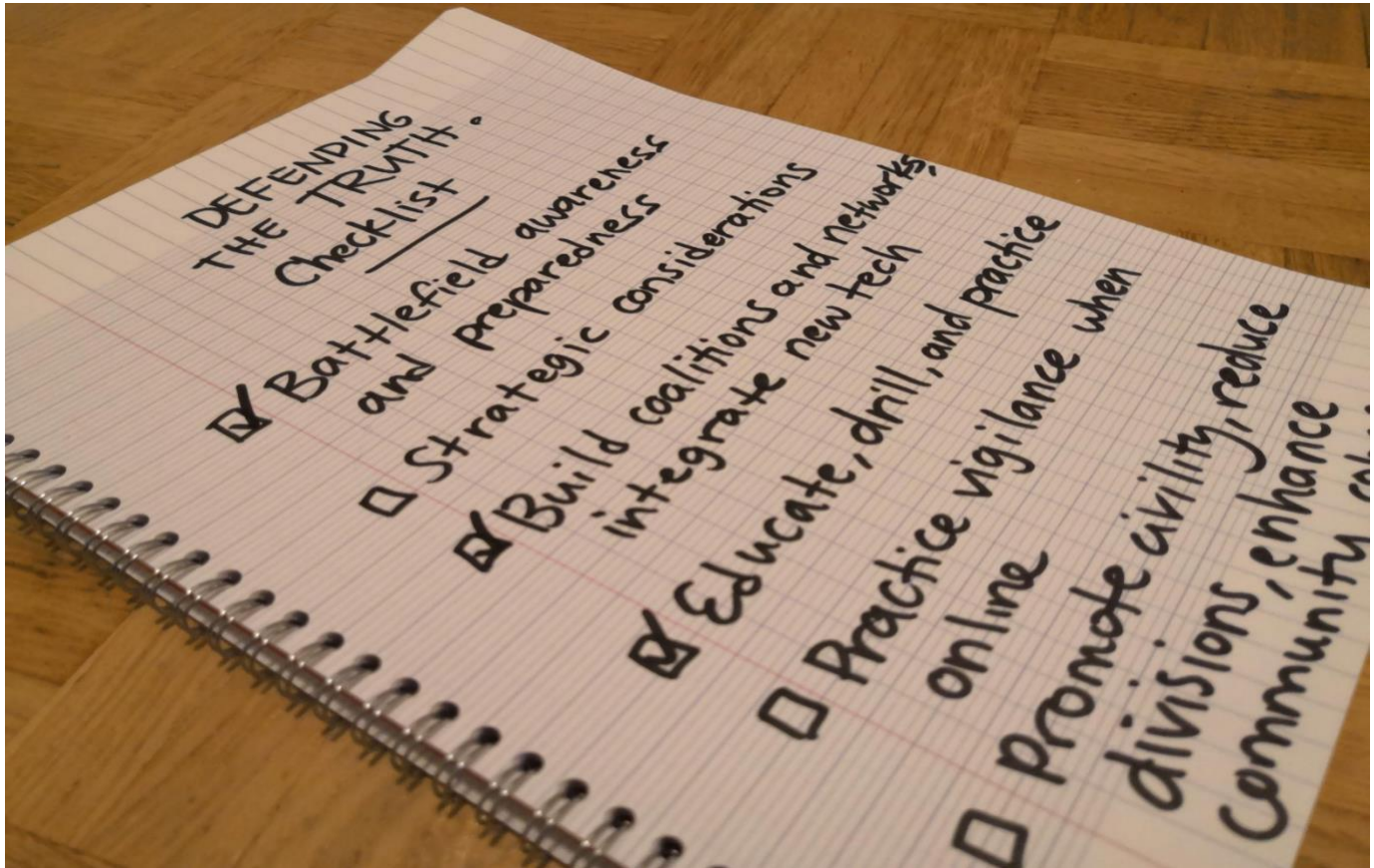


AN ACTIVIST'S GUIDE TO FIGHTING FOREIGN DISINFORMATION WARFARE



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This guide is also available on [Minds of the Movement](#),
the blog of the [International Center on Nonviolent Conflict \(ICNC\)](#)

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INTRODUCTION

In summer 2018, [Facebook announced](#) that it discovered a number of new fake accounts linked to the infamous Russian troll factory—the Internet Research Agency. One of these accounts included “resisters” that created and promoted a protest event called “No Unite the Right 2 – DC,” against the planned white supremacist “Unite the Right II” rally. A legitimate U.S. activist got duped into co-hosting the protest. By the time Facebook shut down the page, close to 2,600 users had expressed interest in the event and 600 of them said they would join it.

Two years earlier, Baltimore activists, not even realizing that the Russian trolls stood behind the provocation, [successfully pushed back against outside interference](#) and rejected Russian-based social media calls for protests and street demonstrations on the first anniversary of Freddie Gray’s death. In Texas, on the other hand, Russian trolls [managed to instigate two dueling protests](#) near the Islamic Da’wah Center of Houston in May 2016, one under the banner of “Stop Islamification of Texas” and another counter-protest, “Save Islamic Knowledge.”

Since 2016, activists have had to contend with the fact that at least one foreign power wants to use their local activism to destabilize democratic processes and institutions. No longer is their activism only local. Authoritarian governments seek to weaponize local grievances and legitimate activism as part of their non-military warfare against democracies. Even though local activists may have interests other than international politics and geopolitical rivalries, [Russia’s populace-centric warfare](#) arrived at activists’ doorsteps. This ushered in an era in which Russia and likely other authoritarian regimes, via open and concealed disinformation attacks, will continually attempt to co-opt, exploit, and distort authentic activism in open democratic societies.

Without a strategic approach to countering disinformation warfare from abroad, activists are in danger of becoming “useful innocents”—unwitting assistants for external interests bent on distorting their goals and actions, sowing discord, and undermining democratic practices and trust in democracy. As such, activists must be better prepared for the authoritarian onslaught.

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An Activist's Guide to Fighting Foreign Disinformation Warfare helps activists defend and push back against nefarious interference from abroad. It aims to reduce the danger that hostile foreign actors pose and their attempts at distortion and disinformation. The cornerstone of such resistance is tightly knit local communities that are organized, mobilized, and vigilant. Such communities are characterized by a dense web of mutual aid and solidarity assistance organizations, trusted information-sharing networks, information verification hubs, and rapid mobilization infrastructures to defend against both domestic and external authoritarian threats.

To prepare for disinformation warfare, the *Activist's Guide* underscores that activists in democracies must:

- I. **Become aware** of and prepared for the international information environment that their activism has been thrust into;
- II. **Consider general strategies** most suitable for this new information environment; and
- III. **Undertake specific actions** to advance identified strategic goals

Domestic activists must understand authoritarian regimes view the relatively open societies activists live in as an existential threat to regime survival. Authoritarian government is irreconcilable with democratic societies.

Therefore, whatever makes democratic societies more chaotic, divided, and pulled apart in different, preferably violent extremes, is, in the eyes of the authoritarians, worth an investment of time and resources. To that end, authoritarians look for low-cost and high-impact strategies that include weaponizing unwitting domestic activists to fuel disconnect and widen social rifts. Authoritarians use existing legitimate grievances as fuel to distort words and actions to their own ends.

Activists see their community organizing and activism as an effort to make their country stronger and better, and this healthy attitude can be evoked in the building of coalitions with diverse actors, including activists, civic associations, state institutions, and private corporations to strengthen self-organized solidarity communities. The *Activist's Guide* aims to channel this motivation into an actionable plan to better prepare democratic activists to fight for the truth.

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AN ACTIVIST'S GUIDE TO FIGHTING FOREIGN DISINFORMATION WARFARE

I. [Battlefield Awareness](#): Recognizing the New Reality in which Autocrats Exploit Authentic Activism in Democracies

1. Activists may feel that their actions are small and local and thus not of concern to other countries. They may be surprised to find out that activists in democracies belong to a high-risk group for foreign hybrid threats and attacks, including disinformation and becoming “useful innocents” for nefarious state and state-commanded actors.
2. The environment will become even more treacherous for activists in democracies in coming years as more sophisticated and difficult-to-identify fake and deliberately misleading content flood communities with the goal of exacerbating existing political, ideological, ethnic, or class-based divisions. One example of this that has recently emerged are “deep fakes,” fabricated videos or articles carrying highly realistic visual disinformation, while referencing elements of truth to try to seem credible.
3. Authoritarian regimes are determined to exploit grievances related to state misconduct and corruption. This is a particular challenge to address, because activists’ legitimate organizing on these issues is an essential part of democratic life and key to creating greater accountability, and yet such issues are also in-roads for foreign authoritarian regimes to try to create or widen local and national divisions.
4. Activists’ work centered on local community organizing, mobilization, and resilience to fight domestic injustice, combined with their vigilance against agents provocateurs and domestic misinformation, can also be tapped and used effectively in the fight against threats and attacks emanating from abroad.

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II. **Strategic Considerations**: Defining Overall Approaches and Behaviors in the Age of Disinformation Warfare

1. Take the same precautionary measures that you adopt while fighting a deceitful opponent at home to protect yourself and your allies against disinformation attacks from abroad.
2. Cross-community partnerships that bring together local decision makers, emergency planners, business entrepreneurs, digital and tech professionals, and activists are needed to establish effective capabilities, including rapid response mechanisms to withstand and counter authoritarian disinformation warfare.
3. Emphasize and promote assertive nonviolent discipline in your activism. Disinformation perpetrators aim to magnify tensions in the community and turn them into violent confrontations. Activists must strive to internalize nonviolent discipline in all their actions and advocate for this behavior among supporters, members, groups, and organizations within their community.
4. Take assertive actions to address grievances while also promoting alternatives and social cohesion based on inclusivity, humility, and benevolence. Even in undertaking confrontational nonviolent actions, stress the need for civility, dialogue, and practical ways out of political polarization and gridlock in which opponents have an opportunity to become shareholders in positive change in the future. Keep in mind that your language and actions could be misconstrued; authoritarian governments seek ways to deliberately misrepresent activist statements and activities, artificially widen divisions between you and your domestic opponents, and heat up political confrontation to such levels where violence becomes not only more likely but also viewed as justified.
5. Assess the following before launching a nonviolent campaign:
 - ✓ How well you know key campaign participants.
 - ✓ The degree of influence you exercise over participants' behavior and actions in the context of a nonviolent campaign.

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- ✓ Your capacity to maintain effective coordination with different groups within the campaign.
- ✓ Your ability to control the campaign message, set goals, and deploy actions that challenge the unjust status quo and advocate for alternatives. At the same time, leave room for adversaries to shift their positions and become stakeholders in the desired change.

6. Articulate how your activism and causes relate to nurturing and defending the truth.

III. **Tactical Considerations: Developing Capacity and Undertaking Specific Actions Against Foreign Disinformation Operations**

A. *Build coalitions and networks, and integrate new technologies*

1. Establish local networks that can be rapidly activated to verify accuracy of shared information or legitimacy of online personas that call for certain actions in the community. These networks could also be used to spread the word about identified doctored information that may be significant to the community.
2. Corroborate information with established local and national fact-checking organizations that identify false information.
3. Partner with allies in the community, in particular, universities and local technology companies with demonstrated digital know-how. Such partners could assist in analyzing disinformation attacks and threats to local activists.
4. Establish civic-public-private partnerships (CPPPs) at the local level that may engage state authorities, local security and emergency agencies, religious, business, professional organizations, communication and transportation services, and civic institutions and networks. Include these actors in developing integrative strategies and rapid response mechanisms against influence and disinformation operations of foreign actors that might target a local community.

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5. Build solidarity and mutual assistance programs or services for others in your community to help build awareness about and resilience to disinformation operations.
6. Identify technologies and tools such as these deep-fake identifying apps that will help you and your community ascertain authentic and doctored audio, visual, or textual information.

B. Educate, drill, and practice

1. Develop courses and trainings to build resilience against outside manipulation in your community. Emphasize civic and democratic virtues. Teach how to identify a deep fake and conspiracy theories and ways to react to them. Teach responsible and critical thinking of consumed information. Share ways to verify information. Showcase examples of nonviolent mobilizations in defense of democratic principles, including that of telling and defending the truth. Prompt learners to design community-specific measures to counter disinformation operations from abroad.
2. Conduct trainings and drills for the public, and target young people and activists in your recruitment. Conduct role-play simulations, board and computer-based games that incorporate both domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns, and share cases of successful resistance strategies to such campaigns. Teach specific strategies that activists can use to better defend themselves and their information space.
3. Work with local teachers and instructors in elementary, middle, and high schools and after-school programs to help develop appropriate curricula with relevant cases of activism, with the aim to improve digital and media literacy, including the ability to identify misleading or fake information, and how to respond.

C. Exercise vigilance when online

1. Be aware of anonymous interlocutors who attempt to draw you to causes that seemingly align with your own activism goals. Ask them to reveal their identities first before committing to anything.

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2. Do your homework by vetting your potential partners. Perform due diligence by asking the following questions:
 - ✓ Who are these anonymous personas asking me to join an online protest group or a live street protest?
 - ✓ Do they know anything about my community? Who do they represent? Where does their legitimacy come from?
 - ✓ What are they trying to achieve? Is it clear that they care for the well-being of the community, or do they in fact seem to be more interested in undermining further community cohesion and exploiting its existing divisions?
 - ✓ Who has already met them in person and can vouch for them?
 - ✓ How do I know they are truly with me, genuinely aligned with my goals and values, and committed to the long-term struggle of which I am a part?
 - ✓ Will they go out and join the street protest as well? If not, why not? If yes, how will I recognize them?
 - ✓ Will they be there for me in the event that their proposed actions and people that joined them are repressed? What will such solidarity look like and how will it be offered?

3. Although part of due diligence is checking online personas' social media accounts, do not assume that a social media account is legitimate and its posts accurate because it has a lot of replies, likes/favorites, or reposting/retweets. Time and again, we have observed disinformation go viral. In case of doubt, do not repost or quote. Even when there is no apparent inaccuracy, it may be more prudent to only quote the source but not repost or retweet the information (which would have automatically shown others how many retweets or likes the information already accumulated).

D. Promote bridging of diverse interests and populations, reduce divisions, and enhance community cohesion

1. Insist on a degree of self-control in community interactions. Civility does not preclude a conflict, but conflict must always be carried out through disciplined, nonviolent means.

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2. Draw on community mediators to convene dialogues on challenging issues within your community.
3. Do not let incidents of violent conflict, racism, discrimination, or bias, whether within your movement or in your community, go unnoticed. Address them immediately and professionally.

E. Engage in responsible disruption and useful construction

1. Undertake nonviolent actions such as demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and noncooperation as a last resort, and with the broadest possible coalition of diverse groups and organizations. This approach will shine light on injustice and illustrate that there is a unified community stance on the problem and possible solutions.
2. Invest in developing low-cost, high-impact parallel media in the form of blogs, podcasts, videos, interviews, and instructional webinars to build capacity to fight disinformation. Be absolutely committed to verifying and confirming factual information presented in these media.

F. Fight for the truth

1. Develop strategies to enhance your community's receptivity to the idea that ascertaining and verifying facts is essential for addressing a problem.
2. Declare your commitment to truth and verifiable facts, including making public and honest corrections if you inadvertently shared inaccurate information or joined actions set up by fake personas. Praise those who adhere to truth or publicly retract untruthful information that they might have previously shared.
3. Stress the importance of truth in community as a matter of inviolable human rights. There are no human rights without state institutions being truthful to citizens. There is no public truth without respect for human rights.

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G. Reach out to the communities of the attacking authoritarian state

1. Reach out to local community members of the countries that are suspected of disinformation attacks against your community. Identify potential civic allies in these countries with whom you can start interacting, for example, on the basis of apolitical issues such as sports, environment, or technological innovation. In turn, cross-border communities of practice can create propitious environments for tackling political questions of social justice, corruption, transparency, and accountability.

H. Use humor

1. Create or [join](#) an online “community of elves” that take on hordes of trolls. Commit to making online trolls look ugly and boring by countering them with humor and beautiful actions. Make truth, facts, and accurate information hot, appealing, and viral.

REMAIN

POSITIVE THOUGH VIGILANT;

NONVIOLENT THOUGH RESOLUTE;

MOBILIZED THOUGH REFLECTIVE;

**BE WIDELY INFORMED AND NETWORKED WITHIN AND BEYOND YOUR TIGHTLY KNIT
SOLIDARITY COMMUNITY.**

AND REMEMBER, WHERE THERE IS A WILL, THERE IS A WAY.

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