

HOW CAN WE AVOID THE FIGHT AGAINST DISINFORMATION BECOMING DISINFORMATION ITSELF?

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE
METHODOLOGY OF INFORMATION
WARFARE ANALYSIS

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Introduction



In terms of security policy, **disinformation** that is directly or indirectly controlled by foreign states is categorized as a hybrid threat. The category of hybrid threats includes the manipulation of public opinion by spreading disinformation and propaganda online, as well as other forms of foreign interference.

The question is how do we study this phenomenon? What are the best means? In my paper, I will focus on methodology, but also on the consequences of using inappropriate methods of analysis.

The final thesis of the article is that without the right methodology, the war against disinformation can turn into the biggest disinformation.

1. The triad of information warfare thinking



We live in societies in which mistrust/suspicion/disbelief is the default option. We do not trust our governments, if you look at the surveys – trust in EU institutions is declining, we do not trust our media, mainstream parties, mainstream media, etc.

What should be done?

The methodology for analysing information warfare is still in its infancy. In this article, we will outline the three analytical dimensions developed in our research. We will call them the triad of information warfare thinking.

The first is what we call **two-step thinking**. The second concerns the crucial importance of the **trust/distrust** dichotomy in any investigation of information warfare, or in responding to and resisting it. The third dimension is that of **geopolitics of distrust**. All three elements are interrelated and provide us with a meaningful analytical perspective for researching disinformation.

2. Source and the Sender

The theory: Magic Bullet Or Hypodermic Needle Theory Of Communication

Primary source misinformation refers to the spread of inaccurate or misleading information through original, firsthand accounts or documents. This differs from secondary source misinformation, which involves analysis or interpretation of primary sources that may introduce bias or inaccuracies. Understanding this distinction is crucial for evaluating the reliability of information and combating the spread of misinformation.

The assumption is that the sender is the main thing.

In the mid-1930s, media scholars found the first theory on Media Effects and Media Behaviors. During World War II, the media played a vital role in both the United States and Germany in influencing people's minds. The media (magic gun) fired the message directly into the audience's head without their knowledge.

The message caused an instant reaction from the audience's mind without any hesitation, which is called the **"Magic Bullet Theory"**. The media (needle) injects the message into the audience's mind and causes changes in the audience's behavior and psyche towards the message. The audience is passive and cannot resist the media message, which is called the **"Hypodermic Needle Theory"**. Both theories deal with the impact of media messages on the audience's mind and how the audience reacts to the message without hesitation.

Sociologists work with what is called "Thomas' theorem." The Thomas theorem is a theory of sociology which was formulated in 1928 by William Isaac Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas: **If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences**. In other words, the interpretation of a situation causes the action.

This interpretation is not objective. This says that "a false fact, perceived as real, becomes real through consequences". The best-known application of this theorem is the attack against a bank or a financial-banking system. A series of rumors related to a bank that would be bankrupt even though it is not (the false fact), once believed by the public (perceived as real) leads to the action of the depositors to withdraw their money, simultaneously and untimely, from the banks. As a result, the bank goes bankrupt (the false fact becomes real through consequences). This example, and many others, poorly digested and hastily used, fuel the idea that propaganda and false rumors can decisively influence social life on all its levels.

One of the ideas that often underlies analyses of propaganda and/or information warfare is the presumption of their omnipotence. This way of thinking is the worst thing that could happen to the Euro-Atlantic space in general and to Europe in particular.

The idea of the omnipotence of propaganda actually obscures the societal tensions that characterize our Euro-Atlantic societies. The potential effectiveness of propaganda is directly proportional to these tensions.

3. *The Reciever*

In reality, it is not like that.

This is a very poor model. When American researchers asked Japanese prisoners of World War II how they reacted to the leaflets dropped from planes before the battle telling them that Japan had been defeated and that the emperor had betrayed them, so it was useless to continue resisting, their answer, which stunned the researchers, was that they fought even harder! What was believed by some to be demoralizing propaganda actually had the opposite effect.

And the error that is the basis of this way of thinking can also be seen in the previous example: in order for the initial rumor (the bank is bankrupt or insolvent) to be perceived as real, there must have already existed, in the population, mistrust and the feeling of the precariousness of the financial-banking system and, therefore, of the respective bank.

In a state where trust in this system is deep and justified, such a rumor campaign has extremely low chances of leading to results like those described above.

In other words, there is a need for a previous crisis, at the level of social trust, which would generate the consequences suggested above. Before the actual crisis—the collapse of the bank—there must be another crisis, less visible but essential: the crisis of confidence.

We therefore need, instead of simplistic and, sociologically speaking, uneducated causality, a two-step approach. The first level is to investigate the degree of social trust in the institutions of a state or a larger entity (the EU, NATO, etc.). When this is solid, the chances of success of destabilization actions by an external enemy through manipulation or media attacks are reduced. When the society in question is already in crisis, when the wounds are open, when the level of trust in institutions and politicians (in the "System") is collapsing—then external intervention has an undeniable chance of changing the profile of a society. Outside of this initial crisis, external intervention will only reach an irrelevant and unrepresentative percentage of the population (modern states are large enough to find a hundred supporters for anything!), but it cannot dismantle or change the societal profile.

The first level concerns sociological analysis, the second the analysis of manipulation and disinformation operations.

4. Two-Step Thinking



We now have a suitable framework for better understanding what is happening in our societies in relation to disinformation and manipulation. The best definition of an intelligent person is that they do not confuse plans. In this case, neither should analysis. Thinking only about the second level (manipulation, disinformation, etc.) means not seeing the forest for the trees or turning effects into causes, and vice versa.

A relevant example: discussions about Russia's involvement in the US elections. In line with what we have discussed here, these discussions too often reveal a profound sociological ignorance. The idea that Russia made Trump president—aside from the fact that it says exactly what Russia wants to be said about itself!—is a perfect illustration of the flawed thinking we have analyzed above. In this scenario, neither deep public discontent, nor disappointment in the American system, nor Hillary Clinton's virulent anti-charisma (who, in Donald Trump's words, could not gather crowds without being led by the hand by an established celebrity) matter. Nothing. It's all about “fake news,” manipulation, and disinformation. And that's it.

The situation in the US is doubly absurd, even comical, if it weren't for the serious consequences. To say that Trump won because of “fake news” delivered insidiously by Russian hackers borders on the absurd and, sociologically, takes us back almost 100 years to the early days of communication sociology, when the world was convinced that a well-targeted media injection could change anything, anytime, anywhere. Hence the then famous theories of the “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle,” based on a simplistic causality: the sender transmits, the receiver passively receives.

Public debates about Russia's omnipotence are tacitly based on these naive assumptions, according to which certain media messages can do anything. That (otherwise) seductive Russia Today, Sputnik, and other insidious channels, including social media, can change realities. This is obviously a lie by exaggeration.

And, in the American case, a profound contradiction in terms. If the Russian media and propaganda were able, supposedly, to radically change voting behavior in favor of Donald Trump, how is it that virtually ALL mainstream media in the US (with rare exceptions), from CNN to the New York Times, plus Hollywood with all its celebrities, each with Facebook accounts with tens of millions of followers, failed to change the electoral appetite of the same public? How many hackers would it have taken to hijack Robert De Niro's anti-Trump message, broadcast and commented on at peak times by all American television

stations, published on all newspaper websites and widely shared on social media? The question is rhetorical. In reality, Donald Trump's victory is the purest expression not of the superpower of the “official” (system) media, but of its impotence in certain circumstances. America did not see itself well in Europe because of CNN. That is a reality.

But in America, it did see itself. And Americans voted for Trump despite colossal and unprecedented media pressure in favor of Hillary Clinton. This is where any serious discussion should start.

In Europe, things are the same. To believe that Russia is changing everything through manipulation and that the EU will fall apart because of this is a gross mistake. Of course Russia is trying to do this—it's in its nature and in the nature of things!—but if it succeeds, it will not be only because it is trying, but (also) because it is knocking on open doors. In this case, Russian propaganda has, as sociologists say, a reinforcing effect.

And in Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel, in order to win again, must reinvent herself, including with regard to the famous and sadly memorable political "Willkommenskultur" (welcome culture). If she wins tomorrow, Angela Merkel will certainly not have the same political agenda as yesterday. And this is not because of Russian hackers, but because of deeper European developments, a dangerous decline in trust in European leaders and in the European project, which cannot leave Germany unaffected at the polls. And these things exist. They are the real challenges facing the Euro-Atlantic world, regardless of Russia's efforts to undermine it at any given moment.

One example: everyone in Europe knows that the National Front was financed by Moscow. The French have also found this out, without a doubt. Despite this, the leader of this party was at the top of the polls for a long time, only to lose the election by a significant margin. One thing should be remembered: the French electorate did not vote for Le Pen because she was financed by the Russians, but the Russians financed her and invited her to the Kremlin because she was voted for by the French... Which is something else entirely.

The main task of European leaders is not just to fight Russian propaganda, but—above all!—to increase the confidence of European citizens in European institutions and the European project. This is where everything must start. You cannot put the cart (the fight against propaganda) before the horse (the fight against mistrust).

5. Trust/mistrust

Why the West cannot wage an information war in Russia.

The best example of understanding the importance of the trust/distrust dichotomy **is the West's inability to dismantle the Russian Federation through international disinformation war.** The West is richer, more powerful, and more technologically advanced than the Russian Federation. And yet, an information war against Russia would be doomed to failure.

Beyond the tech stuff, there are two main things in an info war: **trust in the source and the target community not trusting their own leaders.** Why did Romanians listen to radio stations like Radio Free Europe and Voice of America with almost religious

devotion before 1989? Because these two fundamental conditions were met: Romanians trusted the West and did not love their leaders. In other words, they trusted the source and did not trust the official messages.

Today's Russian Federation is the complete opposite. On the one hand, it does not trust the West, and on the other, it (still) loves its leaders. Hence the conclusion that, regardless of the skill and subtlety of any messages involved in a Western information warfare campaign, they would not achieve their goal.

To a large extent, Russians are relatively immune to Western propaganda, even if they recognize the West's strength and superiority, even if they spend their vacations in the West and send their children there to school. For now, the image of the 10 years of Yeltsin's rule, the so-called "bad years," when Western dominance was, at least in the public perception, decisive, is too strong. Since they suspect the West of perfidy every time, it is difficult to manipulate them.

Therefore, the approach can only be indirect. From this perspective, the most effective operation against Russia was President Trump's decision to bomb strategic targets in Syria (April 7, 2017). This undermined, at least for the moment, confidence in Russia's leaders, who were left without a response. When trust in Putin is undermined, the population will be more open to receiving certain messages from the West. When the question arises, "What if Putin is wrong, what if the West is right?", Russia becomes permeable to such messages—it is not now. That is why Russia must be approached differently, because it cannot be done with the classic tools of information warfare.

6. *Information/disinformation is about supply and demand*

Focusing on the supplied side not on the demand side: rationalisation etc. Disinformation is a process of rationalisation.

When I no longer trust the government, political leaders, the EU, Russia, etc., what I do is look to the public space, for messages that confirm my assumptions or beliefs.

What do governments that feel they have lost the trust of the population do? They start to ban or diminish counter-messages or criticism (they close television stations, stop funding critical TV or radio stations, shut down websites, etc.). This is a huge mistake.

Because those who are already against the government will not change their minds or regain their trust in the government, and will start looking for articles or messages criticizing the government from even more distant, external, and harder to control sources.

More specifically, I will take an example from my own area. If the EU tries to play the ban and control card, this will not increase trust in the EU. On the contrary!

This is precisely what will make people go looking for information that confirms their beliefs and convictions outside the EU. In other words, this is precisely what will drive them towards China, Russia, etc.

So the EU's intention to combat Russian disinformation through bans will drive people into the arms of... Russia!

7. Geopolitics of Mistrust

The last element of the analysis is what we call the geopolitics of mistrust. These are areas where the population has a low level of trust in its own elites, its own institutions, and its own founding projects. These areas can be nations, but also larger entities such as the European Union.

When we identify large areas marked by such moods among the population, those areas can become strategic targets and are, from the perspective of information warfare, vulnerable. In this situation, we are talking about a veritable geopolitics of mistrust that identifies areas and territories according to the criteria suggested above.

8. Conclusions: The obsession with propaganda can become... propaganda

Does propaganda exist? Of course it does. And it will continue to exist. Should it be combated? Of course. But our attitude towards it must be carefully calibrated. The effectiveness of propaganda/disinformation is directly proportional to the crises of trust in our societies. Not focusing on these and considering only the second level to be essential is not just a sociological mistake or an excuse for European politicians, but a major strategic trap.

If it persists in this strategic trap, the Euro-Atlantic space will only repeat the mistakes of the USSR in its confrontation with the West. The USSR collapsed without firing a shot. By ignoring its deep internal contradictions, economic crisis, and chronic lack of trust among its citizens in their "homeland," Moscow fell into traps and embarked on foreign adventures or confrontations with America ("the Star Wars") that it could not win. It was a completely wrong assessment that could not overcome the contradictions of the system and the crisis of internal confidence.

The discussion about propaganda, manipulation, and information warfare is essential, but we must be aware that these are by no means the only instruments that account for the developments in the world around us.

The paradox of paradoxes: the exclusive and obsessive focus on propaganda and disinformation can itself become an exercise in propaganda. It may sound paradoxical, but it is not prohibition, but freedom of speech or freedom of expression that is a much better means of keeping citizens away from foreign sources of disinformation.



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