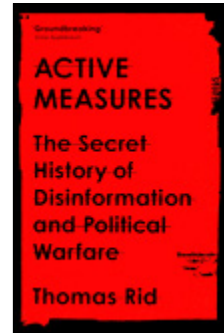


Book Review



Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare

By Thomas Rid

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Reviewed by Flight Lieutenant Tom Raeburn

Biography: Flight Lieutenant Tom Raeburn is a Typhoon Pilot with 6 Sqn at RAF Lossiemouth. In 2018 he completed a Chief of the Air Staff's 'Trenchard' Fellowship at King's College London where his research focussed on strategy in the 2014 Ukraine conflict and the structure of Violent Non-State Actors.

Introduction

Disinformation or 'active measures', in the parlance of an intelligence professional, are frequently referenced in relation to recent global events. From the feared 'troll armies' of the Ukraine conflict to a US election plagued by allegations of foreign meddling we are never far from this malign influence. In *Active Measures* Thomas Rid takes the reader on a journey through the last century of disinformation. Many may recognise the newsreel moments, but few will know the back stories of subterfuge and intrigue which Rid has researched in impressive detail. For any operator in the political, intelligence or security spheres this is a fascinating and enlightening read which illuminates the threats and myths of disinformation.

Thomas Rid, now Professor of Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins, has a breadth of academic experience across various leading think tanks and the King's College London Department of War Studies. Crucially he has occupied the academic intersection of cyber and irregular warfare, a standpoint which is frequently apparent in his analysis of contemporary active measures. Rid offers a balanced examination. He avoids hype but clearly signposts the

strategic significance of modern disinformation techniques and the threat faced by Western liberal democracies.

The modern era of active measures, according to Rid, commenced in the 1920s. Journalism, transformed by the speed of radio, adopted a new cutthroat style ripe for exploitation by state actors. Little further justification is made for this precise start line and it would perhaps be interesting to demarcate this first generation of active measures against earlier nefarious activity.

The first in detailed investigation highlights the capacity for an organised disinformation to shape the 20th Century political landscape. Operation Trust, a Russian ploy, created a faux monarchist group within the Soviet Union. Not only did this corral potential agitators in a closely monitored organisation but externally it ensured a steady stream of managed strategic communication. Potential aggressors, seeking the demise of the new communist state, were persuaded that they should avoid intervention and instead await an internal revolution. This episode is the first of several case studies which Rid uses to highlight the ease by which genuine activists can be enveloped in a disinformation operation. Active measures simply light the touch paper of prevailing discontent with targeted communication and financial support to forward the aims of a hostile power.

Active Measures, uses a generational analysis with four suggested eras. This provides a useful, if slightly superficial, frame with many of the active measures seemingly spanning the traits of several generations. The first wave of the 1920s and 30s exploited the new mediums of high-speed journalism. Following World War II, the major intelligence agencies engaged in aggressive campaigns exploiting intelligence breakthroughs to target the underlying issues of an adversary. The author proceeds through several detailed case studies, hopping seamlessly from West to East as the great powers sought to prevent military deployments or initiate a cultural revolution. Uncovering CIA, KGB and Stasi plots he demonstrates how active measures increasingly became the remit of well-funded professionals establishing growing bureaucracies to manage tailored disinformation – the third wave.

Finally, Rid embarks on his most interesting analysis, appraising the fourth generation where disinformation is more active but less measured than ever before. Unconstrained by the limits of editorial discretion and amplified by automated 'bots', active measures can exploit the internet to reach a greater audience. There is a fascinating description of Russian meddling in the US. Rid highlights that while initial active measures were beset by technical incompetency the aftermath, notably an investigation into the attack, has contributed to several widely held conspiracy theories. Subsequent measures incorporating elements of covert action in addition to disinformation, such as the hack and sale of National Security Agency tools, have proved even more effective. Not only have these turned international public opinion against the USA but they have also rendered important national intelligence assets impotent.

It would be easy for an author to overhype a rising threat from organised active measures, but Rid is consistent in his balanced analysis. This is an essential attribute when dealing with a topic which is so closely linked to emotive communication. Several profiled operations were hugely successful, but the legacy of others has been written by disinformation departments keen to justify their continued existence. The metrics of new posts by online troll armies may be terrifying but frequently these simply resonate in existing echo chambers with little engagement from the target populace.

The insight which *Active Measures* offers into the playbook of disinformation establishes this text as an essential read for the modern warfighter. Increasingly operating in theatres where active measures may be deployed, it is vital to understand the blend of leaked intelligence, fakery and targeted dissemination which can make these instruments so potent. Thomas Rid also raises an important conceptual issue. With active measures primarily exploiting a free press and open internet are liberal democracies increasingly vulnerable? Disinformation revels in factual uncertainty and therefore strong transparent democratic institutions are our best defence – an important lesson for the design and conduct of our government organisations.

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