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State-Sponsored Disinformation, Hate Speech, and Violence: Mapping Conceptual Connections and Analysing them through Iran's Anti-Bahá'í Propaganda

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Abstract

Considering the persisting force of state-sponsored campaigns of hate speech and disinformation around the world, this chapter offers an initial theoretical model of six interrelated statements based on available literature to facilitate the study of such operations. Additionally, a case study is built by applying this framework to the campaign carried out by the Islamic Republic of Iran against the Bahá'ís, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in that country. Apart from illustrating the key precepts of the model and testing their analytical value, the case study generates some insights for further reflection and research.

Keywords

State-Sponsored Disinformation, Hate Speech, Incitement, Human Rights, Violence, Iran, Bahá'ís

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State-Sponsored Disinformation, Hate Speech and Violence: Mapping Conceptual Connections and Analysing them through Iran's Anti-Bahá'í Propaganda

Campaigns that combine hate speech and disinformation against vulnerable minorities persist in the 21st century as a strategy intimately connected to direct violence and frequently sponsored by specific governments. The role played by these discursive practices in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda genocides has been documented (Oberschall, 2000; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014), whereas the recent human rights catastrophe of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar provides an example of their persisting force well into the present century (Ronan, 2019). In these cases, as in less notorious ones, verbal attacks and distortions of facts have been used effectively to incite violence and discrimination against specific populations. Additionally, the systematic use of online media for manipulation campaigns has been detected in 70 countries, according to an Oxford study that also highlights how these digital spaces are co-opted by many authoritarian regimes (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Aggressive language and deception are certainly not new, and neither is the fundamental contribution they can make to structural and direct violence. However, the concepts of “hate speech” and “disinformation” have only gained prominence in the last decade in scholarly work, legal frameworks, and policy debates (Kapantai et al., 2020; Paz et al., 2020), as they address the complexity, speed, global reach, and loosening of ethical standards that characterize communications in the current media environment. Although a diverse range of studies about these two concepts is rapidly accumulating, the relationship between both notions —as well as their connection to state-sponsored behaviour— still constitutes a fuzzy subject.

In this chapter, we argue that developing conceptual clarity about such relationships and studying them empirically are two important, pending, and interconnected tasks. On the one hand, by implementing a review of key theoretical developments and research works, this chapter will identify and describe some fundamental connections between state-sponsored disinformation and state-sponsored hate speech, as well as the relationship of these communication practices with more flagrant violations of human rights against specific populations. On the other hand, to test this general framework and draw new insights from factual experience, those conceptual categories will be used in the process of organizing and interpreting available information about a contemporary case, which is the persecution carried out by the Islamic Republic of Iran against the Bahá'ís, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in that country.

Naturally, disinformation and hate speech do not exist or thrive in a vacuum. A number of studies present some key contextual reference points, such as Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) “information disorder”, Bennet and Livingston's (2018) “disinformation order”, and Chadwick's (2019) “crisis of public communication”. What these assessments have in common is the observation of deteriorating democratic values in a rapidly-changing media environment —“a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming . . . ‘polluted’ messages” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 4), and the erosion of “authenticity, rationality, tolerance, and trust” in the dynamics of public opinion formation (Chadwick, 2019: 4). It is within this general context that we approach the following definitions.

1. Conceptual Definitions

Concerning disinformation, a succinct and widely accepted definition is “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (European Commission, 2018: 3). We understand hate speech, on the other hand, as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group” on the bases of some “identity factor”, such as race, religion, gender or other (UN, 2019a: 2).

Even when morally unacceptable or socially harmful, acts that fit under this wide definition of hate speech do not necessarily constitute a crime, especially in legislations where freedom of expression is considered a fundamental value. If speech assumes the form of “incitement”, however, things change. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), for example, states that “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law” (Art. 20).

This leads us to the third component of our conceptual “triangle”, which is the subject of violence. Galtung’s (1990) classical theorisation on interrelated forms of violence provides important contextual elements about this topic (Filibeli & Ertuna, 2021). Whereas direct violence is composed of visible events, its variations across multiple circumstances can be explained in terms of its root causes in cultural and structural forms of violence. Under this perspective, physical or verbal aggression (direct violence) can be interpreted, for example, as emanating from the normalisation of hate speech, prejudices, and stereotypes against certain groups (cultural violence), which can in turn be institutionally sanctioned through state-sponsored social and economic discrimination (structural violence). At the same time, direct expressions of violence reinforce the structural and cultural aspects.

2. Conceptual Mapping and Observation: Complementary Strategies

Based on the definitions presented in the previous section, the following pages will seek two interrelated objectives. The first one is the development of a framework that conceptually integrates the notions of state-sponsored hate speech and disinformation with more direct forms of violence that constitute flagrant violations of human rights. The purpose is to facilitate the study of historical and current campaigns where these elements are the defining characteristics. As we do not have records of previous theoretical works that address this disinformation-hate-violence triangle in an integrated way, our model required the study of systematic literature reviews that present the state of the art for each of these matters independently, on the one hand, and the publications that observe each side of the “triangle”, on the other. All the conceptual postulates and empirical observations that help define and interrelate these subjects were analysed by mutual comparison to classify them into broad categories. Six statements emerged as a result; they will be presented as the components of a preliminary theoretical model that can guide future research efforts on the matter.

The second specific objective is to analyse those connections through an empirical case study in order to explore how they operate in practice and generate new theoretical insights from social reality. The persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran combines the three elements of state-sponsored hate, disinformation and human rights violations, and can therefore provide paradigmatic value (Brookshaw & Fazel, 2008; Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2016). Complementing the academic literature, the case study will be developed through primary sources: official reports and resolutions from intergovernmental organizations, documents

from the *Archives of Bahá'í Persecution in Iran*—which include official state and media documents from this country—, reports from human rights organizations, and accounts published by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC), the organization that represents the Bahá'ís at the United Nations and other international fora. The documents will be content-analysed through qualitative techniques using our theoretical model as a set of pre-defined organizing categories of information.

Apart from defining conceptual postulates and observing a case in order to understand its internal features and mechanisms, our work intends to generate new insights for further theoretical refinement. This implies a dialogue between theory development and a case study, an epistemological strategy used in approaches such as *process tracing* (Bennett & Checkel, 2014).

3. Theoretical Model

This section offers an initial theoretical model of six interrelated postulates to facilitate the analysis of state-sponsored hate and disinformation campaigns, based on the available conceptual and empirical studies on the matter. By “initial model” we mean an approximation to the object of study in order to capture its complexity and breadth by representing some of its key features and mechanisms, and not a detailed network of explanatory interactions.

3.1. Hate relies on disinformation

While disinformation can exist and spread without relying on hate, the opposite is hardly imaginable. When hate drives action, truth and falsehood become relativized weapons. Although hate speech and disinformation seem to have a multifaceted relationship, this is the aspect that is predominantly assumed and reported in the literature. Terms like “invariably” (George, 2020: 146), “inextricably” (Kojan et al., 2020: 81) and “essential” (Holvoet, 2022: 2) are used to characterize the reliance of hate speech—including incitement—on disinformation. A study has found that partisan attacks, negativity, and hate speech are most likely to occur in false information that deviates furthest from reality (Hameleers et al., 2022). It should be noted, however, that not all content imbued with hatred reveals its own aggressive characteristics. Hate speech can also appear to be “articulately and reasonably expressed” (Sorjal, 2015: 299).

3.2. Hate incitement is a predictor of direct violence, including mass atrocities

Much work has been carried out to determine the relationship between incitement and violent action, and solid arguments about the former being a “precursor, indicator, predictor, and catalyst” of the latter have been made (Richter et al., 2018: 40). We have chosen the word “predictor” for this model because of its value for early warning and prevention purposes, and in order to move beyond debates about causality between speech and violence, as both are clearly multidimensional and complex objects of study.

It should also be noted that strong connections have been observed not only with respect to the concept of incitement, but also when using the more general concept of hate speech, with its intimate nexus to deception. “Hate speech begets hate crimes, as can misinformation and disinformation” (UN, 2021a: 7). In the case of mass atrocities, including genocide, emphasis should be added. The UN framework to analyse these crimes includes “acts of incitement or hate propaganda” targeting particular groups or individuals among the “triggering factors” (UN, 2019b: 17). Genocides involve the participation of large

numbers of ordinary individuals transformed by “messages, imagery, and power relationships that dehumanize the intended targets” (Kopel, 2016: 452).

The seemingly ubiquitous presence of aggressive and deceiving discourses in online environments might suggest—at least to the uninformed observer—that such practices are somehow “diluted” across cyberspace, equally affecting diverse segments of the population, with attackers and victims constantly exchanging roles. However, this is not the case. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, three quarters of cases of hate speech around the world target specific minorities (UN, 2021a). Of course, targets are not always numerically defined. Concepts like vulnerable groups and gendered disinformation and hate help to address this aspect (Juárez-Rodríguez, 2015; Judson, 2020).

3.3. Disinformation (and counter-disinformation) pose threats to human rights

While the previous component of our theoretical model highlights the danger that public expressions of hate can pose to the fundamental rights of people, disinformation itself—even when free from hate speech—shares the same characteristic. This is because it depends on practices that “infringe on the autonomy and dignity of the person” (Glassius & Michaelsen, 2018: 3795). An illustration of this point is how disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic affected the right to public health (Ramírez-Bañuelos, 2021). As reported by a recent UN document, there is “growing evidence that disinformation tends to thrive where human rights are constrained, where the public information regime is not robust and where media quality, diversity and independence is weak” (UN, 2021b: 2). In such contexts, counter-disinformation initiatives can be understood as way of promoting human rights. However, it should also be noted that counter-disinformation can be used to justify human rights violations (Colomina et al., 2021). What becomes clear when considering this double-edged relationship, is that human rights norms offer “a normative framework that should underpin responses” to disinformation (Jones, 2019: 2).

3.4. State agency implies a unique concentration of resources

Troll factories, controlled mass media, surveillance, restrictions to information access, special propaganda offices, as well as instrumentalized education systems, state-religion institutions and co-opted public figures are some of the resources used by certain states to deceive and spread hate for specific interests. Clearly, states are “the most prolific users of disinformation” for a reason (Gunatilleke, 2021)—they concentrate the necessary capabilities. A relevant example is the massive use of coordinated fake social media accounts controlled by human, bot, and cyborg state actors to spread computational propaganda and disinformation, especially in critical moments of public life (Beskow & Carley, 2020; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Niblock et al., 2022; Zannettou et al., 2019).

Furthermore, state potential for discriminatory and deceiving communications cannot be fully assessed without considering the role that policy, administration, and legislation—even constitutional texts—can have in allowing, expressing, and engendering hate and disinformation. For example, Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar are left stateless through the constitutionally accepted notion of “national races” (*taingyintha*) (Cheesman: 2017).

3.5. Hate campaigns are structured and underpinned by wider narratives

When analysing a hate campaign, attention tends to be drawn to speech that is extreme, but these expressions do not work in a vacuum. “Hate campaigns comprise multiple, layered, loosely interlocking messages, disseminated by different actors over years or

decades” (George, 2020: 147). These messages have some basic features, such as the dehumanization of a target group and the reinforcement of a positive in-group feeling (Ibrahim, 2019; Kojan et al., 2020; Uyheng et al., 2022). A feature we mentioned previously is their reliance on disinformation narratives, which in turn are not completely out of touch with reality—they “alter, doctor or manipulate” information (Hameleers, 2022: 8). At the same time, speech acts happen in an even wider discursive context. Master narratives, which cultivate a primary social identity, provide the backdrop and are regularly refreshed with contemporary examples from the news and other sources (Levinger, 2018).

3.6. *The strategies are multilevel and multichannel*

Considering the scale and power of state structures, intentions to deceive and spread hate will usually move into action through specific objectives and multiple means and levels of implementation. These levels are conceptually organized in various ways, usually by interconnecting terms like operations, manoeuvres, tactics, behaviours, practices and toolkits (e.g., Bathia & Arora, 2022; European Commission, 2022; Lukito, 2020; Vargas et al., 2020). No model or terminology has been proven to be universally applicable. The important premise is to consider multiple strategic levels and relations organized around objectives or intentions.

On the other hand, as the object of study is communicative in nature and massive in its reach, media is usually a key criterion when approaching problems of disinformation and hate speech. Digitally mediated communication, especially social media, is usually the dominant focus, but there is no reason to assume that malicious agents will choose specific media types in the clear-cut manner that communication scholars frequently do. Usually, a strong communication objective calls for a multichannel approach. Neither can we assume that offline practices like a sermon from a pulpit or a pamphlet at a doorstep are intrinsically less relevant.

4. Case Study: Iran’s Hate and Disinformation against the Bahá’ís

Adherents of the Bahá’í Faith have faced violent opposition in Iran since the mid-nineteenth century, and they are under a new wave of systematic and state-sponsored persecution from the early 1980s to the present day (Amanat, 2008; Ghanea, 2002; Milani, 2016, Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2016). With a community of around 350,000 members, Bahá’ís form the largest non-Muslim religious minority in that country. However, they are regarded by the state as “unprotected infidels” (UN, 2019c: 13). They are murdered with impunity, imprisoned without due process, their properties are confiscated and their rights to work and education are denied, just to mention some examples of violations.

This section will focus on the discursive aspect of the persecution by analysing state-sponsored disinformation and hate speech, as well as their relationship to violence. Considering the evident complexity of such a task, it is expected that the six components of our theoretical model will help us build a case study that provides both clarity and breadth, on the one hand, and generates new insights for theoretical reflection, on the other.

4.1. *Reliance of hate on disinformation*

Manipulation of truth has historically been a key ingredient in the “otherization” narratives about the Bahá’ís in Iran (Chehabi, 2008; Yazdani, 2012), but the relation between the contemporary concepts of “hate speech” and “disinformation” requires scrutiny of specific communication contents. The organization representing the Bahá’ís has gathered

a sampling of official and semi-official anti-Bahá'í propaganda issued in Iran during a 16-month period, documenting around 400 articles, broadcasts, and other materials (BIC, 2011). The report identifies recurring themes —that Bahá'ís are agents of Zionism or spies for Israel, that the Bahá'í Faith was created by imperialist powers like Great Britain or Russia, that it is a “misguided sect” associated with “cultlike” practices, and several others. It also observes a shift in these themes, which are “expanding from traditional theological attacks to those with a more contemporary flavor, with the goal of prejudicing the increasingly secular-minded Iranian population” (BIC, 2011: 13). The media examples provided by the report show that incitement can rely on disinformation to an extent where the distinction between the two becomes only analytical. For example, an article stating that Bahá'ís are, according to their teachings “free to marry their daughters, sisters, aunts and uncles” constitutes both an incitement to hatred and a baseless fabrication at the same time (BIC, 2011: 21).

4.2 The predicting qualities of hate speech at different analytical levels

The Bahá'í case shows how aggressive speech precedes violence on many levels. For example, at a general or historical one, Ayatollah Khomeini's discourse presented this minority as Iran's “internal Other” for decades before climaxing in the Islamic Revolution (Yazdani, 2012), which in turn was followed by several atrocities —including the execution of over 200 bahá'ís— by a regime that actively moved along the pathway towards genocide (Affolter, 2005; Bigelow, 1992; Momen, 2005).

An example of a more specific analytical focus is the BIC's (2012) report about the happenings in Semnan between 2005 and 2012, where anti-Bahá'í seminars, sermons, pamphlets and radio programmes created an atmosphere of animosity where both officials and citizens became free to act with impunity. The same approach can be narrowed down to an event-level of analysis —for example, as the document recounts, a single conference given in early December 2009 by the author of an anti-Bahá'í book was immediately followed by a series of raids in 20 Bahá'í homes (BIC, 2012: 17).

4.3. Counter-disinformation as a justification of human rights violations

In Iran, the precept of countering disinformation is instrumentalized by the government for Internet censorship and shutdowns, which are common in the country, and draft legislation for “preventing and countering publication of false information” has been created to increase control over the media (UN, 2021c: 12). But direct attacks on communities and individuals, including Bahá'ís, are also made on the same grounds. A charge commonly used by Iranian officials is the “spreading of lies” (Sanasarian, 2012: 312). For example, court documents against Sahba Rezvani, who was imprisoned in 2008, charge her with “propaganda against the holy regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran” (BIC, 2012: 21).

4.4. Concentration of resources implied in state agency

In Iran, “discrimination against the Baha'i community is legally sanctioned” (UN, 2017: 16) while “widely exercised by various organs of the Iranian state” (Milani, 2016: 137). Official budgets have included allocations for “educational” programmes to “confront” the Bahá'í Faith, and state organs have been established for that purpose (BIC, 2019: 12). The following example can help in understanding the institutionalized nature of hate. In 2007, the Education Department in Shiraz circulated a form to be completed by all non-Muslim students. The section for “religion” listed only four options: “Christian”, “Jew”, “Zoroastrian”, and “Perverse Bahaist sect” (BIC, 2013: 23).

Hate and disinformation activities are implemented through such discriminatory policies, but also by blocking the application of non-discrimination policies. For example, Bahá'ís have long been denied access to any means of communication with the public and cannot counter the accusations propagated about them and their religion, which is in contradiction with Article 5 of Iran's Press Law (BIC, 2019).

A key dimension of the campaigns against the Bahá'ís, is a network of hundreds of political, judicial, and religious leaders that openly speak and write against this minority (BIC 2018 UPR.). Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, for example, issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) on his website stating that “you should avoid any association and dealings with this perverse and misguided sect” (BIC, 2019: 13). The volume of anti-Bahá'í media contents is difficult to measure, but they include thousands of articles, videos and other materials (<https://iranbahai persecution.bic.org>). Bahá'í representatives have denounced that the propaganda is “shocking in its volume and vehemence, its scope and sophistication” (BIC, 2012: 2). They also inform that other sources of slander, such as graffiti, pamphlets and anonymous letters contain “without fail” the same language found in media affiliated with the government (BIC, 2019: 12).

4.5. Wider narratives

Hate campaigns are structured and underpinned by wider social narratives. In this respect, the case shows how such structures can persist over time, even when some of their protagonists and specific details can be “conveniently” supplanted in different periods. For example, the successive accusations of Bahá'ís as agents of the Russian, Ottoman, and British empires in different stages of Iranian history over 150 years have now taken on the form of Bahá'ís as agents of Zionism and Israel in the contemporary official discourse (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2008).

At the same time, the master narrative about the Bahá'ís has a more fundamental religious component. As adherents of a post-Islamic religion, Bahá'ís are referred to as followers of “the misguided and misleading sect” (*firqā-ye dālla-yi muḍilla*) (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016: 125). For this reason, they are considered religiously unclean (*najis*). This long-standing belief has persisted as a backdrop of anti-Bahá'í rhetoric and discrimination in the 21st century. For example, a *fatwa* signed by six Grand Ayatollahs in 2010 states that they “are even more *Najis* than dogs” (BIC, 2017: 120), and dogs are considered ritually impure in Islam. Using Ervin Staub's analysis of the road to genocide, Affolter (2005) shows how the anti-Bahá'í narrative is a fundamental strategy for excluding people from one's own “moral universe” (Affolter, 2005: 89).

4.6. The strategic perspective

Currently available information on the Bahá'í case shows the value of gathering evidence at the highest level of government in order to understand strategies. The official policy of the Iranian government against this minority is summarized in a secret memorandum obtained in 1993 by a UN Representative (BIC, 2017). Signed by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, it states that “the government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked” (BIC, 2017: 95). This document, which remains in effect 30 years later, outlines measures to restrict the educational, economic, and cultural life of Iranian Bahá'ís, including the creation of special propaganda offices. On the other hand, public speeches and *fatwas* of the Supreme Leader set the tone for anti-Bahá'í rhetoric and are usually followed by multiple amplifying messages in media organizations affiliated with the government (BIC, 2012).

While massive disinformation operations deployed by the government of Iran through fake accounts on Twitter and other social media have been detected and analysed (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Nemr & Gangware, 2019, Niblock et al., 2022), the study of official documents, public speeches, and legacy media contents can place social media activity within wider strategies and detect specific state policies and campaigns. In this context, offline activities cannot be underestimated. Visual Arts Festivals where participants are incentivized to design anti-Bahá'í posters, or the presentation of numerous anti-Bahá'í books at Tehran Book Exhibitions and Fairs are examples of such operations (BIC, 2022).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Describing a state-sponsored campaign of hate and disinformation, and its connections to violence, can be a difficult task. This chapter has sought to facilitate this task by providing six interrelated conceptual statements that can help organize and interpret information about the scope and nature of such campaigns. The analytical value and the main precepts of this initial model were illustrated through a case study.

Additionally, the case generated some conceptual insights that, even when not fundamentally altering the framework, can prove useful in future research endeavours. Concerning the reliance of hate speech on disinformation, the Bahá'í case shows how this relationship can be strong to an extent where the distinction between the two becomes only analytical, as deception and hate incitement can be constituent elements of one discourse, one campaign, and even one statement. Regarding the predicting qualities of hate speech in relation to violence, the case reveals that these qualities can be observed at different levels of analysis, ranging from historical processes to event-specific views.

With respect to the structural properties of hate speech, the connection of these discourses to wider social narratives, and the potency they can gain when sponsored by the state, the case study helps us move from general notions to more specific analytical categories that can be helpful in gathering and organizing information. Furthermore, it shows how evidence from official documents, public speeches, state-affiliated legacy media and offline communications can clarify the underlying strategies and provide context to the social media operations that are usually the focus of disinformation studies.

As this chapter focused on state-sponsored campaigns —and not on the wider social processes of hate speech and disinformation—, some contextual aspects have been excluded from the analysis, such as the roles of non-state actors like social media platforms and users, or the communication patterns shown by the populations under attack (Karlberg, 2010). Although this approach was chosen intentionally to place state action in the focal point, it is only based on an analytical distinction, as state action is connected to wider societal processes.

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