

# Understanding the Contemporary Information Landscape: A Handbook

**Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (Eds.)**

Study Group Information



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6/2022

Vienna, August 2022

**Imprint:**

Copyright, Production, Publisher:

Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence  
Rossauer Lände 1  
1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by:

National Defence Academy  
Command  
Stiftgasse 2a  
1070 Vienna, Austria

In co-operation with:

PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes  
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

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August 2022

ISBN 978-3-903359-49-9

Printing:

ReproZ W 22-xxxx  
Stiftgasse 2a  
1070 Vienna, Austria

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## Acknowledgements

It is always difficult to correctly recognize the individual effort that goes into producing a handbook like this one. No language is rich enough to properly recognize the generosity, resilience and tenacity of contributors and translators alike. Yet we must make an effort to do so.

The editors would like to personally thank the operations staff at the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes for the logistical and financial support provided over the course of this project. We also want to thank Mr. Benedikt Hensellek and Mr. Andreas Wannemacher, respectively of the Austrian National Defence Academy and the Ministry of Defence of Austria, for supporting, managerially and morally, the production of this handbook. The editors especially recognize Ms. Polina Vershinina in her role as managing editor for the Russian version. Thanks to her and our volunteer translators, we can extend the hand of understanding across divisive borders.

In an atmosphere of rising tensions, the editors especially want to congratulate all the contributors who have produced chapters for this book, not merely for their excellent time management skills, but also for producing content that would be appealing to markets that seem farther out of reach day by day. The editors are especially proud in seeing individuals of countries in conflict working together to achieve a common product. That is the spirit of the PfP Consortium, and one of the chief aims of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group.

Inevitably, there will be mistakes and oversights in the present handbook. These are the editors' alone, and we hope these will not deter the readers or the institutions from using the important product herein in their respective learning journeys or curriculum.

## Introduction

Regardless of how one defines “thinking”, it remains that people are thinking beings. Things have not always been this way, however, and it is only recently in human evolution that this quality has emerged to surpass mere problem-solving. The ability to form opinions and construct knowledge from different bits of information is what defines humankind. Animals display mental agility in problem-solving; sea otters use stones to crack open urchins; seagulls use gravity to open mussels; cows have been seen activating the bolt-lock of their holding pens with their tongues. Intelligence is a multi-faceted ability, but only in humans has it evolved to the point of creating problems as well as solutions. That is also recent. When humans created the tools to hunt or tend their crops, they also created weapons of war. The invention of the main battle tank follows that of the wheel in a nano-second, in planetary terms. There is no need to review humanity’s catalogue of dual-use inventions to bring this point home.

Today’s “hybrid warfare” (a term which does not make unanimity, but is nevertheless here to stay), concerns dual-use; more precisely the use of innocent tools for sinister purposes. Experts define hybrid warfare as a combination of military and nonmilitary, as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic coercion, lawfare, corruption, irregular and regular forces. Hybrid methods attempt to undermine target institutions and populations to achieve strategic aims, while allowing hybrid actors to maintain their activities below the threshold for retaliation. While these threats are not new, technological advancements and increasing global connectivity have recently expanded their speed, intensity, and scope. On the other hand, Russian experts (e.g. Gleb Pavlovski or Modest Kolerov) pretend that what in the West is perceived as Russia’s hybrid warfare would be in fact methods all states used to exert soft power.

Information is one of those dual-use tools. However, unlike an axe, we don’t *automatically or instinctively know* when this tool is used for constructive or sinister purposes. Unlike a person wielding an axe, the context from construction to aggression is informed by whether the axe is being swung at a tree as opposed to another person. Information is what we know – at least as far as

the general public is concerned. Social psychologists such as Daniel Kahnemann will quickly bring precision to our conceits; information is what we *think* we know. Or what we *choose* to think (and that, not so freely).

Information is public knowledge, freely available, instantly, at our fingertips. However, our brains are tailored to a particular understanding, therefore it is also personal knowledge. We think it absolute and central to our selves. Because it is sophisticated, or because of the way it is presented, we think it is new. Because it is new information, we confuse it with learning. And because we confuse it with learning, we imagine that there is an effort involved, much as there was an effort involved in learning at school. When we were at school, the reward for learning was not merely graduation; it was the access to *truth*.

We unconsciously think this truth is immutable because truth cannot be wrong, and because we have made the effort to learn, and we have acquired truth, we are also in the right. This is not merely a matter of ego; of knowing something someone else may not know; it is a matter of integrity. Our respective schooling has involved us in a transactional relationship with our teachers and with the world they enabled us to discover. This transaction amounts to the “deal” we have just alluded to; *effort in exchange for truth*. A deal which should not be broken; if the truth changes, then the implications are that we were fooled. It is this implication that our ego cannot accept. This equation has been drilled in our minds since the invention of systematic schooling a thousand years ago. According to James Burke, it is only since the Reformation (that is, since the invention of the printing press) that humankind has been enabled to reflect on information received. No longer is learning committed to memory; it is committed to paper, and from the information on the paper, the mind is free to consider the information objectively.

It has only been two-hundred and fifty years since mankind’s understanding of the surrounding world has provided the basis to question absolutism, and thence, everything else. For many countries, this process was never implemented, as they were beholden to different philosophies and philosophical processes. For other countries, like those in the South Caucasus and the rest of the former USSR, these processes were delayed first by an absolutist monarchy that ended only in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and second by the Communist experience for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Too often we neglect to



reflect on the impact of the end of Communism on generations of people led to believe in history's march, that it explained everything in human relations, and aimed at the disalienation of humankind.

East and West have this in common that “unlearning” knowledge is *costly*. After decades of living with a “truth”, individuals become reluctant to part with a philosophical position because of their emotional investment in it, and because of the sacrifice implied; sacrifice of ego, on the one hand, sacrifice of time, on the other. People don't have time to re-learn. Time is a precious commodity, and nowhere is it more precious than among populations who feel they have been cheated out of liberty and development opportunities. At the root of all this is the false equation that learning is an effort which is rewarded by truth. Because truth is personal, it can be exclusive. It is, literally, what we make of it.

At this point, we should cast a light upon another confusion; that between *facts* and *truths*. Facts are elements that can help us build truth. True in themselves, facts are not necessarily *the* truth. An example; the sun rises in the East and sets in the West. This is a fact which is as true for the person who believes that the *sun goes around the earth* as well as for the person who understands that the *earth goes around the sun*. The image – the reality of what they see – is the same for both, but there is only one truth; that the earth goes around the sun. This confusion between fact and truth leads people to re-investigate facts. This is why we have a resurgence of people who believe mordicus that the earth is flat; because they think they are questioning an exclusive truth. In reality, they are bringing into question a *fact*.

This is why our “own” truth cannot be turned against us, but that one can always question the neighbour's version. The neighbour, of course, has the same attitude towards us. We question each other's premises and “truths”. At the most benign level, it is friendly small talk between friends or family members around a coffee, glass of wine, or at the dinner table. At worst, it is a declaration of war among nations. Usually, our conversations have led, ever since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, to the synthesis of information into new combinations, new truths. And so humankind went from the wheel and the printing press to space and nano-exploration. This process continues as I write, and as you read. Today's level of technological achievement is so high, the pace of discovery so celeritous that individuals

struggle to keep up with the truths they learn from one month to the next. Our particular verities become all the more precious because they are ephemeral. The human task of cooperatively building tomorrow's "truth" becomes exhausting, if not self-defeating. We have become "lazy with success".

We have lulled ourselves into this laziness. We prefer believing today's progress stems from our collective immutable truths and leave it at that. This has made us vulnerable to the weaponization of information. Our truths are challenged daily by contradictory or deliberately shocking information to shake us into action. In an effort to cope, the individual suspends belief and disbelief equally. In other words, he or she does not know what to believe, and is bereft of method to sift through truths and untruths. Yet meaningful social interaction requires currency with affairs surrounding us, and that could affect our lives. Scientific progress demands clean and clear information even more. We are all ever more vulnerable to disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, falsehoods and fantasy. Clear and clean information is needed to make decision-making as optimal as possible. No decision can ever be fully optimal because all the information pertinent to one's dilemma is not always knowable or available. Nevertheless, decisions are always *rational* insofar as they are taken in the best interest of the decider with the best information available.

Some may seek vaccination for themselves or their children while others won't based on the information that they have received and integrated into their decision-making processes. Obviously, there cannot be two right decisions; one will be more correct than the other based on the merits of the results on the one hand, and on the merit of trustworthy sources acting in the public interest. At some point, it "satisfices" (to take Herbert Simon's happy term) that experts are doing the thinking for us. This leaves every individual to pursue his or her own field of activity expertly on their own, contributing to the progress and welfare of the whole society. Engineers, lawyers, physicians, chemists, accountants, etc. each do their part in the mechanics that help a civilization advance effectively. Evidently, the media is the conduit that serves each individual this information.

The problem comes when the quality of information we receive from these expert sources is no longer trustworthy. The processes and motives of media reporting have become suspicious. Therefore, the individual is left with no

other option than to devote more and more time to the pursuit of information accuracy, now essential to “more optimal” decision-making. Few take the time to do this. Not only because time is more precious, but because our biology cannot cope with the vastness of information. We each have our mental shortcuts, and as laziness sets in, we rely on those ever more frequently. And so we don’t check information, skimming the headlines only, and declaring it true if it “feels” right, and untrue if it makes us angry. Whether information salubrity is a subjective feeling or an objective fact is not open to question here. The dilemma of deciding how to determine whether the information that is presented to us is suitable is at issue. This book seeks to provide answers to the need to develop methods to reinforce information’s credibility and trustworthiness.

The idea for this book sprang forth from the conclusions and policy recommendations issued in the wake of the 16<sup>th</sup> workshop of the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group, held in Reichenau-on-the-Rax, Austria, in November 2017. That workshop followed a previous workshop also held in Reichenau in November 2015. The 2015 workshop asked whether it was appropriate to spin information for the benefit of preparing populations to peaceful settlement of disputes. The general conclusion was that truthfulness was always the best policy. The 2017 workshop sought to stimulate thinking about the information that appeared on the lead-up to the many conflicts that have racked the South Caucasus (and Ukraine). More to the point, the question asked was whether it was possible that today’s conflicts were waged upon yesterday’s lies. The results were inconclusive, but the recommendations were that henceforth, information transmitted through the media should be of better quality. Since this is a recommendation that has little likelihood of ever being applied, the best alternative was to provide a primer on how to navigate the media.

This contribution is designed to sanitize the media landscape – at least in information consumers’ minds. This book is intended for policy-makers, media studies, public relations and public administration students. Students of psychology, and particularly social psychology may also find this contribution useful. It starts off with a theoretical section and it then explores the various information risks and methods to responsabilize the media, protect the consumers, and help them in discriminating between appropriate and vitiated information. The last part of the book is introducing several case

studies, which were meant to serve as concrete examples to be used in dedicated studies of information risks and remedies. We hope that the production and distribution of this book will eventually lead to a reduction of regional tensions and that together, the peoples across the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian areas will shape the better future they deserve.

# **PART I: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

## Media Literacy: A Practitioner's Outlook

*Jan Hunter*

I was a radio journalist for many years. I worked at radio stations as a news anchor and as a street reporter covering everything from fires to crime, to political and/or entertainment personalities coming to town. Over the years, I worked in several radio markets both small and large, climbing the ladder to a major news market, which was Boston. As a news reporter I would gather and disseminate the news, often working by myself to do so in smaller markets and then with a team at larger stations.

Broadcasting was entirely different then. There were a lot more broadcast news stations than there are now. Today, due to the tightening of budgets, consolidation and the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) decision to allow stations to merge, the situation is different. Some would think that the news – particularly local news coverage – would thusly be reduced, but in fact, in many markets, local news coverage has *increased*. A recent Gray TV study concluded that;

“(in) markets where a consolidation of local broadcast stations occurred, total news output increased at those stations by almost 28 %, while in other markets without any consolidation, the total news output grew less than 18 % over the same period.”<sup>1</sup>

When I was a reporter and news anchor, CNN and the other 24-hour news networks were barely on the scene so you did not have the constant barrage of news. The Internet was in its infancy, as illustrated – in the mind of Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979)<sup>2</sup> and of course social media was as yet unheard of.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Jacobson, “Gray’s BIA-Boosted Consolidation Argument: News Viewers Win,” Radio+Television Business Report, (23 Sept. 2020). <https://www.rbr.com/grays-bia-boosted-consolidation-argument-news-viewers-win/>, quoting Mark Fratrick, “The Impact on the Amount of News Programming from the Consolidation in the Local Television Station Industry”, BIA Advisory Services, (23 Sept. 2020), 14-18. <https://www.rbr.com/wp-content/uploads/Gray-Local-News-Programming-Report-.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (London: Pan Books, 1979). The novel introduces the guide which came to conceptualize what we know today as the Internet.

Print journalism was also quite different and there were many more news reporters covering different beats, and multiple topics. Also, in print media, over the years, there's been a consolidation and tightening of budgets mostly due to the Internet. With more people reading their news online than purchasing a newspaper or journal, as well as the influx of free news and video sites, print media's production costs have become prohibitive relative to electronic media. Paper and printing ate into dwindling advertisement revenue profits, and many hallowed newspapers, like the Chicago Tribune in the United States, or La Presse, in Canada, have either gone bankrupt or switched to online delivery exclusively.

Then, as now, when news happen reporters are sent to the scene to cover or investigate. In broadcast there are assignment editors who work with a team to decide what they will cover for the day. There is an old saying in broadcast: "...if it bleeds, it leads." That has always held true. Broadcast being a visual medium they prefer using colourful visuals; meaning the reports of a fire, or something "happening" other than a talking head – so to speak. However, if a breaking news story happens such as a shooting or a major announcement, that always takes precedence over whatever is already planned for coverage that day, and perhaps the ensuing days.

Reporters can propose a story to the assignment editors and it is really a team effort to decide what will be covered. Sometimes reporters do have to 'fight' to have a particular story aired, and that can be subjective – what seems like a good feature story for example to one person may not appeal to the editor. The reporter could also have a strong interest or concern in a particular area such as health – perhaps a family member was affected by a particular illness so the reporter might be more apt to want to cover that particular area. News editors as well as station owners also take into consideration the "demographics" of the station – who is the audience they are catering to? Who are their listeners? Who watches their segments? What age group is the main audience? Those factors are also weighed in when editors decide on what stories are to be covered and during what time period of the day they will be aired.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, prior to round-the-clock broadcasting, there were four to five programming slots; morning/matinée, daytime, prime time (after supper), and late night. Prime time was the most sought after slot for TV stations because this is when the

However, what often happens when editors decide on their coverage is that a particular issue was recently covered by the station itself or by another station and the editors don't want to cover it again by giving it a "plug" so to speak. And, sometimes it just comes down to the fact that they have too many breaking news stories that day, and so therefore the story that was scheduled to be aired, and had already been recorded has to be scratched. It may air again on another date, or it may be canned. Therefore, timing can be important!

Reporters go out and do their interviews, and then go back to their stations to edit their stories. At that time, they record their "voiceover" in which you hear the reporter speaking over the video that's being played. They also prepare an "intro" to the story, to do when the anchor goes to them during the coverage. So, the news production cycle involves a lot of planning, and "breaking news" is not always as spontaneous as suggested.

Radio stations use stories that have great "sound bites" or short recorded declarative sentences or captions written to capture people's attention because it's a medium for the ear, not the eye. You have to realize that most people are driving in their cars, or perhaps cooking in the kitchen when a radio news story comes on. That is why it is particularly important in radio to "write stories for the ear." This has become particularly important as "sound bites" have grown shorter and shorter every year. Whether this is a function of a decreasing attention span is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the necessity to grab attention and maintain it may sacrifice nuance, leaving the individuals to draw conclusions they would not otherwise have with another medium.

Radio stations compete amongst each other and against TV stations as well to get the news first and deliver it in a timely fashion. Both radio and television stations package the story usually within a time limit of one to three minutes and back time it to fit in the commercials. Commercials or ads drive

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broadest section of the demographics could be found watching television, as it was family viewing time. Day time, by contrast, had an audience mostly composed of homebound spouses, and thus programming was tailored to their tastes, and sponsored by companies most likely to cater to their needs as well, hence the appellation of "soap operas", funded by companies like Lever, Colgate, Ivory, and Johnson Wax (Eds.).



the revenue for the radio or TV station. They do not dictate the news but, in a way, they dictate the time limit or length of the stories you are viewing and hearing to fit in the commercial. And of course, the revenue from those ads is what keeps the station operating. In certain markets, there is a sort of co-dependency between stations and advertisers; they both need each other, and so stations may shy away from certain news items for fear of displeasing their sponsors.

Newspapers rely on subscribers for both print and digital. If there aren't enough eyeballs on the digital and not enough subscribers to the print, ownership has to come up with ways to change that to attract more interest – either through discounted rates or with changing the style of their coverage – because the same logic operates as with radio and television. That's not to say they will alter the stories covered or prevent the news from being written or delivered but they will change the way those stories are presented. However, despite increased advertising rates, it is expected that global revenues in the news industry will continue to decline unfortunately for the next several years, as print products fade out, and digital growth may or may not deliver the same profit margins.

In broadcasting, the pursuit of greater profit margins has led to changes in news anchors, favouring younger men and women, sometimes to the detriment of more seasoned and therefore more “trustworthy” presenters. In Latin America, and also in the U.S. for example, this attitude has driven certain stations to hire very “controversially” attired “weather-girls” and news anchors.

Media attractiveness can be enhanced with the addition of new or different segments that are more family-oriented, or more “relatable”. Newsroom sets will also become more attractive, using a different colour scheme or background to attract viewers, sometimes giving them the impression of a “nerve centre” always with its eye on the situation that the station is following. Different techniques and styles will be implemented until ratings rise and overall viewing improves.

So, in broadcasting, it comes down to ratings – ratings can refer to either a generic term for the popularity of a show or the method used to specify the level of the show's content. In the United States, it usually refers to Nielsen

Ratings, a system developed by a firm of the same name (Nielsen Media Research), for determining how many viewers are watching a program at any given time. The ratings are used to set up the broadcast ad rates (costs) for the next year. For years advertisers have used those ratings and the pricing metric to determine costs. These days however, it is more about finding the right audience – which is hugely important with all the new streaming TV channels.

Fortunately, here in America, the government does not dictate the news, although as you may know, we have broadcast stations and newspapers that lean to one side or the other – left or right. So, information is presented differently. Perhaps more leaning toward the Democratic platform or more slanted toward the Republican platform. More liberal or more conservative. They will all give you the facts, but with commentary or commentators that will usually lean more one way or the other. News stations have always had some bias, to an extent. According to Michael Sinkinson, professor of Business Economics and Public Policy at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, “media bias occurs when journalists or news organizations allow their own opinions to affect the news that they report and the way that they report it.”<sup>4</sup> Media outlets can establish bias by omission, by source or story discrimination, by the manner of placement in the medium, by labelling (see Dr. Simons’ chapter in this volume), and by interpretation (otherwise known as “spin”). Note that none of these amount to outright “lying”. The problem of course, is that media bias creates or reinforces individual cognitive bias. Bias comes from excessive reliance on intuition, defective reasoning, or both.<sup>5</sup> According to a landmark study by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, information received in conditions of pre-existing cognitive bias is interpreted as *heuristic*. Individuals are unwilling to recognize that pre-conceived notions are further framed and anchored by slanted information.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wharton School, “Knowledge at Wharton School,” <https://kwhs.wharton.upenn.edu/term/media-bias/> (accessed 2 February 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Jack B. Soll, Katherine Milkman & John Payne, “Outsmart your Own Biases,” *Harvard Business Review*, online, (May 2015). <https://hbr.org/2015/05/outsmart-your-own-biases> accessed 30 January 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Amos Tversky & Daniel Kahneman, “Judgement over Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” *Science* 185, #4157, (24 Sept. 1974). 1124-1131.

Be that as it may, in a democracy, it is the audience's privilege to *decide* what is "fake" and what is true. It's up to the audience to watch CNN or Fox News or one of the main broadcast channels like the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), or even National Public Radio (NPR) or the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), the latter two which are not-for-profit and yet will give the audience in-depth reporting and news stories of longer duration. Yet it is also the audience's responsibility to check against bias. Alas, as more recent studies have shown, individuals are less likely to verify bias due to the cognitive exhaustion caused by the constant bombardment of information and sensory stimuli.<sup>7</sup>

A Gallup/Knight survey<sup>8</sup> administered between August and October 2017 finds nearly half of Americans – 45 % – said there is "a great deal" of political bias in the news. This accounts for a sharp increase from a 1989 Pew Research Center telephone survey, which saw 25 % of respondents point to media bias and a further increase noted in another study made by this agency in 2012 of 37 %. Media bias perceptions are naturally correlated to the survey respondents' political leanings. According to the same Gallup/Knight poll, 53 % of respondents who identified as Democrats believed the media were careful to separate fact from opinion. However, only 27 % of independents and 13 % of Republicans were under this impression.

Inversely, when asked about whether there is a great deal of political bias in news coverage, the Gallup/Knight survey reveals that 26 % of Democrats and 67 % of Republicans believe so. Independents position themselves in between at 46 %. Thus, the survey points to a worrying trend; a majority of Americans consider each of seven possible types of bias evaluated in the survey to be problematic in news coverage today. A high of 69 % say that news outlet owners attempting to influence the way stories are reported is a

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<sup>7</sup> See in this respect Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking: Fast and Slow*, New York: Penguin, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Jones & Zacc Ritter, "Americans see more News Bias. Most can't name Neutral Source," GALLUP, (17 Jan. 2018). <https://news.gallup.com/poll/225755/americans-news-bias-name-neutral-source.aspx> (accessed 31 Jan. 2021).

major problem, while a low of 57 % say news organizations reporting information they believed to be accurate but that turned out to be inaccurate is a major problem.<sup>9</sup>

Although the phenomenon is not new, it's really only over the last few years that this has been illustrated and exemplified more and you see not only the competitiveness but differences in style between CNN, the Fox News Network and those who own and operate those conglomerates – and what their political leanings appear to be; Roger Ailes ostensibly founded the Fox News Network to balance against Ted Turner's CNN.

In print, you also see the left and the right views, and particularly you see this in the opinion or editorial sections of major newspapers like the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post (owned by Amazon's Jeff Bezos), or the New York Times. In the latter cases, media bias is worrisome because these print media outlets are considered newspapers of “record”, that is, publications whose reputation for trustworthiness is such as to be officially accepted as archival in nature – establishing facts as much as reporting them. You also see it in some of the political writing or coverage too which seems to have increased as well over the last few years.

Americans, at any rate, account for media bias, but are unable to clearly discern their own bias in relation to the information they consume. To a certain extent, part of the responsibility for media hygiene falls to the reporters, and there are remedies against tendentious reporting. For example, one of the last radio stations I worked at pressured reporters to write in a certain way which we considered biased. We refused and went to our labour union the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA – which joined forces with the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in 2012) which sided with the reporters. But fortunately, smaller news markets generally broadcast the news as it happens without that bias perceived now on some of the major networks.

Historically, however, stronger intervention has been sometimes warranted in the United States, which brings into question the balance between freedom of speech, and freedom of the press. For example, the United States

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<sup>9</sup> Jones & Ritter, “Americans see more News Bias...”.

Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798; four acts designed to mitigate the risks of anti-Federalist sympathisers convincing the people to side with France in a war that seemed then imminent. Section 2 of “An Act in Addition to the Act” entitled “An Act Punishing Certain Crimes against the United States” permitted the President, under the Constitution, to imprison up to a period of two years, anyone who would “write, print, utter, or publish” or cause to write, print, utter, or publish “false, scandalous, or malicious writing” that would defame American officials or institutions. This Act remained in force until March 1801, but it aimed at shutting up political opposition to the Federalists, and was seen by John Adams (no relation with the aforementioned Douglas Adams) as a “war measure”.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, in response to the publishing of counterfeit official documents, Abraham Lincoln signed an executive order 18 May 1864 directing Major-General Dix, commanding the Union Army in New York State, to “arrest and imprison in any fort or military prison in your command the editors, proprietors, and publishers of the aforesaid newspapers.” 300 newspapers were thus shut down during the American Civil War.<sup>11</sup>

So, media bias has been around for years, but in my opinion, is more written about and is more of a concern now due to the influx of political news and political coverage. Nevertheless, the martial context of the two examples given above will not be lost on the reader keen on exploring the concepts of “information warfare” and “hybrid warfare.”

Getting back to disinformation campaigns, countries, or entities are also gathering data about us, and if we respond, receiving our email addresses and other personal information. They want us to spread this disinformation that’s

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<sup>10</sup> On this and other legal documents, see Yale Law School, *The Avalon Project* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2008). [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/sedact.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/sedact.asp). The Avalon Project supports the transcription and digitization of historical and official documents for the National Archives and Records Administration at [https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures\\_of\\_congress/text/page5\\_text.html](https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures_of_congress/text/page5_text.html) and <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=16&page=transcript> (accessed 31 Jan. 2021).

<sup>11</sup> University of California at Santa Barbara, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-arrest-and-imprisonment-irresponsible-newspaper-reporters-and-editors> (accessed 31 Jan. 2021).

created by them and then spread it online. All of this just exploits divisions and causes national unrest and sedition. The responsibility is on us, to investigate any news item, make sure it is true, Google it, and not recycle, or re-tweet, or post that news item on Facebook or Twitter, or whatever platform, if it is not true.

So again, it is up to the audience to decide what to watch, what to read, and how to interpret that news carefully and be mindful not to spread incorrect information. And interestingly, if you think about it, different people experience the same media message differently. Each person brings to that message a unique set of life experiences and as well, difference in age, gender, and culture generate a differing interpretation. For the journalist, it can be difficult at times to hide bias, and keep their objectivity intact. It is a struggle. Most journalists state that they value objectivity in reporting the news. But a majority of reporters also identify as liberals/Democrats. The question arises does any of their so-called political leanings bleed into coverage of the stories they are covering? Does that also seep into the gate-keeping process? Does that influence what kinds of stories they cover? It is a much-debated concern and one that will probably continue as the years go by. So, things are changing and they will continue to change as our technology changes and evolves – especially with the continuation and increased use of social media. But what’s important is to put the focus on the youth of the world. They need to understand the vital role of newsgathering and reporting and of the reporters who do that work. They need to understand the role the media plays and realize the harm that is exuded when the term “fake news” is used. It should be up to them, to investigate and know what is real and what is not. Having a free press is important, valuable and most needed – in our country as well as any.

# Media Literacy in an Interconnected World

*Elena Mandalenakis*

Globalization and constant technological progress have increased both the speed and the volume of information transmitted through digital networks. The speed of information transmission has outgrown the capacity of traditional forms of communication such as print media and has made digital media the forerunners in the information race. As a result, the ability to identify the relevance and accuracy of the information has become of major importance thus, making the media literacy of the public an overarching issue. This work initially discusses definitions of media literacy and it proceeds with the identification of the importance of media literacy in today's political and social systems in a globalized world. It concludes that there is a social and especially a political need for a comprehensive media literacy strategy able to mitigate the impact of false information and the media illiteracy of the public. Finally, it discusses the necessity of media literacy education with all its benefits and shortcomings.

## **Definitions: Media Literacy**

In a constantly changing media environment it is essential to define what the term "media literacy" entails. Evidently, it consists of two components; 1) the media aspect and 2) the literacy aspect. "Media" involves all media from print, to broadcast, to electronic and digital. "Literacy" in the past mainly referred to reading literacy as the ability to read and write for the purpose of cognition development. In our time, literacy is further connected to media literacy that is the ability to identify the different types of media, to understand the content of the messages they disseminate and the purpose of their creation. Before we proceed with a detailed definition of media literacy we should discuss information literacy, which is considered the basis for media literacy.

According to the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy "to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate,

and use effectively the needed information.”<sup>1</sup> Shapiro and Hughes refer to information literacy as “a new liberal art which extends beyond technical skills and is conceived as the critical reflection on the nature of information itself, its technical infrastructure and its social, cultural and even philosophical context and impact.”<sup>2</sup>

Understanding this all-encompassing definition of information literacy requires that the concept of media literacy is treated in a more holistic way. One that includes the practical aspects of information literacy, its relevance to and application in education, as well as its sociopolitical consequences from its implementation or its absence.

To begin with, the Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute (1992) defines media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms.”<sup>3</sup> Due to the evolution of computer science and telecommunications via smartphones in the last three decades the definition has been expanded to include the current technical standards as well as its political significance. Hence, the Center for Media Literacy defines media literacy

“as the 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media Literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Media Literacy Now defines “media literacy as the literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”<sup>5</sup> and explains that

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<sup>1</sup> American Library Association, “Final Report,” *ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy*, (1989). <https://libguides.ala.org/InformationEvaluation/Infolit>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy J. Shapiro & Shelley K. Hughes, “Information Literacy as a Liberal Art,” *Educom Review* 31, #2 (March/April 1996): 3, <https://teaching.uncc.edu/sites/teaching.uncc.edu/files/media/article-books/InformationLiteracy.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Media Literacy, “Media Literacy: A Definition and More,” <http://www.medialit.org/media-literacy-definition-and-more/> (accessed on February 4, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Center for Media Literacy, “Media Literacy: A Definition and More.”

<sup>5</sup> Media Literacy Now, <http://medialiteracynow.org> (accessed on February 4, 2021).



“media literacy skills are essential to health, well-being, and full participation in economic and civic life today. Therefore, these skills must be taught in ALL schools. The fight for media literacy education is the fight for equal access to education.”<sup>6</sup>

It is critical to mention that there is no common definition on media literacy and the associated ideas. Some emphasize only the ability to access, analyze and evaluate media messages; others add to the above, the ability to create and disseminate messages; while others just refer to media literacy as the correct use of media devices.

As the presence or absence of media literacy impacts the public in multiple ways, the above-mentioned definitions discuss how media literacy skills impact the social and political systems and how these can be acquired through education.

## **Media**

Throughout the history of civilization, there was always a constant need for information. In the absence of technical means of broadcasting, dissemination of information was effected through the town crier, who rang his bell and called the residents to the public square in order for them to receive the news. The oldest forms of media produced printed messages in petroglyphs, pictograms, ideograms, papyrus, newspapers, magazines, board messages, leaflets, etc. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a large volume of news were not just printed but were widely broadcasted through the radio and in the second part of the century through television. The broadcast of voice and video messages drastically changed the landscape of media communication.

Although broadcasting remains important, the media’s use of electronic technology has not only significantly altered the process of creation, dissemination and storage of information but has broadened the circle of news producers, has expanded the volume of the audience and surpassed national geographic boundaries. In consequence, the authority of news creation, dissemination and ultimately legitimation does not rest anymore exclusively on professional editors and journalists but on any individual who becomes and acts as both the receiver and the creator of the message. As a matter of fact,

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<sup>6</sup> Media Literacy Now, <http://medialiteracynow.org> (accessed on February 4, 2021).

it is very common nowadays that mainstream media rely on private reports and videos from individuals who happened to be at the scene of the event.

The advantages of the current plethora of electronic news agencies and social platforms cannot be disregarded. On the contrary, they should be emphasized and explained despite the shortcomings arising from their misuse.

Electronic media including the press and social media enhance the reception of abundant information through a multiplicity of user-friendly electronic platforms. This decentralized way of information dissemination often bypasses hierarchical producers of information in partisan media and thus, strips certain institutions from the monopoly of information. In countries governed by authoritarian regimes, independent electronic media provide the possibility for social and political opposition. In addition, it gives space to independent news agencies and thus, ensures the presentation of all different angles of the subject at hand and encourages investigative journalism.

As individual citizens also report news and have the tools to openly criticize the content of the information transmitted, it empowers active citizens to practice true democracy as well. At the same time, all have the possibility to disseminate an opinion over social media, making use of their freedom of expression, which is their constitutionally protected fundamental right.

The abundance and the variety of electronic media however, and in particular their misuse, transforms them into a potential threat, one that may even endanger the roots of the same democratic system they originated from and which were designed to reinforce. The unencumbered flow of information coupled with its potential for abuse may lead to misinformation or disinformation. The lack of professional media expertise and journalistic authority, able to critically determine the validity, accuracy and objective presentation of the disseminated information, may allow for propaganda to be incorrectly attributed and labeled as unbiased news. Of course, the biased presentation of news has always existed and depending on the channel of news distribution, political and financial allegiances and the strength in numbers of its audience, flourished. Nevertheless, in light of the race for news exclusivity and the high volume of information disseminated, the detection of biases was made into an even more time consuming endeavour. Although established news agencies try to avoid this problem, the degree of bias increases

when information is re-transmitted through social media, as the messages are selected to fit the biases of the sender and presented out of their original context.

Another disadvantage of the wide accessibility of electronic media is the unfiltered self-expression and lack of accountability, which do not abide with the rules of social conduct and courtesy of the physical world. It reduces the quality of public discussion and inhibits any constructive debate on account of an ill-mannered exchange of views, which is often accompanied by offensive and derogatory language. The anonymity coupled with the lack of physical proximity provides a false sense of privacy, among friends who know each other well. The parties often ignore or disregard the fact that this virtual conversation can be disseminated into the public sphere (i.e. re-tweeted) and will be viewed by people who may or may not share the same opinion or belief system, nor understand the initial purpose of the message. This has the potential to lead to online abuse or harassment and even migrate to physical confrontations in the real world. Alternatively, it may allow for peoples' mobilization for erroneous or misleading reasons and may facilitate to the organization of the masses with particularly destructive tendencies and behaviours. There are countless examples of such mobilizations all around the world where activism is used as the cover for actions aiming at the destruction of public and private property.

### **Literacy for Media**

In order to enjoy the advantages of media and especially of electronic media, one must be mindful of the problems arising from their use or misuse. As already mentioned, the introduction and the spread of electronic media and especially of social media in everyday life for communication (personal and professional relationships) and information purposes (news, real-time reporting, etc.) demands continuous critical thinking of the disseminated content. Social media compete with traditional forms of information and communication and threaten to gradually replace them, as their users operate under the conviction that their online contacts/"friends" send messages that are based or directly originate from trustworthy sources. The transmission of editorials and opinion messages that are often labeled and presented as factually accurate, when they are obviously not, should raise further concerns.

## **Demand for Media Literacy**

Media literacy is influenced by technological, economic, legal, social and political factors. This discussion centers on the social and political need for media literacy and media literacy education, as it contributes to the protection of values deeply embedded in a democratic political and social system, nationally and internationally. In principle, it is technological and legal factors that are the driving force behind the need for a basic understanding of digital literacy. At minimum, they call for a basic understanding of computer safety, the cyber sphere and the related legal framework that facilitate the use of digital systems. The economic need for media literacy is connected to the need for financial security and profit in a globalized economic and financial system. At the same time, the emphasis on the political need for media literacy lies on the fact that political considerations are the ones responsible for safeguarding the techno-logical, legal, economic and social framework within which the media operate.

## **Social Need for Media Literacy**

Media literacy encourages responsible participation in social life. As media influence and even shape our needs, values, ethical norms and identity, they determine our social behaviour. As self-identification is socially constructed and influenced by media representations, media literacy provides the tools for the critical evaluation of the electronic media.

### *Social Interaction*

The necessity for an appropriate social interaction requires the respect of individual and collective rights as well as the acceptance of social responsibilities. In cases where people cannot physically socialize, either by choice or by exclusion, they find the virtual world to be the perfect substitute. Social interactions through the Internet have rapidly replaced the traditional forms of socializing. As digital media allow for real-time interaction at the convenience of each individual (time and location-wise), they have become the preferred method of communication in both private and professional life. The advantages are significant as the means of communication, the volume and the distance cease to be inhibiting factors in the communication. Needless

to say, there is multiplicity of choice in the form and manner of communication.

### *Information Exchange and Discourse*

The use of social media platforms for the sake of exchanging opinions and organizing civil society is one of the most important advantages of social networking. The benefit of these platforms is their ability to identify and to virtually connect people that share similar opinions and belief systems. Grouping the audience facilitates mass mobilization as the creation and organization of social movements is achieved at lightning speeds comparable to traditional equivalent methods.

Electronically-transmitted messages and in particular social media messages, have the capacity to reach vast numbers of individuals at no cost, while bypassing state and other organizational authorities. Hence, issues not included in the official discourse or agenda are often included, presented and discussed through social media. The original purpose and intent of social media was to enable freedom of expression within the legal constraints currently defined by each democratic state. In the case of non-democratic or authoritarian regimes this electronic freedom of speech coupled with the decentralization of information, favours grassroots organizations globally. Among the benefits is the exposure of social and political repression to the global media, which allows for the mobilization of civil society. Needless to say that social mobilization and activism have been equally utilized by groups subscribing to extremist ideologies aiming at the disruption of liberal democracies, despite the fact that liberal democracies provide space for the expression of opposition or denial of state authority (i.e. anarchism).

### *Psychology*

Social media are connecting people around the world but they also influence the psychology of their users with adverse implications for the society. They target the savvy young generation on account of its digital literacy as opposed to older generations. Whilst the youngsters use social media to connect with their friends and for information on fashionable world trends, this qualifies

them as consumers in the eyes of the companies. They simultaneously consume and create information, sounds, images and videos before they even reach adulthood and their products are globally consumed.

The popularity of social media is founded upon algorithms that serve the function of gradually reprogramming cognitive processes to facilitate addictive behaviours. Social media strive to keep their users online by seeking their constant and absolute attention. The users continuously seek acceptance, gratification and admiration from their online friends and live under the pressure to perform in their virtual life in the same way their contacts or followers would expect them to. Acceptance and admiration is measured and quantified through the amount of likes and followers they receive. Hence, they perform and eventually they become addicted to the satisfaction of social acceptance they feel in the virtual platforms. In reality, the social media exert control over them with potentially severe cognitive and psychological consequences. Research demonstrates that the abuse of digital media leads to the development of both mental and physical debilitating conditions such as short attention span, poor health, low self-esteem and isolation. More severe effects include mental health problems and even depression. The evidence shows that these negative out-comes are more common in the young population where the media use exceeds the maximum recommended amount of time. For this reason alone, media and gaming companies provide specific disclaimers on all their products and go as far as to incorporate technical features that disrupt the use of their product after a predetermined amount of uninterrupted use.

Media literacy ensures that the society benefits overall from the use of electronic and digital media and mitigates the harm from their misuse. Media literacy enhances social participation and social responsibility in the virtual and physical world. Media literate users are critical to the social inequality created by misinformation and disinformation, which migrates over to the political system.

### **Political Need for Media Literacy**

Informed citizens and citizens with critical thinking are the cornerstone of democracy. Free flow of information and freedom of expression ensure the

exchange of ideas and ideologies within the boundaries of democracy. Ideally, this allows for the presentation of multiple, if not all, perspectives and points of view that are balanced through the political process in democratic states. Educated decision-making implies the openness of the political system so that all levels of governance are checked against the interests of the citizens.

Media literacy is an important aspect of this process as it permits citizens to analyze and evaluate information and to make informed decisions in the political sphere. Democratic systems with media literate citizens, who are able to constructively participate at all levels of governance, form a strong civil society able to influence the political system so that it is responsive to the citizens' social needs.

Digital media provide the venue through which all points of view are expressed and heard around the world. The abundance however, of digital media leads to an abundance of information that can create an infodemic as already seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over-information makes it practically impossible to filter the information for its validity and accuracy.

Generally speaking, media literacy helps to avoid the distortion of facts, their dissemination and the creation of alternative realities. Nevertheless as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, even a media literate audience that followed selected media outlets, could barely manage the overflow of information. The politicians' reliance on social media (i.e. Trump's tweets) aiming at communicating directly their political message to the society, contributes further to this information overflow and points to the prevalence of this form of communication into the political sphere. Individuals, organizations and governments alike, prefer the use of social media for direct communication with the public, as that particular medium lacks intermediaries and the political message is transmitted directly, expediently and without filter to the targeted audience in question. The downside is that on account of technical limitations, the message might be condensed in a manner that would corrupt its intended meaning and context.

Perhaps, the preference and prevalence of social media for political communication purposes, is owed in part to the general mistrust of the public on anything related to government and state control. Public polls consistently

show the mistrust of large parts of the society on the mainstream media's objectivity, integrity and influence. The public is equally concerned with the concentration of power by the social media companies as well as with their impact on politics. According to a June 16 to 22, 2020 survey, 72 % of adult Americans feel that "social media companies have too much power and influence on politics today."<sup>7</sup>

Public confidence in the press, according to Michael Schudson, has been measured (before the COVID-19 pandemic) against trust in other institutions and the results show that Americans have trusted less political and media institutions and more institutions connected to science, medicine, military and organized religion.<sup>8</sup> The distrust is closely related to the party affiliation of the respondents and varies accordingly, which indicates that trust in the media constitutes a political position. Although mistrust in the media is a negative attitude it can become a positive public behaviour. More specifically, public mistrust keeps media in check and acts as a reaction to the media's self-righteousness. High mistrust indicates that the public does not accept anything at face value and reminds the media that they are also subject to the same scrutiny as other public institutions. According to Daniel Kreiss, this mistrust suggests "a level of 'civic skepticism' appropriate to a democratic society."<sup>9</sup> Such corrective measure is mostly possible as well as powerful when it is driven from an educated and media literate audience.

On the opposite side of the educational and literacy spectrum, when the facts do not lend to the credibility or legitimacy of the action pursued, politicians or public and media relations professional turn to an appeal to emotion, in an attempt to manipulate the masses and direct their behaviour to a prescribed outcome.

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<sup>7</sup> Monica Anderson, "Most Americans Say Social Media Companies Have Too Much Power, Influence In Politics," *Pew Research*, (22 July 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/22/most-americans-say-social-media-companies-have-too-much-power-influence-in-politics/>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Schudson, "The Fall, Rise and Fall of Media Trust," *Columbia Journalism Review*, (Winter 2019), [https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/the-fall-rise-and-fall-of-media-trust.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/the-fall-rise-and-fall-of-media-trust.php).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Schudson, "The Fall, Rise and Fall of Media Trust."



According to Paolo Gerbaudo, messages transmitted through social media platforms mobilize emotions irrespectively of the accuracy or not of their content.<sup>10</sup> Even if the news is inaccurate or fake the emotions are real and direct away from the actual issues of discussion with consequences for knowledge. The implementation of emotional politics, is a cognitive aspect of social media.<sup>11</sup> Aside the language of the messages, the fact manipulation aims at directing the audience to be susceptible to persuasion through guided messages. The identification of the individual then depends on the messages it receives eliminating any possibility of free choice. Consequently, it would be possible to predict the social and political behaviour of the masses as an outcome of the information they are flooded with.

This often leads to political polarization and in extreme cases, even radicalization. Social marginalization is often exploited by radical organizations to recruit new members for their own purposes. Media illiteracy makes people susceptible to guided messages and propaganda that determine political behaviour. In fact, the identification of individuals with similar belief systems allows for their simultaneous targeting and influencing. This capability favours undemocratic practices and facilitates the establishment and support for authoritarian regimes.

In addition, social media provide an additional tool to already established democratic procedures (i.e. political participation through representation), ensuring that political authorities and financial conglomerates abide by democratic values. They provide an alternative form of checks and balances to the political system and allow for direct social and political participation and mobilization. The individual freedom to participate into the public sphere without any intermediate authority screening the content of the transmitted information, uncovers neglected but important political, social and economic issues.

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<sup>10</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo, "Fake News and All-Too-Real Emotions: Surveying the Social Media Battlefield," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 25, # 1 (Fall 2017/Winter 2018): 86, <http://bjwa.brown.edu/25-1/fake-news-and-all-too-real-emotions-surveying-the-social-media-battlefield/>.

<sup>11</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo, "Fake News and All-Too-Real Emotions..." 87.

## **Media Literate Individuals**

As already discussed, media literate individuals are able to access and gather information from trusted sources, to analyze and critically evaluate their content as well as to create and communicate their message. They are able to evaluate the truthfulness, the relevance, the accuracy and the validity of the message's content as well as the purpose it serves. Information accuracy and validity imply a better understanding of the environment within which one lives. Accurate knowledge does not preclude opposition in the society but it reduces the chances for cognitive and behavioural radicalization, which lead to extremism. Media literate individuals are critical consumers of information and will not be susceptible to beliefs founded upon partial and inaccurate knowledge, which does not coincide with democratic values of freedom, social inclusion and disrespects fundamental human rights. In practice, as public behaviour is likely to span within certain social margins, the social and political value of media literacy allows for behavioural prescription within democratic systems. The anticipation of the public's responses helps governments to adjust their policies to social needs and avoid social unrest and political instability.

Media literate individuals have the capacity to create messages of accurate or inaccurate content, to distribute them through the proper channels and either become responsible actors or actors of misinformation or disinformation. A media literate creator utilizes one's knowledge to create carefully designed messages that fulfill their purpose. Hence, media literacy can also be used to strengthen practices of disinformation, propaganda and indoctrination. Indeed, media literate individuals may try to advance their personal agendas through the compilation and dissemination of inaccurate or invalid messages congruent with their belief system in order to gather support from like-minded individuals. In this case, the information can be a vehicle for behavioural changes where behaviour would be aligned to the audience's perception of reality. Information can be used to enforce a belief or to convert a belief and thus behaviour.

The media literate audience's knowledge and perceptions are normally closer to reality. The individuals are critical consumers of information and are careful disseminators of information not only with respect to the content but also regarding the platforms or sources they use. They are able to identify

the targeted audience as well as the aim of the message. As a result, this audience is able to recognize misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and indoctrination. In cases where the media literate audience does not agree with the content of the message, it disregards it and will abstain from re-publication. If the audience decides to act, it proceeds towards correcting the message by revealing the erroneous information and replacing it with the accurate version. From a technical perspective, a media literate audience is able to safeguard their media environment and to minimize the vulnerability of their devices.

### **Media Illiterate Individuals**

As media encompasses all media from print, broadcast and electronic, there is a need to pay attention mainly to the media that do not require special skills of operation other than a basic knowledge of Internet use. Receiving news or messages is not a complicated process, whereas creating and disseminating files (text, audio, visual, etc.) to communicate a specific message may be more challenging and requiring some elements of technical expertise.

The simplicity of social media platforms and the mass increase of users around the world, browsing and communicating through them, makes them an interesting genre. Social media have taken the function of informing the public so official and independent institutions use their platforms to reach their followers. As vehicles of information, they do not screen the truthfulness of the content they disseminate.

A good example of the importance of social media in decision-making processes was the Syrian refugee crisis, seeking asylum in Europe since 2015. Information disseminated through social media, either from contacts or non-governmental organizations, influenced the decision-making processes of the refugees; the choice of their migration routes, the choice of border crossings, as well as the choice of their final destination.

Their exposure to misinformation or disinformation in the social media contributed, in some cases, to the failure of reaching their final destination. Furthermore, it additionally led to distorted perceptions of reality, leading to inability to adapt and integrate into the receiving society and eventually to their marginalization.

Being kept on the sidelines causes feelings of anxiety and anger with the political establishment or system. Similar feelings of anger and anxiety can be currently observed during the COVID-19 crisis. The change of information throughout the pandemic and its transmission through mainstream and independent media created fatigue and increased the distrust in the media mainly due to users' media illiteracy. Hence, the audience has been embracing inaccurate, invalid and hazardous information. The distrust in the health and political authorities as well as the increased susceptibility to misinformation due to media illiteracy, poses a danger to the democratic political system and public health.

Media illiteracy will lead to more severe consequences for the non-literate individuals during the post-pandemic period as the very much needed transfer of the daily functions and lives to the virtual world will be further installed and will become the new "normal."

## **Conclusion**

As a consequence to the above analysis, it is important to stress the significance of media literacy education for individuals or groups. This depends on their level of media literacy and it can be achieved through formal and/or informal education inserted in the national school system as well as in the life-long learning system.

Formal media literacy education initiatives have already been developed and introduced in the school system over the last decades in most countries in Europe,<sup>12</sup> North America and Oceania. However, a relevant higher media literacy education process, up to and including universities is still under development.

National media literacy programs have been designed and implemented in schools of multiple countries to assure that children, the future citizens, have

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<sup>12</sup> The European Union has been supporting the introduction of media literacy programs at schools. Julian McDougall et al., *Teaching Media Literacy In Europe: Evidence Of Effective School Practices In Primary And Secondary Education: Analytical Report* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018): 1-90, <https://nesetweb.eu/en/resources/library/teaching-media-literacy-in-europe-evidence-of-effective-school-practices-in-primary-and-secondaryeducation/>.

computer, digital and media literacy proficiencies for their online safety and for the provision of life-long skills that help them to critically evaluate the messages transmitted by the media. Media literacy education prepares the young students to adapt to the ever-changing digital world and enhances their critical autonomy that is valuable for a responsible participation in the political and social life.

Multinational enterprises relying on electronic communication and work setting already provide mandatory formal media literacy education to their employees in the form of seminars, workshops, etc. These however are currently focusing more on digital rather than media literacy, as their main purpose is to protect the companies' systems and network against external attempts to compromise them.

Informal media literacy education provides indirectly learning tools and comes in many different forms and platforms (i.e. social media platforms, online journalism, podcasts, webinars), with subjects relating to communication, information, entertainment, education and other fields.

Despite the existence of media literacy programs, the older generation that lives and operates mainly in the physical world is found lacking in this digital environment due to their inferior computer affinity and skills. For some, it is hard to adapt to the digital era for their daily information, excluding broadcast news. To elevate their media literacy, emphasis should be initially given to programs that improve their computing and digital skills. Their normally higher literacy skills, their in-depth way of analysis and their life experience should facilitate their media literacy education. On the other hand, aging takes a toll on the acquisition of new skills.

Media literacy education should also highlight the ancillary need for protection of privacy in the virtual space. The ability to effectively use various forms of digital communication that support visual and audio files for the creation and distribution of messages is almost innate to the children nowadays. Media literacy education is designed to develop their critical thinking regarding the content transmitted, as well as their personal data. As they increasingly grow up in social media, the protection of their privacy is essential, for it is increasingly violated and traded. They need to learn that the use of media has commercial, social and political implications for the individuals

and the society as a whole. Furthermore, as media constructs versions of reality, they also construct personal identities that dictate the virtual interactions. Media literacy is a constant and ever-evolving process throughout a person's life.

# Role of Labels and Descriptions in the Politicised Communication of Theories and Concepts

Greg Simons

This chapter concerns the role of labels and descriptions in the use of theories and concepts, which is not a straightforward and apolitical exercise. The act of definition of elements of the human realm is by its very act political. Language plays a key role in defining the human existence and experience in the three realms of the *physical*, *informational* and *cognitive*. The physical realm is where actual events take place in a tangible sense, the informational realm is the interpretation of events and people in the physical realm, and the cognitive realm is occurring in the mind of the individuals in terms of forming their world views and opinions of the environment around them by combining physical realm experience and informational realm exposure.

In his 1946 work, *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell contended that language was an instrument which we shape for specific purposes and goals, where language can be used to conceal or prevent independent or critical thinking. This raises foundational issue questions concerning the semantics and philosophy of language, such as the relation between sense and denotation, the relations between thought and language.<sup>1</sup> Language is an essential element of communication, where communications are defined as a technique for the effective exchange of information or ideas and the transmission of information via a medium, and some tools that unites language with the act of communication are concepts and theories.<sup>2</sup>

This assumes an objective application of the tools of language and communication, such as concepts and theories, as a means to enlighten and inform the intended audience. However, the intervention and influence of politics and a political (or financial) agenda can ensure a subjective application of those tools to influence an audience towards accepting the terms of their

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<sup>1</sup> J. Fodor & E. Lepore, "Why Meaning (Probably) Isn't a Conceptual Role," *Philosophical Issues* 3 (1993): 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam Webster*, s.v. "Communication" Merriam-webster.com (accessed 7 January 2021).

agenda. As noted by Edelman “what is accepted as a ‘good reason’ tells nothing about the cogency of the argument but is a sensitive index of problems, aspirations, and social situation of its audience.”<sup>3</sup> It is the intention of this present chapter to analyse this phenomenon from more of a theoretical, rather than an empirical perspective.

## **Role of Theories and Concepts in the Human Realm**

Gelman notes that “concepts are fundamental to all of human experience. Naming objects, recognizing novel instances, generalizing from the known to the unknown, making inferences, and learning new information all make use of concepts.”<sup>4</sup> Also noted by Gelman, concepts should not be treated and analysed in isolation from theories, stating “both are mental representations that give order to experience.”<sup>5</sup> This represents the significance of theories and concepts for the human experience and interpretation of the physical realm. More exact definitions of concept and theory, together with the links between them.

Clark defined concept as being “a set of properties that are associated with each other in memory and thus form a unit.”<sup>6</sup> Such units may be referring to the individual level or perhaps to a category and is captured through the use of a single word. Gelman states that this contrasts with theories that “are larger structures that include interrelated sets of beliefs, causal explanations, and predictions.”<sup>7</sup> These enable certain cognitive tasks and functions through input received from the informational realm.

As such, concepts serve a number of important functions that include: organising information effectively in memory efficiently, form analogies, create figurative images, embody and pass down ideological beliefs, solve problems

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<sup>3</sup> M. Edelman, “Political Language and Political Reality,” *PS* 18, #1 (Winter 1985): 17.

<sup>4</sup> S.A. Gelman, “Concepts and Theories,” in *Handbook of Perceptual and Cognitive Development*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Gelman, R. & Kit-Fong Au, T., eds. (San Diego: Academic Press Inc, 1996), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Gelman, “Concepts and Theories,” 118.

<sup>6</sup> E.V. Clark, “Meanings and Concepts,” in *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol. 3: Cognitive Development*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., Flavell, J. H. & Markman, E. M., eds. (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1983), 789.

<sup>7</sup> Gelman, “Concepts and Theories,” 118.



and more.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, theories and concepts are important elements in constituting meaning, which leads to the gradual creation of opinions and perceptions of people and events in the physical realm of human existence where the interpretations of the information real help to promote cognitive evaluations. However, this does not mean that the process is objective in nature owing to the subjective nature of politics and biases in deriving those cognitive conclusions.

The discipline of psychology tends to view concepts as “identifiers rather than bridges between mind and world that participate in the generation of meaning”.<sup>9</sup> This is done through understanding

“concepts are what we use to navigate through and make sense of the world around us, enabling us to classify and interpret new situations in terms of previous ones. [...] A concept is generally associated with a set of properties.”<sup>10</sup>

This creates an interesting situation where the informational realm influences the cognitive realm;

“[...] meaning depends on role in conceptual scheme rather than on truth conditions. That is, meaning has nothing to do with evidence, inference, and reasoning, including the impact sensory experience has on what one believes they way in which inference and reasoning modify one’s beliefs and plans, and the way beliefs and plans are reflected in action.”<sup>11</sup>

The above quote exemplifies the role of language and its perception in influencing an audience rather than through the use of objective “truths”. Field argues that logic is making sense and better understood from the perspective and use of “subjective probability rather than truth in our semantics,”<sup>12</sup> this leaves semantics to engage with the conceptual role rather than the

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<sup>8</sup> S.A. Gelman & D. L. Medin, “What’s So Essential About Essentialism? A Different Perspective on the Interaction of Perception, Language, and Conceptual Knowledge,” *Cognitive Development* 8 (1993): 157-167.

<sup>9</sup> L. Gabora, E. Rosch, & D. Aerts, “Toward an Ecological Theory of Concepts,” *Ecological Psychology* 20, #1 (2008): 84.

<sup>10</sup> D. Aerts & L. Gabora, “A Theory of Concepts and Their Combinations I: The Structure of the Sets of Contexts and Properties,” *Kybernetes* 34, #1/2 (2005): 168.

<sup>11</sup> G. Harmon, “Meaning and Semantics,” in *Semantics and Philosophy*, M. Munitz, M. & P. Unger, eds. (New York: New York Press, 1975), 11.

<sup>12</sup> H. H. Fields, “Logic, Meaning and Conceptual Role,” *Journal of Philosophy* 74, #7 (July 1977): 380.

“truth”. There are a number of problems that stem from the approach of academia in terms of definitions and approach to theory.

Gunnell argued that political science along with social sciences and humanities tended to focus “on the level of definitions rather than in terms of informing philosophical assumptions about social reality.”<sup>13</sup> As such, the findings and conclusions of academic work can lack the necessary associated context in order to make them meaningful and understandable. Although, Coticchia and Catanzaro argue that it is necessary to better distinguish concepts (and not conflate) from each other in order to improve the interpretation of the political phenomenon and permitting better comparative research findings.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Gunnell (1968: 200) identified the dangers of understanding politics from a purely analytical manner, “the construction may be so narrow as to miss what may be significant and/or fail to take account of changes in political symbolisation.”<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the end result is “to make the concept of the political meaningless in any explanatory sense and useful only as a tool of classification, and consequently one loses grip on the very thing that one seeks to make intelligible.”<sup>16</sup> In the following section, the role of labels in generating concepts that lead to theories or the creation of a version of reality is considered.

## Labels and Their Role

The Cambridge Dictionary defines label as “a word or a phrase that is used to describe the characteristics or qualities of people, activities, or things, of in a way that is unfair.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> J. G. Gunnell, “Social Science and Political Reality: The Problem of Explanation,” *Social Research* 35, #1 (Spring 1968): 199.

<sup>14</sup> F. Coticchia & A. Catanzaro, “The Fog of Words: Assessing the Problematic Relationship Between Strategic Narratives, (Master) Frames and Ideology,” *Media, War & Conflict*, (2020): 1-23.

<sup>15</sup> Gunnell, “Social Science and Political Reality...,” 200.

<sup>16</sup> Gunnell, “Social Science and Political Reality...,” 200.

<sup>17</sup> *Cambridge English Dictionary*, s.v. “label”, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/> (accessed 9 January 2021).

Language is important in ordering our experience and relationship to the physical realm and has been identified and proven to influence the ability to create categories. Gervits, Johanson and Papafragou state that linguistic labels are more likely to determine category boundaries than symbols or numbers, whether they are intentionally used or not.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, labels are an important element that indicate category membership. Labels can also be “accepted, modified or refuted in the definition and identity.”<sup>19</sup> The use and approach to labelling should not be considered as an objective and equal process.

Buss and Nikam state that not all labels develop equally, where labels act in the role of guiding attention to certain and specific dimensions. Labels are language tools that can act as a mechanism that instructs the exposed audience as to their behaviour (both in terms of thoughts and acts) on the subject of the communication, regardless whether it is manipulated or not. Negative labels that are applied to subjects or objects have a tendency to produce an implicit or explicit stigma among the audience<sup>20</sup> and to form dimensions of category (whether or not negative in nature).<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the negative categorisation of elements of the human experience in the physical realm through the use of labels can create a negative evaluation of those communicated elements in the cognitive realm of the target audience.

The power of language and labels combined influences how elements in the physical realm are categorised and also the opinion (and actions) of the audience towards those labelled elements.<sup>22</sup> Johnston Conover and Feldman

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<sup>18</sup> F. Gervits, M. Johanson & A. Papafragou, “Intentionality and the Role of Labels in Categorisation,” *Cognitive Science* (2016): 1146-1151.

<sup>19</sup> S. Smith, D. Fisher & J. S. Cole, “The Lived Meanings of Fanaticism: Understanding the Complex Role of Labels and Categories in Defining the Self in Consumer Culture,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 10, #2 (2007): 77.

<sup>20</sup> See R. D. Ashford, A. M. Brown, J. McDaniel & B. Curtis, “Biased Labels: An Experimental Study of Language and Stigma Among Individuals in Recovery and Health Professionals,” *Substance Use & Misuse* 54, #8 (2019): 1376-1384.

<sup>21</sup> L. K. Perry & G. Lupyan, “The Role of Language in Multidimensional Categorisation: Evidence From Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation and Exposure to Verbal Labels,” *Brain & Language* 135 (2014): 66-72.

<sup>22</sup> D. Haag Granello & T. A. Gibbs, “The Power of Language and Labels: The Mentally Ill Versus People With Mental Illness,” *Journal of Counselling & Development*, 94 (January 2016): 31-40.

negated a held belief by finding that “the meaning of ideological labels is largely based on symbols rather than on issues”<sup>23</sup> and not structured in dimensional terms and largely issue oriented. It is not difficult to create oversimplifications or distortions of reality as a result. This creates the situation where labels can be used as a means of ordering the human experience through categorisation, which can include the use of an accusative tone towards an opponent or competitor without the burden of sufficient proof, but with the possibility of priming and mobilising an audience to realise a political (or economic) agenda.

## Descriptions and Their Role

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the word description as “discourse intended to give a mental image of something experienced.”<sup>24</sup> Smith, Fisher and Cole note that “human experience is inseparably entangled with our descriptions of it.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the human experience in the physical realm and how it is processed in the cognitive realm, very much depends on the audience’s exposure to the specific language-based interpretations of reality in the information realm. This view is further reinforced by the very technical and operational definition of description from the dictionary.

Not all descriptions are “equal” as there are different levels. For example, “thin” description refers to, for example the physical aspects of someone’s behaviour, to relay to the audience the act of the individual. However, a “thick” description interprets the behaviour of the individual within a certain context, ascribing thinking and intentionality in the observed behaviour (both in terms of the present and the future).<sup>26</sup> Description is qualitative by its very nature, but it does vary in terms of the depth and breadth of how far it can go in analysing a person or a particular situation or circumstance.

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<sup>23</sup> P. Johnston Conover & S. Feldman. “The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications,” *American Journal of Political Science* 25, #4 (November 1981): 641.

<sup>24</sup> *Merriam Webster*, s.v. “description”, merriam-webster.com (accessed 9 January 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Smith, Fisher & Cole, “The Lived Meanings of Fanaticism...,” 92.

<sup>26</sup> J. G. Ponterotto, “Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept ‘Thick Description’,” *The Qualitative Report* 11, #3 (September 2006): 539.

In Kneale's description theory of names, it is stated "that a proper name is synonymous with a definite description of the form of the named individual."<sup>27</sup> In terms of an interpretation of a description (or any other device of communicating language), there are two aspects at play in the audience (receiver of the text – written or verbal). The first is that "it is about the mental process involved in the interpretation of an utterance, and about the mental representations that they give rise to."<sup>28</sup> This is seen in the use of language by actors to define a reality that is convenient to their agenda.

### **Politics and Language as a Definer of Reality**

One of the key techniques to eloquently expressing one's opinion and vision for an argument or support or oppose an idea or proposition of 'reality' with language is through the art of rhetoric. Aristotle divided the art of persuasion into three subsidiary categories – projecting a good impression, expounding the facts of the case, and creating the desired disposition among the intended audience. Aristotle argued for the division of rhetoric into three distinct forms: *logos* (the use of logic and reason, including false logic); *pathos* (the use and role of emotions, both positive such as patriotism, and negative, such as hate); and *ethos* (the use of legitimacy or recognition of the speaker as the source of persuasion).<sup>29</sup> The connection between rhetoric and meaning is the role of politics to use language to persuade or dissuade the audience to act and think in a predetermined manner that suits their interests and objectives. Classical Greeks and Romans understood clearly the fundamental relationship between language and politics through their treatises on rhetoric, so this relationship is far from being a contemporary issue.<sup>30</sup>

However, the nature of priming and mobilizing a public through the use of language can be problematic from an operational and cognitive perspective. "Meanings do not depend solely on the dictionary definitions of words or

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<sup>27</sup> B. Geurts, "Good News About the Description Theory of Names," *Journal of Semantics* 14 (1997): 319.

<sup>28</sup> Geurts, "Good news...", 343.

<sup>29</sup> J. S. Tuman, *Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Terrorism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 38-39, and J. Matusitz, *Terrorism & Communication: A Critical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 185-186.

<sup>30</sup> P. L. Dunmire, "Political Discourse Analysis: Exploring the Language of Politics and the Politics of Language," *Language and Linguistics Compass* 6, #11 (2012): 735.

phrases but rather on the social situations, experiences, ideologies, and current psychological needs of those who process and those who originate the language.”<sup>31</sup>

It is about the perspective of intended meaning by the communicator and then how the message is interpreted by the intended audience. “Meanings are created by the conceptual frameworks, interests, biases, mistakes, and assumptions of those who use language and by their audiences.”<sup>32</sup> The use of language in politics is used in an operational capacity to bring about a certain physical realm result via influencing the cognitive realm of the target audience.

While coercion and intimidation help to check resistance in all political systems, the key tactic must always be the evocation of meanings that legitimize favoured courses of action and threaten or reassure people so as to encourage them to be supportive or to remain quiescent.<sup>33</sup>

Language is used in politics to bring about or prevent change through the strategic use of persuasive effects on the intended audience.

With respect to social change language use is manifestly crucial. It helps determine beliefs about the past and the present and what specific changes will mean for various groups in the future, and it shapes beliefs about which interest groups and public officials should be regarded as allies and which as threats or enemies.<sup>34</sup>

This is about the ability of an interest group to be able to political prime and mobilise their target audiences. In essence, it concerns the ability or inability of actors to achieve the sufficient accumulation of social or political capital to active that audience. Smith and Kulynch note that this applies to the public and political aspects of human activities, where language is intended to present a more appealing garb for the purposes of the political aims and

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<sup>31</sup> Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 78.

<sup>32</sup> Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Murray Edelman, “Political Language and Political Reality,” *PS 18*, # 1 (1985): 11.

<sup>34</sup> Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*, 78.

goals.<sup>35</sup> Beyond the use of individual words, concepts and theories is the use of sentences and more substantial groupings of text that are intended to convey a specific meaning.

When exploring the double-sided language of politics and the politics of language it becomes necessary to delve into the analysis and evaluation of discourse. As political discourse and political narratives are intended to denote the political reality that is being represented and interpreted in the text in order to prime and mobilise an audience towards certain conclusions that lead to the (ideally) legitimisation of the proposed political solution to an identified “problem.” Dis-course is the means that is used to create a narrative, which is an interpretation of events through storytelling. Shenhav suggests that three basic components of the political narrative need to be taken into account: characters, events and background; the sequence of events; and causality.<sup>36</sup> In understanding the discourse, there are four levels to be considered: strategic narrative, master narrative, frame and ideology. They also note the role of ideology in supporting frames and narratives.<sup>37</sup>

Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael Rich refer to the problem of *truth decay*, the diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life. The manifestations of truth decay are the increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data; blurring between opinion and fact; increasing volume and influence of opinion and personal experience over fact.<sup>38</sup> However, even if the problem is identified, it remains that a single universal and commonly agreed upon vision of “facts” and “analysis” have never existed in the age of literate cultures of mankind and it is unlikely to be realised owing to the nature of the cognitive realm and the interactions with the information and physical realms.

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<sup>35</sup> S. Smith & J. Kulynych, “It May be Social, But Why is it Capital? The Social Construction of Social Capital and the Politics of Language,” *Politics & Society* 30, #1 (March 2002): 181.

<sup>36</sup> S. R. Shenhav, “Political Narratives and Political Reality,” *International Political Science Review* 27, #3 (2006): 258.

<sup>37</sup> Coticchia & Catanzaro, “The Fog of Words...,” 1-23.

<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Kavanagh, Michael D. Rich, et al. *News in a Digital Age: Comparing News Information over time and across media platforms* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019).

The next section shall involve an attempt to gradually step beyond the strict boundaries of theoretical academic analysis and to illustrate with concrete physical realm representations by the information realm, by the illustration of concrete examples of contemporary political discourse and narratives.

### **Visualising the Problem in Practice**

The use of Political Discourse Analysis (closely aligned to the discourse analytic approach of Critical Discourse Analysis)<sup>39</sup> is a good tool for exploring the interconnections between political cognition, discourse, behaviour with how properties of speech and text influence political systems and processes and vice versa. It is argued by Dunmire that this is useful for understanding the complex events of the opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as the “proliferation of new media technologies; the global war on terror; and the rise of popular resistance movements seeking to challenge repressive regimes, neo-liberal austerity programmes, and US hegemony.”<sup>40</sup> This section shall look at the selected use of some contemporary terms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that are symbolic representatives of the politicisation of language.

Two concepts in particular shall be very briefly analysed from the perspectives of the above-mentioned theoretical overview and background. New Cold War and Hybrid Warfare are those chosen as they are both currently used for political and geopolitical goals and agenda, also both of the concepts are very open to multiple interpretations and communicated to large global audiences as a means of trying to define the “reality” of contemporary international relations.

New Cold War is defined rather neutrally as tensions between blocks led by Russia and/or China, and the other led by Euro-Atlantic powers. This is an attempt to define the global geopolitical situation without engaging in an exercise of assigning blame to one side or another within the current context of the increasing tensions between blocks of great powers. As a label it is used to describe the characteristics of those geopolitical blocks, which can

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<sup>39</sup> P. Muntigl, “Politicisation and Depoliticisation: Unemployment Policy in the European Union” in *Politics as Text and Talk: Analytic Approaches to Political Discourse*, P. Chilton, P. & C. Schaffner, eds. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 45-49.

<sup>40</sup> Muntigl, “Politicisation and Depoliticisation...,” 45-49.



and will assign blame to one side more than another in order to create subjective geopolitical category boundaries between “us” (the “good” guys) and “them” (the “bad” guys) of the intended political narrative. Descriptions that are embedded in the political discourse are intended to influence the audience experience of the current geopolitical tensions giving a subjective context, ascribing thinking and intentionality of the sides of the narrative that not only includes the present, but is intended as a subjective predictive measure of intent too. This can be used to drive emotional conditions (fear or hatred for example) and/or *logos* (including a false logic) among the target audience through *pathos*, for example, in order to prime and mobilise the audience for or against a political course of action that is not based on the ‘truth’ but rather what is believable or seemingly credible.

Whether it influences the target audience or not depends on the specific sets of circumstance and the particular situation (historical and contemporary). In short, labels and descriptions are used to harness legitimacy for the “us” side and “illegitimacy” for the them side in order to control the perception and reception of the channels of information around the conceptual event that yields greater operational freedom for the actor controlling those flows. There is also a connection to the theoretical level, where this concept implies the use of realism in foreign policy (Realpolitik) in the field of international relations.

Hybrid Warfare as a purely dictionary definition of the concept is given as:

“the use of a range of different methods to attack an enemy, for example, the spreading of false information, or attacking important computer systems, as well as, or instead of, traditional military action: Technology has opened up new ways to conduct hybrid warfare. In this new era of hybrid warfare, adversaries are able to threaten each other’s security interests without resorting to direct military action.”<sup>41</sup>

This is a definition that gives clarity to the actual practice and operational aspects of the concept of hybrid warfare, it does not assign context or blame to any possible or actual actors. The purpose is for the audience to understand the practice without attribution. However, hybrid warfare can also be

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<sup>41</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “hybrid warfare”, [dictionary.cambridge.org](https://dictionary.cambridge.org) (accessed 11 January 2021).

a label as a means to convey ‘sneaky’ or otherwise “underhand” tactics that create an element of risk for the target of the practice.

It means that the label of hybrid warfare can also serve as an accusation, possibly given without or with insufficient proof. Therefore, there is a delineation of good and bad sides, aggressors and victims being relayed by the interpretation of the informational realm in the cognitive real of the target audience. The elements of description in political discourse through the invoking of hybrid warfare assign intentionality to an actor (aggressor), it does not have to be based upon truth, but it does need to be credible and/or believable to the target audience. Kneale’s description theory of names has relevance here too, because if the concept of “hybrid warfare” is prefixed by the name of a specific country, the intention of the communicator is to infuse the already negatively perceived conceptual practice of hybrid warfare with the brand and reputation of the ‘guilty’ country to form a very definite description.

These are both examples of organised persuasive communication that is intended to pave the way for some form of social, political and/or economic change that may be otherwise difficult to “sell” to an audience in ordinary circumstances. This is why there are attempts to mobilise an audience through the manipulation of emotions by raising and invoking the spectre of crisis, risk, hazard or threat to a value or norm that is cherished by the target audience. Labels and descriptions are therefore not necessarily true and accurate characterisations of elements and events in the physical realm, but rather constructed and intended to create a specific cognitive effect that can support a political or economic agenda of an actor.

## **Conclusion**

Kavanagh and Rich argue that the main drivers of truth decay include cognitive biases, the rise of social media and other changes to the information environment, the education system’s inability to keep up with changes in the information environment, and political and social polarisation.<sup>42</sup> All of these certainly contribute to motivation and the ability of unscrupulous actors to

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<sup>42</sup> Kavanagh & Rich, et al., *News in a Digital Age*.

influence and manipulate contemporary target audiences for some kind of political, social or economic gain.

Labels and descriptions play a definite role in constructing an interpretation of the physical realm, which is often done as a means of engineering opinion, perception and ultimately consent towards a specific goal of objective. They do this by defining reality for the audience in such a manner that audience is placed in a position to choose between controlled binary choices. For example, a choice between something bad, and something worse, losing one's civil rights and liberties in a 'democratic' country during the Coronavirus pandemic or possibly the projected thought of losing one's life or the life of a loved one.

The effect of labels and descriptions is to "neatly" order and categorise aspects and elements that constitute the human life experience. They make things more "understandable" and "comprehensible", even if from a misinformed and manipulative perspective. These can be then fed in to a more systematised and formalised understanding and means of analysing and predicting the political, economic and social world of mankind by the creation of concepts. As concepts are fundamental to all human experience by recognising instances, generalising for the known and unknown, and to make inferences and predictions. Add to this the strategic element of theory that are formed sets of interconnected relations. The systematisation of information via the evolution of labels and descriptions to concepts and theories is the road to knowledge and this can, in turn, become the orthodoxy of knowledge. That is something that is hard to challenge, even if it is build on a non-truth, yet widely believed and therefore forming an ingrained part of an individual's or group's core worldview and influences their political, social or economic relations.

# I Like you to Death: Social Media and Radicalization

*Pierre Jolicoeur and Frederic Labarre*

## Introduction

Radicalization is a social problem and a matter of national or international security when it leads – or threatens to lead – to violence. In finding remedies to this problem, a careful balance between security and liberty must be established if the fabric of society is not to be irretrievably disturbed.<sup>1</sup> Regimes with varying degrees of openness will tend to favour one principle over the other in their choice between liberty and security.

Regardless of regime, however, the mass-media have a role to play in political change. The common-sense literature on the subject ascribes a causal impact to media, and, more and more, to social media, in triggering political change. However, recent findings seem to suggest the picture is not complete without understanding the articulation of many other processes.

This contribution looks at how social media use and media exposure shapes individual cognition, and directs the individual towards violent extremism. Radicalisation is defined by David Mandel as a “process whereby attitudes, beliefs, and values are acquired that support the intention to commit acts of violence... or... the perpetration of violent acts by others.”<sup>2</sup>

Our literature review makes reference to radicalisation as a psychological outcome which leads to terroristic violence. However, radicalisation does not always lead to violence. It nevertheless affects the quality of normal intra-social discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Jolicoeur & Frederic Labarre, “Absolute Freedom and Security in post 9/11 Canada,” in Denis Caleta & Peter Shemella, eds. *Managing the Consequences of Terrorist Acts: Efficiency and Coordination Challenges* (Ljubljana: Institute for Corporate Security Studies, 2012), 121-136.

<sup>2</sup> David. R. Mandel, “Radicalisation: What does it mean?” in T. Pick, A. Speckhard & B. Jacuch, eds. *Homegrown Terrorism* (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2009), 108.

Even if we source our understanding of the concept in political violence literature, we would nevertheless define radicalisation as a process whereby attitudes, beliefs, and values are acquired that support an uncompromising worldview, which carries the potential for violent socio-political change.

## Literature Review

Scholarship on radicalization has evolved over the last three decades in accordance with the perceived evolution of the problem of radicalization. In 1977, Walter Laqueur published his seminal synthesis “Terrorism”, outlining how difficult it was to establish a profile of a terrorist.<sup>3</sup>

Each adaptation since then has spawned a corresponding change in terminology. Revolutionary, rebel, freedom-fighter, insurgent, suicide-terrorist, home-grown terrorist, foreign fighter, lone wolf, and radicalised individuals are concepts that have one thing in common; the desire to join a group, risk their reputation and lives for a cause. Yet, instead of focusing on radicalisation, most experts insist on organization, and attempt to derive solutions based on structural evidence.<sup>4</sup>

The psychological factor is frequently acknowledged, but rarely integrated in analysis. In general, the fault has been put on charismatic individuals or structural pressures, where absence of democracy, disenfranchisement and sub-optimal governance trigger a desire for radical change.

The authoritative context need not be prestigious; social clubs are sufficient.<sup>5</sup> In fact, prestige has little to do with the appeal of a radical message; witness for example how correctional staff separate radicalised prisoners from the

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism and The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little-Brown, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Bard O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (London: Brassey's, 1990). In fact, O'Neill uses an Eastonian analytical approach which simultaneously, in the opinion of this author, legitimizes the insurgent organization, and neglects the impact of environmental inputs or governmental outputs on individual fighters.

<sup>5</sup> Jahangir Arasli, “Violent Converts to Islam: Growing Clusters and Rising Trends,” in John J. LeBeau, ed. *The Dangerous Landscape: International Perspectives in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Terrorism* (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: PFP Consortium Press, 2013), 113.

rest of the carceral population.<sup>6</sup> Often, a virtual organisation will be sufficient for messaging and coordination.

It has been argued by many psychiatrists and psychologists – from Sigmund Freud to Margaret Singer – that the source of radicalisation lies not in the prestige of a cause, but in the charisma of its leadership, yet;

...a leader need not be all that impressive. He or she can develop power by distorting their followers' idealism, dividing their loyalties, using flattery, threats and spurious logic to defeat objections and rationalize their demands.<sup>7</sup>

An individual's development as a member of a group is correlated with whether the leadership stimulates or represses the member.<sup>8</sup> When leadership makes demands that the member adopt certain positions (or carry out violent acts), we must ask how this can come about if that the leadership is "not all that impressive." Is it merely the member who is impressionable?

At this juncture, the literature often returns to structural causes. Radicalisation, whether religious or secular, is understood as a reaction to conditions that the group or its members have come to find intolerable. Semionova has demonstrated that the authorities' attempts at providing representativeness and inclusiveness have not mitigated the propensity for radicalism.<sup>9</sup> Her study suggests that radicals not only challenge (and simultaneously use) democratic principles and symbols; they also challenge alternative religious narratives. Oftentimes, this manifestation of outrage is the result of perceived socio-economic and political neglect.

Structural explanations of insurgency and radicalisation have also focused on lack of good governance and effective administration of public services. In conflict zones, attempts at mitigating and resolving violent insurgencies

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<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Beardsley, "Inside French Prisons: A Struggle to Combat Radicalization," *NPR.org*, (25 June 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Deikman, "The Psychological Power of Charismatic Leaders," in James J. B. Forrest, ed. *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training and Root Causes. Vol. 2: Training* (New York: Praeger, 2006), 71-72.

<sup>8</sup> Deikman, "The Psychological Power of Charismatic Leaders," 73.

<sup>9</sup> Simona Semionova, *The Charlie Hebdo Effect: Security vs. Liberty?* (MA thesis, Aalborg University, 2016), 41-42.

through elaborate social development programs<sup>10</sup> (soft security approaches) have met with limited success.<sup>11</sup>

This does not explain why individuals who have been born and raised in fully-functioning societies and have been shielded from the horrors of conflict embrace radicalism. Explanatory components are missing to bring analytical richness to the motive of radicalisation.

## Research Design

The revolution in communications has not helped to build bridges, but rather to erect walls, and further fragment opinion holders within societies. Biases being accentuated, radicalisation has continued unabated not only since 9/11, but has tended to accelerate since the Arab Spring, in conjunction with ever greater computing power, ease of communication (especially applications), and the incessant exposure to media. We know too little about how modern communications contribute to the self-isolation of vulnerable individuals, or rather, how communications – especially in the social media environment – make individuals vulnerable to suggestion in the first place. Several hypotheses come to mind;

H1. The information consumed is presented in such a way as to crystalize existing perceptual biases;

H2. Far from eradicating bias, the existing media environment reinforces the sense of like-mindedness and community, leading to an alternative legitimacy, brought about by the democratic nature of the media environment;

H3. The resulting gap between the alternative legitimacy and that which is required by the mainstream environment is such, that the individual feels alienated. This alienation can only be resolved by embracing the authority of self-generated echo chambers.

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<sup>10</sup> Sybille Schreyiers, “Is the Law of Armed Conflict Outdated?” *Parameters* 43, #4, (Winter 2013-2014): 45.

<sup>11</sup> Frederic Labarre, Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Comparing the American, British and Canadian Approaches, Report 082-2011, Ottawa: Defence R&D of Canada, 2011).

## Methodology: A Systems Approach

Radicalisation takes place at the intersection of several systems; socio-political, psychological, biological and technical.<sup>12</sup> The literature on radicalization is not particularly good at describing the relationship between the individual and the socio-political environment through the filter of social media. Here, we use David Easton's systems theory to describe and map out the interplay of influences on a political system and on individuals evolving and living in particular communities as part of the socio-political environment. To adapt the theory with psychology and biology, we treat the individual's personal faculties – the brain – as the “black box” of the will's own “system”.

Recent advances in communications, and in particular the communication of news items and the shaping of public opinion through social media have been poorly researched by the social and political sciences discipline. True, many insightful articles have appeared in communication studies journals, as well as consumer behaviour and marketing magazines, but these studies have helped the cause of commerce, not of security. In a systems approach, communications – message transfers – lubricates the process of input and output function.

However, the impact of social media, of propagandist content, of how that content is generated, diffused, and integrated by the consumer – and how it shapes beliefs and directs action – is poorly understood. Information and communications technology do not cease to innovate, and with them our manners of media interaction are modified faster than our capacity to understand. Furthermore, there is evidence that our biology – not only our psychology – is also being affected. Our brains are being physically shaped by the type of information we receive, how it is communicated and absorbed.

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<sup>12</sup> Marc Galanter & James J. B. Forrest, “Cults, Charismatic Groups and Social Systems: Understanding the Transformation of Terrorist Recruits,” in J. J. B. Forrest, ed. *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training and Root Causes. Vol. 2: Training* (New York: Praeger, 2006), 55.

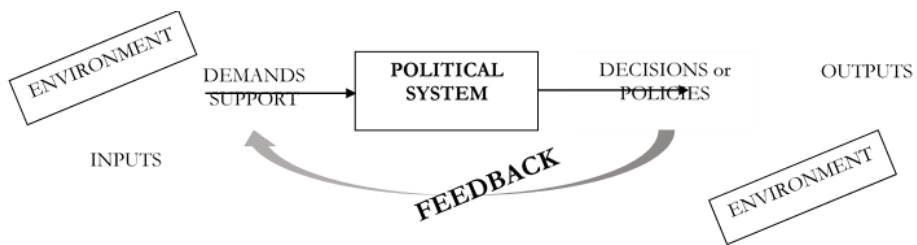


## Theoretical Design

Over time, the boundaries between a political system and the environment in which it operates become blurred. “Deference” towards political elite erodes. The “ceremony” and “pageantry” of political office becomes a subject of ridicule, not respect. The elite and politicians have strived to reduce the “distance” between their office and the daily lives of the constituents, by doing so, they have eliminated the “mystery” of the political process.

In the end, the political system has become merged with other systems operating within the environment; careers, families, communities, groups, and even virtual communities are now aggregated. No longer is the political system neatly distinct from its environment as it is in Easton’s model, in Fig. 1.<sup>13</sup>

Fig. 1. *The Political System*



For the would-be radical this exclusion is arguably mitigated by participation in other social systems, such as life in a minority community, a sports group, or in a virtual world. Easton explained that the birth of a political system is rooted in the efforts of its members to cope with a changing environment. When the system is unable to produce the expected outputs, marginal members tend to defect from that system. Members join fringe groups that they have an input into and in which they can satisfy some of their expectations.

The boundary of a political system is defined by all those actions more or less directly related to the making of binding decisions for a society; *every social*

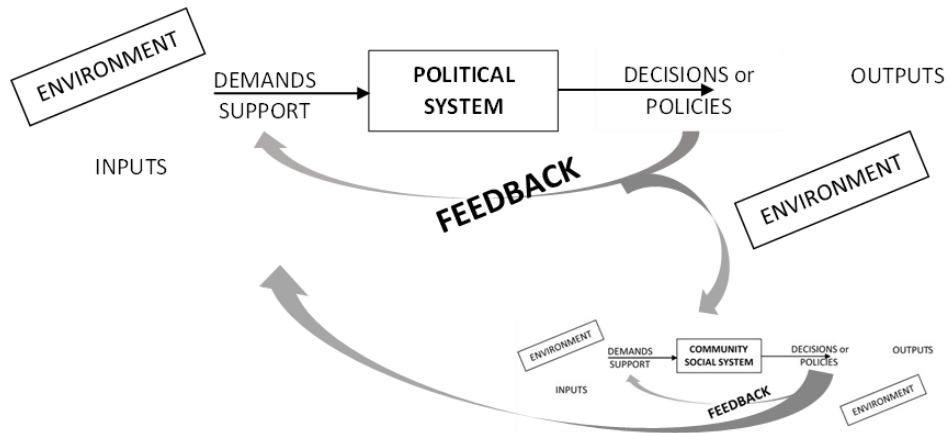
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<sup>13</sup> David Easton, “An Approach to the Analysis of Political Systems,” *World Politics* 9, #3, (April 1957): 384.

*action that does not partake of this characteristic will be excluded from the system... as an external variable in the environment.*<sup>14</sup>

Post-modern societies are systems of political systems (see Fig. 2), where group and individual inputs reinforce each other, and create outputs which are then driven as inputs towards the titular political system. Today's socio-political environment is replete with diverse interest groups, political forces, and "community social systems" which are more or less in the margins of the political system. Each has its own system of support, of inputs, and outputs of those sub-systems (or para-systems) act as inputs in the political system.

*Fig. 2. A system of socio-political systems*



The important point of our model is that the individual member is nearly as powerful as a source of output, and acts as a self-contained "black box" to other external influences, not only those of the groups to which he or she belongs. Those influences act through the individual to by-pass para-groups to input the political system. Predictably, the degree of support for minority demands would tend to be lesser. Continued frustration of demands may entail group defection, or worse, the substitution of a more responsive pole

<sup>14</sup> Easton, "An Approach to the Analysis..." 385.

of authority for another, less manageable system. This happens when “structural differentiation sets in motion forces that are potentially disintegrative in their results for the system.”

Easton conceived of the combined action of demands and support under the rubric “information”, yet, it is no longer reasonable to suggest – in the current information landscape – that “some claims... never find their way into the political system but are satisfied through the private negotiations of or the settlements by the persons involved.”<sup>15</sup> The media disproportionately enhances the weight of minority and fringe opinions and demands. Modern communication means accelerate and magnify the spread of each of these. There is no need for private transactions or negotiations to satisfy demands of a socio-political nature; all are merged into the environment and expressed there.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century socio-political environment is democratic and inclusive. Freedom of expression and communication fools the political system and its members into accepting marginal, non-viable, non-democratic and sometimes hateful ideologies as apparently dominant.

Modern communication means are more than enablers, or support for inputs. They help shape supportive behaviour... a “state of feeling on the part of a person.”<sup>16</sup> To political scientists, feelings are not rational, and therefore not measurable. On the other hand, Robert Aumann, Nobel Prize laureate for Economics in 2005, stated that “a person acts rationally when they act in their own best interest per the information available.”<sup>17</sup>

Recent advances in socio-psychology, and in psychological research have confirmed that human attitudes are infinitely malleable. The role of information in shaping these attitudes is not new. However, we are only beginning to understand the effect of information frequency and pace. Intuition (feelings) and reason become confused in a world where integrating and digesting information ever more rapidly and in ever greater quantities becomes the

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<sup>15</sup> Easton, “An Approach to the Analysis...,” 387.

<sup>16</sup> Easton, “An Approach to the Analysis...,” 391.

<sup>17</sup> Notes taken by F. Labarre on the occasion of a presentation by Robert Aumann at the 2005 Nobel Prize ceremony, Stockholm, (December 2005).

measure of success or failure. The next section of this study demonstrates how modern communication tools and techniques have social consequences that influence individual perception and motivation.

### **Articulating How Modern Communications and Social Media Shapes Opinion and Motivation**

We have shown elsewhere that society could be shielded from unwanted influences and its fabric “atomized” to isolate its members.<sup>18</sup> There is no need for legislative constraints for this. News consumers knowingly ignore certain sources in favour of information that is only mainstream in appearance. Opinions are not affected by the availability of contrary data, or the existence of other authoritative sources. According to Anton Tamarovich, information is not a support or an input from the environment, it is an output coming from the authorities. The intention of the fabrication of information is to prevent factionalism.<sup>19</sup> According to Adam Satariano, even democratic governments also resort to these methods; “data analytics software allow governments to more effectively tailor [messaging].”<sup>20</sup>

The context is the same for radicalization; the group spews out decisions, policies and information that becomes authoritative, thereby shaping the attitudes and motivations of its more vulnerable adherents. In this process, two factors merit further study; how a group supplants legitimate authorities, and how an individual self-isolates from the mainstream political system.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Jolicoeur & Frederic Labarre, “The Sources of Neo-Totalitarianism: Media Manipulation and the Cultivation of Fear” In: H.-C. Breede & S. von Hlatky, eds. *Culture and the Soldier: Identities, Values and Norms in Military Engagement* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019), 154-175. Hannah Arendt had argued that total control required the atomization and isolation of the individual within society. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1973).

<sup>19</sup> Anton Tamarovich, “The Media in Russia: Interests, Stakeholders and Prospects,” in F. Labarre & G. Niculescu, eds. *The Media is the Message: Shaping Compromise in the South Caucasus*, Band 12/2016, (Vienna: National Defence Academy, 2016), 15-27.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Satariano, “Government ‘Cyber Troops’ Manipulate Facebook, Twitter, Study Says,” Bloomberg.com (17 July 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Phil Williams “The Global Crisis in Governance,” in H. Matfess & M. Miklaucic, eds. *Beyond Convergence: World Without Order* (Washington DC: Center for Complex Operations (CCO), 2016) 22.

Let us imagine that, as in Fig. 2, a community operates as a self-contained social system within the mainstream (titular) socio-political system. Often, such communities act as a filter to enable an ethno-religious group to maintain its cultural traditions within the mainstream society. It is thought that this “output” will mitigate the risk of radicalisation of vulnerable individuals. In France, the creation of a “Conseil français de la Confession musulmane” (CFCM) has resulted in the institutionalisation of the Muslim community at national level, from the many isolated mosques that existed before.<sup>22</sup> While the far-right fears that communautarianism may lead to further acts of extremist violence, this system also enables the filtering out of information from members of that community about potential radicals. From April 2014 to October 2015, 5871 “at-risk” individuals were singled out through this process. Of note, two thirds of this number have been identified by members of the community who were family members, friends, colleagues or teachers of the individuals.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the community provides “input” to the authorities, who then act on the information received.

“At-risk” individuals are not only subjects to both their “own” and “mainstream” communities; they are also subjects to online “remote” communities. They are themselves processors of inputs, and creators of outputs. Remote communities or groups extend far beyond national boundaries to which the individual would normally identify. The individual has, at his/her disposal, means of coercion and communications whose reach rivals that of the State’s. Efforts at integrating visible or religious minorities usually result in formal or semi-formal communities, such as the CFCM. Although the radicalisation mitigation strategy seems to work on the whole, the experience of France, Belgium, Canada, Germany and of the United Kingdom since 2015 suggests that radicalisation occurs at the intersection of the individual’s psyche, and his relationship with and belonging to remote (online) “cults.”

Because inputs to the individual emanate from outside the mainstream socio-political system’s confines, we must start to conceive of cult-like “virtual

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<sup>22</sup> Semionova, *The Charlie Hebdo Effect...*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Romain Quivoij, “The French Counter-Radicalisation Strategy,” *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies* (RSIS) paper 301, Singapore (27 December 2016), 7.

societies” that sustain their members across borders.<sup>24</sup> Cults engage the minds of proto-radicals to generate psycho-social forces that devolve into new identities and social structures.<sup>25</sup> Although such groups “hide in the open” online, they must monopolize their members’ attention in a context of competing attractions.

Charismatic groups function as social systems, taking in external inputs and putting out a particular product.<sup>26</sup> Security requires dislocation so that the group be shielded from retribution. The community therefore becomes virtual. Social media then becomes preferred because it seems to offer anonymity which conspiracy requires.

Different systems are used for different propagandist products (inputs into the individual’s belief system).<sup>27</sup> The use of secure messaging reinforces security and belonging on the part of the individual. Applications sustain the sentiment of urgency in the consumer’s mind, as notification features bombard the individual with “news” which simultaneously obviate alternative points of view, and reinforce belief and sustain attitudes.

The quality of the output depends on the system that is penetrated. Mainstream “authoritative” socio-political systems will likely reject out-of-hand radical messaging. It may legislate against the “glorification” of terrorist acts, or against “extremism”. Ethnic and religious communities may call for moderation, non-violence or denunciation of stray members. Corporate giants may take on the responsibility to rid the public sphere of extremist content. These decisions are outputs from para-systems.<sup>28</sup> All these responses are likely to be fed back into radicalizing systems, and individuals belonging to

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<sup>24</sup> André Donk. *Digitale Wissenschaft? Eine empirische Bestandsaufnahme* Münster University (2009), [https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/25b49a3c80c021becb9c7ec784f94266.pdf/ZTMK\\_Donk.pdf](https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/25b49a3c80c021becb9c7ec784f94266.pdf/ZTMK_Donk.pdf) (accessed 4 January 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Galanter & Forest, “Cults, Charismatic Groups and Social Systems...,” 51.

<sup>26</sup> Galanter & Forest, “Cults, Charismatic Groups and Social Systems...,” 54-55.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmet S. Yayla & Anne Speckhard, “*Telegram*: The Mighty Application that ISIS Loves,” ICSVE Brief Report, (9 May 2017), [www.icsve.org/telegram-the-mighty-application-that-isis-loves](http://www.icsve.org/telegram-the-mighty-application-that-isis-loves).

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Kuchler, “Facebook turns to AI to help block Terror Post,” *Reuters.com* (15 June 2017) & Linda Fioretti, “Social Media Giants Step Up Joint Fight Against Extremist Content,” *Reuters.com* (26 June 2017).

such groups are equally likely to see further evidence of a “mainstream” conspiracy at work against their chosen “reality”. “So-called catnets, that is, networks that are homogeneous in terms of social category belonging, are likely to cause far stronger and more extensive intersubjective uniformities in beliefs.”<sup>29</sup> The very nature of modern communications makes “boundary control” between systems and external influence mitigation meaningless.<sup>30</sup> Rather, radicalisation requires self-isolation. Self-isolation results from the individual’s online interactions and exposure to messaging.

### **Messaging and Technology as Input at Individual Level**

Four psychological levers are essential in building loyalty to a cause; a shared belief system, social cohesiveness, behavioural norms, and compelling charismatic power from an authoritative source.<sup>31</sup> Individuals can evade many of these levers online; a belief system is always at the mercy of external influences. Social cohesiveness is also subject to individual distractions. Behavioural norms cannot be enforced from afar. Finally, charismatic leadership is always made relative by the experience of the individual’s immediate environment. Yet we notice the confounding effect of self-generated echo chambers in social media contexts.<sup>32</sup>

While a person may have innocent interest in the religious or political views of a given community, this interest is picked up by technology, in addition to the constant bombardment of fresh “news”. “Our smartphone... is a vast psychological questionnaire that we are constantly filling out... consciously and unconsciously.”<sup>33</sup> As the person refines his or her views, perception becomes vulnerable to “shaping techniques” by apologists, propagandists and

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<sup>29</sup> Jens Rydgren, “Shared Beliefs about the Past: A Cognitive Sociology of Intersubjective Memory,” in J. Rydgren, ed. *Frontiers of Sociology* (Brill Online, 2009), 319.

<sup>30</sup> Galanter & Forest, “Cults, Charismatic Groups and Social Systems...,” 59-60.

<sup>31</sup> Galanter & Forest, “Cults, Charismatic Groups and Social Systems...,” 61.

<sup>32</sup> Brigitte Nacos, “Mediated Terror: Teaching Terrorism through Propaganda and Publicity,” in J. J. B. Forrest, ed. *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training and Root Causes. Vol. 2: Training* (New York: Praeger, 2006), 99.

<sup>33</sup> Hannes Grassegger & Michael Krogerus, “The Data that Turned the World Upside Down,” *Motherboard* (28 January 2017), [www.motherboard.com](http://www.motherboard.com).

even robots.<sup>34</sup> The effect is to lead the recipient to “voluntarily” relinquish critical thinking, and to accept the propositions presented as their own views.<sup>35</sup> For this to happen, the virtual group has to attain greater legitimacy in the mind of the proto-radical. As Brigitte Nacos observed; the “mere fact that the terrorist is interviewed by respected media representatives and treated like a news source that is worthy of being part of serious debate elevates the person to the level of legitimate political actor.”<sup>36</sup> When these interviews get shared through social media platforms, the patina of legitimacy of the original content transfers to the platform. Thus, platforms like *YouTube*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter* not only become confused with the original sources, but they acquire legitimacy as well.

One effect of this is that people seeking information within this space may think that they are getting information from different sources when in fact they are getting information from the same or very similar sources, laundered through many different websites... conspirational thinking is related to a “crippled epistemology”... a limited and/or slanted information diet... shaped by a social group.<sup>37</sup>

The legitimization process allows not only the ideas to circulate as “normal” inputs into the mainstream socio-political system, but marketing techniques elevate fringe groups professing minority viewpoints and ideologies to supplant the mainstream socio-political system. A terrorist group that seeks to recruit through online or social media cannot hope to achieve “mass appeal”, but it can attract a few dozen individuals in search of “belonging.” Those members will not only evaluate their group membership positively to reinforce self-esteem, they will tend to excuse the group for negative occurrences.<sup>38</sup> Thereafter, “contagion” and emulation can be counted on provide mass effect.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kate Starbird, “Information Wars: A Window into the Alternative Media Eco-System,” *Medium.com* (14 March 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Nacos, “Mediated Terror...,” 101.

<sup>36</sup> Nacos, “Mediated Terror...,” 108.

<sup>37</sup> Starbird, “Information Wars...”.

<sup>38</sup> Rydgren, “Shared Beliefs about the Past...,” 314.

<sup>39</sup> Nacos, “Mediated Terror...,” 112.



To maintain commitment (behaviour), the individual's loyalty depends on how collective memory and beliefs are shaped. A radical group operating online will have to build a legend around the courses of action that it intends its militants to engage in. This is not merely an exercise in cognitive dissonance and rationalisation; it involves the shaping of collective memory, which supplants beliefs. Facts are turned into beliefs, and beliefs are then interpreted as memory, both individual and social.<sup>40</sup> This process is intersubjective; the individual is a system operating within a wider radical socio-political system, to which other members participate.

Because the radical group now carries all the legitimacy in the individual's mind, its message is authoritative. Discussions about the message, news items about the group, and all forms of information reinforce this legitimacy. Anyone holding contrary points of views are automatically anathema and ejected from the group. *Belief* – not collective memory – drives behaviour. Social media and online communications are the tools whereby “individuals are motivated by an ‘effort after meaning’... cognitive closure by imposing order upon... the ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ of raw experience.”<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of how the information is generated, its nature and pace are what matter; “our increasing abilities to store information outside of personal, biological memory may have diminished some aspects of human memory capacities, particularly our skills in mental... and rote memorization.”<sup>42</sup> This loss may already be happening as technological means to survey digital memory tend to re-inforce biases produced by prolonged exposure to radical narrative; search engines mostly produce results based on individual preferences and earlier searches.

This leads the individual to assume that what is in reality a minority issue has attained mainstream status. It may reinforce the impression in the individual that there is no alternative at all, and will forgo any attempt at critically evaluating the information presented. In addition, the psycho-social investment made by the individual may entail cognitive costs too great to bear. That is;

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<sup>40</sup> Rydgren, “Shared Beliefs about the Past...,” 308.

<sup>41</sup> Rydgren, “Shared Beliefs about the Past...,” 309.

<sup>42</sup> Jeff Pruchnic & Kim Lacey, “The Future of Forgetting: Rhetoric, Memory, Affect,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41, #4, (2011): 5.

the person becomes incapable to integrate facts that go contrary to their established biases. Kahneman has shown how onerous critical thinking is on the nervous system, and also on our human powers to control ourselves.<sup>43</sup>

The illusion of online anonymity may lead the individual to release their inhibitions but at the same time, “trolling” produces stress and anxiety. Challenges to the ego are answered with vicious counter attacks. “Vulnerable” individuals are those who cannot stand up to “bullying”, or contrary online opinions, and will seek refuge in the safety of acceptant online societies and like-mindedness.

Kahneman continues by saying that “ego depletion” caused by contrarian challenges, leads the individual to abandon self-control.<sup>44</sup> It is at this junction that the individual is most susceptible to undertaking violent extremist action; the person does not think through the consequences of the actions in question, precisely because the nervous and psychological system is literally exhausted by the effort of self-control and critical thinking. The group will have developed messaging techniques that enhance associations between disparate concepts, to give the illusion of logic. Associations are mentally constructed in “resemblance, contiguity in time and place, and causality.”<sup>45</sup> For example, we associate things that resemble each other, and this leads to categorization, which is another form of generalization. Thus we put our bank cards together, but separately from government-issued cards in our wallets. Doing this with mental concepts involves the same categorization.

Contiguity in time and place derives possible association simply by juxtaposition. Marketing the idea that the United States is responsible for the plight of Syrian children is as easy as providing repeated images of the latter meandering through ruins, followed immediately by an image of an American flag. The human mind, consciously or not, will tend to establish a causality chain between the first and the second item – although the exact nature of that causality is never present.

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 41.

<sup>44</sup> Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 52.

In real causality, however, the association is functional between cause and effect. Usually, these causal chains do not require us from thinking things through, because they are part of collective memory and understanding. For example, no one needs to test out the proposition that oil repels water.

People generally make associations that do not really exist, or that should benefit from deeper enquiry.<sup>46</sup> Psychological research suggests that the associative capacity of our brain – initially designed to save time – will not only make false analogies look real, but will also modify our behaviour. The way technology and social media present information “primes” the individual to act a certain way after being exposed to certain associations, or affective and somatic markers.<sup>47</sup> The implications for the would-be violent extremist are clear;

“...living in a culture that surrounds us with reminders of money may shape our behavior and our attitudes in ways that we do not know about and of which we may not be proud. Some cultures provide frequent reminders of respect, others constantly remind their members of God, and some societies prime obedience by large images of the Dear Leader. Can there be any doubt that the ubiquitous portraits of the national leader in dictatorial societies not only convey the feeling that ‘Big Brother is Watching’ but also lead to an actual reduction of spontaneous thought and independent action?”<sup>48</sup>

Young people are driven to act old when they are confronted with associations to old age. Radical sympathizers become violent militant when they have been repeatedly primed by social media and internet exposure. The quality of information online and in social media reinforces perceptual biases; vivid information is more easily remembered than “pallid” information, which explains the increasing sensationalism in news media, and the provocativeness of opinion online. As Rydgren concludes, because people more frequently remember instances of conflict than peace, they will tend to overestimate the chances of conflict arising.<sup>49</sup>

More importantly, however, by that time *belief* will have substituted memory in the individual. That is, the individual will *feel* more than he or she will *think*. Precise “emotion-based messaging” then targets the individual to exploit the

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<sup>46</sup> Rydgren, “Shared Beliefs about the Past...,” 310.

<sup>47</sup> Pruchnic & Lacey, “The Future of Forgetting...,” 14.

<sup>48</sup> Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Rydgren, “Shared Beliefs about the Past...,” 313.

niche feelings he has about the issues that he has been exposed to through intersubjective discussions online and in social media.<sup>50</sup> Because the individual “feels”, the object of feeling is all the more tangible and real. Individuals take for true what is linked by logic, association, source trustworthiness, and are rewarded by “cognitive ease”.<sup>51</sup> This cognitive reassurance is helped by technological means which leverage so-called big data to enable micro-targeting of messaging.

Psychometrics enable what Kahneman called “the associative machine” to work with greater ease, relieving the individual from critical thinking. Algorithms and electronic robots then engage to provide the individual with the sort of messaging which will be reassuring to the ego, self-esteem and self-worth, primarily by avoiding contrarian ideas, and promoting ideas and concepts firmly within the individual’s perceptual bias; “people let their likes and dislikes determine their beliefs about the world.”<sup>52</sup> Taken in the social-media context, likes and dislikes can be managed so that the individual will find those ideas and concepts more “available”, that is, they will come more easily “top of mind” further easing (and limiting) thought and decision processes, and reinforcing the illusion that radical narratives are legitimate, and even entering the mainstream.<sup>53</sup>

Very soon, the person will be continuously exposed to the sort of imagery and messaging that he or she finds appealing, and reinforcing messaging will appear on newsfeeds and message boards apparently randomly, or by chance. No message which could contradict the individual’s pre-existing biases, or even the biases “shaped” by prior interaction will cross into his field of vision.

The individual’s memory will not be reliable anymore to call up to mind positions or ideas that could contradict the dominance of the radical narrative. The individual will shield himself or herself from a greater society (whether the ethno-religious community, professional association, other sub-group or

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<sup>50</sup> Pruchnic & Lacey, “The Future of Forgetting...,” 19.

<sup>51</sup> Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 64.

<sup>52</sup> Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 103.

<sup>53</sup> Asma Khalid, “Tech Creates our Political Echo Chambers. It might also be a Solution,” [www.NPR.org](http://www.NPR.org) (2 April 2017).

the mainstream socio-political grouping) to relieve the dissonance and protect themselves from “unhygienic” thinking. That is when self-isolation takes place.

The principle of group belonging does the rest; the individual may even try to prove his or her worthiness to the cause by going down in the street and joining a protest, or worse, engaging on the path to violence.

## **Conclusion**

In the preceding research note, we have attempted to highlight the process whereby a normal socio-political system allows for the creation of smaller groupings to stimulate political participation and integration into the mainstream. We have argued that radicalisation does not take place from within those socio-political sub-groups, but rather from a process that links vulnerable individuals with remote fringe groups through online and social media interaction. In our argument, the individual participates as a “psychological” system or unit, also susceptible to inputs from his or her environment, and capable of producing certain outputs.

The direction and nature of those outputs is what marks a radical from a normal, integrated member of a larger socio-political system. We have attempted to describe that for this to happen, the virtual radical group had to become more legitimate than the sub-group or wider socio-political framework in which the individual evolves. This explains in broad strokes how radicalism is bred in an online context. We have then focused our attention on how the individual is influenced by the methodology of big data and clever psychological manipulation so that, as a self-contained unit within a larger system, the individual’s psychology remains consonant and directive so that the individual’s action would simultaneously act as feedback into the online virtual radical group (as a reward to the group for its acceptance of the individual) and as an input from that radical group into the wider socio-political system.

To summarize, the following conditions seem to be necessary for radicalisation to take place:

1. The individual believes what he thinks he remembers. He only believes what he trusts. Trust and belief become interchangeable, and so is the source of belief.
2. *Remembering* is simply the ordination of inputs at individual level integrated as facts from outside.
3. “Affection” substitutes rationality. We trust and believe what we have come to like.
4. Individuals come to like other like-minded individuals, extending their affection and trust.
5. Modern technology is an enabler that re-shapes not only opinions, but also cerebral biology through neuro-plasticity.

Further research is needed on the interaction of technology and the impact of social media and modern information and communication means on human psychology and biology. It is to be hoped that this mapping exercise provides the starting point for a more robust synthesis.

## **PART II: INFORMATION RISKS**

# Consciousness Hijacking: In Search of False News' Ideal Recipe

*Iryna Lysyckina*

## Introduction

This chapter aims at defining the tools that are applied to promote false news. The latter are used to construct the virtual reality that impacts people's attitudes, thinking, behaviour patterns, and lifestyle. Emotional resonance, proper wording, and visualization are the main factors that contribute to the manipulative impact on the addressee's consciousness and value system to persuade and impose the narrative desired and constructed by the narrator. That is consciousness hijacking. The author suggests looking at false news and the contributing factors through the cocktail metaphor where false news is alcohol able to hijack the consumer's consciousness when used with inebriating ingredients.

## Current News Menu: Narratives, False News, Fake News – What Is Stronger?

The digital era we live in is characterized by easy access to huge amounts of information from multiple sources, making it difficult to tell truth from lies. This gives rise to the concept of *Homo Confusus*<sup>1</sup> as a modern person at a loss. *Homo Confusus* is overwhelmed with information that often comes in the form of news, and facts are often blurred with fiction on purpose in order to mislead, deceive, impose certain views and ideas. Not only news but also facts themselves have lost their direct link to reality with the rise of new term *alternative facts* as falsehoods, untruths, and delusions;

“A *fact* is something that actually exists – what we would call “reality” or “truth.” An *alternative* is one of the choices in a set of given options; typically the options are

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<sup>1</sup> Anatoly Kozyrev, “Homo Confusus – Человек растерянный,” *CEMI-RAS*, (7 Feb. 2019). <https://medium.com/cemi-ras/homo-confusus-Человек-растерянный-8a4a5b> accessed. Accessed January 28, 2021.



opposites of each other. So to talk about *alternative facts* is to talk about the opposite of reality (which is delusion), or the opposite of truth (which is untruth).”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, it becomes more and more complicated to tell truth from untruth since reality and truth are rather subjective and people tend to attribute additional meanings acquired from their personal experiences. The overwhelming power of virtual reality created amongst others by games like “Second Life” and “Minecraft” contributes to mixing realities a person lives in. As a result, impossible becomes possible, and the borders between the real world and other realities become eroded. Working with the concepts REALITY and TRUTH, some researchers-denialists<sup>3</sup> made an attempt to visualize reality as a multifaceted phenomenon calling it “the crystal of reality” (Fig. 1). Anyway, since reality is empirically verifiable, it correlates with the truth.

People usually perceive reality from one or two projections ignoring the rest. These projections correlate with the news in the form of which people get new information concerning reality.

*News* is a key term for this chapter, therefore, it is necessary to clarify exactly what is meant by it. According to Collins Dictionary, news is

1. information about a recently changed situation or a recent event;
2. information that is published in newspapers and broadcast on radio and television about recent events in the country or world or in a particular area of activity.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to point out that broadcast channels in the second definition should be extended to social media and other Internet resources since many people prefer to get news from new media. The definition above underlines the main features for information to become news – novelty and sharing (by publication or broadcast). It is worth mentioning that news is not a synonym to truth since trustworthiness depends on a number of factors: source, focal point, perspective, etc.

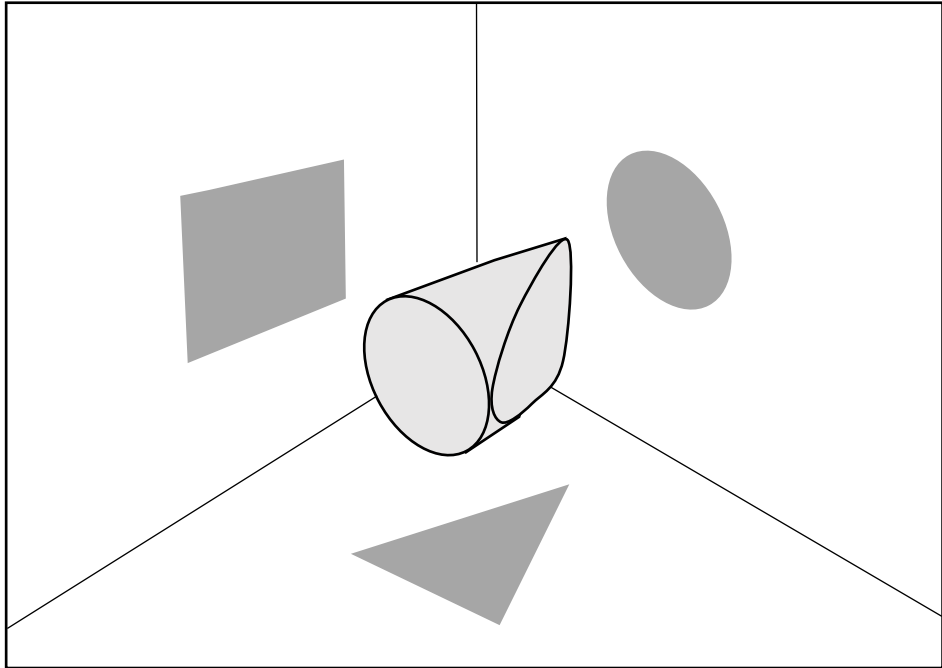
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<sup>2</sup> *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. “Alternative facts,”  
<https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/alternative-facts/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ivaness, “Концепция ‘Реальность’: проекции мироздания,” *Ivaness*, (9 April 2016).  
<https://ivaness.com/концепция-реальности/> (accessed 5 January 2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. “news,”  
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/news>.

Figure 1. The “crystal of reality”



Since 2017, when the term “fake news” was announced as the Collins Word of the Year 2017,<sup>5</sup> new shades of meaning were added: “If you describe information as fake news, you mean that it is false even though it is being reported as news, for example by the media.”<sup>6</sup>

Fake or false news can be loosely described as a process and result of *misinformation* when information is inaccurate or misleading, and *disinformation* when spreading false information aims at deceiving people. A number of communicative strategies are applied to cover delusion and deception in news, for instance: irony, misleading headlines, misleading inference to the

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<sup>5</sup> *Collins Dictionary*, “2017 Word of the Year Shortlist,” <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/word-lovers-blog/new/collins-2017-word-of-the-year-shortlist,396,HCB.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *Collins Dictionary*, s.v. “fake news,” <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fake-news>.

given facts, stories presenting only one side of an argument, imposter content with reference to a reputable source, decontextualized content, fabricated content with doctored photos in support, etc.

Nowadays, “fake news” is rather a label to any information or source of information often used as a political strategy to devalue the opponent’s narrative, thus, this term has lost “all connection to the actual veracity of the information presented.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the researchers believe that fake news have “been irredeemably polarized in our current political and media climate.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, to underline the reference to veracity, false is a better term than fake.

News, both true and false, are used to build a narrative as “a story explaining an actor’s actions in order to justify them to their audience, a sequence of events with significance for narrator and audience.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, it includes stories about the events that are defined by the narrator as relevant for the audience, narrative being the desired description of the reality.

Narrative is the main information feed since “narratives both resonate with the intended audience’s core values and advocate a persuasive cause-effect description that ties events together in an explanatory framework.”<sup>10</sup>

False news’ mere existence does not allow for the addressee’s consciousness to be hijacked. Like alcohol, the addressee’s inclination to consume false

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus Woo, “How online disinformation spreads,” Knowable Magazine, (2 November 2021), <https://knowablemagazine.org/article/society/2021/how-online-misinformation-spreads> (accessed 5 January 2022). Alexandra, “The psychology of fake news: how disinformation spreads online,” *Social Media Psychology*, (20 Sept. 2018). <https://socialmediapsychology.eu/2018/09/20/the-psychology-of-fake-news-how-disinformation-spreads-online/>.

<sup>8</sup> Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy & Sinan Aral, “The spread of true and false news online,” *Science* 359, #6380 (9 March 2018): 1146-1151, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

<sup>9</sup> Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography* (London: Sage, 1989), 96.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas Antoniadis, Alistair Miskimmon & Ben O’Loughlin, “Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives,” Working Paper #7 (Brighton: Centre for Global Political Economy, University of Sussex, 2010), 29-35, <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=cgpe-wp07-antoniades-miskimmon-oloughlin.pdf&site=359>.

news and its quantity are important to produce an effect. In other words, it is false news virality conditioned by the following factors;

1. Information overflow, especially in the social media news feed;
2. The audience's limited attention span caused by the nature of Homo Confusus;
3. Confirmation bias as our tendency to share information that supports our beliefs;
4. Cognitive bias as the reference to one's value system relative to the concepts of SAFETY, TERRORISM, DISASTER, POLITICS, etc.;
5. Third-person effect, or the tendency to believe that others are more vulnerable to the effects of mass media, in the context of political communication on social media.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) researchers have investigated the differential diffusion of all of the verified true and false news stories distributed on Twitter from 2006 to 2017.<sup>11</sup>

The analysis showed that false stories reach much bigger audiences, spread faster and broader compared to true stories.

“Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. We found that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information. Whereas false stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise in replies, true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust. Contrary to conventional wisdom, robots accelerated the spread of true and false news at the same rate, implying that false news spreads more than the truth because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it.”<sup>12</sup>

False news can vary in its impact potential based on the topic it refers to. Thus, misinformation in the context of politics is more difficult to debunk, compared to topics such as health or crime. Disinformation is much stronger than misinformation because of its delusion and deception nature.

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<sup>11</sup> Vosoughi, et al., “The spread of true and false news online,” 1146.

<sup>12</sup> Vosoughi, et al., “The spread of true and false news online,” 1146.

Review of the basic features of the current news menu including news, narratives, false and fake news enables to define their specialties. Though included in news and narratives, reality and the truth are vague; narratives built on disinformation and realized in the form of false news have the highest potential in hijacking people's consciousness; people's preference for a particular narrative becomes an addiction that distorts the taste of reality and the truth; fake news is a brand label with politics flavour and can have a surprising taste; false news can be based on misinformation and/or disinformation and should be consumed consciously to avoid addiction and taste distortion for new information coming as news.

### **How Does False News Find its Way to Consciousness?**

Incoming in the form of news, information contributes to the construction of the model of the world in the mind, that is in the consciousness. The latter seeks for clear unambiguous interpretation of the situation/activity since *Homo Confusus* tends to avoid cognitive dissonance. Here, an important tool is used – a frame. In his frame theory, Lakoff states that “frames are mental structures shaping the way we see the world.”<sup>13</sup> According to Lakoff,

“Framing is critical because a frame, once established in the mind of the reader (or listener, viewer, etc.), leads that person almost inevitably to the conclusion desired by the framer, and it blocks consideration of other possible facts and interpretations.”<sup>14</sup>

Constructed in the mind, a frame allows for filtering out any incoming facts that contradict the addressee's set of thoughts, beliefs, values. The media, especially new social media, are very powerful in constructing those desired frames in the audience's consciousness. Those desired frames correspond and reflect the media-created virtual world which is usually brighter than the real one and is clearly based on the cognitive map of human consciousness.

Being part of a greater narrative, false news creates the mental model of the situation, on which the addressee starts to rely. This virtual mental model

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<sup>13</sup> George Lakoff, *The ALL NEW Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014), XV.

<sup>14</sup> Lakoff, *The ALL NEW Don't Think of an Elephant!* XV.

creates another “draft” of the world, which is superimposed on the basic mental model.<sup>15</sup>

“Since the media professionally take into account the painful points of mass consciousness for building the communication, nowadays, we fail to tell a fake from the truth since we experience a lot of forgery and fakery.”<sup>16</sup>

In most cases, a person does not conflict with the model of the world, does not seek an alternative interpretation. When the interpretation in the mind coincides with the one offered in media communication, this model is strengthened.<sup>17</sup> The built-in frames support this process and block any “side” information. Other “side” facts will be denied by the addressee if they do not correspond to the existing model of the situation.

Simultaneous use of several different media intensifies the influence and supports the narrative, as well as news.<sup>18</sup> Repetition changes its status and makes it not only a fact, but also general knowledge. Social media builds communities of interest, and “the growing polarization of users on specific narratives drives the rapid diffusion of disinformation online.”<sup>19</sup>

The source and the deliverer of information – or rather misinformation since it is about false news – are significant in terms of false news virality. False news is perceived trustworthy when delivered by celebrities and experts – authorities whom the audiences trust like family members, following them in the media and social nets, or as unbiased professionals in the field. For example, based on the investigation of misinformation on COVID-19, seven types of people who start and spread viral information have been identified; jokers (pranksters having fun), scammers (making money out of the situation), politicians (getting publicity), conspiracy theorists (promoting theories), insiders (boasting of supposed access to secret or privileged infor-

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<sup>15</sup> Iryna Lysyckhina, “Narrative Shaping in Strategic Communication,” in *Between Fact and Fakery: Information and Instability in the South Caucasus and Beyond*, F. Labarre & G. Niculescu, eds. Band 2/2018, (Vienna: Austrian National Defence Academy, 2018), 53-63.

<sup>16</sup> Joe Navarro & Marvin Karlins, *What Every Body is Saying: An FBI Agent's Guide to Speed-Reading People* (New York: Collins, 2008), 250.

<sup>17</sup> Navarro & Karlins, *What Every Body is Saying...*, 250.

<sup>18</sup> Lysyckhina, “Narrative Shaping in Strategic Communication,” 53-63.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandra, “The Psychology of Disinformation Spread.”

mation), relatives (driven by empathy and familiarity), and celebrities (amplifying misleading information that goes mainstream).<sup>20</sup> This is one of the many existing typologies of false news deliverers who ensure virality and direct the news to the addressee's consciousness.

Thus, false news uses a rather simple mechanism to get to people's consciousness: first, it imitates the shape of the mind frame to get into the consciousness (mainly, by targeting the value system), then it builds into the frame; with further false news flow, it substitutes mind frames of the veracity filters and blocks "side" information. This is the case when quantity turns into quality – more intensive false news flow, especially in the form of an organized well-planned narrative, is perceived by the consciousness as universal knowledge.

The news menu items mentioned above need to be intensified in order to achieve a better and faster result in consciousness hijacking. Among the best intensifiers, I would list three; emotional appeal able to produce resonance, word choice contributing to "covering" deception and lie and imitating the truth, and visualization to bridge the gap between false news and reality.

### **Emotional Resonance – Some Like it Hot**

There have been numerous attempts to understand the reasons why people fall for some news and ignore others. The explanations can vary from personal interest and motivation to a particular mood at a particular time and place.

News gains the potential to impact the addressee's consciousness when it evokes emotional resonance as the emotional response and/or reaction that leads to changes in attitudes, understanding and behaviour since resonance is "the quality of having an intensity of emotion or richness of expression that evokes or reinforces a sympathetic response."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Marianna Spring, "Coronavirus: The seven types of people who start and spread viral information," *BBC News* (4 May 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-52474347>. (accessed 05 February 2021).

<sup>21</sup> *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, s.v. "resonance," <https://www.yourdictionary.com/resonance>.

Studies show that content evoking high-arousal emotions, both positive (awe) and negative (anger or anxiety), gets more shares than content with low-arousal emotions.<sup>22</sup> For instance, false news associated with strong emotions like disgust, fear, and surprise, as well as true news associated with sadness, joy, or trust evokes stronger emotional resonance, the intensity of emotions being a leading factor.<sup>23</sup> Emotional resonance can be caused by the element of surprise and novelty since people tend to share breaking news and to be among the first to get and disseminate the news.

Emotional resonance can switch off people's cognitive ability to verify the information by defaulting the veracity filters in the consciousness. As mentioned above, when false news gets into our consciousness it stays there and builds into the filter for new information. It is a proven fact that such news with a strong emotional component is "extremely hard to debunk."<sup>24</sup>

According to the physiological research on eye movement, when we read a story that provokes emotional reactions, and is relevant to us, we get a sort of *tunnel vision* and our attentiveness increases manifold, which makes us more likely to remember the story, and more disinclined to re-evaluate the information later.<sup>25</sup>

Tunnel vision correlates with frame theory mentioned above since both are used to create false news and ensure its sharing. Tunnel vision adds speed to false news spreading when the latter resonates with the addressee's value system and feelings. For instance, nostalgia evoked by the false news forces the addressee to recollect happy moments from the past and link the incoming information, thus the addressee's consciousness gets trapped in sweet memories and blocks information evaluation through the veracity filters.

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<sup>22</sup> Jonah Berger & Katherine L. Milkman, "What Makes Online Content Viral?" *Journal of Marketing Research* (April 1, 2012). <http://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353>.

<sup>23</sup> Vosoughi, et al., "The spread of true and false news online," 1146.

<sup>24</sup> Alexandra, "The Psychology of Disinformation...".

<sup>25</sup> Johanna K. Kaakinen & Jukka Hyona, "Task Relevance Induces Momentary Changes in the Visual Field During Reading," *Psychological Science* (January 3, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0956797613512332>.



## Proper Wording – Truth, Nothing but Truth

*Homo Confusus* does not feel comfortable in cluttered information space, neither in an information vacuum. Their consciousness built-in frames follow the principle “first come-first served.” People’s cognitive ability conditions how well they can adjust their attitudes after false information is being corrected; a

“...study first assessed peoples’ judgment about a fictitious character after receiving negative information about her, but later corrected that information and assessed whether changes in the subjects’ original judgments occurred. It turns out, only participants with high cognitive ability adjusted their opinions after being presented with the contrasting information. Participants with low cognitive ability persevered with their initial opinion, despite the new facts.”<sup>26</sup>

“Making a given fact a matter of course” can be read as “giving a satisfactory explanation of that fact”, thus, the narrative explains the fact/event in a way that makes only one interpretation possible, which is desired by the narrator and presented as the truth. For instance, in the 1993 New York mayoral election campaign, Rudy Giuliani avoided “*crime*”, “*criminals*” and related “*fighting crime*” shifting to “*personal and public safety*” and “*safe, civil society*.”<sup>27</sup>

Deception and manipulation have psycho-linguistic markers. False news usually is characterized by wide usage of superlatives, modal verbs which are referred to the means of exaggeration, while truthful news contains precise information: statistics, money, numbers, comparatives, as well as links to the information sources. Qualitatively, however,

“...researchers also found that first-person and second-person pronouns are used more in less reliable news types, while trustworthy news is more likely to avoid language that seems too personal. Fake news reports also commonly contain two clear signs of deceptive language – more vague expressions in general, and more hedge words, or words used to soften or lessen the impact of the statements that follow (e. g. “a little bit”, “somewhat”, “maybe”, “apparently”, “sort of”).”<sup>28</sup>

Headlines are also very important in producing the desired effect.

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<sup>26</sup> Alexandra, “The Psychology of Disinformation...”.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Luntz, *Words That Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear*. (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 150-178.

<sup>28</sup> Alexandra, “The Psychology of Disinformation...”.

“Fake news is closer to satire than to real news, concluded the authors – their titles are longer, use few stop words (short function words such as “the”, “which”, “on”, “is”), and fewer nouns, but more proper nouns. Fake news packs the main claim of the article in the long title, which is often a claim about a person or an entity, while the body of the article remains repetitive, short, and less informative.”<sup>29</sup>

False news is more verbally selective since the words, especially those in headlines, perform several functions: to attract the reader’s attention, to trigger emotions, to hide deception, imitate reality and block veracity filters, and to arouse a desire to share the news. The words usually refer to the value system and feelings associated with safety, fear, and politics.

It is important that false news tend to hide the performer of the action by passive voice structures to add mysteriousness to the fact, or to shift attention from the real performer if necessary. A reputable information source might be mentioned to add credibility to the information through general phrases such as “it is well known”, “they say”, “our insiders claim”, etc. to overcome the veracity filters.

Thus, if emotions are a kind of accelerator, they help the false news to get to invade consciousness faster by avoiding the veracity filters, by “covering” deception through proper wording, by imitating the truth, and by targeting the individual’s value system.

### **Visualization – Cherry at the Top and a Sipping Straw?**

From the psycho-linguistic perspective, visualization of information contributes to capture attention, illustrate the message, process and remember it by promoting the narrator’s vision and attitudes. In the *truthiness* paradigm, although photos do not provide probative information for a target claim, they might nonetheless boost belief in the claim because photos are inherently credible themselves.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Alexandra, “The Psychology of Disinformation...”.

<sup>30</sup> Eryn J. Newman & Lyn Zhang, “Truthiness: How Non-probative photos shape belief,” in *The Psychology of Fake News: Accepting, Sharing, and Correcting Misinformation*, Greifeneder, R., Jaffé, M.E., Newman, E.J., & Schwarz, (Eds.) N. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2020), 93. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429295379>.

False news is often accompanied by different types of photos to help visualize the information, make people believe, and set the desired thinking:

1. decorative nonprobative images that are real, related to the topic/situation but that do not provide evidence whether the news is true;
2. doctored photos purposefully created to mislead the audience;
3. misleading photos that are real but taken from a different time-place dimension, context, or collages/fragments of such photos.

Nonprobative photos create the *truthiness* effect<sup>31</sup> when biased people believe claims since, as the research suggests, images signal truth and can bias people to believe within just a few seconds.<sup>32</sup>

The truthiness effect adds to a larger literature on cognitive fluency and is yet another example of how the availability of conceptually relevant information can enhance processing, but bias judgment. While people may be confident in their ability to discern fact from fiction, truth from lies, and real from fake, the truthiness effect squares with broader research on eyewitness memory, lie detection and truth, showing that assessments of truth are fallible and vulnerable to biases we are often unaware of.<sup>33</sup>

Misleading, especially doctored photos are more efficient in supporting false news since they illustrate concrete facts, regardless of veracity, and impose a particular vision to the addressee: “When misleading photos are doctored to represent an event that never happened, or are paired with repeated suggestion from a trusted source, they can lead people to believe and remember completely false information.”<sup>34</sup> The examples mentioned above used to illustrate false news correspond to the types of videos that can also support false news. The latter in the form of video has a higher potential for visualization.

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<sup>31</sup> Newman & Zhang, “Truthiness...,” 90.

<sup>32</sup> Newman & Zhang, “Truthiness...,” 106.

<sup>33</sup> Newman & Zhang, “Truthiness...,” 108-109.

<sup>34</sup> D. Stephen Lindsay, Lisa Hagen, J. Don Read, Kimberley A. Wade & Maryanne Garry, “True photographs and false memories,” *Psychological Science* 15, (2004): 149-154. <https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.0956-7976.2004.01503002.x>.

Thus, photos and videos help to impose the narrator's vision to the addressee who "believes his/her eyes" and classifies such information as true even if it is false news. Photos and videos are a bridge between reality and false news properly worded to hide deception and imitate the truth. When emotional resonance is applied, photos and videos block the veracity filters.

### **Conclusion – Consciousness Hijacking Cocktail Recipe**

The three components addressed in this chapter – emotions, words, photos and videos – are the perfect ingredients added to false news for a consciousness hijacking cocktail. Each of them performs a particular function – emotions accelerating false news on its way to the consciousness-avoiding filters, word choice concealing deception and imitating the truth, photos and videos blocking the veracity filters in the consciousness and decorating the cocktail. Their proportion depends on the addressee's taste conditioned by age, gender, experience, cognitive abilities, etc. False news causes strong addiction and damages the consciousness when consumed indiscriminately in big quantities.

# Digital Public Diplomacy and Propaganda: A Catch-22?

*Céline Emma La Cour*

## Introduction

The contemporary information landscape presents us with both opportunities and challenges whether we act as individuals, organizations or governments. With social media, it is easier for us to share our opinions and engage in debates with people far away. At the same time, it is harder for us to separate true information from false within massive floods of news and different narratives stemming from a growing number of sources. While we have easier access to information, the risk of being subjected to propaganda and disinformation increases. States fear this risk since information influences peoples' opinions and peoples' opinions are what end up defining government policies.

Therefore, many states have developed strategies on how to educate their citizens in media literacy and how to trace and counter propaganda and disinformation. The establishment of East StratCom Task Force under the European External Action Service (EEAS) and of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) with departments collecting open-source intelligence and mapping digital disinformation are just few recent examples.<sup>1</sup> In September 2018, the Danish government also announced an initiative to increase Danish resilience against foreign influence and disinformation by monitoring media campaigns, and training communication officers from various ministries on how to identify and counter disinformation.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is impossible for a state to totally prevent what it perceives as propaganda and disinformation from entering the information space. Thus, the best way to prevent unwanted information from influencing people is to

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<sup>1</sup> Ilan Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy, 2019), 150.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, "Strengthened safeguards against foreign influence on Danish elections and democracy", (2018). [https://um.dk/en/news/news\\_displaypage/?newsid=1df5adbb-d1df-402b-b9ac-57fd4485ffa4](https://um.dk/en/news/news_displaypage/?newsid=1df5adbb-d1df-402b-b9ac-57fd4485ffa4). Accessed 21 May 2021.

expose such information as false, make sure that more accurate information reaches as many people as possible, and in general try to appear as the more trustworthy source of information. This is done with so-called “soft power” as famously defined by Joseph Nye as a country’s ability to attract people by promoting the country’s culture, values and policies, instead of coercing them.<sup>3</sup> For states to be attractive and make their narratives believable, they need to continuously communicate with “the people” through effective communication channels. In other words, states need to practice *public diplomacy* (referred to as PD hence-forth) which can be defined as a state’s communication to populations of foreign countries with an aim to positively influence that population’s opinion about the state in question.<sup>4</sup>

Today much public diplomacy has become digital. States use social media or distribute narratives via digital news outlets to promote a positive state-image. However, we will show that PD efforts today can easily be perceived as propaganda by foreign publics, precisely because people are encouraged to be critical towards foreign influence attempts. Furthermore, we argue that perceived propaganda amplifies negative state image. In the endeavour to counter propaganda and disinformation, states risk undermining legitimate public diplomacy efforts, and with public diplomacy states risk worsening relations instead of improving them.

This chapter examines the symbiosis between public diplomacy, propaganda and disinformation, and discusses the consequences of digitalization of public diplomacy with the aim of providing policy advice for PD-actors. We focus specifically on Western-Russian relations and use Denmark as a reference. The paper seeks to answer the question: How does digitalization of public diplomacy affect Western-Russian relations?

We argue that, since public diplomacy, propaganda and disinformation are intertwined conceptually and practically, digital public diplomacy intensifies mutual accusations of propaganda and therefore also states’ efforts to counter it. Perhaps the most important point of this paper is that public diplomacy

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr. “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, (2008), 94.

<sup>4</sup> J. Pamment, *New public diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: A comparative study of policy and practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

aimed at building trust and mutual understanding has become less effective, because people in both the West and Russia have become overly critical of attempts at building a positive image. This, out of fear of being manipulated into trusting malicious actors or misleading information.

There are four sections to this chapter. The first will describe and problematize the concepts of public diplomacy, propaganda and disinformation with a constructivist approach. The second will explain consequences of digitalization of public diplomacy, and why this has led to intensified securitization of “foreign influence” by drawing on Ilan Manor’s book on digitalization of public diplomacy and securitization theory. Third, by drawing on John Zaller’s theory of opinion formation, we will reflect upon a survey-experiment that measured Danish students’ perceptions of Russia as a military threat after reading perceived Russian propaganda. Finally, we provide policy advice for PD actors. All sections also draw on four interviews with Russian experts conducted specifically for this chapter.<sup>5</sup>

### **Perceptions of Concepts: True, False or Biased?**

The concepts “public diplomacy” and “propaganda” look alike. The Encyclopedia Britannica dictionary define public diplomacy as

“...any of various government-sponsored efforts aimed at communicating directly with foreign publics. Public diplomacy includes all official efforts to convince targeted sectors of foreign opinion to support or tolerate a government’s strategic objectives.”

The intent of public diplomacy, according to Gifford Malone, is to influence the behaviour of a foreign government by influencing the attitudes of its citizens.<sup>6</sup> William Roberts has pointed out that public diplomacy includes efforts aimed at creating a positive image among foreign publics to facilitate the acceptance of certain foreign policies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> All interview subjects have agreed to appear with full names and quotations.

<sup>6</sup> G. D. Malone, *Political advocacy and cultural communication: Organizing the nation’s public diplomacy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> W. R. Roberts, “What is public diplomacy? Past practices, present conduct, possible future,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 18, #4 (2007), 36-52.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines propaganda as “information, ideas, opinions or images that give one part of an argument, which are broadcast, published, etc., in order to influence peoples’ opinions.”<sup>8</sup>

According to this definition “state propaganda” is similar to public diplomacy in that both must be assumed to be state-sponsored, created to benefit a government and seeking to influence popular opinion.<sup>9</sup> The only difference is that propaganda is specifically biased and not necessarily aimed at foreign publics.

Taking a look at the concept of “disinformation” from Oxford Reference, we find that it is defined as “a form of propaganda involving the dissemination of false information with the deliberate intent to deceive or mislead.”<sup>10</sup> Here, state propaganda and disinformation are synonyms and both are aimed at influencing people by misleading them. Disinformation is also used to describe information that leads to misconceptions about the real state of the world.<sup>11</sup> These definitions show that the concepts are intertwined when they are referred to on a daily basis.

According to a positivist approach to philosophy of science, something is real, when we *know* it is true.<sup>12</sup> But when determining what is true, false or biased, we must consider what people *think*, not what is scientifically proved. In daily life popular perceptions matter more than researchers’ integrity. This is why this paper adhere to a constructivist approach where reality is socially constructed within different social contexts. According to such an approach something is real if we *believe* it to be true. Thus, what is considered propa-

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<sup>8</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “propaganda,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/propaganda>. Accessed 17 May 2021.

<sup>9</sup> E.C. Tandoc, Jr., Z. W. Lim & R. Ling, “Defining ‘fake news’: a typology of scholarly definitions,” *Digital Journalism* 6, #2, (2018), 137-153.

<sup>10</sup> Oxford Reference, s.v. “disinformation,” <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095721660>. Accessed 17 May 2021.

<sup>11</sup> J. Tucker, A. Guess, P. Barberá, C. Vaccari, A. Siegel, et al., *Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature* (San Francisco, CA: Hewlett Foundation, March 2018).

<sup>12</sup> B. Caldwell, “Positivist philosophy of science and the methodology of economics,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 14, #1 (1980), 53-76.



ganda and disinformation varies from individual to individual and from society to society because information is interpreted within the framework of preexisting beliefs.<sup>13</sup> An example is the “annexation” of Crimea as it is called in the West and the “reunification” of Crimea as it is referred to in Russia. Those who agree with one or the other see true information, those who see an unfair framing see biased information and those who strongly disagree might perceive the information as false.<sup>14</sup>

### *Public Diplomacy Agents*

Like different perceptions of true and false, there are different understandings as to how public diplomacy is practiced. In Denmark there is an official PD-structure within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Headquarters in Copenhagen have a PD-department which provides guidelines for Danish missions abroad on what narratives to promote. Many missions have public diplomacy staff which manage social media accounts and PD-initiatives in host countries. But such communication varies in topic and channel in different host countries and includes both what could be referred to as “cultural diplomacy” promoting cultural events such as film-screenings, literary readings and art exhibitions and “political diplomacy” such as political statements or webinars on political topics. However, the official PD-structure does not rule out that PD also takes place outside the government.

The Danish Cultural Institute and *VisitDenmark* are examples of Danish organizations that are partly sponsored by the government and are invested in branding Denmark’s political values, culture and tourism.<sup>15</sup> Thus, “nation branding” also becomes a relevant concept as well. For example, the Danish Cultural Institute is committed to promoting art, education, sustainability, democracy and human rights which makes them an actor of both cultural and political public diplomacy.

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Jervis, *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 120.

<sup>14</sup> Celine E. La Cour, “Legitimate Soft Power or Malign Influence?” *PICREADI* (2020), [https://www.picreadi.com/legitimate\\_soft\\_power\\_or\\_malign\\_influence](https://www.picreadi.com/legitimate_soft_power_or_malign_influence). Accessed 19 May 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Danish Cultural Institute, “About,” <https://www.danishculture.com/about-danish-cultural-institute/>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

According to the Russian PD-expert and founder of the non-governmental organization Creative Diplomacy, Natalia Burlinova,<sup>16</sup> there is no well-organized official PD-structure in Russia. The closest you come to a governmental PD-department is “Department of Information and Press” which would fall into the “political PD” category and “Rossotrudnichestvo” (including “Russian Houses” and “Russian Centres for Science and Culture”) whose activities aim at implementing state policies of international humanitarian cooperation and promotion abroad of an objective image of contemporary Russia.<sup>17</sup> Their activities convey both cultural and political narratives.

By talking to Russian experts, an additional category of public diplomacy emerges, which could be described as “peoples’ diplomacy.” This is diplomacy *by* the people *for* the people. As Denis Volkov – Director at the Levada Centre in Moscow – puts it; “it’s more about independent organisations reaching out to counterparts in other countries to make bridges between societies.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the state is not always the main sender of the message or of the activity. Some public diplomacy actors in Russia refer to themselves as non-governmental organizations with an objective of promoting the understanding of Russia abroad through seminars, programs for young leaders, educational programs, etc.<sup>19</sup> Examples of such non-governmental organizations are Creative Diplomacy (also called PICREADI<sup>20</sup>) and the PIR Centre.<sup>21</sup> They often receive “presidential grants” from the Russian government and thus, they are sometimes viewed as illegitimate in the West because they are not purely “non-governmental.”<sup>22</sup> The same is true however, of the Danish organizations mentioned above (and many other Western NGOs besides). Nevertheless, Russian NGOs perceive themselves as public diplomacy actors and therefore the practical use of the concept is broadened to

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<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with the author on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Russia in the World, “About,” <https://en.rwp.agency/agency/>.

<sup>18</sup> Personal interview with the author on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Greg Simons, “The Role of Russian NGOs in New Public Diplomacy,” *Journal of Political Marketing* 17, #2 (2018), 137-160.

<sup>20</sup> *Public Initiative “Creative Diplomacy” (PICREADI)*, “About What We Do,” <https://www.picreadi.com/activities/> Accessed 5 January 2022.

<sup>21</sup> *PIR Center*, “About us,” <https://www.pircenter.org/en/pages/48-about-pir-center>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Office of the President of the Russian Federation, “Recipients of Presidential Grants for Civil Society Development Announced,” *Press Release* (14 January 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/administration/64893>. Accessed 5 January 2022.

include not only “the public” as the receiver of communication but also “the public” as the messenger.

If state-sponsored activities directed at foreign publics qualifies an actor as a PD-actor, state-sponsored media and think tanks should also be included. Russian media like *Russia Today*, *Sputnik* and *Valdai Discussion Club* can be understood as PD-actors even though they are often perceived as propagandists by Western actors. Examples of state-sponsored media from “the West” aiming at informing foreign publics are the *RadioFreeEurope* and *Radio-Liberty* channels sponsored by the American government, and *Deutsche Welle* (DW) that is sponsored by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The point is that public diplomacy includes many actors, many topics and many communication channels at once.

### *Propaganda and/or Disinformation?*

So, what is the difference between public diplomacy and propaganda? Experts refer to public diplomacy as dialogue-based and propaganda as one-way communication. Natalia Burlinova adds that propaganda is “*quick*” information where one wants to impose a version of an event on the counterpart, and PD is more about building relations in the long term. The topics of public diplomacy seem to stretch from political values and historical happenings to education, sports and tourism whereas propaganda often involves political issues. But if it is the actor and not the specific piece of information that is regarded as propagandist, then propaganda can also be information about cultural, historical or sporting events. Public diplomacy and propaganda thus overlap.

Is it only the dialogue then that separates the two? In practice, if one looks at social media accounts of Ministries of Foreign Affairs or embassies said to be used for public diplomacy, States rarely engage in direct dialogue with people through comments, so this puts in question whether they live up to a central aspect of how experts define PD. If there is no dialogue, communication through these channels is – like propaganda – a one way street. Therefore, the way to assess whether information on digital channels is propaganda or not seems to depend on the bi-directionality of the messaging and assessing whether the information is unfairly biased. This latter question is

a matter of perception that cannot be objectively measured on the spur of the moment by the receiver.<sup>23</sup>

The line between biased and false information is also blurred. Activities of *EUvsDisinfo* are a good example of this. In a report published on April 26<sup>th</sup> 2020, the Taskforce points to allegations by a Russian state-owned media *Rosija24* that Western values are deteriorating amid the pandemic.<sup>24</sup> *EUvsDisinfo* provides so-called “disproof” to this claim by stating that “the European Union is focused on overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic, it remains committed to its values, including human dignity.”<sup>25</sup> This hardly qualifies as disproof and puts into question whether accusations of disinformation are about hard facts or a question about unwelcome opinions.<sup>26</sup>

Disinformation and propaganda often complement each other in Western countries, showing that propaganda is associated to something negative. However, it appears that it does not always have negative connotations in Russia because propaganda is viewed as a legitimate tool to counter influence-attempts from abroad or as something that is merely used to promote state-initiatives. Oleg Shakirov, a Russian digital diplomacy scholar, pointed out that “people sometimes say that we need more propaganda because Russia is under pressure from Western countries in the media and information space.”<sup>27</sup>

Propaganda can have positive effects, for example, when we talk about “vaccinations” or “a healthy way of living”, said Denis Volkov. Perceptions of propaganda as something negative or positive could depend on whether it is perceived as a legitimate diplomacy tool which again might be attributed to how a PD-actor perceives itself. Though it is simplified, it seems like many state actors in the West discard propaganda as illegitimate, since state actors

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<sup>23</sup> However, attempts are being made at measuring such feelings objectively. See Tamas Kun in this volume.

<sup>24</sup> *EUvsDisinfo*, “Disinfo: The System of Western Values has Collapsed,” (2020). <https://euvdisinfo.eu/report/the-system-of-western-values-has-collapsed/>. Accessed 19 May 2021.

<sup>25</sup> *EUvsDisinfo*, “Disinfo: The System of Western Values has Collapsed”.

<sup>26</sup> Domenico Valenza, “The Trap of Geopolitics: Rethinking EU Strategic Communication,” *College of Europe Policy Brief* 3.21, (2021), 4.

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview with the author on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

see themselves as “protectors of truth.”<sup>28</sup> In Russia where propaganda is often perceived as a legitimate soft power tool, state actors more accurately see themselves as “protectors of state interests.”

### *All as Soft Power Tools*

To create an overview of the different concepts that have been mentioned above and how they are intertwined, we offer Figure 1 (next page).

We suggest that all concepts are used in practice to further a country’s soft power. Secondly, we suggest that propaganda is a subcategory of public diplomacy that often emerges with a state’s effort to communicate strategically about political topics to create a positive state-image. Thirdly, we suggest that *political* PD can be separated from *cultural* PD, nation branding and peoples’ diplomacy in that these three categories are often perceived as less controversial in their topics and efforts. This said, they can still be perceived as propaganda.

Finally, we suggest that propaganda and disinformation are often confused with each other, and distinguishing between the two is context-dependent.

## **Digitalization of Public Diplomacy**

According to Ilan Manor, “new” public diplomacy comprises a distinct break from broadcasting-communication, taking advantage of new digital technologies such as social media. This means that governments can influence audiences through tweets, posts, and other non-traditional engagement.<sup>29</sup> These methods appear in support of government-sponsored English-written and -spoken media. Daryl Copeland argues that in such a complex information landscape, MFAs must constantly explain to their own citizens what they are doing and why.<sup>30</sup>

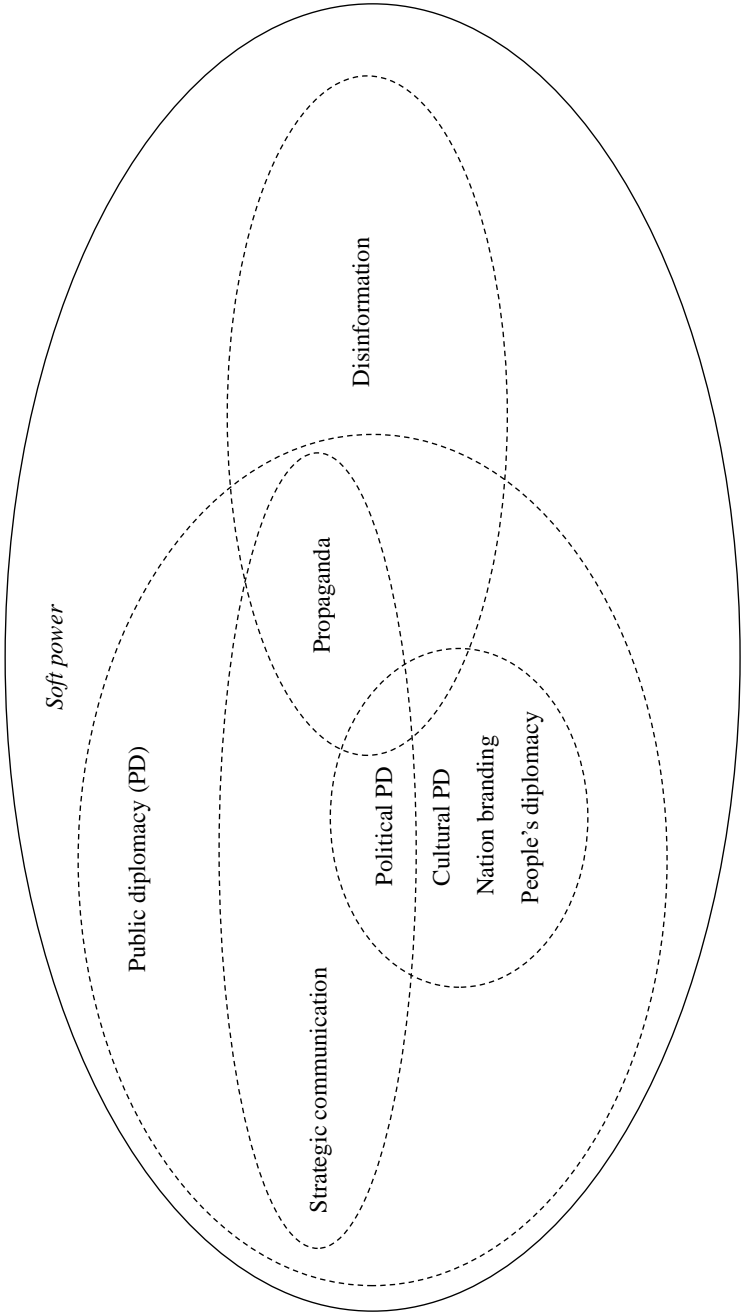
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<sup>28</sup> Valenza, “The Trap of Geopolitics...,” 10.

<sup>29</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> D. Copeland, “Taking diplomacy public: Science, technology and foreign ministries in a heteropolar world,” in R. S. Zaharna, A. Arsenault & A. Fisher Eds. *Relational, networked and collaborative approaches to public diplomacy* (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 56-69.

Figure 1: Interconnectedness between concepts



“New” public diplomacy therefore requires engaging with both domestic and foreign populations, the goal being dialogue and relationship-building.<sup>31</sup> The adoption of digital technologies by diplomatic institutions however, is not covered by the term “digital diplomacy”, since technology is not in itself a form of diplomatic practice, but is rather a new tool to facilitate diplomatic practice.

The shift from broadcasting media and physical newspapers to social media has had several implications. Firstly, the old methods of public diplomacy based on mass media channels relied heavily on one-way communication methods. Messages were transferred through different media platforms, and the audience was viewed as passive receivers acceptant of the information, based on the sender’s reputation as a credible source, and the plausibility of the message.

However, given the possibilities of active engagement of today’s media landscape, individuals are less likely to submit to a passive role in communication. Content today must therefore be tailored more specifically for particular audiences – for example certain national or foreign publics. In practice it seems that the same message is often conveyed to different audiences and the same content is often used on different channels of communication.

Secondly, it seems more difficult for states to control and contain who will receive their messages on social media than when states could choose a broadcasting channel or convey a message through a newspaper; the idea being that a conservative newspaper had a conservative audience and a socialist radio channel had socialist audience, etc. Today, the audience relies on social media algorithms and on who clicks on and shares what content. States can still tailor content and distribute it through mass media, but once shared on social media, big tech companies and connected individuals decide the content’s destiny. In other words, content will likely reach beyond the intended audience.

Third, social media allow for instant communication which means that digital publics expect to be timely and constantly updated and engage in real-time interaction regardless of physical distance. To live up to such expectations,

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<sup>31</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 14.

diplomats have to publish online messages based on their own judgment which means that communication increases in speed and centralization.<sup>32</sup> Thus, diplomats need to be trained in dealing with trolls, bots, and possible negative back-lashes and they need knowledge about each digital platform.<sup>33</sup> In many ways, digitalization of public diplomacy has introduced authenticity and transparency as important elements when communicating.<sup>34</sup> However, the criteria of having to communicate quickly leads us back to propaganda as “quick” one-sided information, suggesting that public diplomacy on social media risks appearing as propaganda.

Fourth, algorithms affect what content reaches which audience. Big tech companies constantly gather data about individual online users to tailor content to them based on their political beliefs and interests, creating so-called “filter bubbles” of like-minded individuals.<sup>35</sup> Within a filter bubble, individuals allegedly only interact with users that share their views resulting in so-called “echo chambers.” Here, one’s opinions, attitudes, and even prejudices are constantly confirmed making individuals more sceptical towards differing opinions and alternative arguments, and leading people from moderate political stances towards extremities.<sup>36</sup>

### **Securitization of Foreign Influence**

Fear of filter bubbles, echo chambers, propaganda and disinformation has led many to argue that social media sites will lead to the undoing of democracy.<sup>37</sup> However, it is not social media in itself that is considered to be dangerous. The danger lies in malicious actors using the benefits of technology to influence ordinary citizens. How do states cope with such dangers?

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<sup>32</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 137.

<sup>36</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 138, & R.K. Garrett, “The ‘echo chamber’ distraction: Disinformation campaigns are the problem, not audience fragmentation,” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6, #4 (2017): 370–376. See also Jolicoeur and Labarre in this volume.

<sup>37</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 138.



Securitization theory provides some answers here. A subject is securitised when it is spoken of as an existential threat to a certain referent object; often a state.<sup>38</sup> When securitizing a subject, the referent object tries to legitimize extraordinary means to counter the threat in question. So, when states refer to propaganda and disinformation on social media as a threat, they often interpret it as a direct threat to democracy because people could be misled into for example voting or protesting according to untrue beliefs. However, successful securitization requires that it identifies where the threat stems from. It seems that both the EU and Russia seek to place the origin of such threat outside of their borders creating a sort of binary code between domestic truth and foreign-made lies.<sup>39</sup> Examples can be found in the “Action plan against Disinformation Report” from the EU.<sup>40</sup> Here, the threat in information space is constructed as “foreign involvement” whereas the EU fails to acknowledge that propaganda and disinformation can also emerge (spontaneously) from within. The same separation of internal truth from external falsehood can be found in Russian state-narratives about foreign interference in domestic affairs.<sup>41</sup> The differentiation between the internal and the external makes the threat of misleading information look more like a traditional geopolitical threat.

Securitization indicates that extraordinary means – often non-democratic means – can be legitimized to counter the threat. Examples of such means in the case of securitization of foreign influence could be censorship of certain news outlets or social media accounts or discrimination of organizations that allegedly receive support from foreign states. Securitization theory however does not assume that such means have to be taken into use for a subject to be securitized. It is only required that they can potentially be used with the acceptance of “the people.”<sup>42</sup> Teaching media literacy for example does not

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<sup>38</sup> Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde & Ole Wæver, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 1998), 21.

<sup>39</sup> Valenza, “The Trap of Geopolitics...,” 3.

<sup>40</sup> European Commission (2018), “Action Plan against Disinformation”.

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on the results of Russian diplomacy in 2020”, Moscow, (January 18, 2021), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4527635](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4527635). Accessed 24 May 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Buzan et al., *Security...*, 15.

fall under the category of extraordinary means, nor does exposing perceived propaganda and disinformation to publics unless you do this by spreading propaganda and disinformation yourself. As stated before, spreading propaganda might be perceived as legitimate when the state is considered to be under “information attack.” Calling out others as “propagandists” can also be propaganda. All in all, securitization of foreign influence seems to increase the appearance of the subject – propaganda and disinformation – that was securitized in the first place.

It is widely acknowledged that information can be used as a sort of weapon.<sup>43</sup> According to Dominico Valenza, securitization has shifted the focus of public diplomacy efforts to involve more speed-messaging and less relationship-building by two-way-communication.<sup>44</sup> The emphasis on geopolitics and strategic communication therefore alters the promising idea of furthering mutual understanding by long termed people-to-people contact and cultural exchange.<sup>45</sup> Cultural public diplomacy in Western-Russian relations is now used merely as a tool to power-showcase positive narratives in a larger geopolitical conflict whereas principles of dialogue, understanding and reciprocity is lagging behind.<sup>46</sup> In line with this perspective, Manor argues that more and more MFAs use digital technologies not to leverage relationship-building, but to leverage for strategic communication, information dominance and influencing peoples’ behaviour.<sup>47</sup>

### **Opinion Formation: Hard to Influence, Easy to Confirm**

The information-threat from foreign countries emerges because governments assess that people can be fundamentally influenced by propaganda and disinformation. But what does it take to influence peoples’ opinion?

Political scientist John Zaller has outlined four axioms that describe how citizens acquire information and convert it into public opinion. The “accessibility axiom” implies that more recent arguments are easier to retrieve in

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<sup>43</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 148 & C.K. Bartles, “Getting Gerasimov Right,” *Military Review* 96, #1 (2016), 30-38.

<sup>44</sup> Valenza, “The Trap of Geopolitics...,” 4.

<sup>45</sup> Valenza, “The Trap of Geopolitics...,” 4.

<sup>46</sup> Valenza, “The Trap of Geopolitics...,” 4.

<sup>47</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 171.

memory for the use of forming opinions. The “response axiom” underlines that people often use the considerations made available to them when responding to political questions.<sup>48</sup> Thus, chances are that individuals who are exposed to positive messages about a state will perceive that state more positively in their apparent opinion. However, the “reception axiom” holds that people with high political attentiveness are more likely to understand political messages, and the “resistance axiom” indicates that people with such awareness can derive contextual information from a message, work out whether the message contradict their political predisposition, and therefore whether they should accept the message or not.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, receivers of a message who have high political knowledge are more likely to be critical towards information and less likely to be immediately influenced by it. Overall, the axioms indicate that many people do not bring their pre-existing opinions to the table because they simply don’t have one in the first place. Public opinion is therefore a “temporary construction.”

We have tested Zaller’s theory with a survey experiment. In 2018, 267 Danish high school students were presented with either an article from *Sputnik* about Crimea where Russia was framed positively or a placebo-article about animal welfare in Australia.<sup>50</sup> We constructed indices for the perception of Russia as a military threat assuming that the students who received the positive article about Russia (the stimulus group) would perceive Russia as less of a threat than the ones who received the placebo-article (the control group), since the former would use the positive article to form a temporary opinion according to the accessibility and response axiom.

To illuminate our assumption, we set up pure models with stimulus and two threat indices, and models where we included the variables that proved to be predictive of the threat perception. The regression coefficients are positive and significant, indicating the opposite effect than what we expected. This means that the stimulus group perceived Russia as a greater military threat

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<sup>48</sup> John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 48-49.

<sup>49</sup> Zaller, *The Nature and Origins...*, 41-42.

<sup>50</sup> Celine Emma La Cour & Frederik Windfeld, “Virker Ruslands Propaganda?” Exam paper, Course: Metode 2, (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Faculty of Political Science, December 2018). \*Can only be retrieved by contacting the authors\*

than the control group, even though Russia was framed positively. However, the effect of stimulus was -0.261 standard deviations using Cohen’s deviation, which is considered small.

*Table 1. The treatment effect on the perception of Russia as a direct military threat*

	Model 5	Model 6
Stimulus (ref. control group)	0.05* (0.021)	0.05* (0.021)
Gender (ref. woman)		-0.046* (0.021)
_cons	0.45*** (0.035)	0.48*** (0.038)
<i>N</i>	267	267
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.16	0.17

Note: Default error in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

To find the opposite effect, although small, required us to consider that political predispositions might play a bigger role than we expected. Most of the high school students in the experiment did not have a particularly high level of political knowledge but they still chose to reject the positive article about Russia, which indicates that they used the resistance axiom despite their lack of political knowledge. Thus, people do not necessarily need to have great political knowledge to have firm political predispositions and use them when formulating opinions. This could be attributed to echo chambers. It seems fair to assume that the more often opinions are confirmed, the more fiercely we believe them, and the more likely it is that political messages will be tuned out if they challenge predisposed opinion. With a constant exposure to “quick” information, people might have firm stances even though they lack in-depth knowledge about the topic in question.

Ultimately, the more Russia tries to appear in a positive light, the more it is distrusted. The article used in the experiment might not have been intended for Danish high school students, but they are likely to be exposed to such ideas through social media anyways. In such cases, it is likely perceived as propaganda or disinformation and undermines rather than enhances the state-image. Chances are that the exact same effect could be measured among Russian students if they read a positive article on NATO or the EU. And when state-image is worsened, public diplomacy and positive image-

building – no matter the format – becomes harder to execute successfully, because it is now more likely that it is turned down as an attempt to manipulate. It seems quite hard to influence people positively about state-image if they have a negative predisposition about the state in question. However, it seems easy enough to confirm negative predispositions.

Ilan Manor argues that the fear of echo chambers and filter bubbles might be exaggerated. He underlines that a lot of us actually seek out diverse information and opinions. He then concludes that society is less likely to be polarized and formed by confirmation bias than we might expect.<sup>51</sup> However, there is a risk that we seek out diverging information to confirm that “the others” are wrong. Instead of using diverging information to understand and interact with our counterpart, it is used to confirm our enemies’ attempts to manipulate. Thus, we might not only seek out information that confirms our opinions, we might also seek out information that confirms the misconduct of our counterpart.

### **Way Ahead for Public Diplomacy**

The following section reflects upon how public diplomacy can best be practiced taking into consideration the findings from above. So, what audience should PD-actors target and what topics and formats should they focus on?

There are three overall categories of audience. The first is a group that already has an interest in your country, agrees with many parts of its narrative, and seeks out your content by themselves. The second is a group that does not know a lot about your country and therefore has a neutral attitude towards it. Here, PD-efforts should focus on awareness. The third is a group that has mainly negative associations to your country. If public diplomacy efforts are to make an actual difference in terms of positive state-image and relationship-building, it shouldn’t focus primarily on the audience that already has a positive attitude.

Focus must be aimed at neutral or negative attitudes. However, the audience must not discard your narrative as propaganda, since the PD-effort will then likely have an unintended negative effect. Instead, the audience has to be

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<sup>51</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 171.

“sceptical but willing to listen and interact.” This group is not easy to detect and is probably also tricky to reach and influence. The cultural attaché at the Danish Embassy in Moscow, Galina Simonova, pointed out that the challenge connected to public diplomacy is that it can be perceived as propaganda in the eyes of the receiver “if people are not independent in their critical thinking and mentally not willing to open up to the world.”<sup>52</sup> She also advises to take into account that such people may be hard to communicate with due to a kind of “self-protection and self-deception” meaning that if they are to change their points of view, they have to cope with the values and narratives they have believed in so far have been somehow false or incomplete.

In general, PD should focus on what is good about the country of the PD-actor and not what is bad about the country or the citizens it is trying to influence. At the same time a country must also be able to criticize itself in public. Self-reflection fosters credibility and avoid positioning the country as some sort of moral high ground trying to force certain values upon others.

Acknowledging that it is too difficult to influence and change anyone’s opinions by speed-messaging, PD should focus more on dialogue and relationship-building. We have to go back to “new” public diplomacy logics, so to say. A general advice could be: Avoid harsh political statements – focus instead on furthering dialogue. The idea is that efforts should focus on activities where political topics are discussed more in depth and include various opinions. Political topics can also be discussed as part of cultural events such as film screenings or art exhibitions with follow-on debates – so-called politics in cultural disguise.

However, we acknowledge that such approaches are difficult because successful public diplomacy is mainly measured in “reach” and “engagement.” As stated in Jan Hunter’s piece in this volume, “if it bleeds, it leads.” Thus, it is sensationalism – the appeal to the senses – which wins out. The same criteria play out when communicating political topics as part of PD. The Russian MFA on Twitter for example uses humour and comic framing of

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<sup>52</sup> Personal interview with the author on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

quite controversial topics such as for example Ukraine and NATO's expansion.<sup>53</sup> Their tweets reach many people and generate a lot of comments but this is not the same as generating a positive state-image or facilitating mutual understanding. Chances are that such messaging does the exact opposite.

Another challenge is that if one party observes that the counterpart is using what it perceives as illegitimate communicative means, the party is more likely to employ such means itself. One can observe it as a sort of an "informational security dilemma." The risk is that information space is filled up with perceived propaganda and that people on respective sides of a conflict undergo an opinion polarization, ultimately making it more difficult to improve relations. Additionally, as pointed out by Ilan Manor, contested realities contribute to feelings of instability, confusion and imbalance given the proliferation of alternative facts and news. Contestations of reality contribute to global tensions by alleging that one side is hiding information, manipulating public opinion or conspiring by hiding its true actions. Thus, public diplomacy comes to undermine relationships rather than facilitate them.<sup>54</sup>

How then can we restore the benefits of public diplomacy in this digital age? Experts point to cooperative and coordinated PD-initiatives. Galina Simonova stresses that public diplomacy should be aimed at creating an open dialogue based on trust-building activities, provided that when you do public diplomacy it is not just a narrative from one country to another. It is interconnected and committed to the parties involved, so that it is largely the same narrative presented by both sides.

In line with this, Oleg Shakirov endorses the idea that

"...we could reach out to foreign ministries to highlight common events and run joint campaigns on for example *Twitter*. It could be helpful for conveying the idea that it's not always about information war and that we can still acknowledge good things and moments in history."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ilan Manor, "The Russians are Laughing! The Russians are Laughing! How Russian Diplomats Employ Humour in Online Public Diplomacy," *Global Society* 35, #1, (2020), 61-83. See also Myroslava Zabolnova's contribution on memes in this volume.

<sup>54</sup> Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, 171.

<sup>55</sup> Personal interview with the author on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

All in all, we need to “de-securitize” information to an extent where another country’s promotion of a positive image is not regarded as a threat to national security and where disinformation is based on facts – not foreign opinions.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to answer the question: How does digitalization of public diplomacy affect Western-Russian relations?

Since public diplomacy, propaganda and disinformation are intertwined conceptually and practically, and since digitalization has led many governments to increase public diplomacy efforts online, there seems to be increasing mutual accusations of propaganda and disinformation. As the appearance of perceived propaganda increases, so do government efforts to protect their citizens against it, resulting in securitization of foreign influence. Thus, information from abroad aimed at promoting a positive state-image can now be considered a security threat. Such securitization leads governments to abandon “new” public diplomacy, focusing on counter narratives and information dominance instead of dialogue and trust-building. At the same time people have become more sceptical towards narratives that challenge their predispositions. When positive narratives about a state reaches an unintended audience, the risk is that it will have a negative effect on peoples’ perceptions because the content is believed to be manipulative.

This is why effective communication between governments and people has stalled. PD should avoid speed-messaging on controversial political issues, and instead promote diverse discussions and common cultural initiatives. Acceptance that information from abroad can be enlightening instead of threatening must be facilitated. The question is of course, whether we can affect Western-Russian relations with better public diplomacy or if ill-receipt of PD-efforts is a symptom of the unhealthy relationship in itself. Our conclusion however is that we have to start communicating *with* each other instead of *at* each other if relations are to improve.



# Manipulative Functions of Political Internet Memes

*Myroslava Zobotnova*

Decades ago, it was hard to imagine that humankind would turn to virtual communications neglecting face-to-face interaction. Social networks have become the key area for communication. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok and others are the networks which occupy the biggest quantity of time of the average Internet user. However, what is communication? What do we need it for?

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, communication is information exchange, and the expression of feeling that can result in understanding,<sup>1</sup> but the concept “strategic” concerns the identification of longstanding aims and interests as well as the means of their achievement. “Strategic” communication occurs when the process of interaction includes additional aims, values, interests, and hidden intentions which are followed by specific individuals or by groups of people. The spread of “soft power” (political influence which is aimed at achievement of desired results based on voluntary participation, sympathy, and attractiveness) has caused impetus for strategic communication development which are basically planned and are a means of achieving global aims which have hidden motives.

Thus, as the politics of one country can influence the political mood in other countries, one particular political party can form an image thereby overwhelming other political communities.

The realization of strategic communication is determined by the following tactics; appeal to values (families, friends, personal life, religion, etc.), threats, defamation, vilification, cooperation, etc.<sup>2</sup> The core arena to implement

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<sup>1</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. “communication,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/communication>.

<sup>2</sup> В. С. Анохина, “Стратегии и тактики коммуникативного поведения в малой социальной группе (семье),” *Вестник Ставропольского государственного университета* 56, (2008): 64-71.

those communicative tactics is political speech, but the contemporary technological society does not pay enough time for a thorough interpretation. Instead, it relies on key abstracts from political speeches that are published as short video fragments and Internet memes presented as cartoonish pictures with occasional textual messages. Such informative abstracts are often taken out of context, affecting the shaping of political views.

### **Political Memes as an Element of Virtual Communication**

To inculcate a political ideology there is a need to clearly set aims; thus, global strategic communications address the popularization of separate values within the nation. Memes occupy the leading position as political messaging vehicles because of their liveliness, brevity, clarity, and precision.

Internet-users facing memes rarely consider the issues which lie behind those pictures. But what is their role? How can they be transformed from pictures into memes? When do they become something more meaningful? The first researcher who coined out the concept “meme” was the British biologist Richard Dawkins. He has compared memes with replicators of information which can transmit stored knowledge from one person to another as genes do.

Such coping and transmission of existing information has been named as replicator. Thus, being focused on the analysis of replicators, the new concept “meme” is assimilated with genes which can copy information to replicate and transmit further – the very essence of propaganda.

In 2015, Chemerkin pointed out that Internet memes are the elements of a game which is constantly conducted on the Internet in the process of communication.<sup>3</sup> Blackmore, in her work “The Power of Memes”<sup>4</sup> viewed memes as habits, skills, inventions, and means which help to implement various actions which can be imitated from person to person. Blackmore has clearly based her theory on the works by R. Dawkins concerning the ability to replicate.

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<sup>3</sup> С. Чемеркін, “Інтернет-мем – що це?” *Культура слова* 82 (2015): 113-116.

<sup>4</sup> S. Blackmore, “The Power of Memes,” *Scientific American* 283, #4, (2000): 52-61.

Wiggins on the other hand, compared Internet-memes with so-called *artefacts* which became an essential part of digital culture.<sup>5</sup> Shifman proposed to distinguish the concept of “meme” as a unit of popular culture which was imitated and transformed by every separate Internet user as the creation of a cultural experience in the process of interaction.<sup>6</sup>

Davison stressed that Internet memes were units of culture, mostly jokes which got their influence through their online dissemination.<sup>7</sup> The researchers distinguished four possible components which could verbalize memes; appearance (visual content of memes), acts (acts which were demonstrated), text (incorporated textual messages), and idea (the concept or idea which is formed by the meme).

A meme is a cultural, linguistic phenomenon which depends on emotional, educational and imaginary possibilities of its author and further Internet users, and which serves as a language unit in the process of modern digital communications.<sup>8</sup> Memes are not simple funny pictures anymore. They have become independent units of communication which have information embedded by the author. So, memes have a tendency to be used as an implementor of soft power in political campaigns. Crewford et al pointed out that memes can be disseminated online to “transfer the concepts of ideology and theories of conspiracy”, that can be compared with political views and interests.<sup>9</sup>

At the very beginning, memes have only entertaining value and present jokes and humorous content. Nowadays communicative functions and the general

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<sup>5</sup> B.E. Wiggins, “Memes as Genre: a Structural Analysis of the memescape,” *New Media and Society*, (2014). [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288811719\\_Memes\\_as\\_genre\\_A\\_structural\\_analysis\\_of\\_the\\_memescape](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288811719_Memes_as_genre_A_structural_analysis_of_the_memescape).

<sup>6</sup> L. Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, (2013): 362-377.

<sup>7</sup> P. Davison, *The Language of Internet Memes: The Social Media Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 120-134.

<sup>8</sup> Myroslava Zabolnova, “The Role of Memes in the World of Developing Internet Communication,” *Науковий вісник міжнародного гуманітарного університету* 30, #2, Серія «Філологія», (2017): 154-156.

<sup>9</sup> B. Crewford, F. Keen et al. “Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Culture,” *CREST Creative Commons*, (2020).

narrative of memes has completely changed. For the last several years, the leading news agencies worldwide have transformed and turned to non-printable Internet content. Earlier media resources have used only their informative platforms, but today due to the development of news chatrooms, all the news agencies are represented in social networks to widen their audience. Social networks are the territory for a younger generation which pays more attention to visual information, as opposed to printed words. Here place is granted to memes which are not a mere temporary trend of networks, but occupy an independent niche in the world of linguistics and communication in general.

Thus, there is no use to consider them from one side only. Having analyzed the existing memes' typologies we have concluded that little attention is paid to the authors' intentions because they are the people who integrate the meme's initial meaning. General pictures give the possibility to determine memes relative to their content;

1. *belonging to a group* (emoticons/emoji, stickers, motivational/inspirational posters, demotivational posters, GIFs, photos and some video fragments),
2. *intention of the author or the Internet user* (main purpose of a meme and its pragmatic side taking into the consideration the national, geographical, lexical and personal characteristics of the individual who develops memes),
3. *emotional intensity* (reflection of one or another emotional state, whether it is positive, negative or neutral), and;
4. *linguistic means* which are used to implement the main idea of the author.<sup>10</sup>

Communications experts have noted how, unbeknown to Internet users, memes imperceptibly shift away from entertainment. Even if the author's intentions are the basis for every meme in the modern communicative sphere, the psychological impact is clear. Thus, a meme is not a simple means of information exchange, but a possible source of manipulation. The main realizer of such influence is world political arena.

The first political meme appeared on the Internet in 2000 when then U.S. President George W. Bush mispronounced the word "Internet" saying it in

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<sup>10</sup> Zabolnova, "The Role of Memes..." 154-156.

plural form “Internets” (Pict. 1), he made the same mistake even four years later during political debates with his opponent John Kerry.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, we can determine political meme as an individual type. Tenove distinguished political memes as purposefully created visual presentation of political positions.<sup>12</sup> He pointed out that such memes’ procession has to cause some concerns because they have almost completely replaced live political discussions – an essential part of the democratic process and experience. Internet users do not take Internet memes as means of communication which can carry out more serious functions than those which every individual can grant to political memes according to their level of education, intellect, and social class.

Years ago, people could exchange information digitally sending separate phrases from political speeches of chosen representatives and their opponents. Today, in times of generations Y and Z,<sup>13</sup> this process includes abstracts from such presentations accompanied with possible embarrassing pictorials which often become the basis for these visual units.

Not every political meme is aimed at the dissemination and formation of political view. Sometimes memes are created to exchange and share information required at that precise moment. Such memes can include facts (Pict. 2), irony (Pict. 3), or entertaining elements (Pict. 4). Such political memes are often seen in social networks at the official pages of numerous news agencies. So, political memes are linguistic and psycholinguistic units of the Internet which narrative is completely based on the political content aimed at the information, dis-information, entertainment, and shaping of the required political views.

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<sup>11</sup> O. Klein, “The Evolution of Political Internet Memes.” *Kennedy School Review*, (2019). <https://ksr.hkspublications.org/2019/03/11/the-evolution-of-political-Internet-memes/>.

<sup>12</sup> K. Tenove, “The Meme-Ification of Politics: Politicians and their “Lit” Memes,” *The Conversation*, (2019). URL: <https://theconversation.com/the-meme-ification-of-politics-politicians-and-their-lit-memes-110017>.

<sup>13</sup> W. Strauss & N. Howe, *The Fourth Turning* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).

## Internet Memes in Contemporary Politics

Contemporary society is impossible without the formation of independent political views. Soft power has become a core aspect of forming the required political influence and creating imagery among the citizens to achieving political interests.

All users of the Internet encounter memes with political content in their social network news feed. Everyone has their own attitude; Internet-users can scroll them, read more precisely, move to comments to discuss the news, or simply share with their friends instantaneously. The sharing process is considered to be the main aim; their coverage, popularity, and virality are the core outcomes of political memetic campaigns of the modern digitalized society.

Why are political memes so popular in the communication sphere? From one year to another they are afforded new ways to be verbalized. Technologies, apps, and social networks do not stand on one and the same place; thus, it facilitates their constant and rapid development. Moreover, not only their way of presentation changes, but also the way of their realization.

Every classification distinguishes political memes without a complex approach and do not take into account their linguistic component. We propose three groups of political memes – *textual*, *non-textual*, and *animated*. Each group is divided into several subgroups considering how they are formed.

*Textual* memes can be divided into the following subgroups:

1. *Original memes* (Pict. 5) are un-manipulated content which do not include any purposefully integrated information, but they demonstrate basic textual message which cannot be easily taken off the photo. Such memes have informative messaging which is not necessarily created by the memes' author.
2. *Symbiotic memes* (Pict. 6) consist of the combination of photo and incorporated informative message. Usually such messages are abstracts from political speeches or articles with a political figure depicted on the background.

3. *Integral* memes (Pict. 7) consist of a picture with unseparated textual message. They can be compared with cartoons.
4. *Fused* memes (Pict. 8) consist of several elements – two or more photos, a short textual message, and visual effects which connect the whole.
5. *Phrasal* memes (Pict. 9) include only textual messaging and a colourful background (without any photos, pictures, and additional visual effects). They are verbalized with the help of abstracts from political speeches, statements, and informative articles. Such memes often quote political leaders.

*Non-textual memes* are divided into the following subgroups:

1. *Original* memes (Pict. 10) are non-manipulated photos which do not include any purposefully verbalized textual information. Often these graphics become memes only because of their virality in social networks.
2. *Fused* memes (Pict. 11) consist of several elements – two or more photos and visual effects, void of any textual messaging. Such memes are very bright, and their aim is to demonstrate various issues of political importance.
3. *Pictorial* memes (Pict. 12) consist of a picture without any textual message. Such memes are mostly represented by a picture or sketch which are cartoonish in nature.

*Animated memes* can be divided into three subgroups:

1. *GIFs* (Pict. 13) are the memes which consist of short, repeated video. Such memes depict political figures who perform simple actions (laugh, bow, dance, etc.). They are not aimed at the presentation of information but help indicate the emotional state of the Internet user at the moment of interaction through social media (anxiety, excitement, cheerfulness, exhaustion, etc.).
2. *Fragmental textual* memes (Pict. 14) are presented with short video clips which consist of very short political speech abstracts which include subtitles, comments, or textual messages. The length of those videos is no longer than thirty seconds and they are aimed at the dissemination of important information.

3. *Fragmental non-textual* memes (Pict. 15) are presented with short video clips which consist of the abstracts mostly from political speeches without any textual message integrated into the video itself such as subtitles. The only verbalized message is presented by the speaker. The length of those videos is no longer than thirty seconds and they are aimed at the dissemination of important information.<sup>14</sup>

## Evaluating the Power of Memes

To evaluate the impact of memes, we have conducted a short research at the beginning of 2021 which included 72 participants from 11 countries (the USA, Armenia, Ethiopia, France, India, Iran, Canada, Pakistan, the Philippines, Romania, and Ukraine). The age of participants varied from 16 to 56. The research analyzed two big groups of political Internet memes; textual and non-textual. The aim of the research was to identify types and subtypes of political memes which pose the highest interest for Internet users and, as a result, can become the means used to form political views.

The questionnaire “Political Memes of Internet” included two propositions to choose from. These propositions are; “Choose from the List below how Attractive those Memes are” and “Estimate the Informational Value of the Memes below Choosing one of the Proposed Variants.”

The first part of this questionnaire “Choose from the List below how Attractive those Memes are” could be graded on a scale from “Attractive”, “A little bit attractive”, “It is hard to say”, and “Not Attractive.” The most “attractive” textual memes included integral political memes, at 30.6 %. At the same time, 52.8 % of respondents favoured the pictorial memes among non-textual memes.

The second part of this questionnaire “Estimate the Informativity of the Memes below Choosing one of the Proposed Variants” could be graded on a scale from “Informative”, “Somewhat Informative”, “It is hard to say”, and “Not informative.”

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<sup>14</sup> Zabolnova M., Textuality of Internet Memes in English Political Discourse. Науковий вісник Міжнародного гуманітарного університету. Сер.: Філологія. 2021 № 48 том 1. С. 66-69.

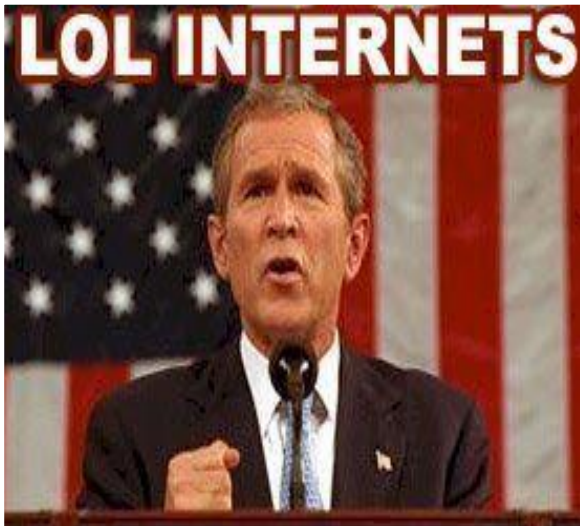


62.5 % of respondents found that textual memes with political content were the most informative. At the same time, 48.6 % of respondents found that pictorial memes among non-textual memes were the most informative. As can be seen, non-textual pictorial memes are most popular in both instances. People “prefer” imagery to text, and may confuse attractiveness with informational value.

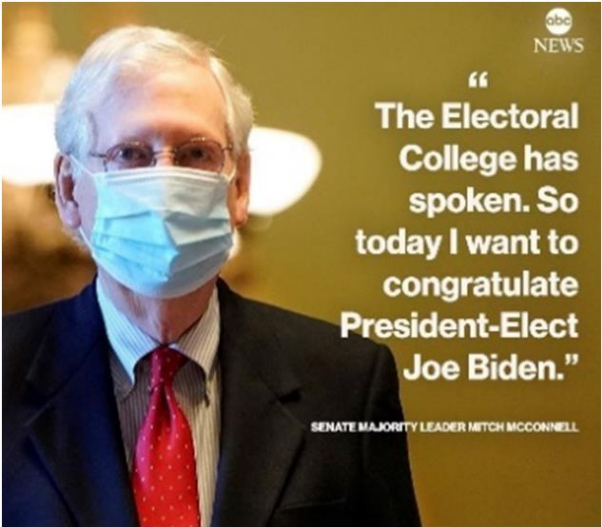
### **The Mandela Effect: Manipulated Memes**

It is possible to compare political memes with candy. Internet users pay attention to beautiful cover and taste but at the same moment are unaware of the ingredients. The first thing every user notice, is a picture/photo and only then a textual message or, if there is not any written passage, the context which lies behind the meme. In this case users are completely oblivious to the true intentions of the memes’ authors, which can significantly vary from those understood by the consumers.

Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5



Picture 6



Picture 7



Picture 8



Picture 9

Biden administration  
expected to announce  
plan to ban menthol  
cigarettes

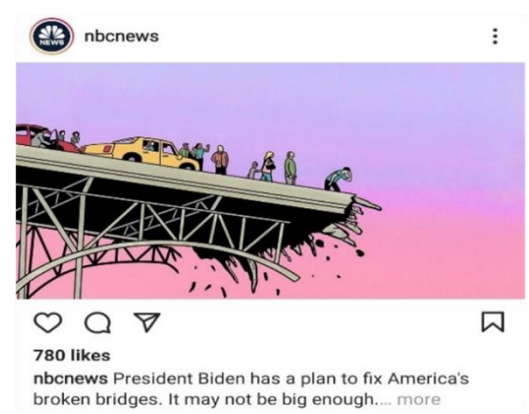
Picture 10



Picture 11



Picture 12



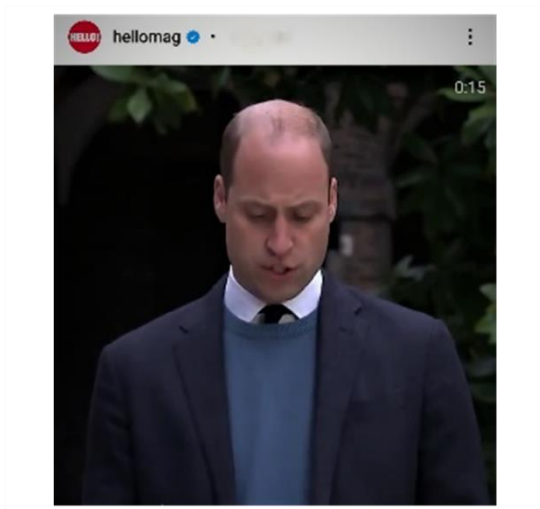
Picture 13



Picture 14



Picture 15

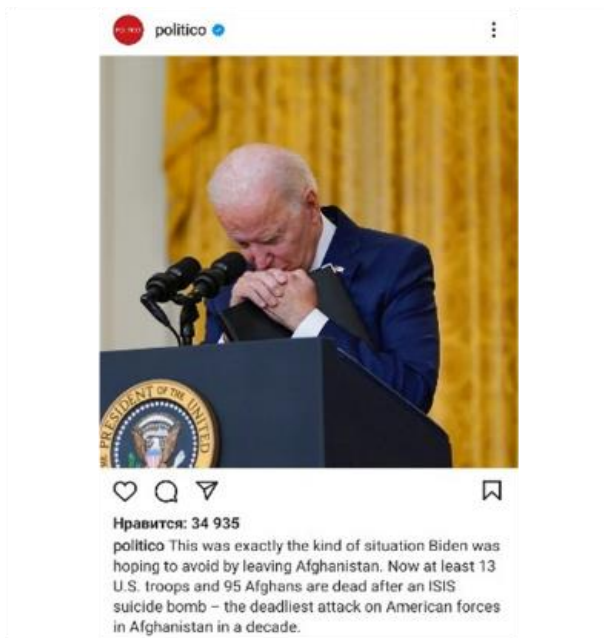




Picture 15A



Picture 16



Picture 17



Picture 18



Picture 19



Picture 20



One of the first scientists who devoted his works to the problem of “manipulation” was the sociologist H. Schiller. He defined the concept of “manipulation” as a process which was harmful and hidden from the targeted individuals. Thus, manipulation implies hidden impact on human consciousness with the aim to shape a particular meaning.

In “The Mind Manager,” Shiller supported the idea that to commit successful manipulative actions an individual should not notice those actions.<sup>15</sup> Social networks offer the possibility to follow, control, and manipulate Internet users’ opinions. The role of memes as support mechanisms to informational manipulation is new, and significant.

For example, Saida Arifkhanova<sup>16</sup> pointed out that manipulation of messages is unnoticed by the audience because of the differences between the reality and the interpretation done by the recipient. That is directly connected with the variety of approaches related to the understanding and the clarification of information. Every individual perceives information in accordance to their personal abilities. These abilities include the following factors;

1. level of language in which the information is presented;
2. linguistic abilities of the recipient;
3. education;
4. access to resources of information;
5. age;
6. specificity of the worldview.

H. Franke in his work “Manipulated Man: The Power of Man Over Man, its Risks and its Limits” highlighted that manipulation in the majority of cases is the influence carried out against human consciousness to harm those whom it is addressed to.<sup>17</sup>

Manipulation includes the desire to overestimate the importance of rules, procedures, categorical statements, people assessment, and events. Social superiority is in the ability to get some material goods thanks to the deviation from rules and thanks to the acceptance of mistakes committed by other people. It follows that one of the possible ways of manipulation which can

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<sup>15</sup> H. Schiller, *The Mind Manager* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Saida Arifkhanova, *Manipulation of Social Consciousness through Mass Media*, (20 Oct. 2010): [https://scholar.google.ru/citations?view\\_op=view\\_citation&hl=ru&user=es1oqYkA AAAJ&citation\\_for\\_view=es1oqYkAAAAJ:u5HHmVD\\_uO8C](https://scholar.google.ru/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=ru&user=es1oqYkA AAAJ&citation_for_view=es1oqYkAAAAJ:u5HHmVD_uO8C).

<sup>17</sup> H. Franke, *Manipulated Man: the Power of Man over Man, its Risks and its Limits* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1977).

be applied in the process of political memes' dissemination is the exaggeration of mistakes and failures of other people.

In this case one and the same fact may be presented by numerous platforms from different angles that can be classified as deliberate dissemination of information, which does not correspond to reality. Often, this occurs when news agencies are owned by different countries with opposite interests.

A striking example of such a phenomenon is illustrated by the terroristic attack which happened at the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August in 2021, and took the lives of more than 200 people including U. S. servicemen. One photo of President Biden was shared all over the Internet; in most cases presented as an example of sincere sympathy and sorrow (Pict. 15, Pict. 16, Pict. 17), but some incorporated messages soaked with open aggressive text, reports of information inconsistent with real events (Pict. 18). News outlets such as *Fox News* and *Russia Today* which are on the opposite of the political spectrum were foremost in presenting the photo of Mr. Biden in a pejorative context.

Manipulative memes highlight the mistakes and failures of others in the political sphere. They help to insert doubt in Internet users' minds about their loyalty to certain political views or parties. Even if the user is emotionally invested in his loyalty to particular viewpoints, memes can nurture the desire to reconsider them. The question is – how much do individuals need to hesitate? Can a simple meme sharply influence the individual?

Influence will not be felt at once, but the feeling of hesitation does not need much time. The situation when an Internet user of any social network scrolls numerous posts and faces memes with political content may have several outcomes – they may scroll on or ponder on them at length. It seems to be the end, but here the stage is set for the Mandela Effect.

The “Mandela Effect” was firstly used by F. Broom in 2009. Broom created a website devoted to her memories concerning Nelson Mandela where blogger mentioned the death of the politician. Thousands of people from her audience believed the information about the date of Nelson Mandela which

had been false.<sup>18</sup> More widespread this concept became in 2013 after the actual death of the politician. That happened because millions of people worldwide had posted numerous comments pointing out the inaccuracy of the information despite the fact that Nelson Mandela was released from captivity in 1990.

Kendra highlighted that the disinformative effect corresponds directly to the information which is remembered right after the event itself. The researchers proved that partial memory which interferes with the event can significantly influence the way individual remember an event.<sup>19</sup>

Psychologists consider that such massive inaccuracy in memory can be provoked by deviations in certain moments of memory, such deviations are called “desinformative effects.” Desinformative effects occurs when acquired information influences the way individuals remember it.<sup>20</sup> Memes are extremely suitable for this method of manipulation.

Nowadays many Internet users have basic skills in photo editing. In such cases the textual message has little importance, as *visual* memory can store far more information presented as pictures but not as text. Political memes with purposefully manipulated pictures have the ability to form *false* memories thanks to the frequency of their propagation in news feeds in social networks. People confuse remembering the “event” with remembering the meme.

In 2010 the American online publishing house *Slate* conducted a research in which they published edited photos of then U.S. President Barack Obama shaking hands with former President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Pic. 19, Pic. 20).<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that the event never took place, more than 5000 respondents (more than a quarter) “remembered” that event.

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<sup>18</sup> L. Collins, “The Mandela Effect, Fake News and Elections,” *Jerusalem Post Online* (2020). <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/my-word-the-mandela-effect-fake-news-and-election-s-647435>.

<sup>19</sup> C. Kendra, “The Misinformation Effect and False Memories,” *Verywellmind* (28 Sept. 2017), [www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-misinformation-effect-2795353](http://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-misinformation-effect-2795353).

<sup>20</sup> Neil Dagnall & Ken Drinkwater, “The ‘Mandela effect’ and the science of false memories,” *MedicalXpress*, (22 Sept. 2019), <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-07-mandela-effect-science-false-memories.html>, accessed 5 January 2021.

<sup>21</sup> E. Jaffe, “Remember When,” *Psychological Science*, (2011),

What is the reason of disinformation emergence? Nowadays it is possible to distinguish several factors which have influence on disinformation processing and dissemination;

1. Original information and transformed information are verbalized only after their being mixed in the memories of an individual.<sup>22</sup>
2. Transformed articles in real life “rewrite” real memories about the event.
3. The mind can adjust facts to the events and events to facts.
4. Transformed information is perceived by the recipient after the event itself influences the formation of new memory.
5. If there are some gaps in the memory concerning definite event, the human mind fills them with the available transformed information.

Scientists have developed the method of false memories creation which received the name “Deese-Roediger-McDermott Paradigm” (DRM).<sup>23</sup> In the process of using this method the participants are proposed to look through the semantically connected words (for example, school, library, hospital, college, etc.). After that, scientists ask questions concerning their ability to recall definite words from the same semantic row, for example, *university*. In the majority of cases people recall this word unconsciously including it to the list even if it has not been mentioned in the original list. The research conducted in 2017 demonstrated that such false memories can be stored in the human memory up to 60 days.<sup>24</sup>

Human memory is a huge mystery. We have the ability to associate pictures with real events and connect real events with fake facts. Thus, political memes with fake information can become a part of the real world of Internet

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<https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/remember-when>.

<sup>22</sup> A.L. Putnam, C.N. Wahlheim, L.L. Jacoby, “Memory for flip-flopping: detection and recollection of political contradictions,” *Mem Cognit* 42, #7, (2014): 1198-1210. doi:10.3758/s13421-014-0419-9.

<sup>23</sup> Vincent Prohaska, Debbie DelValle, Michael P. Toglia & Anna E. Pittman, “Reported serial positions of true and illusory memories in the Deese/Roediger/McDermott paradigm,” *Memory* 24 #7, (2016): 865-883, DOI: 10.1080/09658211.2015.1059455.

<sup>24</sup> Emmanuelle Pardilla-Delgado, Jessica D. Payne, “The Deese-Roediger-McDermott (DRM) Task: A Simple Cognitive Paradigm to Investigate False Memories in the Laboratory,” *Journal of Visualized Experiments* (online) 119, (31 Jan. 2017), URL: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5407674/>.

users. That is not a mistake of imperfect critical thinking, but a mind game. This situation can be compared with an infant studying. If you point to the “table” and many times say that it is a “chair,” the child’s mind will remember that information. Thus, the frequency of political memes with fake information emergence plays a key role in the formation of required political views.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the wide range of possible means of communication, memes reproduce from day to day. Inevitably this development affects social networks. Internet users create new and expand existing means of information interaction.

Experts in the sphere of communication expanded the abilities of Internet users which were hidden from sight of ordinary users. Although the intentions of the authors are the basis for every meme, the contemporary sphere of communication involves psychological issues as well. Thus, a meme is not a simple means of information exchange but a possible vehicle of manipulation.

Political speeches, debates, and presentations are the basis for political meme creation. Abstracts taken from the political speeches are made available in social networks as short video clips or Internet memes which are pictorial or textual in nature. Having no ideal critical thinking and being under constant pressure from correctly verbalized strategic communication it is hard for Internet users to form a stable and rational political view.

Moreover, methods of manipulation in social networks have become core instruments of the information war in politics as well as a communicative arena for the infiltration of adversarial ideas, views, and interests.

Social networks are a vast informative area with huge potential for political manipulation. With the inevitable growth of communicative means in society, the possibilities of those three groups of political memes will never stop increasing. The need to train individuals in critical thinking skills is ever more urgent.



## Imagery Credits

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# Government and Commercial Responses to the Malign Use of Social Media

*Sean S. Costigan*

*“Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it.”*

Jonathan Swift, 1710

## Introduction

After years of negative political surprises, it is now nearly axiomatic that social media appears unable to self-regulate. The arguments for certain allowances for self-regulation in industry – broadly considered – often fall into well worn paths, such as the notion that industry needs the space to innovate without government intervention or that industry is capable of controlling risks better than government. Advocates for regulation of social media tend to concentrate on issues of disinformation (ie “fake news”), misinformation, and radicalization.

For the purposes of this chapter, the efforts of two major social media platforms (*Facebook* and *Twitter*) to forestall further government regulation through proactive self-regulation will be examined. Disinformation and (by extension) radicalization will be the focus, as opposed to misinformation. Proposed solutions to the disinformation problem include fact checking, which typically involves either internal teams or the work of external agencies or organizations. Technological solutions have also been proffered, to include algorithmic alterations as well as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor and curtail disinformation or information that violates terms of use. Finally, this chapter will examine select national and supranational responses to disinformation and radicalization challenges.

Definitionally, whereas misinformation is false information that may prima facie appear to be accurate and may still spread quickly with negative effects, disinformation involves the intentional use of false information to sow discord, cause harm, or otherwise deceive others using a manipulated narrative. These terms are often used interchangeably, but in any analysis of the issues

around social media regulation it is crucial to understand the difference between them. Further complicating matters for any regulation, misinformation may originate from reputable sources, occasionally as a result of poor fact-checking practices, as when a news organization fails to authenticate documents in a breaking story only to have to backtrack some time later. Adding to the challenge, many stories on these issues conflate both misinformation and disinformation with yet another concept, that of fake news, which the editors of a book by the same name define as “purposefully crafted, sensational, emotionally charged, misleading or totally fabricated information that mimics the form of mainstream news.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Internet History and Progressive Visions: Self-Regulation vs. Government Regulation**

Dubbed the most important law protecting internet speech, 47 U.S. Code § 230 – Protection for private blocking and screening of offensive material – protects “interactive computer services” (which by today’s working definition includes social media sites) from liability for damages that may arise from users’ posts. Despite being tucked into a law to regulate offensive material, the language allows for websites to operate with broad protections against what users may say. The precise language of the law is: “No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.”

Section 230 is a critical part of the early history of the Internet, proposed and then signed into law in 1996 at a time when people could not have imagined the scale of today’s information and communications technologies. Further, critics note that Section 230 – while broadly protective of website owners – could not have envisioned humanity’s heavy reliance on social media as a source of news and information. While Section 230 has been affected by newer bills, most notably the anti-sex trafficking FOSTA-SESTA bill signed into law in 2018, Section 230 continues to provide substantial protection. It

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Zimdars & Kembrew McLeod, *Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MASS: The MIT Press, 2020).

has also served as the de facto standard starting point for government negotiations, including the 2011 OECD Council Recommendation on Principles for Internet Policy Making.<sup>2</sup>

On social media sites, the responsibility for what content is seen by whom very often comes down choices written into algorithms. Content shared by algorithms is also shielded by Section 230, sometimes allowing misinformation and disinformation to proliferate. In 2021 Frances Haugen, a former *Facebook* manager turned whistleblower, made headlines by exposing internal company documents that purported to show that “engagement-based ranking algorithms prioritize divisive and extreme content on the platform” and, in her estimation, should therefore result in changes to the law.<sup>3</sup>

Following the electoral defeat of President Trump and the subsequent violent incidents at the House of Representatives on 6 January 2021, Facebook and Twitter either imposed or reimposed bans on Trump’s accounts and those of his allies. *Google*, *Amazon*, and *Apple* also imposed bans on another social media service called *Parler*, which had attracted an audience of like-minded Trump and alt-right supporters. In the wake of these moves by the major social media services and information technology providers, some analysts have suggested that greater self-regulation efforts should be in place, to include curation of news and posts, or social media companies will run the risk of government-imposed regulation.<sup>4</sup>

Given the repeated wake-up calls, complicated Internet history, whistleblowers, and the significant differences between social media platforms, websites, and traditional news media it is no wonder that government regulators are

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<sup>2</sup> Cameron F. Kerry, “Section 230 Reform Deserves Careful and Focused Consideration,” *Brookings Institute*, (May 14, 2021). <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2021/05/14/section-230-reform-deserves-careful-and-focused-consideration/>.

<sup>3</sup> Tim de Chant, “Algorithms Shouldn’t Be Protected by Section 230, Facebook Whistleblower Tells Senate,” *Ars Technica*, (October 6, 2021) <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2021/10/algorithms-shouldnt-be-protected-by-section-230-facebook-whistleblower-tells-senate/>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael A. Cusumano, Annabelle Gawer & David B. Yoffie, “Social Media Companies Should Self-Regulate. Now.” *Harvard Business Review*, (January 15, 2021), <https://hbr.org/2021/01/social-media-companies-should-self-regulate-now>.

looking for new options to regulate social media. As several notable academic and policymakers have argued, self-regulation may not treat the apparent threats of sharing deviant thoughts that may lead to tragic outcomes, particularly if the threat is a feature of the system that gives space for hyper-individualized polarization.<sup>5</sup> However, it should be noted that as with other industries with regulatory concerns, there is often no truly clear distinction between self-regulation and government regulation, instead there is a continuum.<sup>6</sup>

### **Regulation and Policy at *Twitter*, *Facebook***

Examining how two of the larger social media companies have attempted to get a handle on these issues is central to the question of whether self-regulation can be relied on to mitigate negative outcomes of misinformation and disinformation.

#### *Twitter*

While *Twitter's* user base is inconsiderable in comparison to *Facebook's* – in October 2019 Facebook reported 2.45 billion monthly users and 1.62 billion daily active users while *Twitter* reported 145 million daily users<sup>7</sup> – it is widely judged to be a critical part of the social media landscape, particularly for the consumption of news.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, *Twitter* is considered politically important as popular hashtags attract like-minded people who often cohere around messaging from politicians. Perhaps the finest, albeit harmful, example to date of populist sentiment being stoked may be President Trump's

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<sup>5</sup> Dipayan Ghosh, "Are We Entering a New Era of Social Media Regulation?" *Harvard Business Review*, (January 14, 2021), <https://hbr.org/2021/01/are-we-entering-a-new-era-of-social-media-regulation>.

<sup>6</sup> Neil Gunningham & Joseph Rees, "Industry Self-Regulation: An Institutional Perspective," *Law Policy* 19, #4 (1997): 363-414. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9930.t01-1-00033>.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Snider, "Social Media Statistics – Chris Snider," *Chris Snider*, (2019). <https://chrissniderdesign.com/blog/resources/social-media-statistics/>.

<sup>8</sup> Bente Kalsnes & Anders Olof Larsson, "Understanding News Sharing across Social Media," *Journalism Studies* 19, #11 (2017): 1669-88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670x.2017.1297686>.

calls that went out on *Twitter* on 19 December: “Big protest in D.C. on January 6<sup>th</sup>,” and “Be there, will be wild!”

*Twitter* has been a target of many centrally coordinated disinformation campaigns – known as political *astroturfing* – and as such has been the focus of intense political discussions to control disinformation campaigns.<sup>9</sup> Political astroturfing campaigns often emanate from intelligence agencies and government-funded entities known as troll farms (the most famous of which is Russia’s Internet Research Agency), likely because of their awareness of the low barriers to mount operations and such acts’ perceived effectiveness. Enterprising to change debates and alter public opinion is not, by itself, a new phenomenon, but what is new is the power of the technology to amplify messages and deliver them to people who may be most persuaded by them.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of efficacy and the potential to alter civic discourse, a 2018 study on misinformation and “false news” on *Twitter* conducted by researchers at MIT found that misinformation and disinformation “diffuses significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth, in all categories of information, and in many cases by an order of magnitude.”<sup>11</sup> In keeping with several other analyses and the views of some regulation scholars, the authors of the study note the problems require various tactical responses, suggesting again that there is no silver bullet solution.

In addition to putting accounts on pause and engaging in the outright banning of accounts, *Twitter* has put in place several mechanisms to better enforce their policies and self-regulation. Promising to take action against the many forms of false and misleading information, *Twitter’s* plan focuses on using proactive automated tools, artificial intelligence, and internal teams to handle three broad categories of misinformation and disinformation, using a

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<sup>9</sup> Franziska B. Keller, David Schoch, Sebastian Stier, et al. “Political Astroturfing on Twitter: How to Coordinate a Disinformation Campaign.” *Political Communication*, (October 2019): 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1661888>.

<sup>10</sup> Darren L. Linvill & Patrick L. Warren, “Troll Factories: Manufacturing Specialized Disinformation on Twitter,” *Political Communication*, (February 2020): 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1718257>.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Dizikes, “Study: On *Twitter*, False News Travels Faster than True Stories,” *MIT News*, (March 8, 2018), <https://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>.

matrix framework (See Figure 1) for specific actions to be taken by *Twitter*.<sup>12</sup> As of 2019, automated tools were responsible for taking down over 50 % of Tweets prior to user flagging, which *Twitter* also relies on.<sup>13</sup>

*Twitter*'s definition for these categories is also indicative of the complexity across a continuum of types of misinformation. Misleading information, which *Twitter* defines as “statements or assertions that have been confirmed to be false or misleading by subject-matter experts, such as public health authorities” is a particularly fraught category. Disputed claims, which are “statements or assertions in which the accuracy, truthfulness, or credibility of the claim is contested or unknown” is equally challenging, particularly during democratic elections when claims and counterclaims are simply par for the course.

Figure 1: *Twitter's Misinformation Matrix*

Misleading information	Label	Removal
Disputed claim	Label	Warning
Unverified claim	No action	No action
	Moderate	Severe
Propensity for harm		

The final category in *Twitter*'s misinformation matrix is Unverified Claims, defined “as information *which could be true or false* (emphasis added) that is unconfirmed at the time it is shared.” Given the natural propensity for people to share unverified information, which may be driven in part by what MIT scholars have dubbed the “novelty hypothesis” – early sharers may come to be seen as in the know and thereby attract more followers – it remains to be seen whether *Twitter* will be able to grapple with fundamental issues of uncertainty while allowing users to share. After all, uncertainty is

<sup>12</sup> *Twitter* “Updating Our Approach to Misleading Information,” (2020). Blog.twitter.com. (May 11, 2020). [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/product/2020/updating-our-approach-to-misleading-information](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/updating-our-approach-to-misleading-information).

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Kastrenakes, “*Twitter* Says It Now Removes Half of All Abusive Tweets before Users Report Them,” *The Verge*, (October 24, 2019), <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/24/20929290/twitter-abusive-tweets-automated-removal-earnings-q3-2019>.



the normal operating condition and also the result of many scientific and analytical enterprises, leading in turn to more questions in the pursuit of understanding. In political matters, uncertainty may be seen as unavoidable and may by itself provoke adverse outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

### *Facebook*

Well prior to the revelations of whistleblowers, *Facebook's* growth into the world's largest social media network had attracted considerable attention from scholars, technologists, investors, and policymakers. It was to many, particularly in the financial world, a winning formula that simply seemed unstoppable. In what some judged to be a form of political theater (or what the syndicated columnist Walter Shapiro called the theater of contrition), *Facebook's* CEO Mark Zuckerberg was called by the US Congress to answer over ten hours of probing questions about *Facebook's* plans to control misinformation, disinformation, and false news. *Facebook's* subsequent development of an independent review board has done little to quiet concerns about the seriousness of its efforts, with one notable scholar calling it “a good look for Facebook – as long as no one looks too closely.”<sup>15</sup>

Taken at face value, *Facebook's* oversight board promises to make “final and binding” decisions on the removal of content in diverse areas such as hate speech, harassment, and protecting people's safety and privacy. *Just Security's* Chinmayi Arun suggests that *Facebook's* oversight board invites criticism of self-regulation in that it reduces accountability. “It is clear by now that *Facebook* has the power to regulate a vast amount of content, including public deliberation that is important in a democracy, in a manner that evades accountability through the usual democratic channels.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky, Timothy Ballard & Richard D. Pancost, “Uncertainty as Knowledge,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 373, #2055, (28 Nov. 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2014.0462>.

<sup>15</sup> Siva Vaidhyanathan, “*Facebook* and the Folly of Self-Regulation,” *Wired*, (May 9, 2020), <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-and-the-folly-of-self-regulation/>.

<sup>16</sup> Chinmayi Arun, “The Facebook Oversight Board: An Experiment in Self-Regulation,” *Just Security*, (May 6, 2020). <https://www.justsecurity.org/70021/the-facebook-oversight-board-an-experiment-in-self-regulation/>.

Siva Vaidhyanathan, the author of *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, goes further in his criticism and suggests that the oversight board's decisions will be trivial in comparison to the deluge of toxic content that is a feature of *Facebook*.

“It will hear only individual appeals about specific content that the company has removed from the service – and only a fraction of those appeals... It will have no authority over advertising or the massive surveillance that makes *Facebook* ads so valuable. It won't curb disinformation campaigns or dangerous conspiracies. It has no influence on the sorts of harassment that regularly occur on *Facebook* or (*Facebook*-owned) *WhatsApp*. It won't dictate policy for *Facebook* Groups, where much of the most dangerous content thrives. And most importantly, the board will have no say over how the algorithms work and thus what gets amplified or muffled by the real power of *Facebook*.”<sup>17</sup>

These concerns largely parallel what is known about *Facebook*'s internal operations and its algorithms and are apparently among the many reasons that Frances Haugen chose to come forward as a whistleblower. As a *Facebook* employee, Ms. Haugen was selected to design tools to handle the “malicious targeting” of information at specific communities. In Ms. Haugen's testimony to Congress she described how her team of five people were put to a task of gargantuan scale:

“The core team responsible for detecting and combating human exploitation – which included slavery, forced prostitution and organ selling – included just a few investigators. “I would ask why more people weren't being hired,” [Haugen] said. “*Facebook* acted like it was powerless to staff these teams.””<sup>18</sup>

*Facebook* has more than 15,000 content moderators, many of whom are employees of external firms, and all of whom have responsibility for content that may violate *Facebook*'s terms or its community standards. A report by NYU Stern's Center for Business and Human Rights notes that in the attempt to keep up with potential violations moderators are drinking from the proverbial fire hose: reviewing posts, pictures, and videos that have been flagged by AI or reported by users about 3 million times a day while making

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<sup>17</sup> Vaidhyanathan, “*Facebook* and the Folly of Self-Regulation.”

<sup>18</sup> Jeff Horwitz, “The *Facebook* Whistleblower, Frances Haugen, Says She Wants to Fix the Company, Not Harm It,” *Wall Street Journal*, sec. Business (October 3, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-says-she-wants-to-fix-the-company-not-harm-it-11633304122>.

mistakes which, according to *Facebook's* CEO, result in more than 1 in 10 errors including errors of deletion and posting.<sup>19</sup>

Into this environment, the influx of information on the coronavirus created an environment for ever greater sharing of misinformation and disinformation, much of which slipping past artificial and human intelligence. For example, in May 2020, *Facebook* and *YouTube* removed the “Plandemic” conspiracy video, but by the time it was removed it had already been viewed millions of times.

According to various reports that have been circulating since Frances Haugen’s congressional testimony, *Facebook's* own vaunted artificial intelligence is not doing what policymakers have been led to believe. Journalists at the *Wall Street Journal* have examined internal documents from *Facebook* and have come to the conclusion that “*Facebook's* AI can’t consistently identify first-person shooting videos, racist rants and even, in one notable episode that puzzled internal researchers for weeks, the difference between cock-fighting and car crashes.”<sup>20</sup>

Further complicating the overall picture of how well *Facebook* self-regulates is something known as the “takedown rate.” By just one measure – hate speech that is proactively removed by *Facebook* – internal documents now show that more than 95 % of hate speech shared on the site remains, despite alternative data being proffered by *Facebook's* executives that suggests more dramatic gains.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, what *Facebook* executives share is the

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Barrett, “Who Moderates the Social Media Giants: A Call to End Outsourcing,” *New York: NYU Stern/Center for Business and Human Rights*, (2020), [https://issuu.com/nyusterncenterforbusinessandhumanri/docs/nyu\\_content\\_moderation\\_report\\_final\\_version?fr=sZWZmZjI1NjI1Ng](https://issuu.com/nyusterncenterforbusinessandhumanri/docs/nyu_content_moderation_report_final_version?fr=sZWZmZjI1NjI1Ng).

<sup>20</sup> Deepa Seetharaman, Jeff Horwitz & Justin Scheck, “Facebook Says AI Can Enforce Its Rules, but the Company’s Own Engineers Are Doubtful,” *Wall Street Journal*, sec. Tech. (October 17, 2021), [https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-ai-enforce-rules-engineers-doubtful-artificial-intelligence-11634338184?mod=newsvIEWer\\_click](https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-ai-enforce-rules-engineers-doubtful-artificial-intelligence-11634338184?mod=newsvIEWer_click).

<sup>21</sup> Noah Giansiracusa, “How *Facebook* Hides How Terrible It Is with Hate Speech,” *Wired*, (October 15, 2021), <https://www.wired.com/story/facebooks-deceptive-math-when-it-comes-to-hate-speech/>.

“...denominator of the equation [of] what *Facebook*’s AI took down – not the total amount of harmful content. And Facebook doesn’t share how many people viewed the postings before they were removed, or how long they were up.”<sup>22</sup>

### *Artificial Intelligence and Fact Checking to the Rescue?*

Artificial intelligence and content moderators often make mistakes, sometimes erring on the side of false news while blocking accurate information. In Ukraine, where *Facebook* is a highly political space, researchers have noted that post-blocking, often due to bots requesting deletions, there was no way to see content republished. Such problems go to the core of the *Facebook* business model and are not unique to one country or another. Researchers at Privacy International, a UK-based privacy advocacy non-profit, note that the lack of transparency at *Facebook* is critical:

“The power of *Facebook* to delete, promote, and target content juxtaposed with the lack of power users have to contact the company, or to probe, or understand why content is deleted, promoted, or targeted is not unique to Ukraine, and has been central to many scandals *Facebook* has faced over recent years.”<sup>23</sup>

Since the mid-1980s, technologists and marketers have touted artificial intelligence as the latest, best technology to complement or even surpass human intelligence.<sup>24</sup> Yet artificial intelligence has not lived up to the hype, particularly in complex social matters where perceptions of truth or trustworthiness are uncertain. As with the dilemmas central to the regulation and self-regulation debates, artificial intelligence and fact-checking may be best thought of as more of a continuum instead of an either/or proposition: humans should remain in the loop. Given that no less than history is often at stake, it would seem crucial that *Facebook* improve transparency around deletions. Nonetheless, there is no clear and easy path.

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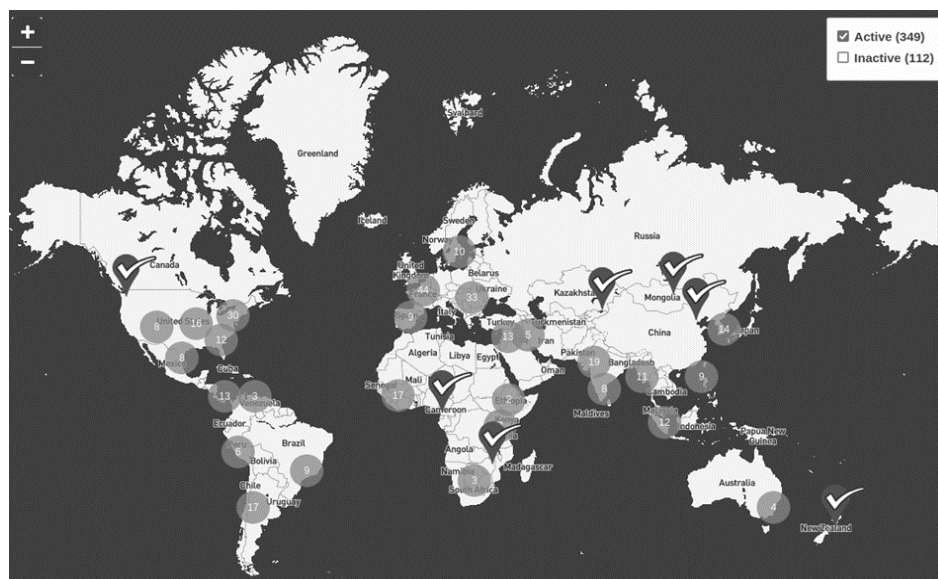
<sup>22</sup> Sarah Frier, “*Facebook*’s Tech Regulation Idea Isn’t as Transparent as It Looks,” *Bloomberg.com*, (March 27, 2021). <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-27/facebook-s-tech-regulation-idea-isn-t-as-transparent-as-it-looks>.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Nelson, “‘Truth Exists but You Have to Find It’: Fighting Disinformation on *Facebook* in Ukraine,” *Privacy International*, (April 21, 2019), <https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/2822/truth-exists-you-have-find-it-fighting-disinformation-facebook-ukraine>.

<sup>24</sup> John Horgan, “Will Artificial Intelligence Ever Live up to Its Hype?” *Scientific American*, (December 4, 2020), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/will-artificial-intelligence-ever-live-up-to-its-hype/>.

When an iconic image of the war in Vietnam was deleted by *Facebook*, German Justice Minister Heiko Maas also shared his opinion on the issue, saying that “illegal content should vanish from the Internet, not photos that move the whole world.” As with other complex social matters, stating the problem is one thing, doing anything about it is another thing altogether. Further complicating matters is the issue of profit: In the case of *Facebook*, the amplification of paid-for content even when misleading has continued despite AI flagging.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 2: Fact-checking Organizations



Research has found that crowd-sourcing may eventually assist social media companies as lay-people may be able to locate misinformation and disinformation at low costs, but would have to be tested in the real world. Ultimately, because content is inextricably linked to social conversations, technology is not likely to produce a single solution:

“The very existence of fake news is a political question inscribing itself in the history of political communication and thus in the long run a question about the democratic

<sup>25</sup> Haidee Chu, “Automated Fact-Checking Won’t Stop the Social Media Infodemic,” *Mashable*, (June 12, 2020), <https://mashable.com/article/automated-fact-checking-misinformation>.

conversation... In other words, there is no technical fix, such as automated flagging or tagging, to the “solution” for democratic conversation.”<sup>26</sup>

Many organizations have entered into this fray with the express intention of fact-checking content. Governments and non-profit organizations alike have sought for ways to show people the truth while social media sites largely rely on notions around a marketplace of ideas where truth will out, despite evidence to the contrary. A troubling finding with fact-checking is that – according to research conducted by Dino Christenson of Boston University and Sarah Kreps and Douglas Kriner of Cornell University – when it comes to Tweets on presidential politics the data “suggests that both social media appeals and corrections to presidential claims had little influence on support for unilateral action to regulate social media platforms.”<sup>27</sup> Presumably more studies will be done, but if the overall effectiveness of fact checking is in question, once again there is uncertainty over what approaches may be beneficial and in what cases.

According to the Reporters’ Lab at Duke University, as of the writing of this chapter there are 349 active fact-checking organizations in the world, the majority of which are in North America and Europe. The Lab tracks fact-checking organizations and selects them for inclusion based on several criteria, notably if the organization reviews statements by all parties and sides; examines discrete claims and reaches conclusions; transparently identifies its sources and explains its methods; [and] discloses its funding and affiliations (“Fact-Checking” n.d.). These criteria should also concern others interested in fact-checking as a potential approach to control misinformation and disinformation. The sources of funding and the actual missions of fact-checking organizations may also play into how they proceed with their efforts.

As Professor Lucas Graves, of the University of Wisconsin and the author of *Deciding What’s True*, notes:

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<sup>26</sup> Jack Andersen & Silje Obelitz Søre, “Communicative Actions We Live By: The Problem with Fact-Checking, Tagging or Flagging Fake News – the Case of Facebook,” *European Journal of Communication*, (December 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119894489>.

<sup>27</sup> Dino P. Christenson, Sarah E. Kreps & Douglas L. Kriner, “Contemporary Presidency: Going Public in an Era of Social Media: Tweets, Corrections, and Public Opinion,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, (November 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12687>.

“There is at least a potential gap between fact-checking organizations and what they say their mission is, such as combating political rhetoric, and the reality that they are fighting all kinds of misinformation... It is undeniable that governments’ and technology platforms’ interest in this has been pushing the field to focus on misinformation.”<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

Social media is among the most challenging creations to come of the information and communications technology age. Credited with the dismantling of authoritarian regimes and accused of supporting anti-democratic sentiments, reviled by free speech advocates for attempting to regulate hate speech while failing at the basic promise to mitigate the worst types of content, it is clear that social media is a deeply challenged space.

While politicians, particularly liberals, seek further regulatory powers and plan on more direct intervention, technologists believe that the ever-evasive magic solution is just around the corner. What is seen, however, is that as more people become engaged in sharing, more people become exposed to content that might upset, misinform, disinform, or indeed even radicalize them. Individually, bans on social media may help but in the aggregate the user population of *Facebook* properties alone would make it the largest nation in the world.

As such, individual actions may feel trivial. International efforts such as the Christchurch Call, which is supported by many countries and technology platforms, may appeal to the political instinct that something must be done. However, free speech protections and the challenges of content moderation whether human or artificial are likely to continue. Surprises will also continue, and many of these will have negative political consequences. In the final analysis, as with other complex social activities, only a set of approaches may approximate solutions. Further research is necessary to test the best set of technological, self-regulatory, government regulations, moderation, and fact-checking that may produce optimal outcomes.

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<sup>28</sup> Emily Bell, “The Fact-Check Industry,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, (2019). [https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/fact-check-industry-twitter.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/fact-check-industry-twitter.php). Quoting Graves.

## **PART III: REMEDIES TO RISKS**



# The War on Disinformation: The Structure of Trust

*Tamás Kun*

## Introduction

Trust is an essential element of teamwork and cooperation, where the participants must work together to overcome challenges. On the battlefield this can mean survival, as soldiers have to face many kinds of threats. Trusting someone with one's life does not come easily, but as we have only one life, but many hazards and challenges to face, and not necessarily in war, victory favours those who can cooperate in greater numbers and in more complex situations. Teamwork is inevitable. In business, survival means remaining competitive and innovative. While regulations and legislation offer a more level playing field, the natural tendency among competitors is to seek a maximalist outcome at the least cost to themselves, and to remove the competition from the game. Business and war, in this sense, are similar.

Logistic chains, suppliers, buyers, intermediaries who make business (and war) possible form a system where its component parts are continuously relying on each other. Completing orders and demands, delivering goods while keeping deadlines and schedules with proper numbers and quality, etc. Behind all of these are decisions from certain leaders, who put their faith in others, in order to maximize interests. From this point, their own activity is depending on the others. Leadership faces several challenges; such as providing vision, setting up objectives and milestones, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. A wise leadership must maintain a supporting team around them to eventually reach those elements mentioned above.

Generating and maintaining that support requires trust between the leadership and the agents charged with making things move. But among those agents too, trust must be generated and maintained if teamwork is to obtain the desired results. This trust is based on effective communication and accurate information. Thus, trust is a function of human relationships, but of interpretation of information as well. This chapter explores how trust manifests itself in algebraic form. The usefulness of this approach is that it can

open up inquiry as to how malicious actors can manipulate, modify, or otherwise affect information so as to correspondingly affect trust; trust among team players, and trust in the information they receive, if not trust in themselves.

## Definitions

In the following section we define terms that are related to the issue of trust. First of all, we set the cornerstones of the operating environment. Today we speak of governmental communication, media and broadcasting, cyberspace, virtual reality, etc. They have simultaneously broadened the operating environment and the tools to deal with challenges and opportunities.

**The physical reality:** This is the environment where events are happening. Collins' dictionary describes the two words as: "Physical things are real things that can be touched and seen, rather than ideas or spoken words" and "you use reality to refer to real things or the real nature of things rather than imagined, invented, or theoretical ideas."<sup>1</sup> In what follows, the oppositions will be made in the same manner.

**Virtual or alternative reality:** This is an environment, where actions can be simulated, and which has a direct connection with the physical reality. According to the dictionary definition, this type of reality is imagined, invented, or theoretical.<sup>2</sup>

**Fact:** This is the description of a closed event, which happened in the physical reality, with the maximum precision and detail as possible. Collins' says that "facts are pieces of information that can be discovered."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Collins English Dictionary, s.v. "Physical reality," [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english) (accessed 28 May, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Collins English Dictionary, s.v. "Alternative reality," [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english) (accessed 28 May, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Collins English Dictionary, s.v. "Facts," [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english) (accessed 28 May, 2021).

Truth: This is a statement about an event, which lacks detailed information. The idea of *partial truth* is synonymous with the phrase a *certain point of view*. Collins' says that "truth is something that is *believed* to be true."<sup>4</sup>

Lie: This is a statement about an event which has never happened. The dictionary says that "a lie is something that someone says or writes which *they know* is untrue."<sup>5</sup> Thus this is different from an error.

Misleading: This is an adjectival statement of an event about which there is no guarantee that it occurred in the exact way as described, and/or contains theoretical elements which may never have happened.<sup>6</sup> It can contain actual facts, which are meant to validate the statement, however, there are elements as well in the statement which are not clear enough to be valid as a whole. To mislead is to create a wrong idea or impression.

Disinformation: This is a statement about an event which has never happened. It may contain elements which even could be facts, however, they are covering another narrative or event which has no connection with the original statement. The key concept is that there is always a harmful intent behind disinformation. It may be built on an alternative reality, but the rules are presented based on the physical reality. Accusing someone of spreading disinformation, means accusing them of spreading false information in order to deceive.

Basically, we interpret the action in the physical world based on a simple rule, the action happened (1) or not (0) using our perception, and that is a binary solution; true or false, 1 or 0. The problem occurs when a statement has roots based on a closed action in the real world, but the outcome does not match the result. That is where misleading and disinformation comes in the picture. A statement which is based on partially closed actions, cannot be stated as true or false categorically.

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<sup>4</sup> Collins English Dictionary, s.v. "Truth,"  
[www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english) (accessed 28 May, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Collins English Dictionary, s.v. "Lie,"  
[www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english) (accessed 28 May, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Collins English Dictionary, s.v. "Misleading,"  
[www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english) (accessed 28 May, 2021).

In order to do that, every action in the statement must be happening in the physical world, otherwise it will be misleading or harmfully disinformative. When we approach with a statement that is partially true, it does not make the statement true at all, because it can contain elements that never happened. In consequence, we can talk about events which are altering the result. Their behaviour follows the output; harmful intent or not. If it is meant to be destructive, it is disinformation. If not, it is misleading, which is containing several elements of truth, which describes certain events that happened exactly as stated in the physical world, but that never existed.

Facts are present in every case, and may incorporate truth, lies, disinformation and misinformation, with the exception that they allow a second level of logical choice framed with the rules of an alternative reality. In an alternative reality, fictitious events can be created where the consequences of these events and their outcome are limited by the possibilities of the physical world where actual resources are existing. The limit of lies and truths of the alternative reality is predicated upon technological capacity, or simply plausibility.

### **Composing Alternative Realities and Building Trust**

Originally, scenario planning has been used first in political and military strategy probably by the Prussian military general and theorist Carl von Clausewitz.<sup>7</sup> During World War II, military operations spawned their own industry called operations research in the United States. After the war the private sector has adapted this kind of thinking and planning in many fields, from military strategy (the Research and Development Corporation, or RAND, which worked initially for the U.S. Air Force), large multinational companies like Royal Dutch Shell and General Electric built models to more precisely bring efficiency to their business processes.<sup>8</sup> Michael Porter defined scenarios as “an internally consistent view of what the future might turn out to be – not a forecast, but one possible future outcome.”<sup>9</sup> According to Porter, scenario planning is not about becoming an oracle, who knows what will

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<sup>7</sup> G. Ringland, *Scenario Planning: Managing for the Future* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1988), 11.

<sup>8</sup> A. Dowse, “Scenario Planning Methodology for Future Conflict,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, (2021).

<sup>9</sup> M. E. Porter, *Competitive advantage: creating and sustaining superior performance* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 63.

happen in a proximate time from when planning is made. It is about creating options for potential hazards and reducing the uncertainty based on present and past experiences.

Ogilvy defined it as “alternate futures in which today’s decisions may play out.”<sup>10</sup> Scenario-making becomes a planning tool which can describe alternate futures, but planners may inevitably be bound to chase those futures or goals.

## **Ideas about Trust**

Lewicki and Wiethoff described trust as “an individual’s belief in, and willingness to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another.”<sup>11</sup> They say that trust can be framed around two main areas: professional and personal. Professional relationships are “task-oriented relationship[s] in which the parties’ attention and activities are primarily directed toward achievement of goals” while personal relationships are social and emotional with focus on “the relationship itself and the persons in the relationship”.<sup>12</sup>

Baldoni says that trust is a key element in leadership; “trust is essential to developing relationships with individuals. Leaders who cannot inspire trust cannot lead; there will be no followership.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in order to address a connection as a relationship, it has to be trust in it. “In all relationships there is a constant accounting process – friend to friend, company to customer. After any interaction you run your trust algorithm.”<sup>14</sup> Mayson

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<sup>10</sup> J. Ogilvy, “Scenario Planning and Strategic Forecasting,” *Forbes*, (8 January 2015), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2015/01/08/scenario-planning-and-strategic-forecasting/?sh=23d0daf4411a> (accessed 29 May 2021).

<sup>11</sup> McAllister, 1995, as cited in R. J. Lewicki & C. Wiethoff, “Trust, Trust Development, and Trust Repair” In: M. Deutsch & P.T. Coleman (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 106.

<sup>12</sup> R. J. Lewicki & C. Wiethoff, “Trust, Trust Development and Trust Repair” In: M. Deutsch & P.T. Coleman (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 106.

<sup>13</sup> J. Baldoni, “How Trustworthy Are You?” *Harvard Business Review*, (15 May 2008), <https://hbr.org/2008/05/how-trustworthy-are-you> (accessed 29 May 2021).

<sup>14</sup> R. Mayson, “Wonky Wonga: a failure to understand trust,” *Black Isle Group*, (5 September 2018), <https://blackislegroup.com/2018/09/wonky-wonga-a-failure-to-understand-trust/> (accessed 29 May 2021).

thinks that there is an “algorithm” which we are running every time when we interact with others. These are the filters that are selecting the people whom we vote confidence for, separating those from who we are not building trust upon. According to the Black Isle Group we are using the term ‘trust’ for a few different reasons:

1. When we want to describe someone’s behaviour (i.e. they are “trustworthy” or are a “trusted source”);
2. When we want to assess that we are feeling comfortable sharing information with an individual, and;
3. When we want to use our own ideas about trust to interpret and understand what other people say.<sup>15</sup>

### **A Model for Building Trust**

Maister et al. have created an actual “trust equation”<sup>16</sup> (below) which excludes risk factors.

$$T_{\text{trustworthiness}} = \frac{C_{\text{credibility}} + R_{\text{reliability}} + I_{\text{intimacy}}}{S_{\text{self-orientation}}}$$

The core principles of trust are based on a two-sided connection. When this occurs, one party has confidence in the other. There is an equation model, where four elements are the following: credibility, reliability, intimacy, and self-orientation.

Trust covers more than only one thing. Trust is defined by the connection between words and deeds. When information is shared with others, the state of mind or emotional status describes comfort and familiarity with the channel and/or methods that are used to transmit information. In other words, it is perceived as a secure channel, regardless of whether the information is actually true or not.

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<sup>15</sup> Black Isle Group, *The Trust Equation* (7 September 2017). <https://blackislegroup.com/2017/09/the-trust-equation/> (accessed 29 May 2021).

<sup>16</sup> D. H. Maister, C. H. Green & R. M. Galford, *The Trusted Advisor* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

Several have shared their thoughts about the model and its relevance. “Most of us might agree to the logic of the trust equation on a theoretical level. However, like so many other theoretical concepts, applying the logic in practice can be difficult.”<sup>17</sup> Greiner says that the variable for self-orientation is so heavily weighted as to be surprising.<sup>18</sup> This however seems obvious, as it is our self-orientation that determines the direction of the building of trust. It has to be weighted in that way. This is a compass and our risk-taking behaviour will be determined by this also. People in general do not trust institutions or organizations – they trust the people inside those organizations. Companies are often described as credible and reliable – the first two elements of the trust equation. The last two are specific to individuals.

This idea could be appealing, because organizations are less likely to conjure a physical appearance, so from this perspective they are harder to hold to account. Closer and more intimate relations correspond to individuals because they are easier to imagine, if not reach and contact. But, the dissemination of the four elements is actually quite thoughtful; “self-orientation is the factor that will reduce trust in your leadership.”<sup>19</sup> Which means that the way in which individuals interact with one another will determine the perception of trustworthiness in their eyes.

## **A Revised Model for the Issue of Trust Building**

The revised model is using the same factors as Maister et al. but it has numbers connected to credibility, reliability, intimacy, and self-orientation. The keystone of trust is the communication between the affected parties. The given word is a key element of the model, weighted higher in the numerator of the fraction. The outcome of the *credibility* variable based on that a statement can be true or false (its maximum value is 50 %) because the trustor’s

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<sup>17</sup> C. F. Hansen, N.S. Worziger & C. Salling, “Become a trusted finance business partner,” *Implement Consulting Group*, (August 2020), <https://implementconsultinggroup.com/become-a-trusted-finance-business-partner/> (accessed 29 May 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Greiner, *The Trust Equation*. (11 April 2013). <https://robertgreiner.com/the-trust-equation/> (accessed 29 May 2021).

<sup>19</sup> B. Brearley, “Why Building Trust Is Better Than Authority” *Thoughtful Leader (online)* (November 2019), <https://www.thoughtfulleader.com/building-trust-leadership-strategy/> (accessed 29 May 2021).

evaluation is based on their own belief and experiences. The *reliability* variable based on the idea that an event can bring three possible outcomes when it is based on planning.

$$= \frac{\mathbf{T_{rustworthiness}(\Omega)} + \mathbf{C_{redibility}(\alpha = \max 50\%)} + \mathbf{R_{eliability}(\beta = \max 33\%)} \pm \mathbf{I_{ntimacy}(\gamma = 0 \text{ or } 17\%)}}{\mathbf{S_{elf-Orientation} (\delta = \frac{1}{1-r})}}$$

*The probability of correctness*

Extreme values

*Without emotional interference*

$$\frac{0,50+0,33\pm 0}{1-0,17 \text{ (Intimacy max)}} = \frac{0,83}{1,20481927} = \underline{68,89\%}$$

With all variables in the numerator with maximum value (with emotional interference):

$$\frac{0,50+0,33\pm 0,17}{1-0,17 \text{ (Intimacy max)}} = \frac{0,66 < x < 1}{1,20481927} = \text{between } \underline{54,78\%} \text{ and } \underline{83,00\%}$$

Risk factor values:

$$\frac{1}{1-0,17 \text{ (Intimacy max)}} = \frac{1}{0,83} = 1,20481927$$

$$\frac{1}{1-0,33 \text{ (Reliability max)}} = \frac{1}{0,67} = 1,49253731$$

$$\frac{1}{1-0,5 \text{ (Credibility max)}} = \frac{1}{0,5} = 2$$



Zero-sum scenario for not taking any kind of risk:

$$\frac{0+0\pm 0}{\frac{1}{1-0}} = \frac{0}{1} = 0$$

First, the action based on the agreement as it has been expected (in that case, the variable has its maximum value 33 %), second the action has been happened in the exact opposite way according to the plan (in that case, the variable's value is zero) or the action has been happened independently (third way) from the plan.

The *intimacy* variable's value depends on whether there is an emotional interference in the decision-making or not (the value is 17 % or zero). The emotional factor has a strengthening and weakening effect in the equation, in the favourable cases, positive emotional impression has a building effect, on the other hand, negative impressions destroy confidence, and, likewise, trust. The *self-orientation* variable amounts to the risk in the decision-making. The delta variable carries the *risk* factor, which is always the equal of the weakest variable in the numeration of the fraction with maximum value. If the risk has been reduced by as much as possible, the model gives the maximum value for making the optimal decision.

We cannot make ultimately a correct choice, because it is the nature of trust, that we are relying on other parties that we have trust in. In other words, there is always a 17 % chance of betrayal or defection. Trust is the *willingness* to become *vulnerable*. That is the reason why emotions can make relevant impacts in decision-making, the presence of this element has the ability to alter the rules of the outcomes in an important fashion. To be a bit poetic, the idea of expressing trust mathematically came from the credibility as the start point of trust-building while the endpoint is the status of being trustworthy. That metaphor appears in the symbols also: from the alpha to the omega.

That is why credibility has higher value as risk, because in my personal belief that could impact much more significantly on outcomes than observed actions or temporary intuition.

## Applying to Problem Solving: The Good Cop/Bad Cop Dilemma

Picking the numbers for the evaluation is based on a 10 scale of past-present experience.

Credibility: 0,3 (6 from 10 ->  $0,6 * 0,5$ );  
Reliability: 0,231 (7 from 10 ->  $0,7 * 0,33$ );  
0,099 (3 from 10 ->  $0,3 * 0,33$ );  
Intimacy: 0 vs 0,17 (*the lack or the presence* of an emotional aspect)

Without emotional interference:

$$\frac{\frac{0,3+0,231\pm 0}{1}}{1-0,17 \text{ (Intimacy max)}} = \frac{0,531}{1,20481927} = \underline{44,07\%}$$

With emotional interference:

$$\frac{\frac{(0,3+0,231)\pm 0,17}{1}}{1-0,17 \text{ (Intimacy max)}} = \frac{0,361 < x < 0,701}{1,20481927} = \text{between } \underline{29,96\%} \text{ and } \underline{58,18\%}$$

Without emotional interference:

$$\frac{\frac{0,3+0,099\pm 0}{1}}{1-0,17 \text{ (Intimacy max)}} = \frac{0,399}{1,20481927} = \underline{33,11\%}$$

With emotional interference:

$$\frac{\frac{(0,3+0,099)\pm 0,17}{1}}{1-0,33 \text{ (Reliability max)}} = \frac{0,229 < x < 0,569}{1,49253731} = \text{between } \underline{15,34\%} \text{ and } \underline{38,12\%}$$

In general, the “good cop/bad cop” routine is quite effective, but it has disadvantages. For instance, it can be easily identified, and the “bad cop” may alienate the subject, and more energy is focused on the tactic rather than the negotiation.<sup>20</sup> This routine is a basic trust-building exercise, where the negotiators are trying to monitor the extreme values, in the hope of gathering valuable information. The problem is that this method can generate opposite outcomes; to relieve discomfort, the interviewee may feed false information.

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<sup>20</sup> R. J. Lewicki & A. Hiam, *Mastering business negotiation: a working guide to making deals and resolving conflict* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 114-115.

Usually, the negotiators dismiss the fact that if the subject aware of what is happening, the conversation could end up as a manipulation exercise. If the subject of this negotiation is an unreliable source, it would be better to drop the routine and approach with an objective solution (neglecting emotional relation), which could lead us to better results.

### A Private Life Problem

In romantic relationships, trust is a key element. Let's say Person A propositions Person B for a date, but B rejects A for some reason. Person A does not perceive themselves to be lying (which means their words are *credible*, because Person A's intentions expressed with words are *true*), and A has clear feelings towards Person B. However, Person A's actions may not be *reliable* according to Person B, and in their evaluation Person A's actions do not mean a thing. In that case, the model goes as such;

Without reliability (taking reliability risk) :

$$\frac{0,5+0\pm 0,17}{1-0,33 \text{ (Reliability max)}} = \frac{0,33 < x < 0,67}{1,49253731} = \text{between } \underline{22,11\%} \text{ and } \underline{44,89\%}$$

In this case, going along is not a considerable option.

#### *Inflection Point*

0,076268655 > 7,62% is the minimum reliability risk needed to reach at least 50 % and the intimacy variable must affect it in a positive way, strengthening the connection between person A and person B. Without the action-based factor, the evaluation's result from Person B will be an opinion, which can be favourable, but it has zero impact for Person A. In order to there be a connection between the two, risk taking is inevitable, even if it is a spark.

Minimum case scenario for risk (to reach 50 %):

$$\frac{0,50+0,07626866\pm 0,17}{1-0,33 \text{ (Reliability max)}} = \frac{0,40626866 < x < 0,74626866}{1,49253731} = \text{between } \underline{27,22\%} \text{ and}$$

50,00 %

## Scenarios for Following Events

Things are more complicated, if the problem was not with Person A's credibility from the start, but rather neither Person A's actions nor emotions were strong enough to make a difference. There is no clear reason, why one is the stronger risk carrying factor. In that case, the story can progress towards in the following:

When reliability value equals with intimacy:

Worst case scenario for risk (Reliability risk):

$$\frac{0,5+0,17\pm 0,17}{\frac{1}{1-0,33} \text{ (Reliability max)}} = \frac{0,5 < x < 0,84}{1,49253731} = \text{between } \underline{33,50\%} \text{ and } \underline{56,28\%}$$

Best case scenario for risk (Intimacy risk):

$$\frac{0,5+0,17\pm 0,17}{\frac{1}{1-0,17} \text{ (Intimacy max)}} = \frac{0,5 < x < 0,84}{1,20481927} = \text{between } \underline{41,50\%} \text{ and } \underline{69,72\%}$$

Correct emotional expectations lead us to better decisions, because our feelings must be in accordance with them. Individuals will actually feel better in every way so long as there is harmony between feelings and decisions. When action is carried out against feelings of disagreement, *doubt* appears immediately.

## Conclusion

If we adapt the model to operational research, experience shows that it might be useful in automated data filtering. To the best of my knowledge, machines do not have the ability to feel – yet. However, according to a recent UN Report there is plausible evidence that a drone autonomously carried out a strike on retreating forces in Libya in 2020.<sup>21</sup> At the current level of data manipulation, we can filter cases that are made by bots; generated websites, news, comments in social media, etc. behind which human involvement is

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<sup>21</sup> UN Security Council, “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1973” (2011), S/2021/229 (8 March 2021), 17.

arms' length. This stems from the idea that there is always an emotional interaction when humans are trying to build trust with others. If we focus on that, we can pinpoint contents that is generated without human interference. On the other hand, we can see that trust is about shaping our way of thinking, like an "algorithm" running all the time and selecting those who are worthy for our confidence and self-interest.

# Countering Information Irresponsibility

*Armen Grigoryan*

## **A Short Media and Social Media Introduction**

The contemporary information landscape is largely decentralised, thanks to the Internet. Over the last three decades, the information flow in Central and Eastern Europe has become easy and inexpensive to an extent hardly imaginable. Within a generation, acceding information was transformed from, for example, watching Western films (still behind the Iron Curtain) on smuggled, exorbitantly expensive VHS cassettes, to satellite receivers worth thousands of not-yet-so-much-inflated dollars, then to broadband streaming at virtually no cost. Digital libraries, online translation provide additional access to information in other languages, and many other tools have widened the public's access to information even further.

Yet, the web has increasingly been showing its negative effects as well. Social networks and video hosting services with livestreaming possibilities, discussion forums, blogs and other tools allowing transmission of anyone's opinion have been largely contributing to the generation of misinformation, disinformation campaigns and the spread of conspiracy theories. For many, especially younger and middle-aged people, online and social media have become the main source of news, they have also become one of the leading conduits of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Previously, people with bizarre, unconventional, or untested worldviews were only heard in their respective neighbourhoods, with few lucky enough to earn column inches in tabloids, to be aired on certain talk radio stations (mostly in the U.S.) or, more rarely, on television. But technology has paved the way for marginal opinions to reach global audiences across borders, and linguistic and social barriers. Such easy access to (sometimes sensationalist) media outlets, like tabloids and foreign television programming, has been particularly acute in Central and Eastern Europe since the late 1980s and 1990s.

Furthermore, social media, with a business model based on creating bubbles of "friends" and "followers", buttressed by big data algorithms, have been

multiplying the negative effects by supplying people with selected information which they would probably like, thereby strengthening confirmation bias and polarisation. The ongoing expansion of social media and other digital platforms contributes to increasing levels of political polarisation, and has apparently stimulated the growth of both right- and left-wing populism.

Moreover, with governments increasingly reliant on digital tools to execute critical processes like elections, the disproportionate influence of social media and other developing technologies on political and social interactions presents another significant problem as well. As the co-editor of the *Journal of Democracy* Mark Plattner noted,

“While these were initially regarded as promising instruments of liberation, today their dark side is increasingly apparent. Domestically, they have contributed to polarization and a coarsening of public discourse. Internationally, they have facilitated foreign disinformation campaigns and other forms of external interference in the political life of democracies. Today these technologies are helping authoritarians more than democrats.”<sup>1</sup>

Plattner particularly notes that those technologies enable “authoritarian” use of sharp power to penetrate open societies with the aim of stifling debate and sapping the integrity of independent institutions.<sup>2</sup> Central and Eastern Europe is

“...highly vulnerable to disinformation. Depending on individual countries, the post-Cold War reform process towards democracy, market economy and open society has remained unfinished, was halted mid-way, or has never really begun. ... all too often, persistent state and political weakness cannot be sufficiently compensated for by civil society and independent media.”<sup>3</sup>

The influence of social media on the outcome of elections has been covered in detail elsewhere. It might, however, be useful in this context to consider also an example of an old narrative which, because of additional possibilities of information manipulations, got a renewed look and, with some adjustments, became a cornerstone of a still ongoing propaganda campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark F. Plattner, “Democracy embattled,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, #1 (2020): 5-10, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/745949>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark F. Plattner, “Democracy embattled,” 5-10.

<sup>3</sup> Joerg Forbrig, “Preface” in *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*, Pavel Havlíček & Andrei Yeliseyeu, eds. (Warsaw: EAST Centre, 2021), 6.

In the recent decade or so, people in several post-Soviet countries have been exposed to a recurrent “imported” propaganda narrative, amplified particularly by public figures and institutions via social networks, as well as some websites and blogs, about the “perfidious West” trying to corrupt national and “spiritual” values. The active use of that narrative in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine started about the time when the Eastern Partnership was launched and those countries were negotiating association agreements with the European Union. Vociferous “parents’ committees” and other structures using similar demagoguery appeared, claiming that Western values were tantamount to sexual perversion and apostasy of traditional values and beliefs. Posing as defenders of youth, such committees decried Western perversion like homosexuality and other “bad Western things”, and so forth. The promotion of Christian conservative identity morally superior to the “nihilistic”, “decadent” West gained popularity with Christian fundamentalists in the U.S. as well (though the latter, themselves posing as champions of the Western values, blame “the liberals”).<sup>4</sup> Ethical and moral polarization added itself to political polarization.

Quite characteristically, the presentation of the Western liberal order as decadent and amoral goes hand in hand with Euroscepticism and the promotion of connections with foreign autocratic powers when pro-government media are tasked accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

That narrative has not spared Russia. It has gained the strongest momentum during the mass protests in Moscow in the winter 2011-2012, after the parliamentary elections in December 2011 and ahead of the presidential elections in March 2012, as the protests were blamed on western meddling. Prominent Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov noted in an interview with the deputy editor of *Novaya Gazeta* that in the aftermath of the 2011-2012 pro-

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<sup>4</sup> Péter Krekó et al., *The weaponization of culture: Kremlin’s traditional agenda and the export of values to Central Europe* (Budapest: Political Capital Institute, 2016), [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC\\_reactionary\\_values\\_CEE\\_20160727.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_reactionary_values_CEE_20160727.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Dominik Istrate, “Hungary” in *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*, Pavel Havlíček and Andrei Yeliseyev eds. (Warsaw: EAST Centre, 2021), 145.



tests, the Russian political system shifted, generating the adoption of legislation and regulation concerning family relations, attitudes towards religion, arts, school textbooks, freedom of the press and Internet were.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Adam Michnik, noted that kind of reasoning in his native Poland already back in 1995. In a report at the first Berlin meeting of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation he pointed out that “post-communist ethnic chauvinism is often buttressed by the political exploitation of religion” so, any bearer of that siege mentality

“...warns against closer links with the European Union, which he sees as Babylon, the seat of sin and corruption, the civilisation of death, the kingdom of pornography, abortion, contraception and divorce.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the opportunity to use new digital tools for propaganda has made some narratives reusable, as if they were freshly constructed. Great power meddling in elections and other potentially harmful activities have been made easier by the Internet but are not wholly new either.

China’s threat to democracy has gone under the radar for quite a long time, but has recently become too large to ignore. The risk in this case is related to perceptions based on a *lack* (as opposed to overabundance) of information. As one of the experts interviewed in the framework of the Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021 project noted, should China choose to engage in intensive propaganda, not only those inclined towards authoritarianism could be susceptible and multiply its effect: even pro-democracy elements of the public have been expressing positive thoughts towards China and Chinese foreign policy, as they are not well informed about it and consider it a peaceful, non-aggressive and constructive actor.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Andrey Lipsky, “Тоталитарный дрейф,” *Novaya Gazeta*, (August 31, 2015), <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/08/29/65410-totalitarnyy-dreyf>.

<sup>7</sup> Armen Grigoryan, “The origins and use of some propaganda techniques and conspiracy theories,” *Armenian Institute of International and Security Affairs*, last modified March 24, 2020, <https://www.aravot-en.am/2020/03/24/252642/>.

<sup>8</sup> Armen Grigoryan, “Armenia” in *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*, Pavel Havlíček & Andrei Yeliseyev, eds. (Warsaw: EAST Centre, 2021), 39-40.

China's propaganda methods include the involvement of top diplomats. In some cases, sympathetic coverage by pro-government media outlets contributes to that propaganda, like in the case with the Chinese ambassador's articles in Hungarian newspapers about the protests in Hong Kong and other issues.

“Although the readership of traditional daily and weekly papers is in decline, their information impact is strong since the articles of leading pro-government commentators are promoted and distributed by multiple online pro-government outlets.”<sup>9</sup>

However, even in the absence of overtly sympathetic ruling elites, China manipulates Western public opinion aptly. Those who criticise China's policies can be harassed by means of a manipulative tactic involving the Western public's sensitivities and penchant for misguided political correctness; thus, any criticism may be framed in the context of racism or colonialism. So Western politicians, media and academia are more likely to comply with some demands just to avoid the “racist” label. That has been the case, for example, in an article published in *The Washington Post* in February 2020, quoting an interview with the Chinese ambassador to the U.S., who, in line with the mentioned method, warned about the threat of racial discrimination and xenophobia in connection with the discussion about the possibility of a leak from the laboratory in Wuhan.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, that very article in *The Washington Post* may also serve as an example of the deterioration of editorial policies and principles. At the time of the publication, the lab leak theory had been labelled “debunked conspiracy theory”, but in May 2021, when the Biden administration authorised a new investigation into the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the headline and the content were edited, so it became a “fringe theory that scientists have disputed.”<sup>11</sup> Notably, following the Biden administration's move, social media have also changed their approach, so, for example, *Facebook* allowed publications suggesting that the virus could have been created artificially,

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<sup>9</sup> Istrate, “Hungary,” 146.

<sup>10</sup> It must be said, however, that the Wuhan coronavirus crisis has heightened anti-Asian sentiment and ugly incidences of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian xenophobia in many countries, even among those having the reputation of being “open” and “welcoming”.

<sup>11</sup> Paulina Firozi, “Tom Cotton keeps repeating a coronavirus fringe theory that scientists have disputed,” *Washington Post*, (February 17, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/16/tom-cotton-coronavirus-conspiracy/>.

whereas prior, comments suggesting that very eventuality had been flagged and deleted by *Facebook* as “fake news” or “hate speech” under their community guidelines. Such flip-flopping of mainstream media and social media editorial policies and arbitrary “community rules” are reminiscent of Orwell’s “Nineteen-Eighty-Four” in which faceless bureaucrats treat the truth as fungible in accordance with the ruling party’s general line. The Soviet Union also had a popular joke about this as well.

As that was not just a single example or an isolated case, a more general, rather disturbing tendency may be noted as well. Many of mainstream English-language media, apparently driven by the wish to oust U.S. president Donald Trump at any cost, not just adopted a biased approach in regards to domestic politics, but also eagerly repeated *Chinese* narratives. For instance, when the Trump administration entertained the early suggestion to ban flights to and from China, many anti-Trump narratives labelled this idea as “racist”, dismissed the lab leak hypotheses as “conspiracy theories”, and so forth.

While the course of the dispute about the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 had perhaps been set by the letter published by 27 scientists in *The Lancet* in February 2020, the media’s eagerness to turn a blind eye to the lack of proper research for making such an orthodox statement, as well as negligence towards the signatories’ conflict of interest is telling. As the latter has finally been revealed,<sup>12</sup> along with information about gain-of-function experiments and the way they were funded, such negligent or possibly even ideologically-influenced editorial policies among actors with large presence on the media market are problematic.<sup>13</sup>

More generally, it is also problematic that, in addition to foreign government-related actors’ attempts to influence democratic societies, self-declared “progressives” have also been attempting to impose control on media content and the general public discourse, advancing a dogmatic approach tantamount

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<sup>12</sup> Sarah Knapton, “Revealed: How scientists who dismissed Wuhan lab theory are linked to Chinese researchers,” *Telegraph*, (September 10, 2021), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/09/10/revealed-scientists-dismissed-wuhan-lab-theory-linked-chinese/>.

<sup>13</sup> At time of writing, it is becoming acknowledged that gain-of-function research at the Wuhan laboratory, aimed at artificially increasing the capability of a virus, had been funded by the U.S. government. Charges in that regard are pending. (Eds.).

to a weaponisation of culture. *Groupthink* including demands to exclude information and opinions which could offend some audiences, “speech codes” and other contemporary practices constitute a threat for the freedom of speech developed over centuries, since the age of Enlightenment.

Perhaps such practices seem to be relevant mostly in the U.S. and a few other countries’ context so far. Yet, considering the worldwide appeal of the English-language content – not only news, but anything from university curricula (particularly in social sciences and humanities) to popular culture – such trends of social engineering may become global, and also influence Europe and its periphery, including the post-Soviet area.

With such trends gaining momentum, the freedom of speech standards which contributed to civil liberties and prosperity in the West, and were a guiding light for East and Central European countries which transitioned to democracy in the 1980-1990s, seem endangered.

It should additionally be noted that search engines, social networks and other large corporations, which not only provide space for foreign influence, but freely use their own capabilities to influence countries’ societies as well. On the one hand, giants like *Facebook* and *Twitter* will promote a “progressive” agenda in Western countries, but on the other hand, will yield readily adapt to restrictive conditions set by authoritarian governments in their respective countries, just for the sake of profit.<sup>14</sup> Such double standards are problematic as they may exacerbate intra- and inter-societal conflict, if not international conflict.

## **Media and Social Media in Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution**

As regards crisis management, mainstream media and, to a certain extent, social media are functional as far as they inform citizens about natural or technical disasters, their consequences, or required actions. However, that functionality depends on the media’s integrity and general disposition, as well as on the level of social trust within the society.

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<sup>14</sup> James Clayton, “Frances Haugen: *Facebook* whistleblower reveals identity,” *BBC*, last modified October 4, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-58784615>.

For example, Japanese media's response to the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster in 2011 was appropriate as they informed the population about the situation, which areas were safe to stay or not, ways of evacuation, etc. Until now, there has been continuous information flow about the situation on the ground, including whether vegetables grown or fish caught in the area are safe to consume. Yet, the international coverage of the crisis was not free, to a considerable extent, from a sensationalist approach and panic mongering, which could ultimately be used to support certain business interests. So, that coverage seemingly contributed to a decision by a government of a country thousand miles away from Japan, where neither earthquakes nor tsunamis happen, to phase out nuclear energy and to increase import of natural gas instead.

Contrary to what was hoped for when the Internet was democratized, the role of social media in conflict resolution, is mostly negative (unless, in some cases, they are used to disseminate otherwise unavailable witness reports, like in the case of the ongoing civil disobedience in Myanmar). The result of so many people from different cultural background, creeds and traditions has not been the harbinger of wonder and understanding. Instead, the Internet and social media are overwhelmingly spreading hateful messages and propaganda, and thus contributing to further escalation of conflicts. In case of the mainstream media, the problem often is that in many cases "neutral" reporting focuses not on the objective reality but rather on presenting views of the conflicting parties equally, resulting in "ambivalence", or false balance. In case of disputes with autocrats and dictators, this kind of coverage usually reinforces their footing by presenting disinformation and manipulation as legitimate points of view.

### **Examples of Good Practice and some Recommendations**

After such a description, many will perceive the information landscape as an ideologically-divided media field and a cyberspace infested with trolls and other malign actors. However, unless there a dictatorship is limiting access to information by restrictive laws or use of arbitrary force, the information landscape can still auto-regulate, thanks to the professional integrity of some journalists, policy agencies, and strong competition. This does not mean,

though, that compromising the freedom of speech and other dubious practices of social networks and other technological giants do not need to be addressed.

Investigative journalism remains important, as it may expose disinformation and propaganda, even when those are favoured by the overwhelmingly pro-government media field.<sup>15</sup> Szabolcs Panyi's detailed report on the Chinese influence in Hungary is a useful example.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, independent media outlets often lack financial resources, and may face harassment; Panyi himself was among the journalists whose phone was tracked via a spyware, after all.<sup>17</sup>

A greater level of international cooperation between media, with knowledge sharing, joint investigations and other outputs could be beneficial as a part of solution – for example, multiple news outlets have been jointly investigating the Pegasus spyware project. Measures to counter authoritarian tendencies at the policy-making level are also important, so the official attention lavished by the French authorities on the Pegasus project serve as an example.

Characteristically, Panyi's report on the Chinese connections is to a large extent based on online databases, among other data. The Internet, despite increasing attempts to impose content control or to delete unwanted information, largely remains transparent, with information still being traceable after attempted deletion.

At the same time, its most important feature – allowing people to freely connect and exchange information across borders – required the Decentralised Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19 (DRASTIC) to challenge the prevalent “science-is-settled” dogma regarding the origins of the virus.

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<sup>15</sup> Istrate, “Hungary,” 144.

<sup>16</sup> Szabolcs Panyi, “How Orbán's Eastern Opening brought Chinese spy games to Budapest,” *Direkt36*, last modified March 14, 2021, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/kemjatszmkat-hozott-budapestre-orban-kinai-nyitasa/>.

<sup>17</sup> Szabolcs Panyi & András Szabó, “A story like out of a spy movie,” personal reports by two surveilled *Direkt36* journalists, *Direkt36*, last modified August 3, 2021, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/egy-kemfilmbe-illo-sztori-a-ket-megfigyelt-direkt36-os-ujsgiro-b-eszamoloja/>.

An important example of professional integrity was shown as the generally left-leaning *Vanity Fair* magazine published one of the most comprehensive reports on the DRASTIC's work, and in a way also admitted the reason for the earlier self-constraint of some media outlets.

“With President Trump out of office, it should be possible to reject his xenophobic agenda and still ask why, in all places in the world, did the outbreak begin in the city with a laboratory housing one of the world's most extensive collection of bat viruses, doing some of the most aggressive research?”<sup>18</sup>

In this context, it is also worth mentioning that one of the dangers posed by political polarisation, radicalisation and “culture war” is the unwillingness to communicate with the opponents to such an extent that many people exclude the media not confirming their existing bias from their reading and watching list.

Diversifying information channels is important. It is also useful to remember that even with social networks and fringe websites put aside, nowadays, unfortunately, some mainstream media have been wasting their reputations by covering (or covering up) events based on ideological preferences. So, people need to choose different sources of information to make comparisons, comprehend different aspects of events, and be able to avoid groupthink with its negative effects.

As regards strategic communications to counter mis- and disinformation and psychological operations, on the European Union level, the European External Action Service (EEAS) Department's East StratCom Task Force's EU vs Disinformation project<sup>19</sup> has been covering the situation in the EU and its neighbourhood in seven languages.

In the Czech Republic, the possibility to introduce a system of strategic communication based on the model used in the United Kingdom and Taiwan

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<sup>18</sup> Katherine Eban, “The lab-leak theory: Inside the fight to uncover COVID-19's origins,” *Vanity Fair*, (June 3, 2021), <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/06/the-lab-leak-theory-inside-the-fight-to-uncover-covid-19s-origins>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>.

has been researched, particularly considering whether the British and Taiwanese models, having strong similarities, would be feasible in the Czech context.<sup>20</sup>

In Slovakia, a *Facebook* page “Hoaxes and scams”, run by the police, with over 100,000 followers, is one of the specialised communication tools. There have also been suggestions that each ministry should have a strategic communications unit.<sup>21</sup>

In Poland, the National Security Strategy adopted in 2020 mentions the need to “create a homogenous system of strategic communication of the state, whose task should consist in forecasting, planning and implementing coherent communication activities”,<sup>22</sup> along with building capabilities to protect the information space, including virtual (systems, software and applications), physical (infrastructure and equipment) and cognitive layers, as well as increasing public awareness by information security education and cooperation with the media and non-governmental organisations.

Closer cooperation between the authorities, civil society and media, in order to exchange information and best practices regarding the analysis and debunking of disinformation, to promote media literacy at different levels, including formal educational institutions, could be recommended in other cases as well.

At the same time, international cooperation, in addition to funding of some media outlets, debunking initiatives, and media literacy courses, needs to be supplemented with information and know-how exchange with foreign research institutions, NGOs and media.<sup>23</sup> Some other measures which may be applied more or less universally include training of public officials in matters of information and cognitive security.

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<sup>20</sup> Pavel Havlíček, “Czechia” in *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*, Pavel Havlíček & Andrei Yeliseyev, eds. (Warsaw: EAST Centre, 2021), 97.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/hoaxPZ/>.

<sup>22</sup> “National Security Strategy of the Republic Of Poland,” *National Security Bureau*, (2020), [https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_of\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Poland\\_2020.pdf](https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Grigoryan, “Armenia,” 51-52.



Regarding the need to counter manipulations by authoritarian actors, the recommendations formulated in the Freedom House Nations in Transit 2020 report remain relevant as well. Particularly, civil society groups and independent news outlets should monitor elite co-optation, technology transfers, dubious investments and infrastructure development, as well as urge their governments to resist the temptation of adopting certain surveillance methods.<sup>24</sup>

Work at a grass-roots level, by means of regular meetings with rural constituencies is needed, but due to high political polarisation, public officials avoid discomfort and prefer meeting loyal citizens, so the effectiveness of strategic communication is diminished.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, speaking of good practices, individual choices and responsibility remain essential. Not all readers can work for the government, media or NGOs, be teachers or otherwise assume direct responsibility for shaping public policies or educating others. But each person still has to decide whether to choose diverse information channels; whether to avoid *groupthink* or to conform; whether to read beyond the headlines; whether to turn our websites or blogs into clickbaits; whether to communicate in emojis and memes or in mature ways; and so on.

The information landscape in our times is very complex, yet individuals still have choice, and it is good to consider long-term consequences of information irresponsibility, particularly for the interaction with people around us.

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<sup>24</sup> “Nations in Transit 2020: Dropping the democratic façade,” *Freedom House*, (May 6, 2020), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020\\_FH\\_NIT2020\\_vfinal.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Lasha Tughushi, “Georgia” in *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021*, Pavel Havlíček & Andrei Yeliseyev, eds. (Warsaw: EAST Centre, 2021), 128-129.

# From Information Warfare to Information Peacefare: Challenges, Opportunities and Prospects

*Elkhan Nuriyev*

## Introduction

In the twenty-first century, information warfare has become a serious threat which poses a significant future security challenge to international peace and stability. In today's globalized world, and especially in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Internet and social media have provided information warfare with new tools which affect not only political, economic and military targets but also influences the minds of civilians. The post-Soviet territory is no exception and a significant example of this is the lack of a just and durable peace in the Eastern Partnership region<sup>1</sup> which comprises six aspiring democracies situated in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Due to those countries' distinct geographic positions, history and culture, this geopolitical area represents an essential link between Europe and Asia and is constantly under political and economic influence of major international actors holding a key role in peace and security.

Evidently, the international community has so far paid little attention to the Eastern Partnership states which are further sidelined in international affairs, in particular as the European Union (EU) has struggled to forge a coherent position internally and externally. This apparent neglect and the lack of understanding of the deep-rooted issues have created an informational landscape where fake news stories harm the ordinary people and violate their fundamental right to make informed choices on the basis of accurate information that is free of deception and manipulation. In effect, the current climate of disinformation aggravates regional tensions and makes incumbent

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<sup>1</sup> The Eastern Partnership, officially launched in May 2009, is a joint policy initiative aimed at closer political association and economic integration between the European Union (EU) and six post-Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. More information about the Eastern Partnership can be obtained from the official websites at [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership_en) and <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/policy/eastern-partnership>.

authorities vulnerable to instability. More to the point, false information not only leads to disastrous results for regional stability but also directly affects peace process in the conflict-torn areas.

The fact that misinformation has a devastating impact on conflict resolution in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus has been evidenced by the recent effects of handling crisis situations in Azerbaijan's Karabakh, Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in Moldova's Transnistria and Ukraine's Donbas. Certainly, international efforts to resolve protracted conflicts and bring about stable peace in these regions must increasingly be looked for at the political, diplomatic and human levels instead of applying traditional forms of information warfare. What is most important today, however, is to develop the art of waging peace. This needs to be done by all the parties involved in the negotiating process to prevent further escalation of the still unresolved conflicts.

That being said, this chapter deals with some of the Eastern Partnership region's most vital issues: information warfare activities, faulty thought patterns and deeply entrenched distrust, as well as challenges and opportunities for facilitating the practice of "information peacefare." The author also discusses how to develop an innovative approach to building sustainable peace with modern information society tools. While looking into possibilities of shifting information warfare to information peacefare in the conflict-torn areas, the chapter further describes collaborative steps that can help local media outlets make the image of "making peace" real in public mind.

## **Turning Information Warfare into Information Peacefare**

According to Western experts, disinformation campaigns are often described as "information warfare."<sup>2</sup> The term itself means influencing the military and

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Spiers, "NATO's Information Warfare," in *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion: From World War I to WikiLeaks*, David Welch, ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 144-156; Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Rod Thornton, "The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare," *RUSI Journal* 160, #4, (September 2015): 40-48; Brett van Niekerk, "Information Warfare in the 2013-2014 Ukraine Crisis," in *Cybersecurity Policies and Strategies for Cyberwarfare Prevention*, Jean-Loup Richet ed., (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2015). 307-339.

civilians of a different state by disseminating certain information. It also includes purposeful actions taken mainly in order to achieve informational advantage by damaging adversary's information and information processes while simultaneously protecting own information and information systems. In other words, information warfare represents the most concentrated propaganda campaigns aimed at creating an image of an enemy and convincing the population in the necessity to defend certain values and strive to achieve certain goals. During these campaigns some parts of information become falsified, and the information that is true gets manipulated and dissected in order to comply with the objectives of the information warfare.

Strangely enough, a growing number of International Relations scholars in recent years have given increased attention to the dynamics of information warfare in the Eastern Partnership countries.<sup>3</sup> Over the last three decades, this topic has indeed become an extremely popular in both public and academic discourse. This is primarily because the lack of conflict resolution has sparked a new kind of information war aimed at obliterating the prospects of peace in the entire region. It is a pity, though, that scant interest has so far been shown in information peacefare which is so essential to investing in reconciliation, conflict prevention and sustainable peace.

Therefore, the parties involved in peacebuilding activities need to promote shared objectives, and particularly a safe and secure environment, the rule of law, good governance, a sustainable economy, and social well-being. For this to occur, however, information peacefare requires the military and civilians to develop innovative strategies, doctrines, and toolkits based on proven practices and the know-how of experienced professionals. Precisely because stakeholders of international relations do not have information peacefare as a tool, the current situation has brought them to an almost over-reliance on information warfare. This explains why information peacefare should be as well developed as information warfare.

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<sup>3</sup> Hanna Shelest, "Hybrid War & the Eastern Partnership: Waiting for a Correlation," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 14, #3, (Fall 2015): 45-53; Levan Makhashvili, "The Russian Information War and Propaganda Narratives in the European Union and the EU's Eastern Partnership Countries," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 7, #5, (2017): 309-313; Michael Gahler, "Boosting the EU's Soft Power in Eastern Partnership Countries," *European View* 20, #1, (April 2021): 14-22.

Nevertheless, an interesting, though subtle, question arises as to why information warfare still prevails over information peacefare in the Eastern Partnership region. Most obviously, the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda through traditional media and social networks poses numerous risks and dangers that sow discord, undermine free society and damage public trust. In effect, information warfare as a major source of fake news is highly politicized in the Eastern Partnership countries where international mediators have failed to assist contending sides in ending the conflicts and reaching peaceful agreements. Increasingly, local media is used as a tool of information warfare – a weapon of words that influences public minds, and hence a weapon of operations that affects domestic policies.

Furthermore, the ability to conduct information warfare activities and disseminate fake stories to shape the public narratives has rapidly transformed local media outlets into strategic weapons in the hands of incumbent governments engaged in the protracted conflicts. For this reason, information warfare waged between conflicting parties has strongly influenced the peace process which continues to languish in the doldrums. People living in this region have become increasingly discouraged by the lack of any genuine progress in reaching a lasting breakthrough. Although international mediators and world political leaders have always stood in favour of a peaceful conflict settlement, they have not yet demonstrated any real inclination towards reaching a coordinated understanding of the intractable problems and achieving a joint resolution. At the present time, this is especially true for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group<sup>4</sup> peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Geneva International Discussions<sup>5</sup> on the consequences of the territorial conflicts in

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<sup>4</sup> The Minsk Group was initially set up by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (which had not yet become the OSCE) in March 1992. In March 1995, the OSCE established a co-chairmanship between Russia and the United States. In 1997, France was added to the Minsk Group, making it tripartite. More information about the Minsk Group can be found at <https://www.osce.org/mg>.

<sup>5</sup> The Geneva International Discussions are multilateral talks, launched in Geneva, Switzerland in October 2008 to address the consequences of the 2008 conflict in Georgia. Mediated by the OSCE, the EU, and the UN, the Geneva process involves representatives from Georgia, Russia and the United States, as well as members of both the Georgian exiled administrations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the de-facto authorities of the two breakaway regions. For more details, see: <https://dppa.un.org/en/press-releases>.

Georgia, the 5+2 negotiations<sup>6</sup> on the Transnistrian conflict settlement, and the Normandy format<sup>7</sup> on the conflict in Ukraine.

More precisely, information warfare can have effects on mediation efforts and stances of the peace brokers, and on their own interests, and on the methods they usually use to prevent an escalation in the intractable conflict and its extremely negative consequences. This explains why diplomatic efforts of the international mediators imply actions aimed at achieving “negative” peace; preventing, stopping, or not permitting a renewal of hostilities in the conflict zone. In fact, ineffective methods of conflict resolution are mostly directed at reaching speedy agreements, hence establishing only negative peace.<sup>8</sup> Further to the point, negotiations on stopping wars and entering agreements on non-use of force are only attempts to halt or at least, control violence already happening, which has been caused by deep-rooted problems and circumstances.

However, there is also “positive” peace which implies eliminating the internal and structural reasons and conditions arousing a violent conflict, toward the curtailment of which “negative” peace processes are aimed. So far, unfortunately, very little has been done to achieve “positive” peace. There is no intention of belittling the role of the mediators and reducing their efforts to naught. No one also denies the fact that peace brokers have made rather

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<sup>6</sup> The 5+2 format, also known as the 5+2 negotiations is a diplomatic negotiation platform aimed at finding a solution to the Transnistria conflict between Moldova and the unrecognized state of Transnistria. It includes Moldova and Transnistria as the Sides, the OSCE, Russian Federation, and Ukraine as the Mediators, and the European Union and the United States as the Observers. For more on this, see: <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/104529>.

<sup>7</sup> The Normandy Format peace process, also known as the Normandy contact group was launched in June 2014. It involves the representatives of Germany, Russia, France and Ukraine, who aim to resolve a war in Donbas. The peace process, however, is largely dormant, with no tangible results after several rounds of talks over the implementation of Minsk agreements on east Ukraine. For the latest information on this issue, see: <https://www.euractiv.com/topics/normandy-format/>.

<sup>8</sup> Elkhan Nuriyev, “Re-engaging Armenia and Azerbaijan in Reconciliation Process: Prospects and Incentives for Nagorno-Karabakh Breakthrough,” in *What Kind of Sovereignty? Examining Alternative Governance Methods in the South Caucasus*, Ernst Felberbauer and Frederic Labarre, eds., Band 3/2014, (Vienna: National Defence Academy, 2015), 163-180.

persistent attempts to resolve the protracted conflicts in the Eastern Partnership region. But if conflicting parties are usually unable to reach “positive” peace sooner under the auspices of the international mediators, “negative” peace easily collapses and one way or another leads to renewed hostilities it was aimed against right from the start. That’s exactly what already happened to the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process which resulted in the Second Karabakh war, upending the decades-long *status quo* in the South Caucasus.<sup>9</sup> In the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Donbas, the above-mentioned process could go on forever, which is evidenced by the existing political deadlocks around these conflict-torn areas where fragile “negative” peace has been kept up for a long time. What’s more, how much positive peace can be created in today’s polluted information environment?

In essence, there are at least two important circumstances that international mediators should take into account in the present-day situation. Firstly, it is the potential impact that negative consequences of information warfare already pose to the current negotiating stalemate in the Eastern Partnership region where the wider public reaction could be aroused by unsuccessful mediation efforts. Secondly, these are the tenacious mores, mentality and culture motivating the conduct of the people in the conflict situation, let alone the expediency of reckoning with the realistic possibilities, the specific situation, and public opinion.

On the other hand, the present impasse exists not only because a solution cannot be found, but because established narratives, thought patterns and

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<sup>9</sup> On 27 September 2020, a fragile “negative” peace in Karabakh easily collapsed, predictably leading to the bloody 44-day war, which was halted by the Kremlin-brokered ceasefire deal signed on 10 November 2020 by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia. A trilateral statement put an end to the years-long occupation of Azerbaijani lands by Armenian forces, hence restoring Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territorial integrity. At the same time, Moscow and Ankara did very well with coordination of their activities, resulting in the deployment of Russian Peacekeeping Contingent to Karabakh and establishment of a joint Turkish-Russian Monitoring Center on Azerbaijani soil. Elkhan Nuriyev, “Why Did the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Process Just Fail? *EUobserver*, Brussels, (2 October 2020), available online at <https://euobserver.com/opinion/149603>. Also, see Elkhan Nuriyev, “Bullet Points and Strategic Recommendations from Azerbaijan,” in *What Future for Nagorno-Karabakh in the Wake of the 2020 Six-Weeks War?* Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu, eds., Band 2/2021, (Vienna: National Defence Academy, 2021), 13-18.

distrust have been deliberately nurtured. Achieving political settlement, therefore, is but one element of a bigger challenge, whose essence is to change the perspectives of the respective governments as to the utility of ongoing stalemate. Exploring and promoting innovative ideas could certainly help inspire and motivate conflicting parties to unjam the frozen peace process. For this to happen, there is a strong need to adopt a changed narrative on conflict resolution reflecting a constructive, dialogue oriented approach. The main goal is to develop more effective ways to better inform the wider public, protect society from illegitimate pressures and thereby safeguard internal stability.

But still, dangerously spreading misinformation calculated to demonize and threaten the other party remains a major obstacle to bringing about lasting peace in the Eastern Partnership region. Given the absence of broad civic discourse on the approaches to a speedy and peaceful resolution to the current crises in Europe's eastern neighbourhood, international mediators should therefore undertake commitment to meet renowned scholars, civil society activists and media representatives from the Eastern Partnership countries on a regular basis to engage them in a more nuanced public debate searching for innovative ways to shape peace effectively and promote eventual reconciliation. The initial point of such an initiative is to establish an expert group in each Eastern Partnership country as a means for fostering "positive" peace in the conflict-torn areas and to help local media outlets rather move away from information warfare to "information peacefare." It is about the creation of an "Eastern Partnership's Futures - Ideas for Action" region-wide project as a novel resource at the intersection of academia, civil society and politics.

### **Inventing Language for Peacefare and Building Corridors for Dialogue**

As is well known, dialogue and peace always serve as common language spoken among nations. Problems of lack of mutual understanding are usually solved by dialogue which is the only way forward to ease tensions and resolve conflicts. Doing enough dialogue means doing enough peace, thereby bridging the gap between the parties and bringing them together for increased understanding how demanding peace dialogue is. That is why using the language of peace as a vital component in the pursuit of reconciliation is so



essential to find any common ground needed to push the peace process further.

Obviously, one of the most challenging problems the Eastern Partnership region is facing today is that incumbent political elites have so far failed to create a viable language for peace as part of a new technology for information peacefare. While there is a relatively well-developed technology of information warfare, political leaderships throughout the entire region still lack a concrete image of what information peacefare might look like. There is a strong need to begin to address this problem by creating and testing new innovative ways to build a platform of mutual dialogue that will enable the parties in conflict to establish a climate of trust and achieve reconciliation. In other words, it is necessary to invent an art of waging “positive” peace, instead of maintaining “negative” peace. With this in mind, the ruling authorities in the conflict-ridden areas must search for alternative approaches and avenues that will provide a way out of the current impasse to negotiate constructively and move seriously towards a political solution.

More frequently, politicians and policy analysts use words like “conflict freeze,” “nonviolence” and “non-use of force” to protest the use of warfare. But yet they have to look at the other side of conflict resolution. It is about a space for deliberation, learning, and looking inward. It is a time of looking at relationships from a different perspective. Openness, tolerance and hope are key factors that foster healthy conflict resolution. Trust is the ability to build confidence in relationships in which the parties believe they will act in the common interest. There is only one thing that can restore broken trust. It is mutual forgiveness that could indeed bring about reconciliation and peace to the conflict-torn region. But when peace supporters talk about “forgiveness”, their efforts are not taken seriously by decision-makers. This is a very real problem for those of scholars and practitioners working in the field of peace and conflict studies and that of peacebuilding more generally. Once again, how can this be possible in the current context of rampant misinformation and disinformation? How will the elite be treated by their respective publics if they put narratives of forgiveness forward?

Paradoxically, incumbent elites have not yet been able to invent a practical tool of peacefare itself. This explains why they cannot develop and apply the technology of “information peacefare.” This is still not being done largely

because they either want to continue to do things the way they have been doing them down through the recent decades, or because they do not know how to find new and better ways of resolving intractable disputes and how to take an innovative approach to making peace with modern information society tools.

Nonetheless, conflicting parties should first build corridors for dialogue through interaction and mutual understanding, and only then move on to foster and facilitate the practice of information peacefare. In order to develop helpful technologies and new approaches in information peacefare, there is certainly an increasing need for a new type of leadership with far more robust diplomacy and strong strategic vision to end still unresolved conflicts. This job could, after all, be done by a new generation of credible leaders willing to invest more of their countries' resources in establishing and conducting positive peacefare.<sup>10</sup> They could create a professional team of conflict resolution facilitators who would test specific models in the field of peacebuilding that could eventually supersede information warfare and promote genuine peace dialogue instead.

### **Creating Peace Constituencies Through Novel Cooperative Projects**

To date the constituency of peace in the Eastern Partnership region is quite small and weak. Any change of attitude will require a commensurate preparation of the public opinion. Adversaries must become partners in the public mind before they become so in reality. This is also necessary for business endeavours to take place in safety. If there was political will to promote inter-ethnic and inter-community reconciliation, restore international legality, ensure freedom for all people, and foster prosperity through economic reintegration, there would be a way to make the regional conflicts come to peaceful, mutually agreed solutions. In that sense, economic dialogues at both the intra- and inter-society levels should become building blocks in conflict resolution processes.

Albert Einstein (1879-1955), one of the world's leading spokesmen for non-violent conflict resolution in his speech to the New History Society on 14

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<sup>10</sup> Herbert Lewis Swan, *Positive (Negative) Peacefare: The Neglected Art of Waging Peace* (New York: Vantage Press, 1966).

December 1930 famously said, “peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding.”<sup>11</sup> This inspirational quote seems to mean that if conflicting parties do not understand one another, there cannot be a peace. There will be misunderstandings leading to heated disagreements which will eventually cause conflict. If they really do not understand each other’s motivations, there is little chance for de-escalation of conflict. Hence, effective communication is the only way to defuse tension and create the right atmosphere for the peace talks to succeed.

But the following interesting question arises: How is peace actually waged? Yet the answer is very simple. Eye to eye, the parties should talk and cooperate in exploring how their differences and disagreements could eventually be buried. In particular, a meaningful public discourse can extensively be employed as a crucial tool for achieving peace, with the precepts that academics and media are significant instruments for promoting mutual understanding and reconciliation. In this context, the EU, the OSCE, the Council of Europe (CoE), international nongovernmental organizations and other public authorities, such as regional governments and civil society organizations must strongly support and encourage greater participation of research scholars and media professionals in the peace dialogue process.

The establishment of the Eastern Partnership Peacebuilding Platform, a regional network that would aim to provide an open intellectual space for academics and media to learn from each other and jointly work to shape public discourse of reconciliation could be an important step forward in trying to contribute towards stimulating progress in the peace talks. The presence of such an interactive network could play a substantial role in helping to prepare fertile ground for accepting a negotiated solution and building up the constituencies for peace when new opportunities for would emerge.

Most notably, prestigious international think-tanks should actively support peace studies scholars in a variety of ways to encourage debate and bring about positive change within and between their societies. One specific recommendation is to launch a program or an initiative called “Scholars for

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<sup>11</sup> Alice Calaprice, *The New Quotable Einstein*. Commemorative Edition (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 158.

Peace.”<sup>12</sup> It is about a special project aimed at building a team of conflict resolution facilitators working to investigate technology’s potential for stimulating and strengthening approaches that can pave the way to true reconciliation process. This group must be made up of professionals who have specific skills, significant competency and extensive knowledge to deal with conflict settlement and with information peacefare technology.

In effect, the initiative described above could help bring experts, their experiences and insights to the table with policymakers, attempting to resolve territorial conflicts. Scholars could share their views and ideas, building coalitions to come up with a new concept and to develop a concrete image of a workable model for “Eastern Partnership Peacefare” in the public mind. The primary purpose of the Scholars for Peace Program would be to demonstrate to skeptical leaders that there are indeed more effective ways to deal with differences than the use of military force.

But even so, it is still necessary to devise a coherent strategic vision and to be able to visualize the possibility of reaching a solution. If a team of impartial facilitators can point to something important that has worked much better or more effectively than warfare, incumbent political leaders will be under severe pressure to search for alternatives and to use the new tools. This in turn will allow the conflicting parties to reshape their perspectives and to visibly turn obstacles into opportunities. Given expertise and capabilities offered by professionals, the world’s most respected think-tanks could guide Scholars for Peace initiative to a positive outcome. So all in all, the program’s work could yield tangible results satisfactory to all the parties searching for innovative ways of breaking the current impasse and resolving the protracted conflicts.

Most importantly, the idea of organizing an international conference for peace scholars, policymakers and practitioners could be a starting point in establishing some kind of regional networking. A select group of specialists in focused field of study could first present their innovative proposals, then debate and deliberate about case scenarios and possible solutions. The main

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<sup>12</sup> The initiative can also be referred to as “Scholars Waging Peace.” This idea was first put forward by the author at the 16<sup>th</sup> Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group workshop that took place in Reichenau, Austria, 9-12 November 2017.

intention is to add value to a new cooperation project with participation of key speakers – peace promoters who could focus especially on a strategic roadmap for fostering dialogue and reconciliation by offering insider perspectives and sharing their expertise.

Meanwhile, information can be for better or for worse. It is just as important to talk about information that serves to create common understanding and peace. In this respect, the media is a vital tool in helping to shape public opinion. Hence the media can indeed play a key role in “peace mainstreaming” and in setting up the image of “information peacefare.” The media representatives should talk more and more about valuable contributions to “information peacefare” and/or about innovative possibilities of information “peacekeeping” as an activity to create and to use situations with symmetric or identical information and knowledge to construct public opinion and to prepare for constructive change in relations among the parties. Addressing the challenges of waging “information peacefare” would be best handled by acting nationally first, and then regionally. This is because the presence of external actors, for example, such as Western and/or Russian media might lead to unnecessary tensions. This kind of promotion could therefore be done by cooperative efforts of the major media outlets in the six Eastern Partnership countries.

Certainly, coordinated action by regional media holdings will be critical to successful “information peacefare” campaigning. For instance, regional media agencies could launch a pilot project that would deal with conversion of media to journalism of peace. One could start with inviting the makers of Peace Journalism to present their ideas and views on potential opportunities for regional cooperation of promoters of peace media. One of the main aims is to set up the Regional Learning Partnership on Peace Journalism and to help people to access and produce alternative sources of information. The pilot project would work with selected local media agencies to make films and documentaries as well as publish opinion articles, essays, commentaries and promote stories that speak of human and cultural diplomacy, using examples of successful multi-ethnic societies and advantages of maintaining good neighbourly relations.

More specifically, a website project called “Eastern Partnership for Reconciliation and Peace” whose purpose would be to promote an exchange of

knowledge and experience at the service of the construction of an art of peacebuilding could be launched jointly by the respective media outlets in each Eastern Partnership country. The website could serve as a tool that would help to translate creative and innovative ideas into action. Its mission should be to make available expertise and know-how about peacebuilding at the service of the implementation of common initiatives at regional level. The main goal is to bring together scholars, journalists, and civil society activists through online tool to form a regional network and to create a synergy between those working effectively in favor of promoting reconciliation and rebuilding peace in the Eastern Partnership region. This initiative could help regional peacebuilders confront information warfare activities by creating new opportunities for them to facilitate the practice of “information peace-fare” and make the image of “making peace” real in the public mind.

Nonetheless, specific measures aimed at triggering relaxation of tensions can be envisaged to promote a constructive dialogue through a well thought-out media campaign;

1. Refocus the media narratives on “information peacefare” and post-conflict reconciliation. It is necessary to put forward a fairly straightforward message containing a rhetoric that favours rapprochement, for example, by jointly addressing common security challenges such as terrorism, energy disasters, and other global issues.
2. Better inform the wider public on the benefits of peace, regional integration and commercial exchange for prosperity of all sides.
3. Engage media to support and promote television talk shows and newspaper stories advocating greater transfer of public funds to peace education.
4. Increase social and humanitarian reporting with a view of developing a common view on particular topic of concern, such as return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), thereby giving a larger voice to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society activists.

Evidently, a de-polarized and independent media has the power to build up a constituency of peace through promoting cross-border cooperation and success stories in fields like economics, energy, tourism, education and culture. Estimating economic benefits of peace is fundamental in understanding economic incentives which might drive political leaders to break deadlocks

and accept negotiated solutions. Perhaps more to the point, only a successful media campaign can move the Eastern Partnership audience from emotionality to rationality, from open warfare to true peacefare, and hence from prejudice to prosperity.

## **Conclusion**

For centuries the peoples of the Eastern Partnership region lived side by side peacefully as neighbours. Even today, despite public resentments, they wish to live in peace and concord. These nations are indeed capable of rebuilding peace, stability and security in the aftermath of the conflicts in the region. This is because they have a rich experience of good neighbourhood relations, which covers a period much longer than the periods of tension and conflict. Hence, opportunities and conditions for re-establishing cooperation can be obtained if the parties strive to restore confidence between them. It will certainly take a long time to rebuild trust and achieve reconciliation. However, a start is needed on steps that can make the confrontation more bearable for the people and less risky for regional stability.

Overall, the benefits of peace are indeed abundant because there are many areas for hope, but strong political will and firm determination are necessary to initiate such change. Halting arms race, reducing military activity, re-establishing economic relations based on mutual interest, opening the border for free trade and other types of commercial exchanges are potential areas for laying a solid foundation for stability, peace and prosperity. Business interaction, educational and intercultural communication may likewise prove to be rich areas for wider cooperation. In order to facilitate the process, however, there is increased awareness of the need to actively involve the private sector and the media systems on all sides, amidst fears of reigniting hostilities and a potential economic decline across the region.

Peace is not simply the absence of war but is a continuation of politics by other means. It is also a process in search of socio-economic recovery, reintegration of conflict-affected communities, and successful knowledge-based economy benefiting all the countries in the region. Most important, the unilateral projection of peace could become a potent political lever and a game changer in international relations. But yet “peacefare” and conflict-quelling capability have rarely been examined in detail.

Even notwithstanding numerous complications, difficulties and challenges facing the Eastern Partnership countries today, there are sensible forces ready to think strategically about tomorrow's peace and to add value to the conflict settlement process. They strongly advocate investment in information peacefare and often argue for economic incentives that can most effectively contribute to creating conditions of mutual consent and advancing reconciliation.

By materializing the whole package of initiatives outlined above, peace scholars and media professionals could therefore generate wider public opinion to convince incumbent political elites to use modern tools and apply new approaches to constructive conflict resolution. By doing so, relations between conflicting parties would evolve into a "warm peace" that could include things like mutual trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges. Achieving such peace certainly requires years of hard work and may even take generations as it needs to be fully blossomed. That, however, proves to be no simple task. It takes a great deal of patience, effort, diligence and commitment to achieve tangible progress. Yet it is believed that there is a light at the end of the tunnel for conflict-troubled societies. Once the peace process is really underway, economic collaboration and regional integration promises to be beneficial for all involved parties in the Eastern Partnership region.



# The Role of Strategic Communication in Countering Disinformation: The Cases of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia

*Elena Marșac and Sanda Sandu*

## Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the definition of power has changed from the conventional term related to military and use of force to one that is less violent and that uses hybrid threats, where media, social media, propaganda, and information can be turned into weapons. Therefore, capacities to implement supportive policies are limited. In recent years, hybrid threats have affected economic and social fields like national elections, foreign investment, and mainstream information delivery.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, hybrid threats, the absence of a security culture (i.e. awareness of the information environment and the use of social networks, disinformation and fake news), and the increased vulnerability of democratic values and national interest, continue to attract academic interest. Hybrid threats, such as fake news and disinformation undermine the security of states, which in turn diminishes the sense of security for citizens.

In its 2018 Megatrends Report, the GLOBSEC Policy Institute underscored three worrying security trends in Central and Eastern Europe; increased confrontation in global security relations, increased influence of informational offensive capabilities, and the weaponization of technologies to achieve political goals.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roman Rukomeda, "Russia's Hybrid War Against Ukraine: The Latest Developments and Trends," *Center for the Integrity of the Defence Sector (CIDS)*, online, (28 Sept. 2018), <https://cids.no/2018/09/28/russias-hybrid-war-against-ukraine-the-latest-developments-and-trends/> accessed 6 January 2022.

<sup>2</sup> GLOBSEC Policy Institute. *GLOBSEC Megatrends 2018*, Bratislava, (2018), 26-33.

Modern information technologies have created a qualitatively new operational environment where influences, beliefs and opinions can be manipulated. This means building a complex production and dissemination apparatus that integrates actors with varying levels of attributions to enable large-scale and complex information operations. Altogether, it puts pressure on national security and defence, self-governance and on the implementation of national interests both at home and in external affairs.

To appear legitimate and credible, spreaders of disinformation and fake news actively frame their content under “freedom of expression”, “access to information” or “myth-busting.”<sup>3</sup> In many cases, the independence of the media is compromised by ownership disputes, augmented by politically-motivated changes to the regulatory framework of media and broadcasting laws.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter analyses the media information landscape, the legislative and public policy domain associated with disinformation resilience, and the role of governmental and nongovernmental actors with respect to media literacy as well as the role of strategic communications. In particular, the focus is on examining strategic communications as a response to disinformation and propaganda and its best practices of its implementation in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia.

### **Why is Moldova so Vulnerable to External and Internal Propaganda? What Could Be Done?**

Because it is torn between Western aspirations and the legacy of Russian influence, Moldova is particularly vulnerable to outside propaganda.<sup>5</sup> Due to its geostrategic location, Moldova faces the clash of strategic communication of international actors such as the EU and the Russian Federation. Consequently, Moldova’s external narratives are highly important for the country’s credibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Olga Chuzhova, “Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe,” Kyiv, (2018), 244. [http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI\\_CEE\\_2018.pdf](http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Chuzhova, “Disinformation Resilience...,” 35.

<sup>5</sup> Madalin Necsutu, “Moldova: Concerns over Cyber Security as Election Looms – Analysis,” *Eurasia Review* (29 Oct. 2020), <https://www.eurasiareview.com/29102020-moldova-concern-over-cyber-security-as-election-looms-analysis/>.

Moldova faces a series of challenges fueled by long-lasting disinformation and propaganda. The lack of information from first-hand (official) credible sources motivates citizens to use alternative resources. Plus, these alternative sources stimulate a polarization of society, undermine security policies and the democratic process, distort the public agenda and the decision-making process, diminish public confidence in state institutions and as a result are faced with increasing public non-compliance with the rules.

For a long period, Moldova has lacked the political will at the state level to fight fake news, external propaganda, and information warfare. One of the main reasons is that local politicians either own or control the media institutions which rebroadcast external media content. The Moldovan public media exposure is fragmented by a lack of clear policy measures, resulting in external media domination. Therefore, they are unwilling to “saw off the branch they are sitting on” by addressing and countering this challenge. Other reasons include the long-term inefficiency in long-term of the remedies (e.g. Antipropaganda Law) and the lack of communication between the main official actors and institutions with regard to information and media security.

While there is an Information Security Strategy for 2019-2024<sup>6</sup> providing some strategic direction in this sense, implementation and performance measurement have lagged behind. As a result, for many years, Moldova’s media landscape has been continuously plagued by socio-political polarization, lack of editorial independence, a broadcasting regulatory authority whose neutrality is far from guaranteed, and a concentrated advertising market which limits the access of most independent media to advertising revenues and compromises their sustainability. Moldova’s context is thus one of limited freedom of expression, conducive to self-censorship.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, national regulatory institutions such as the Audio-visual Council do not systematically perform their tasks or exercise authority to protect the national media infosphere and combat the phenomena of fake news, external propaganda, disinformation, and information warfare.

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<sup>6</sup> Government Decision #257 (22 November 2018). Information Security Strategy for 2019-2024. *Monitorul Oficial* #13-21.

<sup>7</sup> RSF Reporters without Borders, *2019 World Press Freedom Index – A Cycle of Fear*, (18 April 2019), <https://rsf.org/en/2019-world-press-freedom-index-cycle-fear> accessed January 6, 2022.

The 2018 Disinformation Resilience Index ranked Moldova as the weakest performing country (out of 14 states) in terms of “Population Exposure and the susceptibility to Kremlin-led media” (3.2), and “Quality of systemic responses” (3.0). Moldova was attributed the second weakest ranking (after Belarus) in “Digital warfare vulnerability” (2.6).<sup>8</sup> A report published by the Romanian Centre for European Policies (CRPE) in November 2020 shows that Moldova is one of the most affected European countries by disinformation campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, Moldova is a barometer for the effect of disinformation. However, some steps were taken to address these challenges; legal and regulatory remedies, media literacy projects, and implementation of some elements of strategic communication are among the more important initiatives.

### *Institutional Setup*

Parliament, the Broadcasting Coordinator Council (regulator of the TV and radio markets), the Ministry of Justice (the registrar of news agencies and newspapers), the President (the guarantor of national security), and the Security and Intelligence Service (the body dealing with hostile information activities on the territory of Moldova) are the key actors dealing with the response to disinformation.

### *Media Literacy Projects*

There are just three major initiatives to expose and combat disinformation, including one dealing with reporting fake social media accounts used for promoting hostile narratives. One of the first and the most significant initiative is the *Stop Fals!* campaign initiated by the Association of Independent Press (API).<sup>10</sup> API helps develop the capacities of independent media and its network of member-constituents through specialized service provision. It also

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<sup>8</sup> Chuzhova, “Disinformation Resilience...,” 26.

<sup>9</sup> Damian Alexandru & Vladlena Subernitchi, “Campanii electorale toxice: Dezinformare si propaganda la Chisinau,” *Romanian Center for European Policies*, (November 2020), 1-12.

<sup>10</sup> *StopFals!*, “About us,” <https://stopfals.md/ro/about-us> accessed 6 January 2022.

develops a media campaign against fake and tendentious information. Finally, it has produced several videos and audio investigations about propaganda and publishes a monthly newspaper supplement about propaganda.

The *Sic.md* project has ambitious goals of identifying false information and of informing citizens in a simple and accessible way.<sup>11</sup> *Sic.md* monitors the public promises of politicians, acts as ethics watchdog in media and public declarations. *Sic.md* is therefore a tool for political accountability, including politicians' declarations which may be seen as treasonous to the state. Compared to the *Stop Fals!* campaign, *Sic.md*'s scope of activity is much wider.

Finally, the TROLLESS project was developed during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Media Hackathon "The Fifth Estate", organized by the Centre for Independent Journalism and Deutsche Welle Akademie.<sup>12</sup> The primary product of the project is a web browser extension which helps identify the sources of manipulation in new social media spaces and to isolate them. Otherwise, there are very few counter-disinformation projects.

The number of digital-debunking teams in Moldova is insufficient because of the limited resources available. They all depend on foreign financial support and may not be sustainable if this support stops. The Moldovan authorities have been passive in addressing the problem of information security. Moldova lacks an efficient early warning system against information-related threats. First, there is a shortage of monitoring, fact-checking, and debunking capabilities; second, there is no genuine synergy between state and non-state actors.

## **The Current Framework of Strategic Communication in Moldova**

Moldova's authorities are also working to improve strategic communication in public institutions, but progress has been slow. The national institutions of Moldova are facing challenges at strategic level in the field of managing communication efforts. These include

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<sup>11</sup> *Sic!*, "Fact Check", <https://sic.md/tag/fact-check/> accessed 6 January 2022.

<sup>12</sup> *Trolless*, "About us", <https://www.facebook.com/trolless/> accessed 6 January 2022.

1. the lack of an integrated approach to the strategic vision at national level,
2. the lack of a common decision on the development vector and insufficient coordination,
3. the underdeveloped inter-agency communication culture,
4. the lack of transparency in decision-making processes,
5. the state institutions are still far from having a unique voice in terms of promoting national interests,
6. the lack of an inter-institutional communication vision alignment on specific topics,
7. the lack of interest and skepticism among the population and media representatives on security and defence topics, and
8. the information environment is conducive to the presence of external and internal propaganda.

Moldova benefits from international organisation support in addressing disinformation and propaganda activities via the EU's East StratCom Task Force contribution. Additionally, EU and NATO member states provide support and expertise, including with the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence based in Riga. The assistance in ensuring informational resilience is periodic and on a project-based format.

Moldova has acknowledged and assumed that in accordance with Chapter III, para. 44 of its National Defence Strategy,

“...strategic communication will become the indispensable informational element of the national authorities, representing one of the tools that the state has at its disposal to achieve its objectives in the field of security and defence.”<sup>13</sup>

Efforts will be oriented towards the elaboration of an efficient vision of strategic communication, towards the transformation of the institutional communication structures and towards the elaboration of forms of collaboration and interaction between them. Likewise, within the Individual Action Plan of the Moldova-NATO Partnership, Chapter III, p.3.1 stipulates that

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<sup>13</sup> Government Decision #134 (19 July 2018) Regarding the approval of the National Defense Strategy. *Monitorul Oficial* 441, #285-294, (3 Aug. 2018).

“strengthening national capacities in the field of strategic communication is a priority for the Republic of Moldova.”<sup>14</sup>

Among the structures dealing with the management of communication activities at the national level, one finds the National Communication Council set up in addition to the Parliament of Moldova, the Strategic Communication Group of the Government of Moldova, and the National Communication Group COVID-19.

Nevertheless, there are no institutionalized strategic communication structures at the institutional and/or national level which would deal with the management of the communication activities as a process of promoting national interests of the country.

Moldova’s strategic communications should be seen as an integral component of the governance strategy. To achieve this outcome, a well-structured process that reflects the specificity of Moldova and builds an efficient and lasting link between communication objectives and communication capabilities is needed. For the institutionalization and application of the principles of strategic communication, a national approach is needed, by creating a common process and mentality of coordinating activities and messages. However, the difficulties of establishing the authority to direct and manage strategic communication must be considered.

### **Case Study: Georgia**

The key aspect of strategic communication is the clear formulation of a policy and the creation of effective mechanisms for its implementation. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce effective institutional mechanisms for the decision-making and coordination within and among the agencies. The structural units involved in strategic communication, both at national and agency level are still in gestation in Georgia. A series of challenges have been detected in the policy formulation and implementation process, as well as in interagency coordination.

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<sup>14</sup> Government Decision #736 (13.09.2017) Regarding the approval of Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) Republic of Moldova – NATO for 2017-2019. *Monitorul Oficial* 840, #335-339, (3 Aug. 2018).

## *From Recognition to State Policy*

Strategic Communications became institutionalized in 2018 by launching strategic communications structural units in every ministry. According to the authorities, the rationale behind the creation of the aforementioned bodies was to curb the influence of anti-Western propaganda,<sup>15</sup> raising the population's awareness regarding Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and the establishment of an effective, coordinated and proactive strategic communications system in the country.<sup>16</sup>

The objectives of the joint Strategic Communications and Public Relations Department are to increase public understanding of NATO integration and Georgia-NATO cooperation, elaborate communications instruments and products, informational campaigns, raise awareness, and provide an informational platform for the public.<sup>17</sup> Public opinion polls aid in the formulation of narratives aimed at domestic and international communities.

Domestically, strategic communication assures Georgia's society that Euro-Atlantic integration enhances the country's democratic development processes,<sup>18</sup> gives initial support to the protection of national and cultural values, aids the improvement of the living standards of citizens, and enhances the country's defence capabilities.

Externally strategic communications underlines Georgia's strategic geopolitical location and demonstrate Georgia as a regional leader in democratic development and an important contributor to the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

It should be noted that Georgia has strategies, action plans and public policies in place aiming at strengthening strategic communication capacities. Fol-

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<sup>15</sup> Elene Panchulidze, "Russian Soft Power: Balancing the Propaganda Threats and Challenges," *Georgia Institute of Politics* Research Paper 5, (June 2017), 1-19.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Defence of Georgia. *Strategic Communication Department*, <https://mod.gov.ge/en/page/85/strategic-communications-and-public-relations-department>.

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Defence of Georgia, *Communication Strategy 2017-2020* (Tbilisi, 2018), 3, [https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/2018/PDF/strategia\\_eng\\_2018.pdf](https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/2018/PDF/strategia_eng_2018.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Defence of Georgia, *Communication Strategy 2017-2020*, 3.



lowing interviews with experts, however, it was noted that strategic communications as a tool was used by state institutions to promote their image rather than serving as a platform of communication with the public on security and information challenges.

*The Role of Governmental and Nongovernmental Actors: Projects and Best Practices on Media Literacy, Strategic Communications and Countering Disinformation*

Cooperation between governmental and non-governmental organizations is more intense in the area of information security. Joint campaigns have been implemented mainly on issues related to European and Euro-Atlantic integration to provide accurate information to the public. Representatives of non-governmental organizations cooperate with other civil-society organizations within various non-governmental alliances and campaigns. Such formats include the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Platform, Alliance of Regional Broadcasters, and the Coalition for a Euro-Atlantic Georgia.<sup>19</sup>

In Georgia, state-civil society cooperation is partially institutionalized; in most cases cooperation happens on ad hoc basis. Within Georgian civil society, there are several non-governmental organizations that continue to place a particular focus on fact-checking and media literacy. Among the most well-known fact-checking projects are *Myth Detector*<sup>20</sup> and *FactCheck*,<sup>21</sup> run by the Media Development Foundation<sup>22</sup> and Georgia's Reforms Associates respectively. Furthermore, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics openly discusses issues related with disinformation.<sup>23</sup> The aim of the organization is to react to disinformation and myths and provide the public with accurate, fact-based information.

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<sup>19</sup> Simona Ognenovska, Lubin Panov & Eszter Hartay, "Assessing the civil society environment in the Eastern Partnership countries," *European Center for Not-for-Profit Law CSO Meter Regional Overview 2020*, (2020), 19-23.

<sup>20</sup> *Media Development Foundation (MDF)*, "Myth Detector," <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/about-project>.

<sup>21</sup> *FactCheck*, "About us" (in Georgian), <https://factcheck.ge/ka/chven-shesaxeb> accessed 6 January 2022.

<sup>22</sup> *Media Development Foundation (MDF)*, "About us", <https://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/page/1> accessed 6 January 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Transparency International (Georgia), *Fighting Disinformation in Georgia Report*, (2019), 14. [https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/dezinpormaciis\\_cinaagmdeg\\_brzola\\_sakartveloshi-e-web.pdf](https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/dezinpormaciis_cinaagmdeg_brzola_sakartveloshi-e-web.pdf).

The website *mediachecker.ge* is a platform for media critics in Georgia that actively disseminates information about materials containing disinformation and highlights fake news and inaccuracies used to influence public opinion.<sup>24</sup> The interactive platform “Disinfoobserver”<sup>25</sup> aims at increasing awareness of inauthentic Facebook pages, their activities and tactics used, and help users verify sources on *Facebook*. It has been developed by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy. The platform offers a database of suspicious Facebook pages uncovered as a result of social media monitoring. These pages merit their place on that list when they are engaged in discrediting campaigns, spreading disinformation and manipulated information, promoting polarization through divisive narratives, resort to inauthentic behaviour or other harmful information operations.

While civil society initiatives are instrumental in increasing media literacy, the one measure experts single out as being truly effective is including media literacy in school curriculum “on a massive scale.”<sup>26</sup>

There is no such program in Georgia today, but there are media organizations working on this issue. For example the Media Development Foundation elaborated guidelines to help media consumers to check fake information and handle disinformation. The organization, through the support of Deutsche Welle offers courses in media literacy, which include theoretical and practical instruction in the methods of countering propaganda.

### *Main Conclusions and Findings*

The absence of target groups and packages of main messages reduces significantly the effectiveness of strategic communication activities. Georgia’s timely monitoring and response to disinformation is not well institutionalized. Consequently, neutralizing the effects of negative media propaganda is

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<sup>24</sup> *MediaChecker.Ge*, National Endowment for Democracy, [www.mediachecker.ge](http://www.mediachecker.ge) (in Georgian only), accessed 6 January 2022.

<sup>25</sup> *Disinfoobserver.ge*, “About us”, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), <https://disinfoobserver.ge/about>, accessed 6 January 2022.

<sup>26</sup> E. Humprecht, F. Esser & P. Van Aelst, “A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation,” Report of the independent High Level Group on fake news and online disinformation. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, (2020).

not immaculate as well.<sup>27</sup> There is a need to strengthen and broaden existing policies and to optimize relevant mechanisms to fight disinformation.

A shortage of resources within regional civil society organisations and media also poses a problem. A lack of media literacy stands out as one of the main reasons disinformation spreads among the population. There is a serious problem developing the media skills of the population; however, perfecting media skills among journalists in Georgia is far more important.

## Case Study: Ukraine

### *Institutional and Organizational Setup and Legislative and Policy Analysis*

Strategic communications are defined by Ukraine's military as the coordinated and proper use of communicative capabilities of the state; public diplomacy, public relations, military relations, information and psychological operations, and measures to promote the goals of the state. That is the first official enforceable legal definition of strategic communications.<sup>28</sup>

The priority actions is developing and strengthening of communications writ large; creating a transparent system of effective government communications that facilitate coherent implementation of public policies within a specified agenda. Such a system contributes to the realization of communication with the public on reforms of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, reports to the people about the issues and specific characteristics of certain activities of the Government.<sup>29</sup> Also, a Road map of the partnership between Ukraine and NATO in the field of strategic communications is expected.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Atlantic Council of Georgia, "Analysis of Georgian National Strategic Communication System on the Issues of Euro-Atlantic Integration," *Konrad Adenauer Foundation*, (20 June 2016), 15-19.

[https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7\\_dokument\\_dok\\_pdf\\_51846\\_1.pdf/aef199f0-5557-498a-f5c1-c4f48e041c9d?version=1.0&t=1539647756823](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_51846_1.pdf/aef199f0-5557-498a-f5c1-c4f48e041c9d?version=1.0&t=1539647756823).

<sup>28</sup> Decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine. *On the new version of the Military Doctrine*, (2015). Decree of the President of Ukraine #555/2015. *On the Military Doctrine*, (2 Sept. 2015), <http://zakon5.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/555/2015>.

<sup>29</sup> Decree of the President of Ukraine #5/2015. *Strategy of Sustainable Development "Ukraine – 2020"*, (2015), <http://zakon5.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/5/2015>.

<sup>30</sup> Organisation of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, "Ukraine and

### *Institutional Setup*

The Information Security Doctrine (ISD) of Ukraine,<sup>31</sup> adopted in February 2017, proposes an enhanced institutional mechanism among several actors; the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, and within the Cabinet, the Ministry of Information Policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, and the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. They are joined by the Ukrainian State Film Agency, the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine, the State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine. Agencies of the security sector are also present, naturally; the State Service of Special Communications and Information Protection of Ukraine, the Security Service of Ukraine and Intelligence Services of Ukraine are essential. The National Institute for Strategic Studies also figures prominently among the actors dealing with strategic communications.

The Information Security Doctrine and a seemingly strong institutional framework have not contributed drastically to the effectiveness of the implementation of information security policy. Confusion about roles and overlapping functions (not to mention gaps between agencies) should have been detected prior to the enactment of the ISD.<sup>32</sup> There are interactions among ministries, agencies and NGOs on information security and media issues, but this interaction does not envisage an all-encompassing and comprehensive system of monitoring and reaction to information security challenges.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Role of Governmental and Nongovernmental Actors: Projects and Best Practices on Media Literacy, Strategic Communications and Countering Disinformation*

Ukrainian civil society plays an active role in defence policy oversight, but less so in other security sectors, such as intelligence. Civil society's capacity

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NATO signed a roadmap for integration in defence and technical sphere," (17 Dec. 2015), <https://www.rnbo.gov.ua/en/Diialnist/2337.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Decree of the President of Ukraine. *Doctrine of Information Security of Ukraine*, #47/2017 (February 25, 2017), <http://www.president.gov.ua/documents/472017-21374>.

<sup>32</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "Ukraine's Information Security Doctrine: A Breakthrough or the Veneer of Change?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14, #33, (13 March 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/ukraines-information-security-doctrine-breakthrough-veneer-change/>.

<sup>33</sup> Chuzhova, "Disinformation Resilience..." 26.

to oversee – and sometimes steer – policy depends, in large part, on the government’s level of transparency and accountability and its willingness to cooperate with civil society partners. But it also depends on becoming more knowledgeable of strategic communication capacities.<sup>34</sup>

There is cooperation between state and civil society initiatives, but it lacks cohesion and formal channels.<sup>35</sup>

### *Digital Debunking Teams*

Debunking teams appeared spontaneously as a reaction to the external disinformation campaign surrounding the Maidan and Crimean crises in February and March 2014. Due to the unpreparedness of the Ukrainian state authorities, volunteer and civil society groups performed a lot of activity in this realm. Even now, the ISD acknowledges the importance of civil society involvement in countering disinformation. There are different types of initiatives on the ground taking into account the diversity of tools applied by external actors in disinformation and propaganda. They comprise fact-checking teams, open source intelligence communities, investigative journalism groups, media hubs, and expert networking agencies, social media initiatives, cyber-activists, and IT companies with specialized software.

The first initiative to mention is the project *StopFake*,<sup>36</sup> established by Kyiv Mohyla Academy lecturers and researchers in March 2014. The website of the project initially focused on debunking external disinformation and propaganda about events in Ukraine. As time passed, it evolved into an information hub where the team studied all aspects of external disinformation and propaganda. *StopFake*’s information products are translated into 10 languages to increase outreach. The initiative states its independent status and non-affiliation with any Ukrainian institution.

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<sup>34</sup> Jos Boonstra, “Building civil society oversight capacity of the security sector in Ukraine,” Centre for European Security Studies Policy Brief 1, (December 2019), 2-9.

<sup>35</sup> Ognenovska, Panov & Hartay, “Assessing the civil society environment in the Eastern Partnership countries.”

<sup>36</sup> StopFake.org, “About us,” Kyiv Mohyla Academy, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/about-us/>, accessed 6 January 2022.

Another initiative is the website *Dniprorada*<sup>37</sup> – a Ukrainian platform for the development of participatory democracy that also contributes to international discussions on how to resist the disinformation phenomenon.

Another initiative represents the *Information Resistance*<sup>38</sup> that functions as an initiative of the NGO Centre for Military and Political Studies. It is operated by Ukrainian reserve officers and is widely known for thorough fact-checking of the news.

Since 2014, the Ukrainian authorities and civil society have done significant work in order to build up national resilience in many areas, including in the information domain. Most positive results should be attributed to volunteer initiatives and on restrictions on media outlets promoting disinformation and propaganda.

Ukrainian resilience to disinformation is very multi-layered. First, both at state and societal levels, society is conscious that disinformation and propaganda as psychological operations (PSYOPS) are part and parcel of conflict. Experiencing all these facets at the same time leaves the Ukrainian authorities with no illusions about the gravity of the consequences, or what is at stake. That said, in Ukraine there are three main directions in which it is necessary to apply different strategies and instruments to defend Ukrainian national interests. Both state bodies and expert communities have to deliver on information security tasks;

1. on the sovereign territory of Ukraine,
2. in the areas escaping government sovereignty, and, last but not the least,
3. outside Ukraine.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dniprovska Myska Rada, <http://dniprorada.gov.ua/> accessed 6 January 2022.

<sup>38</sup> *Informatsionnoe Protivlenie*. “O nac” (About us), <https://sprotyv.info/o-nas> accessed 6 January 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Tetyana Syvak, “The system of strategic communications in Ukraine: preconditions of formation”, *The World of Politics, Society, Geography* 2, (2016).

## Instead of Conclusions

Since hybrid threats can target the integrity of state security, appreciating the role of strategic communication as one of efficient instrument help bolster political credibility and trust.

Strategic communication becomes a necessity in the context of the exponential development of social media, the intensification of online disinformation campaigns, the diversification of the means, sources and targets of manipulative influence campaigns the lack of trust in the system of liberal-Western democracies. Strategic communication is the process designed to counteract the disruptive effects of disinformation and misinformation, targeting not only the external public, with the aim of promoting national interests, but also the internal public, in order to increase its resilience to national attacks.

At the Government level, strategic communications are the efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favourable for the advancement of the national security interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all state institutions.<sup>40</sup>

The requirement for strategic communication capacity building differs in form, content and urgency depending on the internal political situation among the three cases studied here. There are, however, similar challenges which are shared by all three nations;

1. Lack of effective cross-government strategic communication,
2. Lack of unified vision and coordination of governmental/societal actors,
3. Lack of strong national media, and;
4. Increased activity of external “agents of influence” (NGOs, media, political forces, church).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication* (New York: Praeger, 2011), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Minutes of a Coordination Meeting on StratCom Training for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova held in Riga. *NATO Centre of Excellence on Strategic Communications* (19 February 2015), <http://leurenmoret.info/currents/editorial-page/psyop-101-/doc-1-stratcom-training.pdf>.

It is a question of national interest to have necessary capacities to provide countermeasures against adverse informational influence. The development of countermeasures and dissemination of “own state” narratives have to be a joint effort, requiring the active involvement of all state institutions. This is all what the “strategic communication” concept is about. It should be seen as a priority and an umbrella embracing various goal-directed state communication activities usually covering public relations, marketing and financial communications, health communications, public diplomacy, campaigning, etc., which in national security and international relations context, is a purposeful use of communication to promote the national interests and competitive advantages building a fruitful environment for their realization. It provides synergy from co-ordinated and appropriate use of the national communications activities and capabilities, such as public diplomacy, public affairs, military diplomacy, information operations, psychological operations, etc., in support of the established national objectives.

In the actual security environment, strategic communication is used to achieve a state’s credibility, legitimacy, to discourage and to ensure the freedom of action. It is also vital when it comes to supporting the implementation of national strategies and to protect, restore, maintain and achieve its national goals and permanent national interests. It must be said, however, that the alteration of public reality cannot be combatted only through proactive narrative strategies. Strategic communication can only support such a mission in the medium term.

In the case of Georgia and Ukraine, state efforts to institutionalize strategic communications at the national policy level by adopting official strategies, and by reconfiguring governmental structures to ensure coordinated and coherent public communication should be noted and appreciated.

To ensure coherent coordination of government action with civil society organizations, formal channels should be established. These would be aimed at the creation, enhancement, maintenance and development of an enabling environment to promote legitimate national interests, policies and objectives of the state.



Future initiatives could take into account a more strategic approach to digital developments, considering more advanced planning for new digital solutions and activities.

The analysis of case studies of the three countries demonstrated a lack of quality systemic responses. National institutions and regulations on strategic communications and information security are often underdeveloped. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the regulatory environment is outdated, thus preventing the relevant agencies from duly scrutinizing disinformation channels for compliance.

States should adopt and fully implement national long-term strategies aimed at combating disinformation campaigns and producing coherent narratives towards vulnerable groups of the population. The best responses to disinformation are multi-dimensional, with stakeholders collaborating in a manner that protects and promotes freedom of expression, pluralism, and transparency. Effective action will require continuous research on the impact of disinformation, increased transparency, and access to relevant data, combined with evaluation of responses on a regular, ongoing basis.

#### *What Could Be Done at the Regional Level to Counteract the Phenomenon of Disinformation Through Strategic Communication?*

Drafting a joint communication strategy for Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia aims at developing informational resilience in the region, in particular; a unified action plan of strategic communication and wider consultations between them, based on similar principles, and proposing similar mechanisms.

### **Recommendations**

1. Enlisting the assistance of specialized institutions to create a platform of communication, and share expertise and best practices.
2. Promote media literacy projects and programs that will be implemented by a wide range of stakeholders including state institutions, civil society, academia and private sector.
3. State institutions should take appropriate measures across all relevant public agencies to enhance capabilities, e.g. strengthening and developing

comprehensive and coordinated, effective and well-resourced programs for strategic communication.

4. Adequate training should be made available to public officials on how to detect and respond to information influence operations and create a multi-stakeholder platform for the exchange of information and knowledge about disinformation and successful countermeasures.
5. Stakeholders should establish a dialogue with relevant partners in the tech sector, including social platforms such as *Facebook* and investigate the possibility to extend the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation (signed by e.g. *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Google*) to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.
6. State institutions should ensure media literacy as an obligatory part of school curriculum in both elementary and upper secondary education.
7. State actors should encourage, support and learn from fact-checkers and civil society organizations that work on issues of freedom of expression and media freedom and ensure cooperative platforms of sharing knowledge and best practices.

The successful implementation of strategic communication as a national and regional tool will ensure the transformation of the regional security environment, together with economic, diplomatic and information deterrence factors, will develop resilience and ensure that vital interests are protected and well presented to internal and external partners.

# **Social Media Replacing Media: Disinformation and the Law**

*Emmanuel Mandalenakis*

## **Introduction**

Since the dawn of civilization, information has been regarded as the material block of society. The element that maintains the cohesion of society, by bringing its members to a uniform level of knowledge in regards to their union. However, the flow of information was always limited by the available physical means of dissemination. This was even more exacerbated in societies spanning through great distances and depending on the historical era, the information was conveyed through runners, riders, horse carriages, rowing and sailing ships alike, homing pigeons at delivery times ranging from days to months. A Marathon event, largely considered the pinnacle of running events in today's sports, celebrates exactly that. The delivery of a message on the outcome of the Battle of Marathon. With the advent of the printing press and subsequently the invention of the radio, wired and wireless communications, the delivery times were reduced to mere minutes. But even then, the amount of people receiving the information was still limited by geographical factors.

The introduction of social media in our lives sought to expand our social interactions beyond the borders of geographical and societal constraints. They were designed to bring people together from all longitudes and latitudes and bring more immediacy to the otherwise impersonal existing means of a telephone call or an email. Initially they were used for just that. Social interaction between friends. The popularity of the medium however, invited other aspects of life, namely the business world who sought to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the interconnectivity of persons. It was not long after where the social media became the primary tool for advertising and political campaigning. This latter ancillary purpose is the one that has unduly influenced society to its core.

## **Social Media Used for the Dissemination of Information for Political Purposes**

Before the advent of the Internet and social media, public political debate was limited to the Parliament floor, supported by press releases to accredited media. Most importantly, the sources of such political speech could always be traced to the political opponents and his inner circle. Nowadays, social media allows a voice to everyone, everywhere, regardless of geographical boundaries. One could argue that this is the very definition of democracy. And that would have been the case if, *and only if*, the information that was exchanged and conveyed was based on reality – the essence of Socratic truth.

### *News Disseminated Through Social Media*

The invention and eventual transformation of social media, was the turning point, tipping the balance between objective and subjective dissemination of information. In that regard it is important to note that the primary function and objective of the social media was to connect people. It was meant to replace the impersonal nature of the telephone and email communications by offering an immediate and very personalized way of connecting with long lost friends, often residing in opposite parts of the world. Not long after, political campaign managers realized the recruitment value in the exorbitant numbers of the audience of social media and sought to take advantage to increase their influence in the political arena. From this point onwards, social media became the most prolific means of political debate, in all its forms, directly and indirectly.

Although the direct means of political debate are self-explanatory, the indirect ones are less so. Initially, it started with the direct republication of news from accredited news agencies with the purpose of generating debate amongst the users. The upside to this was in the fact that at the time, the accredited news agencies offered little possibility of direct commenting on their news stories and when they did, they were subject to biased moderation, often performed directly by the author of the news story in question. By contrast, the Terms of Service applicable to the social media websites were considerably more relaxed, allowing for an unfiltered interaction between the users. The popularity of this practice introduced a new market segment and gave birth to impromptu news agencies and journalists, often masquerading

as accredited members of the press. Their sole purpose and intent limited in spreading their message and their version of reality to the masses. This included *bona fide* political operatives, aspiring politicians, special interest groups, influencers, power brokers, extreme political parties, paramilitary organisations, as well as terrorist and criminal organisations. In short, the introduction of political debate through the sharing of online news provided even mentally unstable individuals, not only with a voice but with an audience as well.

The downside to this indirect means of political debate became the lack of accreditation. Legal entities and natural persons not adhering to the journalistic and ethical standards were no longer penalized with obscurity. Quite the contrary indeed. Their lack of accreditation was passed on as freedom from external or government interference resulting in exponential growth of their audience. The lack of standards of any sort, complimented by the lack of accountability and responsibility, encouraged an unclear line between accuracy and sensationalism, which in turn resulted in unverified news, unqualified opinions, self-advertising, propaganda, radicalization, misinformation and disinformation. This chapter examines available legal remedies to disinformation both in the national and international sphere.

### **(In)Accuracy of Information: Misinformation and Disinformation**

Misinformation and disinformation have been used interchangeably by the public, without a clear understanding to the fact that they constitute different offenses, with different legal treatments for each. The difference between them lies exclusively on the intent and their capacity to mislead or deceive the recipients of the inaccurate information.

Misinformation would be defined as the result of unintentional or negligent conduct that has the capacity to mislead the public. That would incorporate information that has been unverified prior to publication, rumours, as well as honest mistakes. One could argue that opinion pieces based on personal beliefs rather than evidence and “fact-based” opinions disguised as news, also constitute misinformation. In the case of the former, it would be hard to make that determination taking into account that personal belief neither qualifies as objective information nor as news. As such it would be difficult to attribute negligent conduct, especially when the article in question is

clearly marked as an *opinion*. In the case of the latter however, the act of disguising an opinion by attaching supporting facts and presenting it as news could amount to negligence or willful misconduct, depending on the circumstances of the case. In the light of this, one does finally understand that when news agencies maintain a separate section for the opinion pieces, they do not do it for the sake of convenience. They do it for the sake of liability.

Disinformation could be defined as the result of intentional conduct with specific objective to deceive the public. Disinformation is not concerned with the mind of the recipient but rather with the mind of the sender. And as ignorance of the law is no defence and the standard duty of care applies, the sender is obliged by law to verify the information he transmits or retransmits. Manufactured and erroneous news, news with elements selectively presented out of context and news that appeal to emotion, are all treated as disinformation. Not only have they the capacity to deceive but they can result in radicalization, political and financial instability, public endangerment and can go even as far as to subvert a legitimately elected government.

As the defining difference between misinformation and disinformation is the intent or lack thereof, they are destined to receive a different treatment under the law. One simple way to understand the difference is through the Common Law test of criminal liability. “*Actus reus non facit reum nisi mens sit rea*” (a guilty act requires a guilty mind), prescribes that to establish criminal liability, criminal intent must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. The *mens rea* (guilty mind) is divided into three categories of mental state in order of severity: purpose, recklessness and negligence.

*Purpose* constitutes the direct intention of a person to commit harm. A straightforward and self-explanatory mental state. Less straightforward is the attribution of criminal liability through indirect means of intent. The rationale behind this is the fact that inadvertent but harmful acts to persons or property are no less damaging than intentional acts.

With this consideration in mind, *recklessness* constitutes the undertaking of an act with no intent but with knowledge of the reasonable likelihood of harm. *Negligence*, on the other hand, amounts to the undertaking of an act with no intent and no knowledge of the reasonable likelihood of harm, but where the knowledge should have been present.

Both mental states of recklessness and negligence are established through the reasonable man test, which determines the foreseeable risk of harm of the action in question. This determination is performed by the courts through the eyes of a fictitious person of average reason, intelligence and education, acting under the same set of circumstances.

While misinformation and disinformation are clearly a problem, their scale and impact have not been adequately investigated or examined. Without that evidence base, it is virtually impossible to quantify the actual and sustained damage which is a prerequisite in establishing civil and criminal liability before the courts. Furthermore, where they are regulated, their legal treatment varies significantly from one legal jurisdiction to another, with penalties ranging from the imposition of civil fines to incarceration. This constitutes the very definition of legal uncertainty.

## **The Law**

For the benefit of the reader, we will limit our discussion to general legal principles that are fundamental and indispensable to all jurisdictions alike and offer some indicative examples of legislation in the area. Before we do that however, we must provide some legal clarification on a topic of extreme importance, the applicable legal system on which the Internet and social media companies belong to.

### *Internet: Public Law or Private Law?*

There is a popular misconception from the side of the public that places the Internet on par with a public forum where the constitutional rights of freedom of speech and freedom of the press take absolute precedence over any other legal consideration. Proponents of this misconception rely on news coverage of the recent discussions on the liability of social media in the United States. More specifically, on the suspension and subsequent banning from social media of then-President Donald Trump. Following his suspension, President Trump proposed the amendment of section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, in order to treat social media providers as publishers and therefore subject them to liability over the content on their platforms. A number of Republican senators heeded the call and aided by the

news media affiliated to the Republican party, sought to inform the general public on the righteousness of their cause.

In the process, several statements were taken out of context and were subsequently used by manufactured news to sell the idea that the internet and the social media constitute a public forum. Specifically, the statement made by Senator Ted Cruz that “Congress believed big tech platforms would serve as neutral public forums”,<sup>1</sup> the proposed Senate Bill 1914 “Ending Support for Internet Censorship Act”<sup>2</sup> by Sen. Josh Hawley and the mere reference by the Supreme Court of a “modern public square” in its decision on *Packingham vs. North Carolina*,<sup>3</sup> were all used as the requisite justification to this misconception.

Had social media been a modern “public square” there would not be a need for a discussion of the amendment of section 230, nor there would be a section 230 to begin with. To make matters worse, section 230(B)(2) states that “It is the policy of the United States to preserve the vibrant and competitive free market that presently exists for the Internet and other interactive computer services, unfettered by Federal or State regulation”,<sup>4</sup> thereby explicitly excluding the application of public law for the Internet and the social media companies.

The specific exclusion of Public Law from the legal treatment of the Internet signifies the applicability of private law in the relationship between the end user and the social media companies, essentially ending any and every discussion on constitutional rights in that specific relationship. The applicability of private law may exclude direct interference by the State but by no means it suggests the inapplicability of the general legal framework. Therefore, in addition to company, consumer and commercial laws, criminal and civil law equally apply to the relationship between the end user and the social media companies, granting specific rights and obligations on the parties involved.

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<sup>1</sup> “Angelica Stabile & Ted Cruz: *Facebook, Twitter, Google* collectively pose ‘single greatest threat’ to free speech in America,” *FOX Business*, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/technology/ted-cruz-facebook-twitter-google-collectively-pose-single-greatest-threat-to-free-speech-in-america>.

<sup>2</sup> S.1914 – 116th Congress (2019-2020): Ending Support for Internet Censorship Act.

<sup>3</sup> 137 S.Ct. 1730 (2017) *Lester Gerard Packingham vs. North Carolina* #15-1194.

<sup>4</sup> 47 U.S. Code § 230 - Protection for private blocking and screening of offensive material.



The legislative reference of the Communications Decency Act 1995<sup>5</sup> is only used in this analysis in light of the vast majority of Social Media companies being registered in the United States. There are other examples of states like China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran which have adopted different approaches. However, as their respective choices stem from direct sociopolitical intervention which result in arbitrary censorship rather than regulation, they cannot be used as indicative examples.

## **Public Law**

### *The Constitution*

If law is the embodiment of society, then the Constitution is undoubtedly its heart and soul. Most importantly, it regulates the relationship between the state and its citizens, and preserves certain unalienable rights. In the interest of this discussion, we must limit ourselves to the most relevant rights; Freedom of Speech and Freedom of the Press.

Freedom of speech constitutes perhaps the most fundamental of the constitutional freedoms. It prohibits the state in enacting any legislation or pursuing any practices that would impede the expression of personal beliefs and opinions. Most importantly, it prohibits the state from taking any disciplinary action against the citizen in regards to the content of such beliefs or opinions. Freedom of speech and its expression is regarded as the backbone to the democratic process. Having said that, the freedom of speech does not amount to a free for all license to exercise speech that violates the personal or collective rights of others. Fundamental rights such as the right to life, liberty, security, equality, integrity, dignity and privacy among others, are equally inviolable and fiercely protected by national and international law.

Freedom of the press is an equally fundamental right. Much like the Freedom of speech, it prescribes for the freedom of expression through printed or electronic media. In fact, the entire concept of the Freedom of speech doesn't revolve so much on the freedom of the citizen exercising his right to inform others, but on the prohibition to the State to interfere in such exercise. As with the Freedom of speech, this freedom can also be limited by

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<sup>5</sup> S.314 – 104<sup>th</sup> Congress (1995-1996): Communications Decency Act of 1995.

reality. Information that has been deemed classified by the state, information that is protected on account of its business sensitivity or value, or even information that may prejudice ongoing judicial and law enforcement procedures and investigations, are expressly excluded from the protection afforded by the Freedom of the press. Such limitations may be deemed as an obstacle to transparency and the right of the public to be informed. Therefore, where such limitations exist, it is for the judicial authorities to decide where the balance of interests actually rests and frequently do so on a case-to-case basis.

Together, these two freedoms protect the expression in both the verbal and publishing domains.

### *Emergency Powers*

Although the Constitution is regarded as the top legal instrument in a state's arsenal, it isn't the only one. There is a higher power that can be none other than the state itself. The State draws its power directly from the very core of the right to self-determination, resulting in a power that can only be described as raw, pure or absolute, for which the Constitution, or in its absence, the general legal framework, is called upon to harness and regulate. One could argue that the Constitution instills a sense of morality to the application of state power and distills its absolute nature to a proportional one.

Historically, the notion that in times of need the State should exercise its authority without bounds, has been argued extensively. Niccolò Machiavelli,<sup>6</sup> John Locke<sup>7</sup> and Jean-Jacques Rousseau<sup>8</sup> proposed that in the face of extreme danger, a more immediate system of authority would be required, one that would be able to take decisions on the basis of the immediacy and unpredictability of the threat itself. Such a system would have to dispense with the morality and proportionality of legal norms in order to maintain effectiveness of response. It was not long after when the notion of the use of absolute powers in absolute emergencies found its way into the Constitutions

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<sup>6</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *The second treatise of civil government and a letter concerning toleration* (London: Blackwell, 1946), 12, 13, 84, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The social contract and discourses*, G. D. H. Cole trans., (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. 1973), 293.

and legal systems around the world. That notion was prescribed as a reservation of the right to use extra-ordinary powers in situations where desperate times call for desperate measures.

Under this reservation, the State can impose emergency measures that have supremacy over the applicable legal framework and can go as far as to limit or even suspend the constitution, in whole or in part. The downside to this supremacy is that authority can and has been abused on a number of occasions, often resulting in the dissolution of democratically elected governments. A notable example of such abuse is Syria, which on account of the conflict with Israel, held a state of emergency from 1962 to 2011. To avoid such abuses, most States have limited their ability to exercise that power to specific instances or scenarios, the most common of which relate to public health, security and safety. These specific scenarios are general enough to encompass a number of conditions or instances whereby the state may declare an emergency.

The limitations are either inscribed in the US Constitution itself or in specific legislation designed to regulate the extent of the emergency powers and the time limits for its implementation. The time limit imposed can vary but usually is limited to three months, after which the government can petition the parliament for its extension, provided that the conditions that led to the state of emergency still persist.

Although the number of emergencies is limited, there is no defined number. The reason for this is that most constitutions prefer to describe a state of emergency as an extraordinary event or set of events that have the capacity and capability to materially affect the wellbeing of the citizens, as well as the viability of the state itself. An extraordinary event can therefore be classified as anything that could be disruptive of the ordinary day to day life, a definition which becomes a rather subjective determination and one that is left to the discretion of the affected states to delineate what constitutes such an extraordinary event. The United States, for instance, have identified 136 such extraordinary events for which they have invoked their emergency powers in the past.

A representative example of enactment of emergency powers into legislation can be found in the recent amendments to the Russian Criminal Code and

to the Code of Administrative Offences. The Russian government, in an effort to curtail the negative effects of disinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic, criminalized conduct through Article 207.1 that

“...publicly disseminates disguised as truthful knowingly false information about circumstances threatening life and safety of citizens and/or measures to ensure safety of the populace and areas, of ways and methods of protection from such circumstances.”

This effort goes even further with the further criminalization of “*public dissemination of knowingly false information of public importance that has led to severe consequences*”, prescribed by Article 207.2 of the Criminal Code, with penalties ranging from a fine up to \$9,000 and incarceration for up to 3 years. Article 13.15 (“Abuse of freedom of the media”) of the Code of Administrative Offences, on the other hand, deals with the liability of the media outlets and users which disseminate such erroneous information and prescribes fines up to 127,000 USD.<sup>9</sup>

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and a number of governments have expressed their reservations on the applicable wording, citing the intentional vagueness as an invitation to the possibility of abuse.<sup>10</sup> Whether they are right or wrong is irrelevant in this discussion. What is relevant is that every law on every legal jurisdiction has the capacity to be abused. And that is quite simply because every law is subject to the interpretation afforded by the courts. Interpretation may correct the effects of a materially deficient law or depart substantially from the original wording and intended effect.

## Private Law

Private law pertains to the relationship between private parties, which includes not only the inter-relationship between natural persons, but the interactions between legal entities, as well as the interaction between legal entities and natural persons. The concept of market behavioural regulation prescribes that the State imposes conditions for every legal entity operating in

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<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International Public Statement, “Russian Federation: ‘Fake news’ bill prompted by COVID-19 threatens freedom of expression,” (3 April 2020), AI Index: EUR 46/2093/2020.

<sup>10</sup> Andrei Richter, “Disinformation in the media under Russian law,” *European Audiovisual Observatory*, (2019). ISSN 2079-1062.

their jurisdiction in order to preserve a level playing field, with accountability and transparency taking centre stage. Obviously, the reasoning behind such a market regulation is infinitely more complex but well outside the scope of this analysis. To preserve their positions in the market, legal entities opt to regulate their own interactions with the customer base of their products or services. In doing so, they essentially guarantee the conditions of their viability and competitiveness. This choice of self-regulation cannot be regarded as strictly voluntary, as it is often the result of relevant legislation or jurisprudence in each field. It could however be summarized as a healthy respect for the general principles of law.

The liability for product and services for instance, has led manufacturers and service providers in limiting the use of their products and services to specific instances which are prescribed in Applicable Terms and Conditions (hereinafter referred to as *terms*). These terms are an indispensable prerequisite which the customer is called upon to explicitly or implicitly agree prior to the use of the product or service. Such terms regulate the entire relationship between the parties in the transaction, outlining in detail the rights and responsibilities of all parties involved, including the termination of the relationship in question.

As the social media companies implement their terms through clickthrough agreements, any provision dealing with prohibited conduct resulting in disinformation, becomes the minimum legal standard. A significant difficulty in establishing that minimum standard however, lies with the applicable legal system in question. In Common Law systems, the interpretation of contractual terms follows a restrictive approach. Contract law dictates that in common law systems, terms and conditions not included in the agreement are specifically excluded from the scope of the agreement.

By contrast, civil law systems adopt a much wider approach in the interpretation. In that approach the courts are called upon to interpret any missing provision, by taking into account the intended purpose of the legislator in seeking a specific and desirable result. This difference of interpretation in common law jurisdictions results with the need for extremely lengthy and detailed agreements which require continuous amendment to accurately reflect the latest state of affairs. To increase their flexibility, social media companies have rejected the option of scheduled periodic reviews of their terms,

in favour of amendments determined by immediacy and necessity, often performed without the requirement of prior notice to the end user.

### *General Legal Framework*

Abuse, Harassment, Defamation, Discrimination, Racism, Sexism, Hate Speech, Incitement to Violence, Illegality, Obscenity, Sedition, Insurrection, Espionage, War. What do they all have in common? Currently existing and applicable legislation enacted to regulate them. The applicability of the general legal framework is self-explanatory and requires no further introduction to this analysis.

### **Use of Legal Remedies**

So far you have read a short presentation of the nature of the problem and its available legal remedies in all different aspects and areas of the law. The question which remains is: “How does all this relate to finding a solution for the problem of disinformation?” If one cannot rely on legislation regulating disinformation, one can rely on legislation pertaining to the elements comprising the disinformation in question.

There is no doubt that a government can limit or entirely eliminate the problem of disinformation when a state of emergency has been declared. The emergency powers it possesses provide far more than the necessary scope to do so, without even having to prove public endangerment. The problem with this however, is the perception of the public. Specifically, how this act of protecting the public interest is perceived or even presented to the public by the supporters of disinformation. As the state interference and any measure adopted, will in no doubt violate the perceived rights of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, such interference may be perceived as violating the democratic principles of society, irrespective of the fact that in a state of emergency these rights can be suspended lawfully. This perception can actually do more harm than good, as it will remain lingering for far longer than the duration of the state of emergency. As such, invocation of emergency powers can only be used as the last resort.

By contrast, the general legal framework can be utilized more effectively on account of its specificity and proportionality. Any piece of disinformation

that contains an offense such as indicated in this analysis, can be tackled by invoking the relevant legislation regulating that specific offense. The upside to this approach is that the problem of quantifying and proving actual damage to persons and legal entities resulting from the harmful act, becomes considerably easier than to having to prove actual damage to the society. A case in point is the Law on Defamation, which, like disinformation, is also based on the dissemination of erroneous information, but differentiated on the intention to harm the reputation of a person or legal entity.

A representative example is the Dominion Voting Systems conspiracy theory which was widely distributed during the US Presidential elections of 2020. That theory contemplated that Dominion had rigged its voting machines to flip votes and hand the election victory to President Biden at the expense of President Trump. This was an obvious piece of disinformation which led to multiple audits and unsuccessful fraud claims in both lower courts and the US Supreme Court. Rather than rely on disinformation provisions, Dominion Voting Systems sued the principals of dissemination of these erroneous claims for defamation. According to the lawsuit, Dominion is seeking damages in the range of 1.6 billion USD from Fox News Network and 1.3 billion USD each from Rudy Giuliani, Sidney Powell, and Mike Lindell.<sup>11</sup>

The downside to this approach is that the general legal framework may not cover all instances of disinformation, especially ones that do not contain any regulated offenses within. This particular problem however can also be resolved indirectly by attacking the republications of the disinformation. Taking into account that the sharing of disinformation pieces through social media is effected with the addition of personal opinions attached to the disinformation piece, the fact that such personal opinions are usually expressed in a derogatory and lewd manner, makes the derivative product subject to the general legal framework anew.

Lastly, where the general legal framework cannot be counted upon to address all facets of disinformation campaigns, it is up to social media companies to

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<sup>11</sup> Durkee Alison, "Business Dominion Subpoenas Giuliani, Sidney Powell, Mike Lindell in Lawsuit Against *Fox News*," *Forbes*, (Jul 1, 2021), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2021/07/01/dominion-subpoenas-giuliani-sidney-powell-mike-lindell-in-lawsuit-against-fox-news/?sh=4bce7b5647ba>.

prescribe the prohibitive conduct that would violate their terms and conditions of use and access to their platforms.

### **The Council of Europe Approach**

The fight against disinformation is riddled by uneven responses to the threat. States have taken different approaches to the problem, either by providing blanket restrictions, or specialised ones divided by sector of engagement, or by doing nothing at all. The US for instance, relying on the broad interpretation margins of its First Amendment to the US Constitution, seems hesitant to act at all, even going as far as protecting hate speech under the freedom of expression. The EU has a different approach and a different problem. There is very little EU legislation on the matter but plenty of national law enacted by its member states, leading to an unharmonized approach and to potential conflicts of laws. To address this irregularity, the Council of Europe commissioned a report to examine information disorder.<sup>12</sup>

It suffices to say that the report concluded that the long-term effects of disinformation to society cannot be quantified yet, with the notable exception of the COVID-19 disinformation campaign, the results of which are quantifiable by the deaths of the unvaccinated. As such the Council of Europe recommended additional research from the member states to map information disorder in their territories, the regulation of ad networks to deprive funding of disinformation sites, transparency over social media ads, financial support to quality journalism, minimum levels of public service news in social media news feeds and increased Cyber-security training for the public sector.

Recommendations are also provided for technology companies, media organisations, civil society, education ministries and grant-making foundations, in an attempt to contain the problem from all possible sides. The most striking and practical solution however is in the words of Hossein Derakhshan, co-author of the report, who stated that

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<sup>12</sup> Claire Wardle & Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*, Council of Europe Report DGI(2017)09, (Strasbourg: COE, Oct. 2017).



“...whilst fact-checking and debunking initiatives are indispensable, rumors and conspiracy need to be fought with engaging and powerful narratives that leverage the same techniques as disinformation. Effective strategies should include provoking an emotional response, repetition, a strong visual aspect and a powerful narrative.”<sup>13</sup>

In other words, fight fire with fire.

## **State Regulation vs. Self-Regulation**

With all the above in mind, an argument could be made between State regulation and self-regulation as the preferred means of tackling disinformation.

### *State Regulation*

Regulation through legislation would certainly provide a level playing field in the dissemination of information. It would ensure a uniform level and flow of information, common publishing standards, publisher accountability, responsibility and liability for the information conveyed. As impressive as these advantages are, the disadvantages are even more impressive. Such regulation would prescribe control at the state level, directly or indirectly resulting in the suppression of dissenting voices and opinions. Considerably more practical difficulties would present the uneven and slow flow of information pending the verification of news and sources, the rigid publishing standards subject to abuse by authoritarian regimes, the nature of domestic law which will lead to a difference of standards per legal jurisdiction and which in turn will result in the unreliability of news on the global scale. Lastly it will require increased policing which will increase the distrust for the government.

### *Self-regulation*

Self-regulation is based on moderation of content and conduct, as well as on the enforcement of the terms and conditions of the social media providers. As these terms constitute a legal contract, any enforcement of their provisions constitutes a pre-litigation measure, adding considerable leeway and

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<sup>13</sup> Council of Europe, “Tackling Disinformation in the Media Environment – New COE Report,” [www.coe.int](https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/home/-/asset_publisher/RAupmF2S6voG/content/tackling-disinformation-in-the-global-media-environment-new-council-of-europe-report?_101_INSTANCE_RaupmF2S6voG_viewMode=view/), (31 Oct. 2017), [https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/home/-/asset\\_publisher/RAupmF2S6voG/content/tackling-disinformation-in-the-global-media-environment-new-council-of-europe-report?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_RaupmF2S6voG\\_viewMode=view/](https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/home/-/asset_publisher/RAupmF2S6voG/content/tackling-disinformation-in-the-global-media-environment-new-council-of-europe-report?_101_INSTANCE_RaupmF2S6voG_viewMode=view/).

discretion in the available means of conflict resolutions. In addition, by involving the end users through media literacy, self-regulation achieves a healthy respect for applicable law, individual and collective rights, as well as equality.

### **Conclusion: The Realistic Approach**

A balance could be struck between democracy and control (in the following order of importance);

1. The state should limit its intervention to matters of public policy alone.
2. Democracy should remain at the level of the citizen, with accountability and personal responsibility. This will be enhanced with the continuous enforcement of the general legal framework on the Internet and a public awareness campaign informing the public of their legal rights and responsibilities in the online medium. Legislation would be required to compel VPN providers to share identifying data with law enforcement authorities.
3. Private companies should actively moderate content and online conduct for compliance to applicable terms and conditions, either through human resources or technological measures. In addition, they should be made subject to an obligation to tackle illegality by reporting such content and conduct to law enforcement, past a certain defined threshold. They should also provide fact-checking or utilize fact-checking services and articles provided by dedicated providers or accredited media.

## **PART IV: CASE STUDIES**

# Case Study: Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh

*Michael-Eric Lambert*

## Case 1: Transnistria

Transnistria is a territory of 4,163 square kilometers located between Moldova and Ukraine, without access to the Black Sea, and subject to Russian influence<sup>1</sup> since its *de facto* independence from Moldova in 1991.

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the authorities in Tiraspol<sup>2</sup> broke away from post-Soviet Moldova to preserve their economic and linguistic interests.<sup>3</sup> For more than three decades, the region has been requesting to become a part of the Russian Federation, according to opinion polls and the 2006 referendum.<sup>4</sup>

Moscow does not officially recognise Transnistria as a state, contrary to other regions such as Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. Nevertheless, the Kremlin maintains special relations in the political, military, cultural and economic spheres, a situation that can be compared to that of China-Taiwan relationship.<sup>5</sup> An example of such ambiguity can be found in the opening of a Russian consulate in Tiraspol, a move that underlines simultaneously how Russia does not recognize Transnistria, but also supports Transnistria's split from Moldova.

Although the region has been isolated from the Western world in the immediate aftermath of the military conflict with Moldova (2 March - 21 July

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<sup>1</sup> The interethnic language used is Russian, added to the presence of the Russian armed forces in the region.

<sup>2</sup> The *de facto* capital city of Transnistria.

<sup>3</sup> Transnistria is a trilingual state with Romanian (Moldavian), Russian and Ukrainian, while Moldova uses Romanian.

<sup>4</sup> Voice of America, "Trans-Dniester Votes to Break With Moldova, Join Russian Federation," *VOA News*, (31 October 2009), <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2006-09-17-voa30/328338.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Witold Rodkiewicz, "Russia's strategy towards Moldova: continuation or change?" *Center for Eastern Studies OSW Commentary* 74, (19 April 2012): 1-6.

1992), the mid-1990s saw a rapprochement between Chisinau<sup>6</sup> and Tiraspol due to economic necessity and the supporting role of Moscow and the West both seeking greater stability in the European neighbourhood.

Due to the Soviet legacy, Transnistria can be considered a “melting pot” society with three linguistic minorities – 33 % Russian, 26 % Ukrainian and 33 % Moldovan – all of which are fluent in Russian which is the lingua franca in inter-ethnic communication. The state-owned and independent media in Transnistria are Russian-speaking and tend to favour a rapprochement with Moscow, even if divergent opinions are accepted, and the locals have access to global information via the Internet.

In light of these elements, the question arises as to why a society like Transnistria, which has unrestricted access to the World Wide Web, to radio and television channels from neighbouring Ukraine, Moldova and the West, to (Moldovan) Netflix, tends to favour Russian information over Western media. This question is central as it goes hand in hand with the legitimacy of the Transnistrian authorities and willingness to become a part of the Russian Federation.

### *Media in Transnistria: An Outlook*

On 31 August 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the Moldovan SSR decided to adopt the Moldovan (Romanian) language as the sole official language in Moldova, including in Transnistria. In addition, it was decided to use the Latin alphabet instead of Cyrillic to affirm the Moldovan-Romanian linguistic identity. As a consequence, two minorities in Transnistria (Ukrainian and Russian) and Gagauzian in another part of Moldova, felt threatened because the use of Romanian was perceived to be a sign of a possible reunification of Moldova and Romania to could lead to the rebirth of the Greater Romania.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The capital city of Moldova.

<sup>7</sup> In 1920, following the incorporation of Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia and parts of Banat, Crisana, and Maramures, the Romanian state reached its largest geographical extent with 295,049 km<sup>2</sup>. The concept serves as a guiding principle for the unification of Romania and Moldova nowadays.

In order to preserve the security of the Russian minority in Transnistria, the Russian armed forces intervened in the region and defeated the Moldovan army, reviving the friendship between the *de facto* authorities in Transnistria and Moscow. In the aftermath of the Transnistrian war (2 March - 21 July 1992), plans for unification into a bilingual and federal Moldova were put on the table, leading to the idea that Transnistria should become an independent state in order to hold an official referendum on joining the Russian Federation instead of Moldova.<sup>8</sup>

Moldova's economic weakness, combined with Russia's continued support to Tiraspol, drove the two societies apart, and while the possibility of joining Moldova was a reality in the 1990s, this is no longer the case today as the two cultures are different, a situation reinforced by the media they consume having diverging opinion on topics such as European Union (EU) membership.<sup>9</sup>

The media in Moldova proper are in favour of the withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria and have turned towards the West, especially with the election of Maia Sandu as President of Moldova in 2020. By contrast, the information landscape in Transnistria includes both government-supported and opposition media. But most, if not all – printed media, radio, television, and the Internet platforms – favour rapprochement with Moscow.

### *Printed Media*

In Transnistria, there are 14 printed publications in a region of 468,980 inhabitants, including several daily newspapers. Due to the small number of potential readers, all have a small circulation, so that issues are released only once a week or a month.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Kozak Memorandum (Russian Draft Memorandum on the Basic Principles of the State Structure of a United State in Moldova) was a 2003 proposal aimed at a final settlement of relations between Moldova and Transnistria.

<sup>9</sup> Chisinau would like to integrate the European Union, while Transnistria prefers the idea of becoming a part of the Russian Federation or at least the Eurasian Economic Union.

<sup>10</sup> Sergei Zveagintsev, "Transnistria Media in Times of Change," Freedom House *Media Forward* 5, (August 2018), 1-6.

The oldest of them is the *Dniester Pravda*, a Russian language socio-political newspaper of the Municipal Council of the People's Deputies of Tiraspol, founded in 1941. It should be noted that while the residents have access to these printed editions, the circulation of foreign media is constrained by the difficulty in receiving them and the lack of interest in foreign language content such as English.

During the Soviet era, Russian was the main language taught in Moldovan SSR schools, followed by French learned by the elites, while English was absent from the curriculum. As a result, there are currently few European languages widely spoken in the region, with the exception of Ukrainian, Russian and Romanian, which makes it economically unattractive to send foreign newspapers to the place.

According to a 2006 U.S. Department of State report, harassment of the independent media by State authorities has been observed:

“The human rights record of the Transnistrian authorities remained poor. The right of citizens to change their government was restricted and authorities interfered with the ability of residents to vote. Authorities reportedly continued to use torture and arbitrary arrest and detention. Prison conditions remained harsh, and two members of the so-called Ilascu group remained in prison despite a 2004 ruling by the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR) to end their imprisonment. Transnistrian authorities continued to harass independent media and opposition lawmakers, restrict freedom of association and of religion, and discriminate against Romanian-speakers.”<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, several opposition newspapers exist in Transnistria such as *Dobry Den*, based in Rybnitsa, *Chelovek i ego Prava*, *Novaya Gazeta* from Bender, Russian *Proriv!*, *Profsoyuznye Vesti* and *Glas Naroda*.

The *Tiraspol Times* used to be an English language website and articles were always published on the former official government website. Newspapers released by or for the government included *Trudovoi Tiraspol*, *Pridnestroynye*, *Novy Dnestrovskiy Kuryer*, *Gomin* (in Ukrainian), *Adevărul Nistrean* (Moldavian written in Cyrillic alphabet).

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in 2005,” Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, (2006).

All elements have been confirmed in the U.S. Department of State report:

“The print media expressed a wide variety of political views and commentary. The government owned a news agency; local and city governments subsidized approximately 25 newspapers. Political parties and professional organizations also published newspapers, most of which had a circulation of less than 15,000. The government did not restrict foreign publications, but most were not widely circulated because of high costs. Russian newspapers were available; some of them published special weekly supplements for the country.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Radio Broadcasting*

A public radio station, *Radio PMR*, broadcasts both on FM and on the 7290 kHz short-wave frequency, and four private commercial radio stations are operating in FM from Transnistria. These stations are *Inter FM*, *Dynamite FM*, *EnergyRadio.FM* and *Frequency3*. Although there is a lack of reports and studies on the topic of radio in Transnistria, it seems that they are using Russian language and broadcasting music from Russia, while the news is often delivered with conventional and pro-Russian viewpoints.

This situation is also due to the influence of the local authorities, as radio stations are controlled by the Transnistrian government, which finances them and therefore dictates editorial policy. Some broadcasting networks, such as the radio station *Inter-FM*, are owned by the largest Transnistrian monopoly, Sherriff, which also holds the majority in the region’s legislature. Although the radio sometimes expressed different points of view for political purposes, their editorial policy did not generally differ much from that of the government-owned and government-controlled media.<sup>13</sup>

### *Television Broadcasting*

There are four television channels and two of them are local (in Tiraspol and Tighina/Bender), while the other two are covering the whole of Transnistria.

For a long time, television was dominated by the public service company *TV PMR*. In 1998 the first commercial channel in Transnistria, *TSV* (Television

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<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports...2005.”

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports...2005.”



of Free Choice) was launched. A cable network operator called *MultiTV* offers 24 TV channels for its premium package and 5 channels for its “social” package.<sup>14</sup> Moldovan TV channels outside Transnistria are not available on cable but can be viewed using an antenna.

With online TV channels available using an Internet connection, it seems rather unclear whether people have a tendency to be more interested in Transnistrian, Russian, or Western channels. Thus, some media companies such as *Euronews* (available in Russian language) are available in the region.<sup>15</sup>

### *Access to the Internet*

In Transnistria, access to Internet is unrestricted. Tiraspol authorities have modern websites available in Russian and English, showing transparency regarding governmental activities at home and abroad.<sup>16</sup> The digitalisation of media has been an opportunity taken by the *de facto* government to argue in favour of State recognition:

“According to some sources, there are a total of about 120 unrecognized or partially recognized states in the world today. The website Geopolitics lists 35 of the most famous of them (without dependent territories), but according to other sources, the number of such countries slightly exceeds 20. All of them have the main features of the state...”<sup>17</sup>

In August 2014, Yevgeny Shevchuk issued a decree on combating extremism that empowered the Transnistrian intelligence services to ask the prosecutor’s office to block Internet content. The authorities are reported to take such a decision after a review by a commission appointed by the Transnistrian intelligence services.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports...2005.”

<sup>15</sup> Empirical observation during a survey of the region by the author in 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Novosti Pridnestrovyia News Agency, “Useful Links,” <https://novostipmr.com/en/page/useful-links>, accessed 7 January 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Novosti Pridnestrovyia News Agency, “12 interesting facts about Pridnestrovie,” *NovostiPMR*, (14 May 2018), <https://novostipmr.com/en/news/18-05-14/12-interesting-facts-about-pridnestrovie>, accessed 7 January 2022.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015,” Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2015).

Despite this, access to the Internet in Transnistria is not an issue, as residents can use applications on smartphones to access almost all Western websites.

Residents show spontaneous disinterest in Western news, and therefore control of the Internet is not a priority or a necessity.

### *Media Access and Media Freedom: Double Standards*

While ordinary people have access to Transnistria, journalists (including those from Moldova proper, who are considered foreigners) may be denied entry or harassed. In addition, some channels may be blocked or made difficult of access with nudging strategies.<sup>19</sup>

On September 1, 2014, the Transnistrian police forces arrested a *Publika Television* crew on their way to a school in the village of Corjova. The Transnistrian authorities arrested the team on the grounds that it did not have special authorization from the Transnistrian security service. After a few hours of interrogation, the police eventually released them.<sup>20</sup>

In 2015, the journalist Serghei Ilcenko was detained for four months.<sup>21</sup> The Transnistrian KGB subsequently warned other activists accused of posting “extremist messages” on the Internet and generally warned Internet users to trust only official media sources and not to challenge the independence of Transnistria.

Because of this restrictive environment, prosecutions based on ideas or words are also linked to the social group to which individuals belong to. As such, you can criticize the local authorities if you belong to the so-called elites of Transnistria, have the support of some members of the government or powerful friends to back you up.

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Whitehead, Rhys Jones, Rachel Lilley, Rachel et al., *Neuroliberalism: Behavioural Government in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports... 2015.”

<sup>21</sup> Leon Morse, “The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia,” *International Research and Exchange (IREX) Media Sustainability Index (MSI) Moldova*, (2016), 200-214, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2016-full.pdf> accessed 7 January 2022.

The same applies to foreign journalists, access to the regions as much as the quality of one's relations with the local authorities will depend on the country one comes from (Russian journalists are generally welcome and Western media less so) and on who is willing to support your work.

Altogether, Transnistria cannot be regarded as a place where media freedom is guaranteed, but it cannot be compared to countries with authoritarian tendencies.

### *Explaining the "Pro-Russian Media Phenomenon"*

Transnistria is a hybrid model; wishing to monitor and control the media while having an open access to foreign opinions. In order to understand the gap between what the authorities would like to implement and the situation observed on the ground, it seems relevant to elaborate on the topic of Russian media, propaganda and soft power in Transnistria.

To begin with, the authorities and the residents in Transnistria have already expressed their wish to be integrated into the Russian Federation. Therefore there is no need for Moscow to develop an active media campaign to sway an already pro-Russian region.

Therefore, it is up to Moldova and the West to implement an active media strategy to increase their respective soft power. Two main difficulties hinder Moldovan and Western media campaigns to promote Transnistrian reintegration with Moldova.

First, Russia offers numerous advantages to the Transnistrian people, ranging from concessions on gas prices leading to a competitive environment for mining cryptocurrencies, pension subsidies for the elderly, and protection of the Russian language in public administration.<sup>22</sup> Moldova, despite all attempts, is unlikely to be able to offer the same incentives, and to date the influence of the Moldavian medias is unlikely to succeed due to the lack of economic advantages combined with a weak soft power.

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<sup>22</sup> Hanna Lucinda Smith, "The Shady Cryptocurrency Boom on the Post-Soviet Frontier," *Wired.com*, (29 Oct. 2019), <https://www.wired.com/story/cryptocurrency-boom-post-soviet-frontier/>, accessed 7 January 2022.

Secondly, the attractiveness of the European Union for Transnistrians would be contingent upon Moldovan membership, which is only possible with full Transnistrian reintegration. The current economic situation in Moldova – in particular corruption – makes it very unlikely that Chisinau will join the EU soon enough to alter Transnistrian interests.

Transnistrians remain attached to traditional Russian and Transnistrian news, which is expected with a population of half a million mainly composed of elderly people.<sup>23</sup> The current demographics is mainly composed of people who are more interested in using cable television and where the penetration rate of new technologies is lower compared to a younger population. This probably explains both the success of Russian media, and the inefficiency of Western soft power which often promotes modern values, while the elderly tend to prefer traditional ideas.<sup>24</sup>

#### *The Transnistrian Information Security Doctrine of the Republic (2020-2026)*

Still, Transnistrian authorities have developed a strategy to be implemented between 2020 and 2026. This document is similar in inspiration to the Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation.<sup>25</sup>

The *de facto* president of Transnistria, Vadim Krasnoselsky, signed a decree on approval of the *Information Security Doctrine of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) for 2020-2026*. The document has been developed within the framework of the *Strategy for the Development of the PMR for 2019-2026*. The doctrine is a document of strategic planning and reflects the system of official views on ensuring information security in the region. It notes that the modern stage of society's development is characterized by an increasing role

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<sup>23</sup> According to the CIA World Factbook the average age in Moldova (including Transnistria) is 37.7 years old with more than 27 % of the population between 55 and 65, including 14 % over 65 years and over.

<sup>24</sup> Norval D. Glenn, "Aging and Conservatism". *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 415, #1 (September 1974): 176-186.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/000271627441500113>.

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation*. (2016), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2563163](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2563163).

in the information sphere which actively affects the state of political, economic, defence and other components of “national” security.

One of the main negative factors influencing the state of information security is the strengthening of the activities of special services of foreign countries, as well as other organizations or criminal elements engaged in technical intelligence, in order to gain access to information protected by the state. They are increasingly using means of providing information and psychological influence aimed at destabilizing the domestic political and social situation in the country.<sup>26</sup>

The Doctrine also cites internal threats. These include, in particular, insufficient financing of information security measures, the difficult economic situation in the region, as well as the lack of technical means of protection between specialised subscriber devices of public authorities and administration. According to the document, the interests in the information sphere is to

“...bring to the attention of the Pridnestrovian and international public reliable information about the state policy of the PMR and its official position on socially significant events in the country and the world.”<sup>27</sup>

The doctrine prescribes strategic objectives of information security with the development of information security tools, the creation of a unified system of training, retraining and professional development of personnel, as well as the creation of state targeted programs in this area. In addition, the strategic task is to

“...promptly respond to information stuffing, facts of dissemination of provocative and unreliable information on social networks with the subsequent publication of rebuttals, explanations with mandatory comments of competent specialists, experts and their placement on the official pages of public authorities and administration.”<sup>28</sup>

The document provides the main directions of information security to follow. Thus, in the field of defence of the country, it is the development of protected, classified communication and control systems for troops and

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<sup>26</sup> President of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. *Development Strategy of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic 2019–2026*, (2019), <http://en.president.gospmr.org/strategiya-razvitiya/>.

<sup>27</sup> President of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. *Development Strategy...*

<sup>28</sup> President of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. *Development Strategy...*

weapons, combined with the improvement of methods of strategic and operational disguise, reconnaissance and electronic warfare that must be developed.

When it comes to the domain of public security, it is planned to counteract the use of information technologies to promote

“...extremist ideology, spread xenophobia, ideas of national exclusiveness in order to undermine sovereignty, political and social stability, violent change the constitutional order, violation of the territorial integrity of the PMR.”<sup>29</sup>

By reading the Transnistrian document, it seems this strategy must be done with an allied country such as Russia as Transnistria is lacking such technical capabilities. Ensuring information security in the field of science, technology and education involves research and development to create technologies and means of ensuring information security, as well as the development of human resources in this region.

### *Conclusion*

*In fine*, Russian success is more linked to the demographic structure and the lack of efficiency of the Western/Moldovan soft power than to a strategy implemented by the Kremlin. Thus, Russian information warfare and propaganda operations are not necessary in Transnistria, as Russian soft power is already sufficient and Moldova has no competitive advantages. It must be understood that residents have chosen to be independent from Moldova after the break-up of the USSR, and even if human rights are lacking and the *de facto* government not approved by some, the feeling of belonging to Transnistria or at least to become member of the Russian Federation remains a reality.

The case of Transnistria gives us some insight into this region where the soft power of Moscow gives it a strategic advantage over Western countries. The elites as well as the inhabitants of Transnistria have chosen a rapprochement with Moscow, and may become part of the Russian Federation, combined with a social structure and 27 % of the population over 55 years of age which favours an interest in traditional Russian-speaking media.

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<sup>29</sup> President of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. *Development Strategy...*

The Transnistrian case therefore leads us to understand that Russia does not always use destabilization strategies and also has its own soft power. Consequently, it is incumbent on Moldova and the West to develop strategies to strengthen Western soft power in the area and to promote the benefits of reintegration within Moldova.

## **Case 2: The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh (1992-2020)**

Among all the cases studied, Nagorno-Karabakh (known as Artsakh to Armenians) stands out as the one which is subject to the most singular propaganda and soft power.

### *Armenian Communication and Media Strategies*

Article 27 of the Constitution of Armenia guarantees “freedom of speech and freedom of the press” and prohibits “incitement to national, racial, and religious hatred, propaganda and violence.”<sup>30</sup>

In-group favouritism more than fundamental rights guarantees by the authorities explains the spontaneous attitudes of Armenian media regarding Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, ethnic Armenians are supporting one view of the conflict, without contesting it, and hence without having to explain it among themselves.

### *Targeting the Audience: Understanding the Mixed Success of Armenian Media Abroad*

Abroad, Armenia authorities make use of the diaspora which defends the interests of the territory relying on the same in-group principle. Media strategies vary significantly from one country to another. In the West, the Armenian political communication contrasts belonging to the Christian world and the choice to develop a democracy, against the Muslim autocratic Azeri re-

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<sup>30</sup> The President of the Republic of Armenia. *Constitution of the Republic of Armenia*, (2021), <https://www.president.am/en/constitution-2005/>.

<sup>31</sup> E. Wilson Aronson & Robin Akert, *Social psychology, 7th ed.* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2010).

gime. This argument has a stronger effect in countries attached to Christianity, but less so in countries with more atheists. As such, Armenian medias in the West are active but geopolitical pragmatism prevails in political institutions.

As far as Russia is concerned, Armenia is ready to concede both diplomatically and militarily to attract Moscow to provide protection for the Armenian community. The recent deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region following the 44-Day war is an indication of this. *In fine*, Russia's religious proximity often pushed in the Armenian medias is not efficient as Moscow is weary of rekindling separatist tensions in Chechnya and Muslim territories in the Russian Federation.

Because of all the elements, the media aims to confirm existing public opinion (in-group phenomenon) while the international strategies are based on the diaspora trying to gain local influence, which happens often, but does not manage to reach the national decision level.

Armenian and diaspora media lean on a strategy of victimisation and try to embrace the Christian communities of other countries within the in-group phenomenon. This has so far not produced the desired results.

*Soft Power and Diaspora: the Peculiar Impact of the Armenian Media and Civil Society in the United States*

Numbering between 800,000 and 1,500,000, Armenian Americans form the second largest community of the Armenian diaspora after Armenians in Russia.

The Armenian American are mostly located in the Greater Los Angeles area in California and New-York City, where the Democratic Party of the United States also has its political base. This provides organisations such as Armenian National Committee of America and the Armenian Assembly of America a privileged platform to advocate for the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian General Benevolent Union is also known for its promotion of Armenian culture and Armenian language schools and publications in California. The weight of the diaspora in the United States is leading to a lobby and direct influence in local medias which is almost exclusively



controlled by those organisations, leaving Yerevan largely out of the strategic communication picture. Contrary to the Armenian governments, the Armenian American diaspora is interested in promoting;

1. American relations with Armenia in terms of financial assistance;
2. Recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the United States and its Allies (which has resulted in a partial success).

Public figures of Armenian descent who have built successful careers in America (as Mike Connors, David Hedison and the Kardashian family, for example) can support the Armenian cause morally and financially. Because of their success in media and business, they can influence the way Americans vote, especially in a time of low voter turnout and almost exclusively in favour of the Democratic party. Such case occurred when the Democrat Adam Schiff won against Republican incumbent Jim Rogan by capturing the Armenian vote.

Diaspora activities have been successful in generating financial aid for Armenia, the continuation of Section 907 of the U. S. Freedom Support Act, blocking financial aid to Azerbaijan, and the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

### *France between the Lobbying Activities of Azerbaijan and Armenia*

France has the third largest Armenian community in the world, which numbers around 600,000 which justifies France remaining a major player as a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group. While both Armenian and Azeri diasporas are especially active in Paris and trying to influence the Quai d'Orsay, Paris has decided to adopt a strategy which has led to tensions inside NATO during the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war.

France's divided public opinion and minorities living in the country make lobbying activities more effective, and have led to symbolic statements made by the French Senate, which show the degree to which French policy is confused.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Proposition de résolution en application de l'article 34-1 de la Constitution, portant sur la nécessité de reconnaître la République du Haut-Karabagh. Sénat français, (2020), <https://www.senat.fr/dossier-legislatif/ppr20-145.html>.

It also led to tensions with the Muslim world, especially Turkey with Azerbaijan, and has corresponded to increased terrorist activity in France.<sup>33</sup>

*In fine*, Paris' confused attempts to play a greater role in support of Russian initiatives have been met with general disinterest by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia.<sup>34</sup>

### *Azerbaijan's Lobbying Activities Abroad*

Azerbaijani lobbying is more straightforward, and underscores;

1. Azerbaijan's importance in relation to European energy security;
2. The Western principle of upholding the territorial integrity of states;
3. Azerbaijan's status as a secular Islamic state and its position as a model of tolerance regarding national and religious minorities;
4. Privileged relations enabling Azerbaijan as a staging area for intelligence operations in Iran.

Baku's success is largely due to its higher financial capabilities and the support of the Muslim world, combined with having international law on its side (many other countries in the world face threats of separatism).

In addition, Azerbaijan is lobbying using official and unofficial means, as this has been done in Washington and the capitals of Europe.

The main asset of Baku remains, nonetheless, the dual approach with the lobbying and role of media ensuring the non-recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh, combined with the pragmatism of Baku when it comes to the lack of capabilities for organisation such as the OSCE and great power in solving the conflict, leading to a pragmatic increase in Baku's hard power capabilities which have enabled it to achieve a significant victory in November 2020.

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<sup>33</sup> "France attack: Three killed in 'Islamist terrorist' stabbings," *BBC* (29 October 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54729957>, accessed 7 January 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Vladimir Soldatkin & Hvar Hohvannisyan, "U.S. and France play catch-up on Karabakh after Russia deploys troops," *Reuters* (12 November 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-azerbaijan-idCAKBN27S2HY> accessed 7 January 2022.

### *Media Activities During Wartime*

During periods of war, the two diasporas are activated, even more so than in the past, in order to give their respective countries leverage. Hence, we observe a growing success of Azerbaijan's media because of the economic asset and its strong relations with neighbouring Turkey. Although the majority of states tend to unofficially favour one country or the other, they prefer not to take a clear stand, especially as they themselves have to face separatist tendencies on their territories (e.g. Catalonia in Spain). In the end, hard power seems to prevail better than soft power in restoring Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The difference between the war of 1988-1994 and the war of 2020 is undoubtedly the presence of social networks and smartphones. As such, what was the domain of the national or international media has shifted to the immediate sharing of people's experiences via social networks. It was thus possible to witness the horrors of the 2020 war from both sides. Social network algorithms<sup>35</sup> have also deepened the cleavage between pro-Armenian and pro-Azeri groups, and as such there is a division and radicalisation of ideas that can be attributed to the in-group and out-group phenomenon combined with the dehumanisation process.<sup>36</sup>

The war of 2020 is consequently the first in a world of *individual* media, where citizens, soldiers, ministries, and tourists had an opportunity to share their opinions and insights live with the international community.

Nagorno-Karabakh is emerging as a case study that is no longer about media analysis but rather about the impact of algorithms for opinion reinforcement on social networks. The 44-Day war evidenced the shift in consumption from traditional media to individual media and sharing platforms, which allow channels such as *Twitter* to have more updated content than traditional media unable to cover a whole territory simultaneously.

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<sup>35</sup> Robin Thompson, "Radicalization and the Use of Social Media," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, #4 (2012): 167-190. <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol4/iss4/9/>.

<sup>36</sup> Albert Bandura, Bill Underwood & Michael Fromson, "Disinhibition of aggression through diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of victims," *Journal of Research in Personality* 9, #4, (1975): 253-269. <http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Bandura/Bandura1975.pdf>.

## *Conclusion*

The media landscape in Armenia and Azerbaijan, combined with the diaspora operating abroad, has not changed much since the Cold War. Altogether, it can be said that hard power remains predominant over soft power in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how important the influence of the Armenian diaspora has become in the post-Soviet context – especially in France and the United States – as much as the social media revolution and relevance of smartphones in a war zone. Personal opinions combined with algorithms have changed the way information is generated and shaped, and how people consume information, and while individuals tend to favour traditional media for daily news during peacetime, an hour-by-hour or even minute-by-minute update is now provided by the likes of *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and even *Instagram* and *TikTok* during wartime.

The Nagorno-Karabakh case study underlines the differences between the media in this region by contrast to other unrecognised states such as Transnistria. In Nagorno-Karabakh, it is more about two countries – Azerbaijan and Armenia – and their diaspora, fighting to attract the attention of global players, which is distinct from Transnistria, where no third country is available to represent their peculiar interests abroad.

# Cyber Antidote: The Spread of Chinese Social Media at the Height of the Global Internet Regulations Modeling

*Daria Strelavina*

## Introduction

Over two decades ago, the promotion of print media, TV and radio broadcasting were limited by print circulation, region of distribution, low level of Internet penetration rate, high cost of IT equipment and personal computers, as well as low-latency Internet access from space, loose satellite communications systems, limited coverage area, and extremely expensive launch costs. Zero qualitative and quantitative changes have permitted traditional media's hegemony to endure, thus it was then the only way to get information.

On the eve of a digital revolution, other forms of news media emerged, and thus the pendulum of public attention swung away from traditional media. Transforming in accordance with advanced communication technologies and new security challenges, new media and digital apps are now significantly interlinked with one another. But at the same time, the transformation from traditional media to new media has brought additional limitations due to platforms specifics, terms of use, and social networks' usage policy.

The field of new media is mostly adjusted by regulation and internal policy of IT companies and social platforms – not by existing international standards, regional agreements, constitutions, civil law or charter of ethics for journalists.

## Zero Sum Social Media Game

Half of the most popular social media were created by Chinese companies.<sup>1</sup> *Facebook* owns four other products among the top ten of the world's most-

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Kemp, "Digital Around the World," *We are Social*, (23 April 2020), accessed March 19, 2021, <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/04/digital-around-the-world-in-april-2020>.

used social platforms (*Facebook; WhatsApp; FB Messenger; Instagram*), while another four belong to Beijing-based ByteDance (*TikTok; Douyin*) and Shenzhen-based Tencent (*Weixin/WeChat; QQ*). And at the same time, as indicated in Table 1, the total number of monthly active users of Chinese-owned social networks has reached 3,603 billion people or some 46 people of the world's population.

Despite *Facebook* holding first position among the most popular social network, the *TikTok* platform has become the most downloaded non-gaming applications worldwide in 2020 according to the App Store and Google Play Market.<sup>2</sup>

*TikTok* hit new levels of popularity for the first quarter of 2020 with more than 332,9 million installs, followed by its main digital competitor *WhatsApp* with 262,9 million downloads. India has been the biggest driver of *TikTok* installs, gaining 611 million lifetime downloads or 30,3 % of its total,<sup>3</sup> while in 2019 India's 277,6 million installs made up 45 % of the total numbers of downloads. In contrast, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States accounted for roughly 7,4 % (45,5 million downloads) and 6 % (37,6 million downloads) of *TikTok*'s global growth that year.<sup>4</sup>

On June 29, 2020, India banned 59 China-linked mobile apps including *TikTok*, *Weixin/WeChat*, *Weibo*, *QQ International*, *Baidu Map*, since "...a view of information available they are engaged in activities which are prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "TikTok Crosses 2 Billion Downloads After Best Quarter For Any App Ever," *SensorTower*, (29 April 2020), accessed March 19, 2021, <https://sensortower.com/blog/tiktok-downloads-2-billion>.

<sup>3</sup> "TikTok Crosses 2 Billion Downloads..."

<sup>4</sup> "TikTok Clocks 1.5 Billion Downloads on The App Store and Google Play," *SensorTower*, (14 November 2019), accessed March 19, 2021 <https://sensortower.com/blog/tiktok-downloads-1-5-billion>.

<sup>5</sup> Shishir Gupta, "India bans 59 China-linked phone apps, orders companies to block them: Complete list," *Hindustan Times*, (June 29, 2020), accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-bans-59-china-linked-phone-apps-orders-phone-companies-to-block-them/story-OZhoz8cpZKv1GAWy8X5PuM.html>.

That digital embargo on Chinese social platforms was imposed two weeks after the Sino-Indian border clash at the Galwan valley in eastern Ladakh.<sup>6</sup> However, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government underscored that the fast-tracked decision was a "targeted move to ensure safety and sovereignty of Indian cyberspace."<sup>7</sup>

Despite a 40 % drop in downloads during the third and fourth quarters of 2020, *TikTok* retained its crown as the world's top non-game applications in 2020. Its rivals *ZOOM* and *WhatsApp* benefited much from the global COVID-19 government lockdowns and India's ban on Chinese apps, provoking a huge surge in April and November 2020.

### **In the Shadow of Cyber Initiatives**

On May 18, 2020, *Facebook* CEO Mark Zuckerberg said he was very concerned about the spread of Chinese-style Internet regulations. According to Zuckerberg, the best "antidote" is the presence of a clear regulatory framework, which should be initiated by Western democratic countries.<sup>8</sup>

The first digital trial of creating a cybersecurity global standard was guided by Microsoft in 2017. Microsoft has conducted the "Cybersecurity Tech Accord" and the "Digital Geneva Convention", which is similar to the Geneva Convention of 1949 with a digital specificity. The Tech Accord was supported by Microsoft, Facebook, CISCO, Panasonic, Dell, Hitachi, and 118 other IT companies. That has become the first big step towards creating the "Geneva 4.0 Commandments." However, the cyber initiatives of technology

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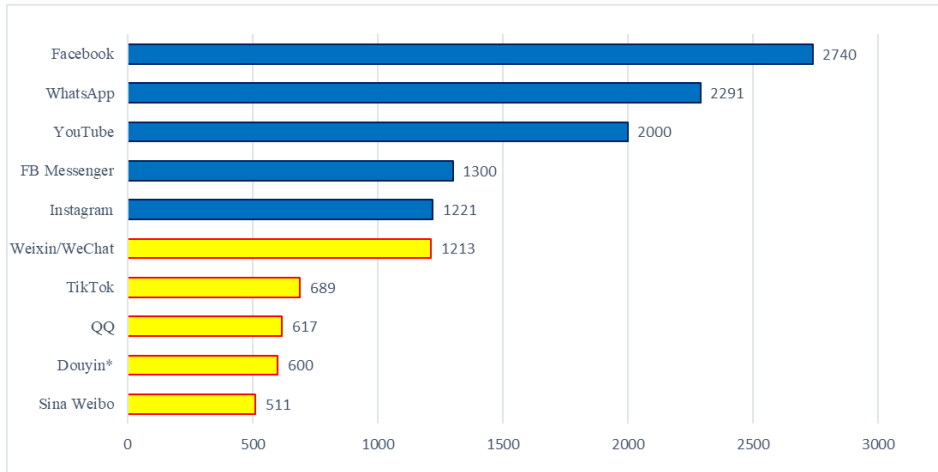
<sup>6</sup> Guan Cong, Isabelle Li, "TikTok Owner Predicts Over \$6 Billion in Losses From India Apps Ban, Sources Say," *Caixin Global*, (July 02, 2020), accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2020-07-02/tiktok-owner-predicts-over-6-billion-in-losses-from-india-apps-ban-sources-say-101574834.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Anubha Rohatgi, "From *TikTok*, UC Browser to Baidu Map: Complete list of 59 China-linked apps banned by India," *Hindustan Times*, (June 29, 2020), accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/from-tik-tok-uc-browser-to-baidu-map-here-s-the-complete-list-of-59-chinese-apps-banned-by-india/story-dNkaBac7WD4G7Btc6AEDfN.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Kayali, Thibault Large, Melissa Heikkilä, "Zuckerberg warns against spread of Chinese-style internet regulations," *Politico*, (May 18, 2020), accessed May 11, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/18/zuckerberg-warns-against-spread-of-chinese-style-internet-regulations-266065>.

companies have quickly shrunk and have received little international official support.

*Table 1. Global social platforms usage, per monthly users (in millions)<sup>9</sup>*



The “Cybersecurity Tech Accord” and the “Digital Geneva Convention” signatories have been welcomed to join the UN Open-ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security (OEWG). Protecting the core interests of the tech industry, they are calling for recognition of its leading role in creating and upholding a normative framework of behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

On March 10, 2021, the UN OEWG members reached a consensus to endorse a report considering existing and potential threats; rules, norms and principles for responsible state behaviour; resourcing of capacity-building efforts and further promotion of coordination efforts in the areas of international law, national legislation and policy.<sup>11</sup> Further discussions on

<sup>9</sup> Simon Kemp, “Digital Around the World.”

<sup>10</sup> “Cybersecurity discussions at the United Nations: Let drafting begin!” *Tech Accord*, (April 2, 2020), accessed May 25, 2021, <https://cybertechaccord.org/cybersecurity-discussions-at-the-united-nations-let-drafting-begin/>.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations General Assembly. Final Substantive Report of the Open-Ended Working Group on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications



information and communication technologies will be held in the 2021-2025 timeframe.

In November 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron launched the “Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace” during the annual UNESCO Internet Governance Forum. The nine principles of international standards mean to defend electoral processes, develop ways to prevent the proliferation of malicious software and practices intended to cause harm, and supports efforts to strengthen cyber hygiene for all actors.<sup>12</sup>

The European Union, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, Singapore, South Korea, and 79 others, following tech giants *Microsoft*, *Facebook*, *Google*, *IBM*, as well as two Chinese-owned companies, *Huawei* and *Shudun Technology*, and more than 700 companies have finally ratified the Paris call. However, the United States, Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, and Israel have not yet ratified the Paris call’s cybersecurity standards.

Sharing the Paris call’s principles, Huawei is simultaneously shaping its internal Global Cyber Security Assurance System, which was announced already in 2011. According to the company’s strategy, cybersecurity is embedded into the organizational design, governance and internal control framework of any organization is the starting point for the design, development and delivery of good cybersecurity.<sup>13</sup>

Some seven years ago, Chinese companies formulated the principles “Cyber Security Perspectives: 100 requirements when considering end-to-end cybersecurity with your technology vendors”, highlighting the importance of understanding the cybersecurity and privacy laws and local requirements in the countries in which they operate.

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in the Context of International Security, A/AC.290/2021/CRP.2, (10 March 2021), paragraphs 33-34.

<sup>12</sup> *The Paris Call of 12 November 2018*. “The Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace”, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://pariscall.international/en/>.

<sup>13</sup> John Suffolk “Cyber Security Perspectives 21st century technology and security – a difficult marriage,” *Huawei Technologies*, (September 2012), accessed May 14, 2021, [https://www.huawei.com/ucmf/groups/public/documents/attachments/hw\\_187368.pdf](https://www.huawei.com/ucmf/groups/public/documents/attachments/hw_187368.pdf).

“The law is complex, variable and ever-changing... just because a country has a law does not mean that it is implemented; if it is implemented, it might be implemented in different ways or there might be different interpretations of the same law or code.”<sup>14</sup>

This was followed by the establishment of Regional Security Officers in the company’s Global Cyber Security Assurance System. In 2013, Huawei involved experts from seven key regions; the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Australia, India, and Japan.<sup>15</sup> The number of regional divisions was significantly reduced by 2019. Germany, Australia, and Japan were not under consideration.<sup>16</sup>

In April 2019, *TikTok* sought to join the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), which includes *Facebook*, *Microsoft*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*, *WhatsApp*, etc.<sup>17</sup> However, the GIFCT has not granted *TikTok* official membership amid concerns over data collection and censorship.<sup>18</sup> Being two of four founding members of the GIFCT, *Twitter* and *Facebook* regularly submit their transparency reports which show how much terrorist content has been taken down on the previous year. At the same time, *TikTok* does not disclose the artificial-intelligence tools that determine users’ feed and does not provide any data about videos that have been removed from the application.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Suffolk, “Cyber Security Perspectives 100 requirements when considering end-to-end cyber security with your technology vendors,” *Huawei Technologies*, (December 2014), accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www-file.huawei.com/-/media/corporate/pdf/cyber-security/hw-cyber-security-wp-2014-en.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> John Suffolk, “Cyber Security Perspectives Making cyber security a part of a company’s DNA – A set of integrated processes, policies and standards,” *Huawei Technologies*, (October 2013), accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www-file.huawei.com/-/media/corporate/pdf/cyber-security/hw-cyber-security-wp-2013-en.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Huawei Technologies. *Huawei’s Position Paper on Cyber Security* (November 2019), accessed May 14, 2021, [https://www-file.huawei.com/-/media/corporate/pdf/public-policy/huaweis\\_position\\_paper\\_on\\_cybersecurity.pdf](https://www-file.huawei.com/-/media/corporate/pdf/public-policy/huaweis_position_paper_on_cybersecurity.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> *Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism*, “About,” <https://gifct.org/about/> accessed January 7, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Emily Birnbaum, “*TikTok* Seeks to Join Tech Fight Against Online Terrorism,” *The Hill*, (November 4, 2019), accessed May 14, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/468884-tiktok-seeks-to-join-tech-fight-against-online-terrorism>.

<sup>19</sup> Drew Harwell, Tony Romm, “Inside *TikTok*: A culture clash where U.S. views about censorship often were overridden by the Chinese bosses,” *The Washington Post*, (November 6, 2019), accessed May 14, 2021,

In May 2019, Paris once again launched a new Cybersecurity initiative. The Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern and the President of France Emmanuel Macron joined with heads of state and IT sector representatives to embrace the “Christchurch Call”; a commitment by governments and technology companies to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online. The Call was a response to the terrorist attack against two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which was live-streamed online by the perpetrator in March 2019. The document was signed by 48 countries, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the European Commission, as well as eight global companies, including *Microsoft, Facebook, Google, Twitter and YouTube*.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Witch Hunt 4.0*

However, the lack of global legal instruments that could regulate the digital field, rethink the role of both state and non-state actors, institutionalize cyberlaw, unify penal systems as well as to clarify the permissible bounds of actions, has exacerbated cyber challenges. Having zero effective international legal authorities, governmental bodies make unilateral decisions to exacerbate political and economic pressure in order to regulate every inch of digital ground.

Following the entry into force on May 15, 2019, of a new “Executive Order on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain”<sup>21</sup> and its further extension on May 13, 2020, by President Donald Trump, the fight against telecommunications equipment and high-tech services from Chinese entities has evolved into a digital arms’ race.<sup>22</sup> The battle over Chinese social networks was slightly shoved into the shadow.

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/11/05/inside-tiktok-culture-clash-where-us-views-about-censorship-often-were-overridden-by-chinese-bosses/>.

<sup>20</sup> New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *Christchurch Call* (Paris, May 15, 2019), accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www.christchurchcall.com/supporters.html>.

<sup>21</sup> “Executive Order on Securing the Information and Communications Technology and Services Supply Chain,” *The Whitehouse.gov*, (May 15, 2019), accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-securing-information-communications-technology-services-supply-chain/>.

<sup>22</sup> David Shepardson, Karen Freifeld, “Trump extends U.S. telecom supply chain order aimed at Huawei, ZTE,” *Reuters*, (May 13, 2020), accessed April 20, 2021,

On March 12, 2020, US rural telecom carriers were barred from using subsidies to purchase network equipment from Huawei and ZTE.<sup>23</sup> On the same day, US senator Josh Hawley (R-MO), and party counterpart Rick Scott introduced legislation to ban *TikTok* on any device issued by United States and government corporations, as well as any application developed by, or by an entity owned by ByteDance, the Beijing-headquartered technology company that owns the hit social video application *TikTok*.<sup>24</sup>

However, the US Department of Defense has called *TikTok* to be banned even earlier than any other US government agencies,<sup>25</sup> followed by the departments of state and Homeland Security,<sup>26</sup> the US military services,<sup>27</sup> and the Transportation Security Administration.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the US Senate passing Senator Hawley's bill to ban the use of social-media *TikTok* on federal devices in August 2020,<sup>29</sup> the legislation was not

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<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china-trump-idUSKBN22P2KG>.

<sup>23</sup> "Secure and Trusted Communications Networks Act Of 2019", *Congress.gov*, (March 12, 2020), accessed April 20, 2021,

<https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ124/PLAW-116publ124.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> "A Bill To prohibit certain individuals from downloading or using TikTok on any device issued by the United States or a government corporation", *Congress.gov*, (March 12, 2020), accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/sites/default/files/2020-03/No-TikTok-On-Government-Devices-Act-Bill-Text.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Josephine Wolff, "The Military's Ban of *TikTok* Is Just the Beginning," *Slate*, (January 6, 2020), accessed June 7, 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2020/01/military-tiktok-ban-strava-genetic-testing.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Ryan Lovelace, "State Department and DHS ban *TikTok* from government-issued devices," *The Washington Times*, (January 3, 2020), accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/3/state-department-and-dhs-ban-tiktok-government-iss/>.

<sup>27</sup> Neil Vigdor, "U.S. Military Branches Block Access to *TikTok* App Amid Pentagon Warning," *The New York Times*, (January 4, 2020), accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/04/us/tiktok-pentagon-military-ban.html>.

<sup>28</sup> "TSA halts employees from using TikTok for social media posts," *CBS News*, (February 24, 2020), accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tsa-halts-employees-from-using-tiktok-for-social-media-posts/?ftag=CNM-00-10aab7e&linkId=82944531>.

<sup>29</sup> Maggie Miller, "Senate passes legislation to ban *TikTok* on federal devices," *The Hill*, (August 6, 2020), accessed April 20, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/510905-senate-passes-legislation-to-ban-tiktok-on-federal-devices>.

passed by the House of Representatives due to the 2020 presidential elections. Later, in April 2021, Hawley reintroduced the legislation to ban the Chinese-owned social media app on government-issued devices.<sup>30</sup>

At the beginning of summer 2020, Hawley called on the Federal Trade Commission to investigate an app from rival Beijing-based company ByteDance, *Zynn*. The near button-to-button clone of *TikTok* had paid users to watch videos and sign-up friends. Besides, there was evidence of an enormous number of video plagiarism (it has been stealing most of the content from *TikTok* app) and created a form of reward scheme that amounted to a form of pyramid scheme.<sup>31</sup>

Hawley claimed that the Chinese short-form video-sharing app *Zynn* may be used to “empower Chinese leadership to pry into the private affairs of Americans by hoovering up enormous amounts of information.”<sup>32</sup> Saying that, Josh Hawley alluded to a 2017 law, that “requires Chinese companies to comply with data request for [Chinese] state intelligence work.”<sup>33</sup>

On June 16, 2020, Apple removed *Zynn* from its Apple Store without any explanation.<sup>34</sup> The app had been previously kicked off from Google Play Market amid accusations of plagiarism and publishing videos from creators without their permission.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Maggie Miller, “Republican lawmakers reintroduce bill to ban TikTok on federal devices”, *The Hill*, (April 15, 2021), accessed April 20, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/548347-republican-lawmakers-reintroduce-bill-to-ban-tiktok-on-federal-devices>.

<sup>31</sup> “*Zynn*, the Hot New Video App, Is Full of Stolen Content,” *Wired.com*, (June 9, 2020), accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/zynn-hot-new-video-app-stolen-content/>.

<sup>32</sup> Chris Mills Rodrigo, “GOP senator urges FTC to investigate TikTok clone that pays users,” *The Hill*, (June 10, 2020), accessed May 14, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/501987-hawley-urges-ftc-to-investigate-tiktok-clone-that-pays-users>.

<sup>33</sup> Rodrigo, “GOP senator urges FTC to investigate...”.

<sup>34</sup> Ryan McMorro, Nian Liu, Hannah Murphy, “*TikTok* rival *Zynn* Removed from Google Play Store,” *Financial Times*, (June 10, 2020), accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/2a0a3089-9477-42bd-9e33-4b2c8ade3369>.

<sup>35</sup> Paige Leskin, “*Zynn*, the *TikTok* clone accused of stealing content, was removed from both iOS and Android app stores,” *Business Insider*, (June 16, 2020), accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/zynn-tiktok-clone-removed-google-apple-app-stores-stolen-content-2020-6>.

Trying to get rid of a bad public reputation and stigma of the most downloaded 2020 *Big Brother* application, *TikTok*'s parent company, ByteDance, has attempted to establish a headquarter outside of mainland China to distance itself from the video app's operations and to create a new management board for the social network.<sup>36</sup> The decision has come in response to the socio-economic, political and media pressure over *TikTok* in the United States.

Despite the fact that *TikTok* stores all American user's data in Virginia (USA) and Singapore<sup>37</sup> (which was confirmed through an independent security audit), the anti-*TikTok* campaign was conveyed by the director of the Stanford Internet Observatory and a former chief security officer at *Facebook*, Alex Stamos. Where the data is stored is "pretty much irrelevant; the leverage the government has over the people who have access to that data, that's what's relevant" Stamos would say.<sup>38</sup>

On August 4, 2020, Trump declared his intention to bar *TikTok* from internet services in the USA, unless a "secure" and "very American" company does not buy its US operations by September 15, 2020.<sup>39</sup> He also signed several executive orders to ban US business transactions with Chinese-owned social apps *WeChat* and *TikTok* citing national security concerns.<sup>40</sup> Large American IT companies Microsoft and Oracle were interested in acquiring *TikTok*'s US operations in partnership with Walmart. Being blessed by Donald Trump, the *TikTok* deal with Oracle and Walmart was finally announced at the end of September 2020. The new company expected to hire at least

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<sup>36</sup> Liza Lin, Shan Li, "*TikTok* Considers Changes to Distance App From Chinese Roots," *The Wall Street Journal*, (July 9, 2020), accessed May 14, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-considers-changes-to-distance-app-from-chinese-roots-11594300718>.

<sup>37</sup> Neil Vigdor, "U.S. Military Branches Block Access to *TikTok*...".

<sup>38</sup> Drew Harwell, Tony Romm, "Inside *TikTok*...".

<sup>39</sup> Libby Cathey, "Trump says *TikTok* will be shut down in US on Sept.15 unless a deal is made," *ABC News*, (August 4, 2020), accessed June 2, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-tiktok-shut-us-sept-15-deal-made/story?id=72150177>.

<sup>40</sup> Steve Kovach, "Trump to block downloads of *TikTok*, *WeChat* on Sunday," *CNBC*, (September 18, 2020), accessed May 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/18/trump-to-block-us-downloads-of-tiktok-wechat-on-sunday-officials-tell-reuters.html>.

25000 people and spend 5 billion US dollars on projects to educate American children about “real” American history.<sup>41</sup>

However, shortly after president Biden’s inauguration, ByteDance walked away from the proposed sale of *TikTok* to Oracle and Walmart because the “raison-d’être of the deal is gone” as “the deal was mainly designed to entertain demands from the Trump administration.”<sup>42</sup> Four months later, Joe Biden officially revoked the Trump-era ban on *TikTok* and *WeChat*, and signed an executive order mandating a broad review of apps controlled by foreign adversaries.<sup>43</sup>

At the end of April 2021, *TikTok* was sued on behalf of millions of European and UK children over privacy concerns, claiming that the app had violated UK and EU data protection laws.<sup>44</sup> In other words, minors’ personal information had been collected without transparency or sufficient consent, which for children under the age of 13 would be required from adults. That was not the first time that children’s data collection policy had been met with international derision. In 2019-2020 *TikTok* had already been fined a record 5.7 million US dollars in the USA<sup>45</sup> and 186 million Won (more than 167,000 US dollars)<sup>46</sup> in South Korea for similar offenses.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Stan Choe, “Trump backs proposed deal to keep TikTok operating in US,” *Associated Press*, (September 20, 2020), accessed June 2, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/technology-business-donald-trump-asia-pacific-data-privacy-a12e3d21ce413df9324f4988fe995e50>.

<sup>42</sup> Zhou Xin, “ByteDance walks away from *TikTok* deal with Oracle after Donald Trump’s White House exit,” *South China Morning Post*, (February 14, 2021), accessed May 25, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/tech-war/article/3121703/bytedance-walks-away-tiktok-deal-oracle-after-donald-trumps-white>.

<sup>43</sup> John D. McKinnon, Alex Leary, “Trump’s *TikTok*, *WeChat* Actions Targeting China Revoked by Biden,” *The Wall Street Journal*, (June 9, 2021), accessed June 9, 2021 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-revokes-trump-actions-targeting-tiktok-wechat-11623247225>.

<sup>44</sup> Madhumita Murgia, “*TikTok* sued on behalf of millions of European children over data concerns,” *Financial Times*, (April 21, 2021), accessed May 18, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/02bb235f-f6f3-42be-a921-bc2c86b86271>.

<sup>45</sup> Ellen Milligan, “*TikTok* Faces Privacy Lawsuit on Behalf of Millions of Children,” *Bloomberg*, (April 21, 2021), accessed May 25, 2021 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-20/tiktok-faces-privacy-lawsuit-on-behalf-of-millions-of-children>.

<sup>46</sup> USD to KRW 1:1,112.17 for 7 June, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> “*TikTok* fined for mishandling child data in South Korea,” *BBC News*, (July 15, 2020), accessed May 25, 2021 <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53418077>.



Artificially increasing the legal minimum age to download or use apps has led to the curtailment of new media audiences. No doubt, TV, as well as game and cinema industries, brand their films, shows and products according to a content rating system. However, the transformation from traditional media to new media has brought additional limitations due to platforms specifics, terms of use, and social networks' policy. Traditional media that have set up their own social media accounts and the new media's audiences have limited reach, because their content is not always accessible to minors, whereas during the print media era, traditional media was accessible to all age groups.

### *Patchwork of Digital Landscape*

Chinese tech companies have swiftly transformed into global leaders, pushing 5G market's gurus out and gaining a monopoly on users' attraction. However, the most popular Chinese-owned social networks have faced with suspicion that video, graphic or text content about the 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests, the Tibetan independence campaign, the Tiananmen Square events of 1989 and the Uyghurs situation are being censored for political reasons.

The censorship criticisms and the collection of private personal information for the benefit of unknown third parties in cooperation with security services have run anti-Chinese social platforms' policy.

As the nation's first comprehensive privacy and security regulation for cyberspace, the Cyber Security Law of the People's Republic of China contains guarantees of national sovereignty, protects critical infrastructure facilities, defines network operators as well as lists responsibilities in cyberspace.<sup>48</sup>

According to Chinese law "critical information infrastructure operators that gather or produce personal information and important data during operations within the mainland territory, shall store it within mainland China."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> China's Cybersecurity Law was passed on November 7, 2016, and came into force on June 1, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> 中华人民共和国网络安全法 (The Cyber Security Law of the People's Republic of China), *Xinhua*, accessed May 15, 2021,



However, due to business needs, it could be provided outside the mainland, if the State Council's and the State cybersecurity and information departments' measures would be fulfilled.

As stated by the Cybersecurity Law of China, network operators refer to network owners, managers, and network service providers, while critical infrastructure includes public communication and information services, power, traffic, water resources, finance, public service, e-government, and other critical information infrastructure. In other words, being linked with any Chinese company in these sectors, a supplier or a partner could also be a subject of legislation.<sup>50</sup> This means that the Cybersecurity Law of China applies against different kinds of digital and non-digital facilities on a national basis.

Contrary to Josh Hawley's opinion, data requests for state intelligence work have not been institutionalized by new cybersecurity rules. However, network operators must provide technical support and assistance to public security and state security organs to investigate crimes and safeguard state security. Moreover, the State Council may take or approve temporary measures regarding network communications – such as limiting communications – to protect national security and public order, or to respond the major security incidents within the society.

During a tit-for-tat trade war between Washington and Beijing, the PRC announced the Measures on Cybersecurity Review that came into force on June 1, 2020. Being initiated by the Cyberspace Administration of China two years prior, the document formulates methods to prevent the destruction, theft, leakage, or damage of critical data and personal information.

Moreover, the Chinese Cyber Security Review Measures highlight the risk of supply disruptions due to political, diplomatic, and commercial factors. Article 5, in particular, stipulates that:

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[http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/07/c\\_1119867626.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/07/c_1119867626.htm).

<sup>50</sup> Jack Wagner, "China's Cybersecurity Law: What You Need to Know," *The Diplomat*, (June 01, 2017), accessed May 15, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/chinas-cybersecurity-law-what-you-need-to-know/>.

“Operators that purchase network products and services shall anticipate the potential national security risk of products and services after they enter operation. If they influence or could influence national security, a cybersecurity review shall be reported to the Cybersecurity Review Office.”<sup>51</sup>

Being a part of a large cybersecurity system, the state authority reports whether network products and services influence national security or not. The move is part of a broader campaign to replace foreign computer equipment and software within three years. No doubt, national-security assessments of deals could place foreign tech products at a disadvantage in the Chinese market.

## Conclusion

The technology revolution and the effects of globalization bring us to the age of new media. As of January 2021, the global average social media penetration rate had reached 53,6 %, with Western and Northern Europe both having the highest penetration rate at 79 %, followed by North America at 74 %.<sup>52</sup>

Being reborn as a manageable appendix of digital apps, new media is bit by bit stepping into the field of cybersecurity regulation. While Western democracies are launching cyber initiatives, warning against the spread of Chinese-style internet regulations, the PRC stands alone and shapes national cybersecurity legislation in order to protect its core interests.

The growing popularity of China-linked social media apps helps to involve loyal allies into their cybersecurity system and vice versa exclude unfavourable digital actors, whereas political and economic pressure on it shows the lack of effective international digital legislation.

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<sup>51</sup> 网络安全审查办法 (Cybersecurity Review Measures), *Cyberspace Administration of China*, (April 27 2020), accessed May 15, 2021, [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-04/27/c\\_1589535450769077.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-04/27/c_1589535450769077.htm).

<sup>52</sup> Hristina Tankovska, “Global social network penetration rate as of January 2021, by region,” *Statista*, (February 16, 2021), accessed May 25, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269615/social-network-penetration-by-region/>.

# Strategic Communication and Influence on Serbian National Security

*Miroslav Mitrović*

## Introduction

Contemporary international relations reflect the different interests of global and regional powers. American unipolarity and domination is ending, and Russia and China are strongly positioning themselves on the global stage. By capably using the results of neoliberal globalization, they are increasing their influence based on technological, media, economic, cultural, political, but also military development. These “new” global players strive to achieve influence through low-intensity confrontation. At the same time, the US is confined by many unresolved events of strategic importance, caused by previous administrations (e.g. Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq). This state of the global environment is being reflected to the region of the Western Balkans. Still, the Western Balkans are burdened by the legacy of the wars of the 1990s, and represents a secondary training ground for the great powers. The Republic of Serbia and the region of the Western Balkans are not of strategic importance to any great powers, but at the same time, they represent an area of low intensity competition.

In this context, Serbia is of interest to great powers, as it aims to strengthen own positions and reduce the influence of others, or to achieve economic goals within a broader geo-economic framework. This struggle is waged primarily by “soft” means – by hybrid actions on the political, informational, economic, cultural, and other spheres of social life. Influence is applied through the action of strategic communication, which has an impact on the political aspects of life. Therefore, the strategic communication of the great powers impacts the national security of Serbia. This chapter examines the strategic communication effects of the United States, Russia, and China on Serbia’s national security.

## Strategic Communication and National Security

*Strategic communication (SC)* denotes the highest level of engagement of an organization's communication achievements in advancing its mission.<sup>1</sup> Successful strategic communication must include communication content and activity broadcast, images, and policy.<sup>2</sup> It is the coordinated activity of messages, images, and other forms of presentation that are intended to inform, influence or convince the audience of national goals.<sup>3</sup> The efficiency and durability of strategic communication depend on the synergy of “deeds, words, and images”, with the essential respect for the ethical and social dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

Strategic communication aims to engage key audiences in creating or maintaining conditions conducive to the advancement of national interests, policies, and goals with coordinated programs, messages, and products synchronized in the zone of possible conflict with the activities of all other national power instruments.<sup>5</sup> Strategic communication, therefore, is an instrument of national power.

*National security* is part of the state's policy aimed at creating national and international political conditions that favourably affect vital national values. National security can be defined in terms of the appropriate elements of state power and priorities that are considered as vital national interests. From the national security's point of view, political security is a reflection of the organizational stability of the state and its legitimacy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Bibliographies*, s.v. “Strategic Communication,”

<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841>.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Paul, *Getting Better at Strategic Communication*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 2011), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Evgeny Pashentsev, “Strategic Communication in EU-Russia Relations,” in *Strategic Communication in EU-Russia Relations*, ed. Evgeny Pashentsev (Cham: Springer Nature, 2020), 22.

<sup>5</sup> “Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication 2006,” *US Department of Defense*, (25 September 2006), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Filip Ejdus, *Međunarodna bezbednost: teorije, sektori i nivoi* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik i BCBP, 2012), 146. See also Barry Buzan, *Peoples, States, and Fear*, (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991).

A general goal in the correlation of strategic communication and political security as components of national security is to achieve the set of national interests by communication means.<sup>7</sup>

Strategic communication plays a significant role in national and international political, diplomatic and economic, security and defence relations. Russian and Western authors disagree about the term Strategic Communication, but its essence of understanding and use are almost identical; strategic communication is an expression of state power. In the context of contemporary conflicts, it is an expression of hybrid action in the fields of information, media, the Internet, and the wide spectrum of public diplomatic performance (culture, religion, economy, etc.). It can have an offensive and defensive character. The main goal is to influence public opinion and shift the focus of the public's attitude towards cultural values, with the eventual adjustment of the political system through the "reprogramming" of the targeted nation's political culture.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of activity is also called hybrid warfare, and it is a postmodern concept of low-intensity conflict, which nonlinearly and flexibly combines conventional and unconventional forms of action.<sup>9</sup> The goal of hybrid warfare is the takeover of the opponent and his capacities, that, unconsciously and reluctantly, are engaged in acting in the interests of the hybrid "aggressor". Such actions target the national security priorities of a State.

In Serbia, certain foreign policy areas are of special importance; the process of integration into the European Union, the status of Kosovo and Metohija, and the political activities of ethnic minorities and of sponsored organizations.<sup>10</sup> These areas will be analyzed through the strategic communications and actions of the US, Russia, and China towards Serbia.

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<sup>7</sup> Miroslav Mitrović, "Strategic communication in the function of national security," *Војно дело* 1, #19, (2019), 43-45.

<sup>8</sup> Мирослав Митровић, Небојша Николић, *Хибридни рат - допринос дефинисању концепта, садржаја и модела деловања* (Београд: Медија центар "Одбрана", 2021 (in print)), 233-277.

<sup>9</sup> Митровић & Николић, *Хибридни рат...*, 137.

<sup>10</sup> Влада Републике Србије. *Стратегија националне безбедности Републике Србије*, (Београд: Службени гласник РС, број 94 од 27. децембра 2019).

## US Approach to Strategic Communication

Vince Vitto, the head of the US Special Department of Defense Science, is the founder of modern “strategic communications”.<sup>11</sup> He used the term “strategic communication” for the first time in a 2001 report about the management of information dissemination.<sup>12</sup> The emergence of the term coincides with the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Namely, the institutions in charge of information and psychological operations, public affairs and defence support, as well as the bearers of public diplomacy, gained momentum and began to wage a “war of perceptions”. Soon, strategic communication became crucial to American national security. It supports goals in diplomacy, defence, intelligence, law enforcement, and national security.<sup>13</sup> According to the US Special Department of Defense Science, strategic communication is an interactive process and a coherent set of activities that involve;

1. Understanding the identity, access, behaviour, and culture; trends in media and information flow; social and other influential networks; political, social, economic, and religious motivations;
2. Advising decision-makers, diplomats, and military leaders regarding public opinion and its implications to the election policy;
3. Engagement in dialogue regarding ideas between the individual and institutions through programs that support national interests;
4. Influencing attitudes and behaviour through communication strategies supported by a wide range of state and civil society activities, and;
5. Measurement and monitoring of the impact of communication activities.

The United States views strategic communication as the synchronization of words and deeds towards perceptual effects achieved with the target

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<sup>11</sup> Paul, *Getting Better...*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> “Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination,” *Office of the Under Secretary of Defense For Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics*, (Washington, D.C., October 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Cristian E. Guerrero-Castro, “Strategic Communication for Security & National Defense: Proposal for an Interdisciplinary Approach,” *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 12, #2, (2013), 28.

audience, and as the programmatic conduct of public affairs, public diplomacy and operational professionals.<sup>14</sup> It can be said that strategic communication is an integral part of US military strategy.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is a very contemporary umbrella concept of various communication activities, usually implemented through public relations strategies, commercial and non-profit marketing, and public diplomacy and information campaigns.<sup>16</sup>

## US Strategic Communication towards Serbia

Serbia is arguably not at the top of the Biden administration's priorities.<sup>17</sup> It is sixth in line, after Afghanistan, China, Iran, Russia, and Ukraine.<sup>18</sup> The US is devoted to supporting the countries of the Western Balkans towards European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.<sup>19</sup> As part of this aim, the US supports all agreements reached after the wars and the disintegration of the Serbian Federated Republic of Yugoslavia and supports the closest possible cooperation with NATO. The specifics of relations with Serbia are highlighted with the NATO campaign against the FRY, which led to the secession of Kosovo from Serbia. The position of the United States is that the independence of Kosovo is not questionable, and thus pressures Serbia to recognize the secession of part of its territory. Therefore, the US and Serbian goals are irreconcilable. Public perception of the US is largely determined by this opposition to Serbian goals.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "National Framework for Strategic Communication," *Office of the President of the United States*, (March 2010), 2.

<sup>15</sup> James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and power: the art of strategic communication*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Paul, *Strategic Communication*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance: Renewing America's Advantages," *Office of the President of the United States*, (March 2021).

<sup>18</sup> "The Western Balkan region is one of Biden's six priorities", *European Western Balkans*, (January 27, 2021), <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/01/27/the-western-balkan-region-is-one-of-bidens-six-priorities/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ned Price, "U.S. Commitment to the Western Balkans," *US Department of State*, (April 26, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-commitment-to-the-western-balkans/>.

<sup>20</sup> Влада Републике Србије. *Стратегија националне безбедности*. 22.

## *The Media*

The American private investment firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR) has been the principal media agent in Serbia since 2013, when the first foreign direct investments purchased the United Group media company. The United Group brought together the largest cable and satellite TV operators and key Internet service providers in the former Yugoslavia, covering nearly two million users.<sup>21</sup> Main media channels are cable TV networks and internet providers. Among them are;

1. SBB (Serbia Broadband) – Serbia’s largest cable TV operator and Internet service provider with 700,000 users;
2. Total TV – Serbia’s leading satellite TV network covering all six countries of the former Yugoslavia;
3. NetTV Plus – the main operator of IPTV;
4. Telemach – the leading cable TV operator and Internet service provider in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina;
5. United Media – which includes TV channels *Sport Klub*, *Cinemanija*, *Ultra*, *Mini Ultra*, *Lov i ribolov*, and;
6. CASMedia – the largest advertising agency on cable and satellite television.<sup>22</sup>

All media are characterized by a critical review and orientation towards investigative journalism, which delves into social problems. This approach often contradicts the attitude of the domestic political and business elite, because it presents things that do not fit into populism and the prevailing regional mass media.

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<sup>21</sup> Ivan V. Surma, “Information and communication expansion in the Balkans as an implement of geopolitical influence,” in *Russia and Serbia in the Contemporary World: bilateral relations, challenges, and opportunities*, Bogdan Stojanović, and Elena Georgievna Ponomareva, eds. (Belgrade: Institute of international politics and economics, 2020), 140.

<sup>22</sup> Surma, “Information and communication expansion in the Balkans,” 140-142.



## *NGO Sector Engagement*

The US has an important institutional approach, through NGOs. Namely, the US Government, as well as other funds originating from the USA, finance the work of a large number of different organizations that deal with a wide range of issues of importance to society.<sup>23</sup> Non-governmental sector organizations operating in Serbia are funded directly by the government or state-run agencies or rely on certain private funds, such as the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. The activities of these organizations have the declared function of promoting democracy and achieving a generally higher level of quality of life in Serbia.<sup>24</sup> However, by dominating public opinion, some of the activities of NGOs are contrary to the national interest. For example, with the sensitive issue of war crimes during the wars of the 1990s, or initiatives to resolve conflicts between Belgrade and Pristina. These activities are strongly perceived as anti-Serbian in the majority of the media in Serbia, especially those who are under the influence of Russia.

## *Overall Impression*

The US does not have a particularly strong influence on public opinion in Serbia. Influence is limited to action through NGO support and through the establishment and support of media that have a significant audience. However, those media are not broadcast on national frequencies, so they do not reach the general public. Narratives on political issues or topics that are important for improving relations between the two countries and the general image of the US in Serbia do not make a strong impression.

## **The Russian Approach to Strategic Communication**

Russian official documents do not explicitly contain the name “strategic communication”, but use the terms “state information policy”, “information

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<sup>23</sup> “U.S. Funds available for Serbia,” *American Corner Beograd*, accessed May 4, <http://www.americancorners.rs/more-pages/en/Beograd/2/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Upoznajte organizacije civilnog društva u Srbiji,” *Ocdoskop*, accessed May 4, <http://ocdoskop.rs/en.html>.

security”, “information support to foreign policy activities”.<sup>25</sup> The significance of information security is revealed in many strategic documents; National Security Strategy;<sup>26</sup> The doctrine of information security<sup>27</sup>, Fundamentals of the State Policy of Russia in the field of international information<sup>28</sup> and the Strategy for the development of the information society of Russia for the period 2017-2030.<sup>29</sup> In organizational terms, it is important to emphasize the establishment of the National Defence Management Centre in 2014. This centre represents the highest level of information management in Russia and directs and synchronizes the work of the entire defence system. The role of the centre is especially important in relation to hybrid warfare (*гибридная война*) and information warfare (*информационная война*).<sup>30</sup>

Peacetime information operations are characterized by covert measures, reconnaissance, espionage, building one’s own, and reducing the enemy’s information capabilities. War information measures are more aggressive and include discrediting the opposing leadership, intimidating military personnel and civilians, falsifying events, misinformation, and hacking.<sup>31</sup> Also, the

“main effort is focused on achieving political or diplomatic goals and influencing the leadership and public opinion of foreign countries, as well as international and regional organizations.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Evgeny N. Pashentsev, “Strategic Communication of Russia in Latin America”, in *Russia’s Public Diplomacy Evolution and Practice*, Anna Velikaya and Greg Simons, eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 220.

<sup>26</sup> Президент России, *Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации*. Указ Президента Российской Федерации #683, (31 декабря 2015 г.).

<sup>27</sup> Президент России, *Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации*. Указ Президента РФ #646, (5 декабря 2016 г.).

<sup>28</sup> Президент России, *Основы государственной политики Российской Федерации в области международной информационной безопасности*. Указ Президента РФ #213, (12 апреля 2021 г.).

<sup>29</sup> Президент России. О Стратегии развития информационного общества в Российской Федерации на 2017 - 2030 годы. Указ Президента РФ #203, (9 мая 2017 г.).

<sup>30</sup> Министерство обороны Российской Федерации. *Национальный центр управления обороной РФ*, accessed May 12, 2021, [https://structure.mil.ru/structure/ministry\\_of\\_defence/details.htm?id=11206@egOrganization](https://structure.mil.ru/structure/ministry_of_defence/details.htm?id=11206@egOrganization).

<sup>31</sup> И. Шаравов, “К вопросу об информационной войне и информационном оружии,” *Zarubezhnoye voynnoye obozreniye* 10, (2000), 2-5.

<sup>32</sup> Ю. Е. Донсков, О. Г. Никитин, “Место и роль специальных информационных операций при разрешении военных конфликтов,” *Военная мысль* 6, (2005), 17-23.

Western analysts naturally conclude that Russia already considers itself at war.

According to Russian authors, information war can be seen as an intense confrontation in the information space to achieve informational, psychological, and ideological superiority, damage to information systems, processes and resources, critical structures, and communications, undermining political and social systems, as well as mass psychological processing of military personnel and the general public. Information warfare is viewed in two ways; as confrontation in the information environment and the media to achieve specific political goals. It is also viewed as part of a military confrontation in the information sphere to achieve advantages in the collection, processing, and use of information on the battlefield, reducing the effectiveness of adversarial actions.<sup>33</sup>

Based on the above, a constant information war is being waged, both in peace and in war, and in all spheres of public life. The goal is to obscure the cognitive activities of the adversary population, to create chaos in hearts and minds and undermine confidence in the future, and to introduce false economic and moral attitudes. The ultimate goal of confrontational information is to conquer and maintain information superiority, advantages over the target in collecting, processing, disseminating information, as well as suppressing adversarial activities.<sup>34</sup> Russian strategic communication addresses allies and adversaries simultaneously, coordinating deeds, words and images within an integrated information warfare campaign.<sup>35</sup>

## **Russian Information Warfare in Serbia**

Russia supports Serbia in the UN on Kosovo and takes the position that it will support any agreement that Serbia agrees to. At the same time, whenever defending the Serbian people on certain forms of independence, autonomy,

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<sup>33</sup> Андриан А. Данилевич, Дмитрий В. Лоскутов, Олег К. Рогозин, Алексей Д. Рогозин, Дмитрий О. Рогозин, *Война и мир в терминах и определениях: военно-политический словарь* (Москва:Вече, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Ryszard Szpyra, "Russian information offensive in the international relations," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 30, #3, (2020): 30-47. <http://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/124436>.

<sup>35</sup> Pashentsev, "Strategic Communication in EU-Russia Relations," 20-22.

or even succession, Russian officials use the opportunity to highlight the example of the Albanians in Kosovo as a positive practice of the people's right to secede.<sup>36</sup> By the prevalent dredging up of memories from the 1999 NATO campaign against Yugoslavia, Russia actively attempts to manipulate the emotions and memories of the population, primarily through Russian-sponsored organizations putting pressure on the public audience against NATO and the US. In addition, Russian-sponsored organizations and media provoke EU skepticism and criticize Serbia's integration.

### *Public Diplomacy*

In the period from 2005, and especially from 2015, there is an intensive action of Russian strategic communication towards Serbia, through public diplomacy, media, energy, and defence. According to the research of the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies in Belgrade, 109 organizations promoting different aspects of Serbian-Russian relations are at work, though not necessarily harmful to Serbia.<sup>37</sup> Among the dozens of NGOs that shape the image of Russia in Serbia, the undisputed leaders are the Russian World Foundation (Россотрудничество Русский Мир)<sup>38</sup> and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomatic Fund, known as the Gorchakov Fund (Фонд поддержки публичной дипломатии имени А.М. Горчакова).<sup>39</sup> Russia's information presence in Serbia is significant for its sports and religious diplomacy, as well as its support of political parties and other organizations.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Bojana Barlovac, "Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession," *BalkanInsight*, (March 18, 2014), <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/03/18/crimea-secession-just-like-kosovo-putin/>.

<sup>37</sup> Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies, *Eyes wide shut – Strengthening of Russian soft power in Serbia: Goals, instruments, and effects* (Belgrade: CEAS, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> In the Balkan region, the Russian World Foundation is present in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. In Serbia, this organization has been operating for a very long time and has representative offices in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Nis. This organization also operates in Bosnia and Herzegovina, through its office in Banja Luka. More at Russkiy Mir Foundation, <https://russkiymir.ru>.

<sup>39</sup> Since 2013, the Gorchakov Fund has been leading the scientific-educational program "Balkan Dialogue" in the form of annual international conferences on international relations, politics, economy, and history of the Balkan region, which are attended by representatives of all countries in which the fund has offices and beyond. The Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, <https://gorchakovfund.ru/en/>.

<sup>40</sup> Evgeny N. Pashentsev, "Russian information presence at the Balkans: Challenges and

## *The Media*

The more prominent Russian media in Serbia are *RT* (Russia Today), *Sputnik*, and *Voice of Russia*. The largest and most influential daily in Serbia, *Politika*, as well as the monthly magazine *Geopolitika*, publish supplements in collaboration with *Russia beyond the Headlines*. The information forwarded by the *Sputnik* agency is transmitted directly to local and national media, as well as to the most widely read daily newspapers, which also have versions of their publications through their web presence. Some 40 internet portals in Serbia occasionally transmit Russian attitudes and views on topics important to the Serbian public (e.g. Kosovo and Metohija, Syria, Ukraine).<sup>41</sup> According to EUvsDiSiNFO, Russia-based info hubs launched 83 disinformation campaigns regarding Serbia or its international relations (mostly regional, US, or NATO related).<sup>42</sup>

Also, Russia is very active on social networks, electronic media, supported organizations, and parties in Serbia. Offensive strategic communications enable Russia to significantly influence Serbia's public opinion through psychological, sociological, cultural, media, and religious-historical soft power. In the period 2014 to 2019, Russian soft power promoted the following;

1. Motivating, organizing, and sending Serbian citizens as foreign fighters in Ukraine and Syria;
2. Organizing and conducting youth pro-military camps for Serbian children in Serbia and Russia, and
3. Subversive intelligence action.

Such activities are supported by massive information campaigns through social networks, by the coordination of Russian compatriot organizations and by Serbian "patriotic" organizations, with tacit Russian approval.<sup>43</sup>

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Prospects," in *Russia and Serbia in the contemporary world: bilateral relations, challenges, and opportunities*, Bogdan Stojanović, Elena Georgievna Ponomareva, eds. (Belgrade: Institute of international politics and economics, 2020), 120.

<sup>41</sup> Pashentsev, "Russian information presence at the Balkans," 120.

<sup>42</sup> *EUvsDisinfo*, "Disinfo Database," accessed May 10, 2021, [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=&date=&disinfo\\_countries%5B0%5D=77578&per\\_page=&offset=0&orderby=date&order=ASC](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=&date=&disinfo_countries%5B0%5D=77578&per_page=&offset=0&orderby=date&order=ASC).

<sup>43</sup> Miroslav Mitrovic, "Assessments and foreign policy implications of the national security

## *Overall Impression*

Generally, Serbia is under Russia's informational influence.<sup>44</sup> We can conclude that Russia wants to slow down Serbia's EU integration, minimize cooperation with NATO, and strengthen Russo-Serbian ties.

## **Chinese Strategic Communication**

The term "strategic communication" appears in official statements by Chinese government officials in 2010,<sup>45</sup> and the first Chinese book on strategic communication "Essentials of Strategic Communication" was published in 2011.<sup>46</sup>

Chinese strategic communication is propaganda divided into internal and external aspects.<sup>47</sup> Internal propaganda is directed towards the local population and party-state structures. External propaganda is directed towards the international public opinion outside China, and seeks to influence it by articulating positive relations with the external audience, and avoiding dissonant reactions.<sup>48</sup> It is also a powerful foreign policy instrument.<sup>49</sup>

The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (SCIO) is where propaganda is planned and implemented. SCIO was established in 1991 to improve China's international image and is under the direct

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of the Republic of Serbia," *Security and Defence Quarterly*, (2021).

<sup>44</sup> Miroslav Mitrovic, "Determinants of Strategic Communication Significant for National Defense and Security," *Matica Srpska Social Sciences Quarterly* LXX, #170, (2019), 179-194.

<sup>45</sup> Lankan Ranger, "China pledges to strengthen strategic communication with South Korea," *Pakistan Defence/ Chinese Defence Forum*, (Aug. 12, 2010), accessed 12 May 2021, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/china-pledges-to-strengthen-strategic-communication-with-south-korea.69022/>.

<sup>46</sup> Bi Y, Wang J, *战略传播纲要 (Essentials of strategic communication)*, (Beijing: State Administration College Press, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Edney Kingsley, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Kingsley, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Kingsley, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, 73.

administration of the State Council of the People's Republic of China.<sup>50</sup> SCIO is responsible for ensuring that foreign media “objectively” and “accurately” report on China, and also has the task of coordinating Chinese media coverage of China.<sup>51</sup> The office is organized into nine departments responsible for various activities, from compiling media statements and comments, developing international public relations, organizing cultural exchanges, researching foreign attitudes towards China, managing online media, conducting online public opinion research, directing the work of the media in the provinces of China, directing the media in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, promoting reports on the advancement of human rights in China and improving the situation in Tibet, managing foreign correspondents working in China, and managing and coordinating Internet culture.<sup>52</sup>

Chinese public diplomacy has a significant role in realizing China's foreign propaganda efforts.<sup>53</sup> Such activities are usually designed to look apolitical, and therefore the way they represent China often focuses on culture or history, which is a direct indication of the development of Chinese soft power.<sup>54</sup> Unlike propaganda practices related to the media, public diplomacy focuses on the long-term projection of the image of China in the mind of the foreign audience. It is firmly planned, organized, and synchronized by the state, and its main goal is to change the way the foreign public perceives China.<sup>55</sup> One of the most obvious examples of party-state public diplomacy in the promotion of Chinese culture is the establishment of the Confucius Institute, in addition to the organizing of large sporting and cultural events. The positive

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<sup>50</sup> Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Ingrid d'Hooghe, “Public Diplomacy in the People's Republic of China,” in *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen, (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 103.

<sup>52</sup> Xiaoling Zhang, “China's International Broadcasting: A Case Study of CCTV International,” in *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication*, ed. Jian Wang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 68-69.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and ‘Thought Work’ in Reformed China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>54</sup> Edney Kingsley, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 77.

<sup>55</sup> Kingsley, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, 85.

perception of influential foreigners (non-Chinese) of China in the international environment is especially important, due to its greater credibility and authenticity.<sup>56</sup>

Chinese media diplomacy generally implies acting on Chinese and foreign media. The English-language *Beijing Review*, a weekly printed in circulation for over fifty years, is the standard-bearer of external propaganda activities. In addition, this magazine is published in Chinese, Japanese, French, German, and Spanish. The English-language daily newspapers are the *China Daily* and *Global Times*. Among audio-visual media, *CCTV* broadcasts in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic inside and outside China. The radio station *China Radio International*, broadcasts in dozens of languages around the world, and the shows are also available on an internet radio platform. *Xinhua News Agency* broadcasts in English 24 hours a day, as well as a Chinese-language channel in over twenty countries.<sup>57</sup>

China's strategic communication is a synergy of foreign policy influence and the strengthening of internal social and political and cultural cohesion. Central management of strategic communication is expected and logical because there is no formal separation between government, state institutions, and the people.<sup>58</sup>

### **Chinese Foreign Propaganda towards Serbia**

Relations between Serbia and China have rapidly improved since Kosovo declared independence in 2008. China, along with Russia, is the strongest advocate of the illegality of this procedure at the United Nations. This relationship led to the signing of a strategic partnership agreement between Serbia and China in 2009, which is also the first agreement that Serbia has signed with a country in the history of its modern independence. By signing this agreement, Serbia also confirmed its support for the "Principle of One China", and China not only reiterated its position on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia but also supported Serbia's efforts for EU

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<sup>56</sup> Kingsley, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, 85-93.

<sup>57</sup> Kingsley, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, 79-80.

<sup>58</sup> Kingsley, *The Globalization of Chinese Propaganda*, 105-121.



integration.<sup>59</sup> Cooperation between Serbia and China is also developing on a multilateral level, especially through Initiative “17+1”, which aimed to enable China to build closer relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Within this program, Serbia has a very important place. Namely, Belgrade hosted the “16+1” Summit in 2014. The peak in Serbian-Chinese relations was achieved in 2016 with the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership at the meeting in Belgrade when Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a historic visit to Serbia and the Western Balkans.

Economic cooperation is the core of the Chinese communication presence in Serbia. There is a disproportion between Chinese investments and economic aid to and a positive promotional appearance in Serbian media.<sup>60</sup> For instance, often Chinese loans are presented as investments. Most of the projects are financed by loans from the Exim Export-Import Bank of China with significant involvement of workers and machinery from China.<sup>61</sup> Projects focus on the energy sector, road infrastructure, *Smederevo* ironworks, a copper mine in Bor, infrastructure for waste processing, as well as popularization of Serbia as a destination for tourists from China.

Strategic communication efforts have resulted in a more positive perception of China in Serbian society. While according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Serbia mostly depends on economic cooperation with the EU (about 60 % of imports to 70 % of exports), it has a much smaller volume of cooperation with China (about 8.5 % of imports and 0.5 % of exports).<sup>62</sup> However, the Serbian public remains unaware of those indicators.

### *Public Diplomacy*

In terms of culture, Serbia is a leader in developing relations with China in the Western Balkans. Of importance for the general cultural exchange is the

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<sup>59</sup> Strahinja Subotić, Miloš Janjić, “Kinesko-srpski odnosi: šta smo naučili iz krize COVID-19,” *Centar za Evropske Politike*, (28 April 2020), accessed May 3, 2021, <https://cep.org.rs/publications/kinesko-srpski-odnosi-sta-smo-naucili-iz-krize-covid-19/>.

<sup>60</sup> Subotić, Miloš Janjić, “Kinesko-srpski odnosi...”.

<sup>61</sup> Subotić, Miloš Janjić, “Kinesko-srpski odnosi...”.

<sup>62</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF). “Trade Statistics”, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85>.

fact that in 2017, Serbia and China abolished visas for travel of their citizens, which indicates the further development of the impact of Chinese soft power in Serbia.<sup>63</sup>

### *The Media*

There are two main channels of China's media influence in Serbia; through Serbian pro-government and state media, and through Chinese media in Serbia or domestic media. *China Radio International* is the most active Chinese media in Serbia, which places its contents mostly on its Internet portal in the Serbian language and Facebook page, and the news is also taken over by the traditional Serbian media. *Radio CRI* does not have its frequency but is broadcast through the radio station *Welcome to Fun Radio (WTF)* which broadcasts promotional content about China and its leadership. In addition, *Radio CRI* cooperates with print political media *Nedeljnik* and *Politika*, which print mostly Chinese-friendly supplements.

### *Overall Impression*

Although in the Serbian media Serbia stands out as the most important country in the cooperation of China in the Western Balkans, this does not correspond to reality. The promotion of cooperation and good intentions of China is framed as investment size, implying billions of Euros. Such news is broadcast as a reflection of the success of the Serbian government, and as an expression of Chinese affection.<sup>64</sup> Such an approach, along with the Chinese support for Serbia's position regarding the non-recognition of Kosovo's independence, creates a very positive public opinion.<sup>65</sup> However, the real picture is that China is investing significantly in all Western Balkan countries. It can be said that Chinese investments in Serbia are part of the general mosaic of Chinese influence in this part of Europe.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> International Monetary Fund (IMF). "Trade Statistics".

<sup>64</sup> Mila Đurđević, "Kineske investicije u Srbiji: Jaz između obećanog i realizovanog," *Raduo Slobodna Evropa*, (Sept. 8, 2020), <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kineske-investicije-u-srbiji-obecano-i-realizovano/30826927.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Maja Bjelos, Vuk Vuksanovic et al, *Mnoga lica Srpske spoljne politike - javno mnjenje i geopolitičko balansiranje* (Beograd: BCBP 2020), 2-10.

<sup>66</sup> Nina Markovic Khaze & Xiwen Wang, "Is China's rising influence in the Western

## Conclusion

The Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCSP) has concluded that in terms of strategic communication, Russia is on the offensive, China is passive, and the USA is stagnant. The research indicates that 40 % of the public considers Russia to be Serbia's best friend, while 16 % recognize China in this role. Among the respondents, 72 % believe that the Russian influence in the country is positive, an increase of 11 % compared to the 2017 survey.<sup>67</sup> Also, over two-thirds of respondents believe that Russia's policy towards Serbia is friendly, and only 2 % believe that Russia's attitude towards Serbia is hostile. China is perceived as an economic power that has not recognized the independence of Kosovo. The increase in pro-China attitudes is the result of the Serbian government's campaign as well as Chinese public and media diplomacy. As many as 87 % of respondents believe that the Chinese influence in the country is positive – an increase of 34 % from 2017.

One of the results of this campaign shows that 75 % of respondents mistakenly believe that China provided the most assistance to Serbia in the fight against the pandemic, although the largest donor was the EU. Strategic communications have a direct influence on the foreign policy reveals public attitudes towards future policy orientations; 57 % of Serbian citizens believe that Serbia should align its foreign policy with Russia and China. On the other hand, although diplomatic relations between the United States and Serbia have improved during the administration of Donald Trump, the research indicates that good political and economic relations between the two countries have not translated into wider public support. Namely, 60 % of Serbian citizens believe that the United States has a negative influence on Serbia, while 13 % of them believe that the United States is Serbia's biggest enemy.

Observed from the declared interests of the national security of Serbia, US, Russian, and Chinese strategic communications have different goals, forms of action, as well as intensity.

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Balkans a threat to European integration?" *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, #2, (2021): 234-250, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2020.1823340.

<sup>67</sup> Bjelos, Vuksanovic et al., *Mnoga lica Srpske spoljne politike*, 2-10.

The goals of US strategic communication towards Serbia could be summarized as resolving the status of Kosovo as an independent state, strengthening European integration, and strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law in Serbia and the region.

The US is active in Serbia through a well-integrated NGO network and foreign direct investment. Despite significant bilateral cooperation in the economy and defence, the US does not show special interest in establishing stronger public relations with Serbia, nor does it want to create a more significant image of itself as a well-meaning partner. This characterizes the position of the US regarding Kosovo, which is of key importance for the national security of Serbia. Namely, the US believes that this issue is over and that Kosovo's independence is irreversible, and that it is the only issue when Serbia will recognize the independence of its southern province. In fact, the impression is that the US is only interested in ending the process, and that they are not interested in developing special relations with Serbia.

Russian strategic communications in Serbia aim to establish a more stable presence in the minds of citizens based on negative feelings towards NATO and the US, slowing down and ultimately giving up EU integration, maximally reducing cooperation with NATO, and disrupting its cohesion in the Western Balkans by creating Serbia as a stronghold against it, by the development of antagonism and irrational feelings of hostility. Mostly based on negative emotions, and often exaggerated relations between the two nations, Russia attempts to assimilate Serbian culture and identity vectors. Thus, Russia tends to achieve the effect on the Serbian audience's perception that an attack on any aspect of the Russian interest will be recognized as an attack on Serbia.

Chinese influence is harmonious with Serbia's national security. Namely, China strongly advocates in favour of Serbia's territorial integrity and on the issue of Kosovo. Also, cultural diplomacy and media appearances do not negatively affect the general political perception of Serbia, because China is clear in its support for European interests. The possible negative impact exists in the opacity of public procurement and agreements with China, a fertile ground for corruption, which is one of the forms of hybrid threat to states.

Taking into account that Serbia in particular is vulnerable to such forms of security violations, this approach should not be neglected.<sup>68</sup>

In general, Serbia is in a region where the interests of the great powers intertwine. At the moment, the offensive is on the side of Russia and China, which coincides with growing multipolarity.

In any case, Serbia in itself is not the subject of strategic communication competition between the US, Russia, and even China. More likely, Serbia is part of a broader strategic approach. Serbia should work on raising the general awareness and knowledge of its population toward rational relations on the political scene, which are not burdened with prejudices or stereotypes, and free from populism.

With respect of power of Internet and social networks and their influence on cognitive and behaviour reactions, it is necessary to develop education of population, as well as awareness about manipulative potentials of harmful cyber activities.<sup>69</sup> In that way, Serbia should develop a sound approach towards its own public opinion, which will be a generator of political decisions, based on realistic and long-term national goals.

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<sup>68</sup> Miroslav Mitrović, "The Balkans and non-military security threats: Quality comparative analyses of resilience capabilities regarding hybrid threats," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 5, #22, (2018), 20-45.

<sup>69</sup> Miroslav Mitrović & Dragan Vasiljević, "Strategic Communication and Social Network influence: the methods of psychological manipulations in Cyberspace and the suggestion for its prevention," *Teme XLV*, #1, (2021), 129-144.

# Discursive Strategies as a Campaigning Instrument for the Far-Right\*

*Lisa Tagwerker*

## Introduction

On 26 September 2021, German parliamentary elections and the elections to the Federal State Parliament of Upper Austria took place. As usual, the parties ran their campaigns, and some of them received support from outside the party spectrum. In particular, the far-right parties Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) were strongly promoted on different social media channels by the speaker of the Austrian Identitarian Movement, Martin Sellner. Of course, the question arises why Sellner, who has no party membership and was not eligible to participate in either of the two elections, so diligently promoted the relevant far-right parties on his social media channels in both Germany and Austria. The present case study deals with the motives for these actions and how mobilization efforts are made through the application of discursive strategies. As an introduction, a short overview of the Identitarian Movement and its Austrian offshoot is given. Thereafter, we propose answering how these discursive strategies and constructed social groups are used to influence campaigning in two concrete elections in Austria and in Germany. The theoretical basics of discursive strategies will be explained to offer a better understanding of the following analysis.

## The Identitarian Movement

For almost ten years, the Identitarian Movement has been one of the most powerful and popular right-wing-extremist groups in Europe. Founded in

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\* Note by the Editors: The term “far right” does not follow a clearly defined scheme and is used very differently in the political discussion. The use of the term in this article for parties or organisations represents solely the personal opinion of the author.

France in 2012 under the name *Génération Identitaire*, they spread over several countries in Europe.<sup>1</sup> While the group has been prohibited in France in 2021, the Austrian offshoot of the Identitarian Movement still receives a lot of media attention. The speaker of the Identitarian Movement Austria, Martin Sellner, has become one of the most important faces of the group and of the right-wing-extremist scene in Europe. His reach extends even to the United States of America through his wife, Brittany, who is American, and hosts a popular YouTube channel on traditional gender relationships. Since its beginnings, the movement strongly counted on several social media platforms to bring their ideology among the people and to take an impact on the political landscape in each country and beyond.

The Identitarian Movement and other right-wing-extremist actors freely admit that they wage a so-called Info-War against the existing system and the supposed “deep States”. The movement acts apart from political parties and the activists clearly define themselves as a non-parliament-group or as a “patriotic NGO”. Nevertheless, political far-right parties have benefited from the movements’ online-activism in the past.<sup>2</sup> Since the biggest and most important social media platforms started to react on critical and partly dangerous content with deleting of those contents and the corresponding accounts, the Identitarian Movement is confronted with a loss of reach. As a reaction to the practice of “deplatforming”, the “second phase” of the Info-War was declared, which should take place on the messenger service Telegram.<sup>3</sup>

Sellner especially was affected by some deplatforming actions by a couple of big social media platforms in the past, like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Due to the bans, he was forced to rely on less popular providers like Telegram, BitChute, Odysee, Gab or Trovo etc. Nevertheless, he can be considered as “successful” in producing and reproducing racist, antisemitic as well as misogynistic content in social media. One central approach to convey the ideas of the Identitarian Movement are *discursive strategies*.

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Bruns, Kathrin Glösel & Natascha Strobl, *Die Identitären. Handbuch zur Jugendbewegung der neuen Rechten in Europa* (Münster: Unrast, 2014), 62, 56ff.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Stegemann & Sören Musyal, *Die rechte Mobilmachung. Wie radikal Netzaktivisten die Demokratie angreifen* (Berlin: Econ, 2020), 16f.

<sup>3</sup> Stegemann & Musyal, *Die rechte Mobilmachung...*, 156.

Applying discursive strategies allows the actors to construct several social groups as well as other social phenomena in their sense among society. They try to use the outcomes of this constructions for campaigning for far-right parties.

### Discursive Strategies and Discourse<sup>4</sup>

Discursive Strategies in the way they are used in this analysis are part of the Discourse-Historical-Approach (DHA), which belongs to the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The DHA is often applied to uncover structures of power, in particular if one social group tries to gain or exercise power over another group. The approach understands *discourse* as a “cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices [...]; socially constituted and socially constitutive; related to a macro-topic [and] linked to argumentation about validity claims.”<sup>5</sup>

Discursive strategies are understood as “a more or less intentional plan of practice (including discursive practice) to achieve a particular, social, political, psychological or linguistic goal.”<sup>6</sup> In this case study, The DHA provides five main forms of discursive strategy. The central goal of the examined discourse for this case study is the mobilization to vote for AfD in German elections, and for the FPÖ in Austrian elections respectively.

In a first step, it is logical to identify which different groups and phenomena are constructed by the strategy of *nomination*. The strategy targets the construction of social groups, individuals but also of other social phenomena. After this first step, social actors and phenomena are categorized into a positive or a negative section, which is called *predication* and is conducted by adding positive or negative attributions to the actors and phenomena. By means of *argumentation*, it is attempted to convince the audience from the truth of the content. *Perspectivation* is an instrument to express social distance or solidarity with the constructed social actors as well as their ideas, intentions and

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<sup>4</sup> Maritin Reisigl & Ruth Wodak, “The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA),” in R. Wodak & M. Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (New York: Sage, 2016), 23-61.

<sup>5</sup> Reisigl & Wodak, “The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA),” 27.

<sup>6</sup> Reisigl & Wodak, “The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA),” 33.



propositions. All the utterances can gain impact on the discourse with the strategy of *intensification and mitigation*.

Investigating the discursive strategies is the core of this paper. In order to afford a complete analysis, the structure of the paper roughly follows the recommended steps by Wodak and Reisigl. As an antecedent step, discourse topics are first filtered out of the research material, which form the discourse of interest (the main discourse) and those which constitute discourses interwoven with the main discourse. In addition, it is assessed in which fields of action the main discourse has its origins. To understand the efficacy of discursive strategies, it is imperative to consider the results of the analysis in the political context. Therefore, the examined content will be discussed.<sup>7</sup>

### **Database and Sources**

The data base for the case study is a set of videos uploaded on *Odysee* and shared on *Telegram* as well as a set of postings and records uploaded on *Telegram*. The originator of the content is Sellner, and he distributed the files on his personal channels on the mentioned social media platforms. Collected and analysed were data which touched on the elections to the Federal Parliament of Germany and the elections of the Federal State Parliament of Upper Austria. Both elections were conducted on 26 September 2021 and Sellner gave attention to both elections. It is important to stress that the bulk of the content deals with the election in Germany and Sellner's efforts for AfD-campaigning are remarkable, because he is a citizen of Austria and has no right to vote in Germany. This is also true for Upper Austria, because he lives in Vienna, which is a different province.

It seems natural to position the campaigning on Sellner's own channel, because a lot of the consumers tend to vote for far-right parties and share the political opinions of Martin Sellner, as a look into the comment column shows. The focus on Germany becomes more comprehensible because it is clear, that a considerable part of Sellner's audience is from Germany and has the right to participate in German elections.

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<sup>7</sup> Reisigl & Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)," 31f.

## Analysis of Results

The filtering of the examined social media content provides plenty of discourse topics, which constitute the main theme under investigation here, as well as corollary topics of interest. The **main discourse is the one which deals with the reasonableness and the necessity to vote for AfD respectively FPÖ**. The origin of the discourse lies in the field of political advertising. The tables (1 and 2) present the discourse topics which create the discourse about AfD and FPÖ voting. These fragments of the discourse can be defined as a kind of “positive” mobilization. They reflect a wide field of things the Identitarian Movement is fighting for and in addition, they are **positively** connoted issues from an identitarian point of view in the most cases.

In addition, Sellner strongly tries to shape campaigning by spending attention on the opposing players. These players occur in an incarnated way or in the form of institutions, organizations, candidates and symbols, etc. In contrast to the data of table 1, these topics constitute the mobilization in a **negative** way, through the demarcation of the mentioned topics. Sellner tries to move the audience to vote for AfD and FPÖ by talking about different fears, the negative results of migration and a couple of other as pejoratively connoted issues. It is conspicuous that Sellner attaches slightly more importance on the negative topics as table 2 indicate.

In the next step, we examine how discursive strategies work. It is shown how the most important actors, institutions and phenomena for the election campaign are discursively formed by the strategies and what purpose the originator of the examined discourse is pursuing. The results illustrate in which way Sellner creates a picture of society that makes the decision to vote for the AfD or for the FPÖ seem necessary.

### *Democracy and the Political System*

In the first place, it seems very salient how the democratic system is nominated. Sellner hardly ever uses the term of democracy when he is talking about the political systems in Germany and Austria (the most time he does not distinguish between the two countries very accurately). He rather talks about a simulation of democracy, a totalitarian system, and a police State.

Thereby, he cast doubt on the legitimacy of the current political system in the two states. Through attributions like “not real” or “endangered”, the speaker reveals a sort of cleavage towards the democratic systems. He does not want to determine whether democracy does not exist at all or whether it is still there but is about to disappear. Since he tries to mobilize for the election, the predication creates a last bit of hope that participation in the election is reasonable, because democracy is “only endangered”, but still existing. The same phenomenon occurs when he talks about “soft” totalitarianism. On the one hand, the nomination tries to convey the feeling to the consumer that the prevailing political conditions are extremely bad, but the attribute “soft” creates hope that going to the ballot box is still an important and meaningful act. The strategy of mitigation also comes into play; the ostensible hopeless situation appears more manageable through the application of mitigation.

*Table 1. Messages of the Right and Far Right*

Identitarian movement, Identitarian positions	Reconquista, recapture
Patriotism	Parliament patriotism
Political fringes	Right relationships and organisations
Third political camp	AfD, increase of votes for the AfD, becoming a catch-all party/ major party
FPÖ, Herbert Kickl	Citizens' movement, affiliated organisations
Party youth	Thuringia
Election of the federal state parliament of Upper Austria	Election, go to the polls, electoral decision, polling numbers
Political resistance, civil resistance	Opposition
Strategy	Telegram
Sense of national identity, community, in-group preferences, homogeneity	East German youth
Civil society	1 % (another right-wing extremist organisation)
Ethno-cultural identity	Rescue of culture and people
Critical towards Islam	Truth, facts
Activism, low-threshold activism	Mobilization
Counter-public	Our Country

*Table 2. Pejorative connotations used by Far Right*

Liberal mainstream	Ideological-religious power
Left-liberal establishment	Conservatives
Totalitarianism, soft totalitarianism	Globalistic left-liberal ideology
Propaganda	Fighting AfD, destruction of AfD
CDU	ÖVP
Green Party	Vaccine-sceptic MFG party
Leftists	Socialist parties
Pope Francis	Antifa
Election fraud	Migration background, migrants
Non-European	Ethnic fragmentation
Political correctness	Shift to the left
Facebook, Twitter	Media, press, public broadcast
Ethnic election	Demography
Multicultural enrichment (ironical)	Globalism
Woke capital	Generation conflict
Status quo of society	Repression
Constitution protection	Asylum camps
De-ethnicizing	Multiculturalism
Multi-ethnic state	Foreigners' right to vote
Great replacement, replacement migration	Germany as an immigration country
Plan of the elites	Brain washing
Corona, green pass	BRD
Afghanistan	

*Election, Ethnic Voting and Election Fraud*

Very important to the depicted perception of democracy and the political system as something vulnerable is the Identitarian conception of “ethnic voting”. Ethnic voting is the turnout of people who are defined as not belonging to the constructed in-group and who are unwilling to vote for the AfD or the FPÖ in elections because of the anti-migrants policies of these parties.

Sellner sees the turnout of people with a migrant background who do not vote for far-right parties as one of the main reasons for endangering democracy. In the course of nomination, he also speaks of a time bomb, an ethnic bomb or a demographic bomb. In this case it seems needless to emphasize that this phenomenon is classified as negative. Nevertheless, the deployed predication consolidates the classification. Ethnic voting is often dropped in an intertextual relation with election fraud. By naming the two terms together, the right for people with migration background to vote has a bad connotation because it is conveyed that it borders on electoral fraud. Like in the case of the political system, the legitimacy of the election is fundamentally questioned if people who are defined as not-belonging can participate.

This conception of ethnic voting runs through the entire study material and is consequently intensified. It is important to mention that Sellner and the Identitarian Movement do not see migration as a result of diverse and complex geopolitical, economic, climatic, etc. changes in different regions, but rather a conspiratorial plan of the so-called elites who want to replace the Germans in a targeted manner. As a penalty for the crimes of the Second World War and the Holocaust<sup>8</sup> but also other historical events in connection with the history of colonization. That is why right-wing extremist circles prefer to speak of the “great replacement” instead of migration.

While people with a migration background represent a threat to democracy by exercising their political rights from the Identitarian Movement’s point of view, they also see electoral fraud as an existing problem. This is also constructed as a real danger, but only if it concerns the AfD. To fight the assumed danger through ballot rigging, Sellner promotes the election monitoring project of the right-wing-extremist organization 1 %. Through the discursive strategy of argumentation, Sellner implies that the Identitarian Movement as well as 1 % are guardians of democracy. By constantly repeating that electoral fraud is a real problem for the elections and thus for democracy, the impression arises that electoral fraud is a completely common event during German elections and no exceptional case. This leads to the following

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<sup>8</sup> Elke Rajal, “Offen, codiert, strukturell. Antisemitismus bei den ‘Identitären,’” in J. Goetz, J.M. Sedlacek & A. Winkler, eds., *Untergangster des Abendlandes. Ideologie und Rezeption der rechtsextremen ‘Identitären’ 2nd ed.* (Hamburg: Marta Press, 2018), 317ff.

conclusion rule for the strategy of argumentation: those who stand up against electoral fraud must be sincere democrats.

*Austria, Germany and the Federal States*

Generally, there is noticeably little distinction between the two states in the investigated discourse. As an Austrian citizen, Sellner often simply speaks of “we” when he talks about Germany, which is an indication of his “völkisch” mindset and allows him to generate a common identity through the strategy of perspectivation. In a few passages in the investigated data, small differences can be seen. First, Sellner speaks very often of the “BRD” (Bundesrepublik Deutschlands); he uses the earlier name for West Germany, when Germany existed in its divided form until 1990. In this way, he creates a closeness to the German Democratic Republic and, once again, to a closed dictatorial system.

So, the recurring pattern of questioning the legitimacy of the political system in Germany is revealed. The German state is described as sick, despite its economic strongness. Crucial for the sickness is the “wrong ideology”, by which the State is controlled. To nominate this ideology, different terms like political correctness, woke capitalism or guilt culture (once again referring the Holocaust) are employed. Sellner describes Germany as in a process of transformation into a multi-ethnic state and, the negative connotation flows in again through predication, since these transformation makes the state unstable. Eastern German federal states are assigned positive attributes, since right-wing parties, above all the AfD, do particularly well in these federal states.

Austria is represented as a less hated object in the discursive construction. It is striking that neither special expressions for Austria, nor for Upper Austria are constructed thereby nomination with regarding the upcoming elections. However, Sellner describes Austria as the better country for patriots, since history has developed differently over the last few decades and Austria with less “brain washing”. To give emphasis to this aspect, he argues that the FPÖ is generally more accepted because the party is represented in some of the Austrian Federal state governments. This leads to the conclusion rule: the more influence a right-wing party has, the better does a state becomes.

### *In-Group, Far-Right Parties and National Identity*

The in-group occurs under various definitions. In the first place, those persons who are autochthonous are defined as belonging to the in-group. In general, this group of people is often simply nominated as “the people”. A feeling of unity is also constructed through political attitudes, mainly when people have a conservative attitude or are defined as patriots. Institutions or parties are also included in this structure, in particular AfD and FPÖ as well as other parties which Sellner would describe as “critical” towards migration. This feeling of togetherness is also defined as something abstract, and the only way to achieve it is a homogenous society.

To categorize members of the in-group in a positive way by the strategy of predication, terms such as patriotic or decent are used. In addition, a sense of unity is constructed when people from the in-group are described as repressed and exposed to destructive powers. The main destructive powers are the state on the one hand and economic actors on the other hand. Experiences with criminal law are commonly categorized as state repression and serve as an indication that someone must have the right conviction. In this case, the discursive strategy of argumentation can be observed again: Those members of the in-group who have negative experience with prosecution must have acted right, since it is a totalitarian system and violation of totalitarian rules seems to be right and good. The speaker clearly positions himself in this group through perspectivation.

### *Conservatives, the Union Parties, and other Enemies*

The out-group contains various players. Interestingly, the use of discursive strategies primarily creates an enemy stereotype, namely the conservative parties Christian Democratic Union of Germany, the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (together they are often named as the Union), and the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP). They are categorized as traitors and criminals, as well as pseudo-right deceivers by the strategy of nomination, although predication also plays a role because these terms are clearly connoted as negative. Regarding the approaching coalition negotiations in Germany and the possibility of a coalition with the Free Democratic Party, the Social Democratic Party or Alliance/90 the Greens, the combination of nomination and

predication is continued; there is talk of plague, cholera, AIDS and cancer. Hence, all the realistic opportunities for a coalition after the election are characterized as lethal diseases.

Individual politicians of the parties, in particular the top candidates Armin Laschet, Olaf Scholz and Annalena Baerbock, are categorized as machine-like or character masks and thus, in contrast to the human beings in the in-group, constructed as inhuman, artificial and inauthentic. Regarding the election in Upper Austria, Sellner also criticizes the leader of the FPÖ in Upper Austria, Manfred Haimbuchner, but he does not deny him being a human. Although an overlapping in policies and ideology between the conservative Union and the ÖVP and far-right are most likely, Sellner tries to create as much distance as possible to those conservative parties.

The main reason behind this may be the fear of losing undecided voters from the right-wing spectrum to the conservative parties what would mean a loss of votes for the AfD and the FPÖ. That is why an attempt is made to make the ideological distance look as large as possible. Representatives of conservative parties are repeatedly identified as executors of the “globalist” agenda and (at least in the examined content about campaigning) positioned as the actual political enemies.

### *Influence and Election Results*

A look on the results of the two elections shows, that both parties, the AfD as well as the FPÖ lost a part of their voters. The AfD achieved a percentage of 10.3 %, which corresponds to a drop of 2.3 % compared to the previous election in 2017.<sup>9</sup> The FPÖ achieved 19.77 % of the votes in Upper Austria, a loss of 10.59 % compared to the elections of 2015 so the party has lost about a third of the votes.<sup>10</sup> The two most common reasons for the AfD’s loss of votes were precisely those that Sellner tried to mobilize against; most of the former AfD voters did not vote at all in this election, the second

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<sup>9</sup> Der Bundeswahlleiter. Bundestagswahl 2021, Ergebnisse, <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse.html>, accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

<sup>10</sup> *Land Oberösterreich*. Landtagswahl 2021, Ergebnis Oberösterreich. <https://wahl.land-oberoesterreich.gv.at/>, accessed 23 Oct. 2021.



largest group voted for the CDU. A similar phenomenon occurs in Upper Austria. Most of the lost votes went to the ÖVP, the second largest part of the former FPÖ voters decided against voting.<sup>11</sup>

This indicates that Sellner's influence on the voting decision is small, it also remains in question, whether he can reach undecided voters via his social media channels. Although the year 2021 is shaped by the Covid-19 crisis and both the FPÖ and AfD are campaigning against the measures to keep the pandemic at bay, this topic seems to have significantly less potential for mobilization than the refugee movements in the mid-2010s, as former elections results show. Sellner never tires of emphasizing that the central theme for the Identitarian Movement is the fear of the "Great Replacement" and demands an appropriate dealing with this important issue from the parties for which he conducts the campaigning.

However, there is one aspect that demonstrates a kind of success of the application of discursive strategies and the dissemination via social media channels. The narrative of electoral fraud has meanwhile become firmly anchored in the discourse on elections, especially in the right-wing spectrum. This is no completely new phenomenon; efforts to propagate a widespread electoral fraud have also existed in Austria in 2016, the year of the Presidential election. After the Austrian Constitutional Court decided that the runoff election had to be repeated, there occurred some problems with the envelopes for the postal vote.<sup>12</sup> This led to a postponing of the scheduled election day.<sup>13</sup> Such an incident offers enough power to continue the discourse on electoral fraud, especially in the right-wing spectrum. For this case, disinformation is

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<sup>11</sup> Land Oberösterreich. Wahl 2021 Oberösterreich, Wählerstromanalyse. [https://www.land-oberoesterreich.gv.at/Mediendateien/Formulare/Dokumente%20PraesD%20Abt\\_Stat/08-LT-W%C3%A4hlerstromanalyse.pdf](https://www.land-oberoesterreich.gv.at/Mediendateien/Formulare/Dokumente%20PraesD%20Abt_Stat/08-LT-W%C3%A4hlerstromanalyse.pdf), accessed 23 Oct. 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Verfassungsgerichtshof Österreich, "VfGH-Rückblick 2016: Aufhebung der Bundespräsidenten-Stichwahl war 'völlig alternativlos'," (23 Dec. 2016). [https://www.vfgh.gv.at/medien/VfGHBilanz\\_2016\\_\\_Aufhebung\\_der\\_Bundespraesidenten-S.de.html](https://www.vfgh.gv.at/medien/VfGHBilanz_2016__Aufhebung_der_Bundespraesidenten-S.de.html) accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Interior of Austria. Bundespräsidentenwahlen, FAQ Bundespräsidentenwahl 2016, Wiederholung des 2. Wahlganges zur Bundespräsidentenwahl 2016, [https://www.bmi.gv.at/412/Bundespraesidentenwahlen/Bundespraesidentenwahl\\_2016/FAQ\\_Bundespraesidentenwahl\\_2016.aspx#pk\\_01](https://www.bmi.gv.at/412/Bundespraesidentenwahlen/Bundespraesidentenwahl_2016/FAQ_Bundespraesidentenwahl_2016.aspx#pk_01), accessed 28 Oct. 2021.

used very deliberately<sup>14</sup> to question the legitimacy of the elections, even if the election rerun, as in the case of the Austrian Presidential Election in 2016, or refutation of the false claims should show that control mechanisms are in place and are effective.

## Conclusion

The analysis has shown that campaigning can be classified as partially successful when it comes to direct voter mobilization. Nonetheless, the Identitarian Movement benefits from these actions, after all, they do not conduct the campaigning as a self-purpose. Through discursive strategies, Sellner succeeds in portraying the Union and the ÖVP as the real evil, even if those parties are in some points rather close to other right-wing parties. It might be for the reason that the Union and the ÖVP are the ones in power during the period the content has accrued. Through the use of discursive strategies, Sellner achieves distance between the conservative parties which are defined as hostile out-group and the far-right parties AfD and FPÖ, characterized as belonging to the in-group.

Through the emphasis on election monitoring by a right-wing extremist organization, he tried to give the right-wing extremist spectrum a democratic face. Additional votes for AfD and FPÖ help the Identitarian Movement to appear more legitimate, since the movement sees these parties as a kind of parliamentary representation of identitarian concerns. A distinction between Austria and Germany seems to be redundant. The investigation has shown that the movement expects a growth of influence, indifferent in which of both countries a far-right party increases its votes.

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick Gensing, "Fake News über angebliche Manipulationen," *ARD*, (27 Sept. 2021) <https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/wahlbetrug-btw21-101.html>, accessed 28 Dec. 2021.

## **PART V: CONCLUSION**

## Conclusion

*George Niculescu*

Truth is what one makes of it. Thirty years ago, the democratization of information promised to liberate us from superstition. The opposite has happened. The authors herein have argued ways to shake off the burden of doubt and uncritical belief. This said, some could think that this Handbook contributes to the pollution of truth. This is why we have thought it wise, besides highlighting the conclusions emerging from the 16 articles/chapters of this book, to also consider the value-added and possible gaps of the content against the backdrop of existing **media literacy standards**. In other words, to check against our own biases, and to validate our own product. To that end, we have chosen RAND's Corporation 2021 Study on "*Media Literacy Standards to Counter Truth Decay*"<sup>1</sup> as a benchmark to consolidate the editors' conclusions from what the contributing authors have proposed.

Below we introduce the main conclusions put forward by the contributors to this book. On that basis, the relevance of the 16 chapters of this book will be subsequently considered for each of the media literacy education standards proposed by the RAND Corp researchers.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

(Ch. 1) Every individual, and in particular those from the younger generation, need to understand the vital role of news gathering and reporting and those who do that work. They need to understand the role the media plays and realize the harm that is exuded when "fake news" is used. It is therefore up to each individual to decide what to watch, what to read, and how to interpret that news carefully and be mindful not to spread incorrect information. News item must be investigated for validity before sharing, retweeting, or posting on *Facebook* or *Twitter*, or on whatever platform.

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Huguet, Garrett Baker, Laura S. Hamilton, and John F. Pane, "Media Literacy Standards to Counter Truth Decay," *RAND Corporation*, (2021), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA112-12.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-12.html).

(Ch. 2) Media literacy ensures that the society benefits overall from the use of electronic and digital media and mitigates the harm from their misuse. Media literacy enhances social participation and social responsibility in the virtual and physical world. Media literate users are critical against the social inequality created by misinformation and disinformation, which could migrate over to the political system. There is a social and especially a political need for a comprehensive media literacy strategy able to mitigate the impact of false information and the media illiteracy of the public. From this perspective, education is an essential part of any media literacy strategy, depending on the level of preparedness of each individual or group, it can be achieved through formal and/or informal education inserted in the national school system or in the life-long learning system.

(Ch. 3) The main drivers of truth decay include cognitive biases, the rise of social media and other changes to the information environment, the education system's inability to keep up with changes in the information environment, and with political and social polarisation. All of these certainly contribute to the motivation and the ability of unscrupulous actors to influence and manipulate contemporary target audiences for some kind of political, social or economic gains. In this context, labels and descriptions are often used to harness legitimacy for "us" and illegitimacy for "them" in order to control the perception and reception of certain channels of information. This would yield greater operational freedom for the actor controlling those flows. Labels and descriptions are therefore not necessarily true and accurate characterisations of elements and events in the physical realm, but rather constructed and intended to create a specific cognitive effect that can support a political or economic agenda of an actor. This includes the "hybrid warfare" label, which can serve as a possible accusation perpetrated without any, or with insufficient, proof.

(Ch. 4) Radicalization is a social problem and a matter of national or international security when it leads – or threatens to lead – to violence. In finding remedies to this problem, a careful balance between security and liberty is necessary. A normal socio-political system should allow for the creation of smaller groupings and stimulate their political participation and integration into the mainstream. Radicalisation does not always take place from within such sub-groups, but rather from a process that links vulnerable individuals

with remote fringe groups through online and social media interaction. Radicalisation is conditional to a sequence of psychological changes in the minds of affected individuals, while modern technology is the enabler that is irrationally reshaping not only opinions, affection and trust, but also cerebral biology. However, further research is needed to better understand the interaction of digital technology and the impact of social media and modern information and communication means on human psychology and biology.

## **Information Risks**

(Ch. 5) Fake or false news are used to construct the virtual reality that impacts people's attitudes, thinking, behaviour patterns, and lifestyle. They can be loosely described as a process and result of *misinformation* when information is inaccurate or misleading, and *disinformation* when spreading false information aims at deceiving people. False news uses a rather simple mechanism to get to people's consciousness: first, they imitate the shape of the mind frame to penetrate the targets' consciousness; then, they gradually build into that mind frame until they substitute the veracity filters and block "side" information. Deception and manipulation have psycho-linguistic markers. False news usually is characterized by wide usage of superlatives, modal verbs which are referred to the means of exaggeration, while truthful news contains precise information; statistics, money, numbers, comparatives, as well as links to the information sources. Emotions, words, photos and videos are the perfect ingredients added to false news for a "consciousness hijacking cocktail".

(Ch. 6) Since public diplomacy, propaganda and disinformation are intertwined conceptually and practically, digital public diplomacy intensifies mutual accusations of propaganda and therefore also states' efforts to counter it. Disinformation and propaganda often complement each other in Western countries, showing that propaganda is associated to something negative. However, it appears that it does not always have negative connotations in Russia because propaganda is viewed as a legitimate tool to counter foreign influence or meddling in internal affairs of the state.

Public diplomacy (PD) aims at building trust and mutual understanding has become less effective, because people in both the West and Russia have become overly critical of attempts by the other side at building a positive image.

In order to change the current pattern of perceiving information from others, countries should “de-securitize” information to an extent where another country’s promotion of a positive image is not regarded anymore as a threat to national security. It would be better to start communicating *with* each other instead of *at* each other. From this perspective, acceptance that information from abroad could be enlightening instead of threatening must be facilitated.

(Ch. 7) *Memes* occupy a leading position as political messaging vehicles because of their liveliness, brevity, clarity, and precision. However, Internet-users facing *memes* rarely consider the issues which lie behind those pictures. Social networks are the territory for the younger generation which pays more attention to visual information than to printed words. At the same time, they are a vast informative area with huge potential for political manipulation. Manipulative *memes* highlight the mistakes and failures of political opponents of those who designed them. They help to insert doubt in Internet users’ minds about their loyalty to certain political views or parties.

Manipulative *memes* have become core instruments of the information war in politics, as well as for the infiltration of adversarial ideas, views, and interests. To counter the potential negative effects of the manipulative *memes* there is an urgent need to train individuals in critical thinking skills to allow them easily separate facts from false information.

(Ch. 8) Can social media self-regulate to counter their abusive use as platforms for disinformation, or must the state regulate? The efforts of Facebook and Twitter to forestall further government regulation through proactive self-regulation have been examined. Proposed solutions to the disinformation problem included fact-checking, which typically involved either internal teams or the work of external agencies or organizations.

Technological solutions have also been such as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor and curtail disinformation. But AI and content moderators often make mistakes, either by lack of human touch, or by excess of human bias. Therefore, AI and fact-checking may be best thought of as more of a continuum instead of an either/or proposition. Humans should remain in the loop, but only a set of approaches may approximate solutions. Further research is necessary to test technological, self-regulatory, government regulations, moderation, and fact-checking that may produce optimal outcomes.

## Remedies to Risks

(Ch. 9) How is trust generated and maintained? Trust is based on effective communication and accurate information. Thus, trust is not only a function of human relationships, but of interpretation of information as well. The usefulness of exploring how trust manifests itself in algebraic form is that it can predict how malicious actors can manipulate, modify, or otherwise affect information so that they affect trust. Individuals will actually feel better as long as there is harmony between their feelings and decisions. At the current level of data manipulation, one can filter cases that are made by bots, generated websites, news, comments in social media. This stems from the idea that there is always an emotional component when humans are trying to build trust with others. If we focus on that, contents that is generated without human interference can be identified. On the other hand, trust is about shaping one's way of thinking, like a permanent "algorithm", selecting what is worthy of confidence and self-interest.

(Ch. 10) Social media aggravate negative effects by supplying people with selective information which they would probably like, thereby strengthening confirmation bias and polarisation. The ongoing expansion of social media and other digital platforms contributes to political polarisation, and stimulates the growth of both right- and left-wing populism.

Self-declared "progressives" have also been attempting to impose control on media content and the general public discourse, advancing a dogmatic approach tantamount to a weaponization of culture. *Groupthink* including demands to exclude information and opinions which could offend some audiences (cancel culture), "speech codes" and other contemporary practices constitute a threat for the freedom of speech. With such trends gaining momentum, freedom of speech, thought and opinion seems endangered.

However, unless a dictatorship is limiting access to information, the information landscape can still auto-regulate itself, thanks to the professional integrity of journalists, effective work by policy makers, and stronger media competition. A greater level of international cooperation between media on knowledge sharing, joint investigations and other outputs could be beneficial to this solution.



(Ch. 11) *Information warfare* is aimed at creating an image of an enemy and convincing the population of the necessity to defend certain values and strive to achieve certain goals. Precisely because stakeholders of international relations do not have also some *information peacefare* tools, the current situation has brought them to largely over-reliance on *information warfare*. *Information warfare* as a major source of fake news is highly politicized. Increasingly, local media is used as a tool of *information warfare* – a weapon of words that influences public minds, and hence a weapon of operations that affects domestic policies.

By contrast, *information peacefare* would require the stakeholders to develop innovative strategies, doctrines, and toolkits (such as platforms for honest dialogues, and electronic tools) based upon proven practices and the know-how of experienced professionals. Peace is not simply the absence of war but is a continuation of politics with other means. It is also a process in search of socio-economic recovery, reintegration of conflict-affected communities, and successful knowledge-based economy benefiting all the countries in the region. Most importantly, the unilateral projection of peace could become a potent political lever and a game changer in international relations.

(Ch. 12) In the contemporary information landscape, effective *strategic communication*<sup>2</sup> has become a necessity for Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. To that end, they should adopt and fully implement national strategies aimed at combating disinformation and producing coherent narratives towards vulnerable groups of the population. At the regional level, a joint *strategic communication* strategy aimed at developing informational resilience was suggested. Appropriate training on how to detect and respond to information operations should be made available, and a platform for exchange of relevant information and knowledge should be created.

Stakeholders should also establish dialogue with relevant partners from the tech sector on the possibility to have them covered by the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation (signed by e.g. *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Google*). Media literacy education should be introduced in the curricula of both elementary

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<sup>2</sup> Understood as the process designed to counteract the disruptive effects of disinformation and misinformation.

and secondary education schools, and collaboration with fact-checkers and other relevant civil society organizations should be developed.

(Ch. 13) The lack of accreditation of legal entities and natural persons not adhering to the journalistic and ethical standards encouraged an unclear line between accuracy and sensationalism, which resulted in unverified news, unqualified opinions, self-advertising, propaganda, radicalization, misinformation and disinformation. Regulation through legislation would certainly provide a level playing field in the dissemination of information. Practical difficulties might pose additional challenges. On the other hand, self-regulation should be based on moderation of content and conduct, as well as on the enforcement of the Terms and Conditions of the social media providers. By involving the end users through media literacy, self-regulation would achieve a healthy respect for applicable law, individual and collective rights, as well as equality. Balancing democratic freedoms and legal controls is proposed along three lines;

1. States should limit their intervention to matters of public policy alone;
2. Individual accountability and responsibility should be enhanced by the continuous enforcement of the general legal framework on the Internet and a public awareness campaign informing the public on their legal rights and responsibilities, and;
3. Private companies should actively moderate content and online conduct for compliance to applicable terms and conditions.

## **Case Studies**

(Ch. 14) The lack of global legal instruments to regulate the digital field, rethink the role of both state and non-state actors, institutionalize cyberlaw, unify penal systems as well as to clarify the permissible bounds of actions, have exacerbated the existing cyber challenges. Having no effective international legal authorities, governmental bodies make unilateral decisions on applying political and economic pressures in order to regulate the digital ground.

While Western democracies are launching cyber initiatives warning against the spread of Chinese-style internet regulations, the People's Republic of

China stands alone and shapes national cybersecurity legislation in order to protect its core interests. Chinese tech companies have swiftly transformed into global leaders, pushing the 5G market's gurus out and gaining a monopoly on users' attraction. Criticisms against censorship and the collection of private information for the benefit of unknown third parties in cooperation with security services have driven anti-Chinese social platforms' policies.

(Ch. 15) In the context of contemporary conflicts, *strategic communication* is an expression of hybrid action in the fields of information, media, the Internet, and in the wider spectrum of public diplomacy. Its main goal is to influence public opinion and shift the focus of the public's attitude towards cultural values, and eventually on the political system. This kind of activity is also called *hybrid warfare*, and it is a post-modern concept of the low-intensity conflict, which nonlinearly and flexibly combines conventional and unconventional forms of action.

The strategic communications of the United States, Russia, and China in Serbia have been examined to show that Russia is proactive, China is passive, and the USA is stagnant. Serbia should work on raising the general awareness and knowledge of the population towards developing rational relations within the international arena, which shouldn't become burdened with prejudices or stereotypes, and should be free from populism. Given the growing power of Internet and social networks and their influence on the cognitive and behaviour reactions of the people, it is necessary to develop the media literacy education of the population, as well as its awareness about manipulative potentials of harmful cyber activities.

(Ch. 16) *Discursive strategies* are understood as a more or less intentional plan of practice (including discursive practice) to achieve a particular, social, political, psychological or linguistic goal. The central goal of the examined discourse for this case study was the mobilization to vote for far-right parties from Austria and Germany. In spite of both the FPÖ and the AfD having lost votes, there has been one aspect that demonstrated a kind of success of the application of *discursive strategies* and their dissemination via social media channels. The notion of alleged electoral fraud has become firmly anchored in the discourse on elections, especially in the right-wing spectrum. This information has been deliberately used to question the legitimacy of the elections. Through the use of *discursive strategies*, the speaker of the Identitarian

Movement of Austria, Martin Sellner, aims to achieve political distance between the mainstream conservative parties which were defined as hostile *out-group*, and the far-right parties AfD and FPÖ, characterized as belonging to the *in-group*. Through the emphasis on election monitoring by a right-wing extremist organization, he tried to give the right-wing extremist spectrum a democratic face.

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It has been widely acknowledged that students, as well as any other individuals, need particular skills to navigate the very wide range of current news and entertainment media, online social media, and to cope with the dis- and mis-information challenges associated with the contemporary online world. However, it is not clear yet, whether the current national or international education systems are providing students with the competencies necessary to recognize and appropriately respond the information risks emerging from a rather complex, and rapidly changing media landscape. According to RAND experts, media literacy (ML) education has emerged as a potentially powerful tool to countering the *Truth Decay*.<sup>3</sup>

To support *media literacy education*, Alice Huguet, Garrett Baker, Laura S. Hamilton, and John F. Pane proposed **15 standards** to engage in the information ecosystem to curtail truth decay. Although non-exhaustive, these 15 standards have been deemed developmentally appropriate for students, as well as to inform standards for younger grades and adults of all ages. The 15 ML standards have been subdivided into four sub-categories that aligned with the previously defined trends, namely;

1. Increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data;
2. Declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts;
3. Blurred lines between opinion and fact;

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<sup>3</sup> Defined as “the diminishing role that facts, data, and analysis play in our political and civic discourse, which is partly fuelled by the current complex and rapidly evolving media and digital technology ecosystem.” Kavanagh and Rich, “Countering Truth Decay”, *RAND Corporation*, (2018), <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay.html>.

4. Increased volume and influence of opinion and personal experience over facts.<sup>4</sup>

To address the first sub-category, RAND proposes the following media literacy standards. First, the ability to identify gaps in one's own or in others' knowledge or understanding (**S1**). Next, RAND suggests strategies to fill those knowledge gaps, such as connecting with experts in a topic, seeking information in a library, or using search engines to find additional perspectives (**S2**). Importantly, when seeking to augment knowledge, one must also understand how modern information sources and tools can limit or prioritize available facts and perspectives (**S3**).

Public trust in journalistic outlets, universities, and other research institutions is plummeting. The sub-category of standards connected to declining trust should focus on understanding the sources of information and their motivations. Therefore, the public must be able to recognize the expertise of individuals and organizations presenting information and understand why a particular party might be publishing or sharing that information; is it an honest effort to disseminate facts or is it driven by political, ideological, or economic interests? (**S4**).

Furthermore, understanding the expertise and motivations of the sources related to the processes that contribute to various information products is important (**S5**); consumers must also evaluate information for bias, deception, and manipulation more generally, as techniques used to spread misinformation and disinformation (**S6**).

Finally, it is essential that individuals apprehend the context within which information is produced. (**S7**).

The second sub-category related to the blurring lines between opinions and facts should focus on evaluating the credibility of information and the soundness of arguments.

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<sup>4</sup> Kavanagh and Rich, "Countering Truth Decay," *RAND Corporation*, (2018).

As technology continues to develop, the public must become aware of how images, video, and audio can be manipulated to mislead the public (**S8**). Having the knowledge that this technology exists is just as important as having the ability to specifically identify “fakes”. Individuals should be able to trace the logic of an argument by analysing whether evidence was adequate and could be independently confirmed, and where there might be gaps (**S9**). To better discriminate opinion from fact, RAND suggests comparing multiple viewpoints on a single topic and using the evidence for each viewpoint to determine how to manage discrepancies (**S10**). In addition, recognizing how media and information act as emotional triggers which supersede intellectual reflection is essential. (**S11**).

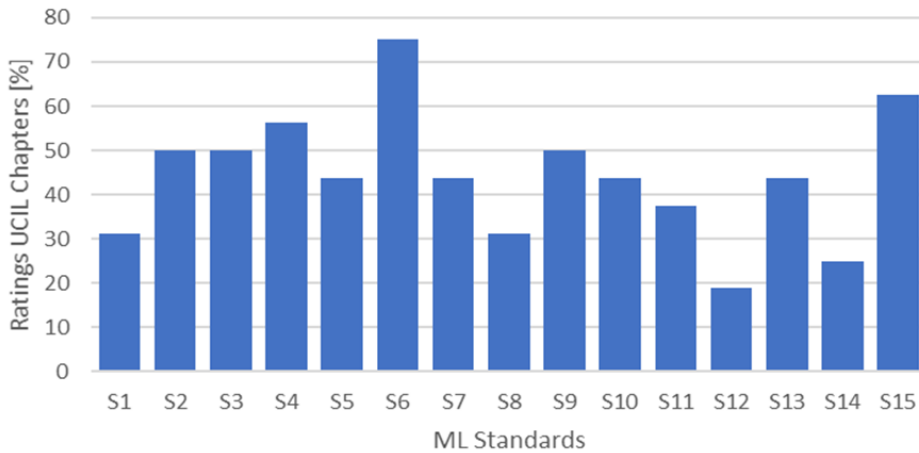
The sub-category pertaining to handle an over-abundance of opinion and personal experience focuses on media literacy standards that focus on individual ability to responsibly anticipate the impact of information sharing and propagation. This ability incorporates the power of opinion and personal experience over facts as a standard of media literacy. (**S12**). Standards also require individuals to recognize their own biases and perspectives before contributing commentary or information to ongoing public conversations (**S13**).

Openness to adapting one’s viewpoint in the face of new information therefore becomes critical (**S14**). Lastly, the actions that the individuals take in response to information should be informed by evidence and context, so that they are able to participate responsibly in the broader society (**S15**).

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We have measured the relevance of the 16 chapters of this book against the 15 media literacy education standards proposed by the RAND Study. To that end, we have checked up on how many of the chapters of this handbook included usable content relevant to each standard presented here above. The results are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Rating UCIL Chapters against Media Literacy Standards



From the analysis of this data, we conclude that six out of 15 ML education standards have been covered in more than half of the chapters of this book. This is an outstanding achievement for each of the contributing authors, as authors weren't specifically asked to match RAND standards.

Obviously, each author who touched upon certain skills corresponding to the respective media literacy standards has done it from a different angle. This will likely help in broadening the understanding of those skills by the readers. This is why we concluded that the media literacy standards Nos. 2,3,4,6,9 and 15 have been **“well covered”** within the overall content of this book. Media literacy standards, Nos. 1,5,7,8,10,11 and 13, were addressed in 30 to 49 % of the chapters of this book, and were considered as **“sufficiently covered”**. While only two media literacy standards (Nos. 12,14) were probably **“insufficiently covered”** for having met coverage ratings under 30 % of the chapters of the book.

Taking into account this self-assessment of the coverage ratings for each of the media literacy education standards considered, the Editors would like to express their gratitude and satisfaction with the most positive results of this project. We are confident this handbook to be a useful supportive instrument for educators involved in developing media literacy skills in individual media end-users, and in particular in students from civilian and military education institutions.

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Once again, the editors thank our contributors and translators who have agreed to be recognized here.

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The socio-political and scientific advancement of democracy depends upon the search for truth, by way of the measured use of our critical faculties for thinking and debating. As a result, it is those very democratic principles and scientific advancements that also provide us with freedom of expression and freedom of the media, taken in the absolute. In times of ever changing “truths”, our societies have become unsure of the information on which they rely to make informed and fact-based socio-political decisions.

This book describes and analyses the content of the current information landscape, explains how information content shapes our perception, and provides case studies and remedies to prevent the confusion of fact and fakery.

**ISBN: 978-3-903359-49-9**

