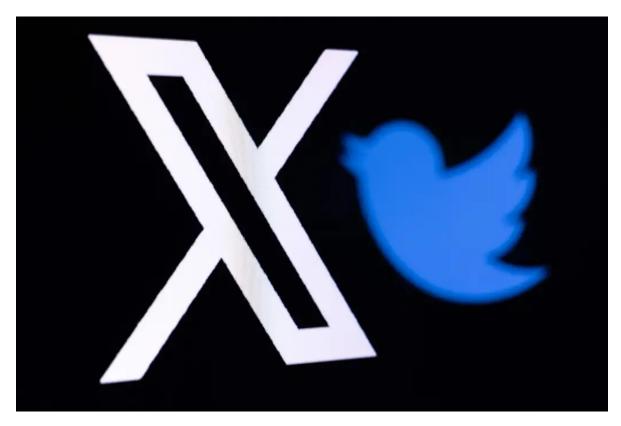# How disinformation became the greatest threat to global order

Aviva Klompas

6–8 minutes

The deep challenges facing today's world come through in daily headlines about everything from global terror to inflation and catastrophic weather events.

Social media platforms such as X saw thousands of fake accounts appear after the Hamas attack on Israel. AFP via Getty Images

But according to the World Economic Forum, the most severe

global risk over the next two years is actually the spread of misinformation and disinformation aimed at widening societal and political divides.

The threat has been lurking for the past half-decade, but the convergence of technological advances and geopolitical dynamics has made the stakes higher than ever.

AI-generated content, bots, algorithmic manipulation, and other tools are being used to squash dissent, manipulate elections, and — as Avril Haines, the US director of National Intelligence, recently announced — shape false narratives, foment outrage, and spread hate toward Israel and the West.

In 2024, half the world's population is participating in elections: in the United States, Mexico, India, Britain, Taiwan, France, and even (not so democratically) Iran. More than ever, lies spread by bad actors have the potential to empower tyrants and embolden terror groups.

Avril Haines, the US director of National Intelligence, says AI-generated bots are being use to manipulate elections and silence dissent. AP

"Misinformation" is generally defined as false and incorrect information. It may be repeated unintentionally but can still do harm. "Disinformation" is more nefarious and aims to deceive people using intentional falsehoods.

As we've long witnessed, autocrats and dictators have been telling lies to win power and marginalize enemies throughout history.

During the Cold War, for instance, the Soviet Union saw Israel as an unwanted American outpost in the Middle East and set out to undermine both nations through disinformation that drew on centuries-old antisemitic tropes. The Soviets said Zionism was fascist, imperialist, racist, and colonialist. They said Zionists were Nazis — and that all Jews were Zionists.

Kari Lake attacks 'fake news' media

0 seconds of 1 minute, 7 secondsVolume 0%

The Soviets also successfully injected those lies into the halls of Western academia, poisoning students with the very rhetoric we now hear in campus encampments across America.

Today, state-backed propagandists can be exponentially more effective by leveraging social media to rapidly spread malicious content and AI, which can easily make the absurd or evil look real. Microsoft, for instance, reports that Russian social media accounts are once again spreading anti-US propaganda in advance of the US presidential elections, often disguised as legitimate accounts.

"AI-based [programs] are being used to create deep fakes of

political leaders by adapting video, audio and pictures," the World Economic Forum wrote in 2022. "Such deep fakes can be used to sow the seeds of discord in society and create chaos in markets."

Thanks to its control by the Chinese government, TikTok is helping to squash criticism of abuses by the Chinese government against the nation's Uyghur minority. Human Rights Watch

Other global threats — hurricanes, terror attacks, rising food prices — are exceedingly harmful but also easy to spot. AI-generated disinformation is more dangerous because, by its very nature, it is cloaked to look authentic.

Sometimes, the problems originate with the platforms themselves. TikTok promotes itself as an open forum that fosters personal connections among its billion users. But the dark truth is that the Chinese-owned company appears to suppress topics critical of the Chinese government.

A report from the Network Contagion Research Institute found that TikTok squashed conversations about China's treatment of the

Uyghurs and protests in Hong Kong while amplifying conversations that undermine America and its allies.

When The Wall Street Journal created accounts registered as 13-year-old users, it took just a few hours before they were shown highly polarized content, including pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel content.

Disinformation post-October 7th attempted to convince the world that Hamas was treating Israeli captives benevolently. AP

The disinformation about Israel spreads well beyond TikTok.

A day after the October 7 attacks on southern Israel, more than 40,000 fake social media accounts that had been inactive for over a year suddenly began posting pro-Hamas messages hundreds of times a day, according to Cyabra, an Israel-based social threat intelligence company. They used hashtags like #IStandWithIsrael to reach audiences and peddle pro-Hamas propaganda.

As videos circulated online showing Israeli women and children taken captive by Hamas, these fake profiles declared that no harm would come to them because Hamas was known for its "humanity and compassion." We see these false narratives persisting today even as former hostages [have revealed the barbaric conditions in Hamas captivity.](#)

[Across Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok,](#) Cyabra found that 26% of the profiles — one in four — participating in conversations about the Hamas-Israel war were fake. Frighteningly, the tactics seem to work. While 79% of Americans support Israel in its war against Hamas, [43% of 18-24 year-olds back Hamas](#). Not surprising for a demographic that disproportionately receives news through social media.

This year more than half of the world will participate in major elections, including the US presidential election in November. Getty Images

As the Director of National Intelligence recently warned, Iran is covertly encouraging protests against Israel on social media platforms, "seeking to stoke discord and undermine confidence in our democratic institutions."

"Americans who are being targeted by this Iranian campaign," she said, "may not be aware that they are interacting with or receiving support from a foreign government,"

It's time for government agencies and social media platforms to take more proactive steps to fight these disinformation campaigns. The rest of us also have a part to play. We must educate ourselves to identify disinformation, verify what we see online, seek out trustworthy sources, and — most crucially — apply critical thinking skills before hitting the share button.

Aviva Klompas is the former director of speechwriting at the Israeli Mission to the United Nations and co-founder of Boundless Israel.