promoting democratic processes amongst our partner nations in Africa. And you know part of supporting democracy abroad is not contributing to the problem. I think the U.S., and you know the UN, for example, and even the AU, there's this preference for stability sometimes at the expense of democracy and so, all that does is feed into the dynamics that empower other, you know malicious actors like Russia, who would be predatory in pursuing those types of power dynamics and relationships, so I think maybe it's time that the U.S. and our allies really reassess, how are we going to support democracy, how are we going to combat backsliding and what that's going to look like because it does have really big impacts.

Miriam Roday: To Sarah's point, there are absolutely risks to allowing authoritarian actors like Russia to make inroads in Africa particularly through information operations and election meddling, and probably the most important thing to note here about this kind of malign influence is that it's incremental. It's more subtle and the effects are going to be felt over the course of decades. And so, understandably, you have decision makers now looking to counter a primary adversary in the Pacific, or to beat back Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and the United States and its allies of course can't be everywhere at once, and can't contest Russian and Chinese influence all around the globe. But at the same time, we have to recognize that there are immediate impacts to Russia's campaigns. And as we wrote in our piece, and as Sarah just said, Russian information operations could fuel conflict in states that are already prone to election violence and they could destabilize governments and economies and this is all going to have the effect of eroding democratic gains across the continent, and this of course poses a direct threat and immediate threat to U.S. and Western interests.

Rhett Moeller: Well, Miriam and Sarah, I want to thank you very much for taking the time to discuss your work with us and for giving us more insight into a topic that is of obvious considerable importance, it has been most illuminating. Listeners, if you're interested in the article itself, we'll

provide a link to the article in the show notes for this episode. Before we close out. I want to take a moment to introduce Taylor White.

Taylor White: Hi Rhett.

Rhett Moeller: Taylor is a colleague, a fellow who works in IDA's Science and Technology Policy Institute located in downtown DC, she'll be working with IDA Ideas and will sit in as host from time to time. Can you take a moment to introduce yourself Taylor?

Taylor White: My name is Taylor White, and I'm a fellow at the Science and Technology Policy Institute. We work on a lot of issues related to science to assist the Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Rhett Moeller: Great. Well, I'm really excited to have you working with us and looking forward to having you on the show. As always, if you want more information on IDA and its ongoing work, please check us out at ida.org. We also have a presence on Twitter at @IDA_org, and we have a channel on YouTube. You can find direct links to all of our online presences in this episode's show notes. This show is hosted by the Institute for Defense Analyses, a nonprofit organization based in the Washington, DC, area. Once more, you can find out more about us and the work we do at ida.org. Thanks for tuning in, and we hope you'll join us again next time as we discuss another big idea here at IDA Ideas.

Show Notes

Learn more about the topics discussed in this episode via the links below.

Cazares, S. M., E. M. Parrish, J. R. Holzer, and R. A. Moeller. "Weaponized Tweets: Artificial Intelligence To Defend Against Influence Operations in Social Media." Audio of podcast available at <https://idaideas.podbean.com/e/ida-ideas-weaponized-tweets/>. Transcript available at <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/i/id/ida-ideas---weaponized-tweets---podcast-transcript/ns-d-17407.ashx>.

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