

Can ethics, standards and liberties fight disinformation?

The final day of the Information Disorder During a War Infodemic Forum went to the heart of institutional practices that enable disinformation.

Disinformation is often rightfully viewed as the result of targeted campaigns that aim to alter public opinion. This is not always the case, though. Disinformation can be just as easily a side-effect of government officials who try to 'spin' major issues so that they end up serving a broader agenda. Then, even when it is an explicit aim, the exploits that allow for it to spread are often overlooked.

One of these exploits, if not the main one, is the media's inability or unwillingness to counter it. And in that respect, the third and final day of the Information Disorder During a War Infodemic Forum, which ended with a broader discussion on the political and institutional failings that enable the spread of disinformation kicked off with an unexpected case study: Greece.

Journalist Katerina Oikonomakou has been investigating Russian propaganda for years. She states that Greece has been extremely susceptible to it. "It goes back many years, but since 2014 [when Russia invaded and annexed Crimea], it has intensified", Ms. Oikonomakou stated. "Even now, if you take to the streets and survey people at random, you'd be surprised to see that many will say that people in the Donbas region were not allowed to speak Russian in public, that they were persecuted by the Ukrainian government and were living in fear".

Greek media, according to Ms. Oikonomakou, have not attempted so far to research and counter Russian propaganda in a systematic manner. "Greek journalists are not encouraged to do research and talk about grey areas and controversial issues", she says. When combining this problem with the public's knowledge of Russia in general, "based on myth and a foggy perception of History and of assumed cultural commonalities", as well as the largely justified lack of trust in Greek media, a fertile ground for Russian propaganda to flourish is created.

Part of the fault for this situation lies on Greek correspondents in Moscow who Ms. Oikonomakou believes they "have been and still are reproducing the announcements of the Kremlin and Russian state media" and have failed to ever report on human rights violations inside Russia.

Then, the mistrust of Greek media has led many people to “self-proclaimed, alternative and anti-establishment media” that do not undergo any scrutiny, with their own public not demanding of them to prove their claims or check their sources. Such outlets come in two brands: they are either affiliated with businessmen and far-right political parties and are not generally considered reliable (“their audience behave more like religious fanatics”) or websites whose target audience is the progressive Left, who care about honest reporting. These latter websites are often shaped around the belief that western media cannot be trusted.

Ms. Oikonomakou believes that the dissemination of Russian propaganda on social media has been so prolific that deeper strategies are required. “It is not enough anymore to fact-check events, we now have to put these events in context”, she added. Russian propaganda is currently viewed in Greece as another valid viewpoint that warrants the same respect, time and space as any other. For Ms. Oikonomakou this should not be happening, since every time journalists include the Kremlin’s line in their reports, “they are not reporting on discoverable facts, they are reporting on opinions”.

The news segments produced by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in Greek media might have failed for Katerina Oikonomakou to convey the reality of war, but a war does not only produce images for viewers from a distance. It also led real people, in flesh and blood, to abandon their homes and become refugees in other countries. The latest data by the UNHCR estimates that roughly 7,7 million people have fled Ukraine in search of safer destinations.

Lefteris Papayiannakis has specialized in migration both through his studies, as well as his practical experience in the field. The former head of the Migrant Integration Council of the City of Athens, he currently serves as Director of the Greek Council for Refugees, an NGO that has been advocating for refugees since 1989.

A few months prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a Ukrainian friend had complained to him that she had grown weary of always talking about refugees and that they should focus on other problems too. In May 2022, three months after the invasion, she called to ask how the reception of Ukrainian refugees in Greece was going and he reminded her of the conversation they had earlier. “I am biting my tongue”, she replied. “You can become a refugee in an instant, in a day, in a few hours.”

Ukrainians might have become refugees, but they would not identify as that. Mr. Papayiannakis notes how they tend to avoid describing themselves as ‘refugees’, preferring to call themselves ‘displaced’. This choice feeds into the narratives promoted by officials, especially those of the Greek government that “the Ukrainians are the real refugees, the ones deserving to be called refugees - implying that the others are not ‘real’ refugees”, but rather economic migrants. Apart from the dangerous undertones of this division, the fact that most refugees are people of Arabic or African descent, the difference in language is weaved together with the double standard held in the European Union, which enabled the asylum process for Ukrainian refugees, but has been more hostile towards refugees who have been fleeing the Middle East since 2015.

This double standard might become all the more difficult as time moves on. Mr. Papayiannakis wonders how this divisive rhetoric will affect the reception of Russian refugees who are bound to follow, a problem that was apparent also in the reception of Turkish refugees earlier. The contradictions that are inherent in the Greek refugee policy could be expected to erupt and the narratives promoted by officials highlight that. Illegal pushbacks in Greece are called ‘active deterrence’. The attempt of refugees from Turkey to cross into Greece through Evros in 2020 was termed ‘hybrid war’ – the same rhetoric that would be employed later against refugees in the border between Poland and Belarus.

“We are very eager to throw people under the bus and to throw human rights out the window in order to justify our narrative”, Mr. Papayiannakis noted. “This terminology is used to make society accept that”.

Mr. Papayiannakis would return later in the day as the moderator of a talk by journalist Stavros Malichudis of the independent investigative website Solomon, who elaborated on the ways disinformation has become a tool for Greek government officials to weaponize against refugees.

Mr. Malichudis was even more specific on the steps taken by members of the Greek government to build and distribute the rhetoric of ‘real’ refugees against the implied ‘fake’ ones. This was the subject of a story published in Solomon, in which the claims made by the Minister of Migration and government MP’s were compared to the actual data provided by experts, the UNHCR and the EU.

The motive behind Solomon’s investigation was given from the start: “We decided to fact-check claims of the government because it’s different when an anonymous account or a troll writes something on Twitter and it’s different when elected officials and people in power spread fake news”. The statements that Solomon studied regarded refugees directly, but also went into the terrain of International Law, Ukraine, NGO’s and International Organizations.

The distinction between ‘real’ and other refugees had been introduced by none other than the Minister of Migration Notis Mitarachi on morning TV. For Mr. Malichudis, “the statement had less to do with people from Ukraine who were fleeing danger and was mostly centered on other people reaching Greece”. In order to refute Mitarachi’s claims, Solomon revisited the Geneva Convention which defines the international legal standard for refugees and consulted legal experts on its interpretation.

The Convention defines as a refugee deserving international protection any person outside their country of origin who is fleeing violence and conflict. When asked to comment on Mitarachi’s interpretation, Chatham House Researcher Anna-Iasmi Vallianatou told Solomon outright that “the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘not-real’ refugees serves political expediency and has no basis in International or European law”.

Another claim that Mitarachi made in the Greek Parliament was that asylum seekers who “come from distant countries and continents, passing through one or more countries, are inadmissible according to international law”. This would mean for example that a person fleeing Afghanistan is not eligible for asylum in Greece. Solomon once again reached out to the UNHCR and studied any and all available official data. As it happens, the official recognition rate in Greece for people fleeing the Middle East ranged between 59.3% for refugees from Iran to 99.3% for refugees from Syria.

Other members of the government have also made outrageous claims that Solomon would debunk. Two days after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine, Vassilis Kikilias took to Twitter to claim that NGOs who are working with refugees on the islands of the northeastern Aegean should head to Ukraine to help the humanitarian crisis. The context of his statement fed to the negative perception of human rights NGOs that the government promotes in public. Solomon showed that the NGOs who were active in the Greek islands, were active in Ukraine as well.

Giorgos Koumoutsakos, an MP with the party currently in government and former Deputy Minister of Migration until 2021, repeated Kikilias’ claims, this time targeting specifically the International Red Cross and the UN for being absent in Ukraine - something that was easily disputed. “With some basic common sense we can understand that these organizations were in Ukraine because this is why they were created”, Mr. Malichudis added.

All these instances show that any development in any part of the world can be made to serve agendas elsewhere. For Mr. Malichudis, the statements he fact-checked make the Russian Invasion of Ukraine “a good example of how a situation of crisis or war many kilometres away can be used, not only for claims related to Ukraine, but also in a rhetoric that promotes goals, assumptions and perceptions here as well.”

In between the two conversations about the ways the Greek government’s falsifying rhetoric on Ukrainian refugees helps establish the double standard for people fleeing different parts of the world, the Forum had returned to the misconceptions born inside the practice of journalism.

Before Ljubisa Vrancev became the co-founder of Symbiosis, he was a radio host in Pancevo, Serbia during the War that ravaged Yugoslavia in the 1990s, ending with the bombings of 1999. His radio show was on at 3 pm in the afternoon. On the day the NATO bombings started, he employed his capacity for black humor and wished his listeners a “good bomb day”. In the evening, the first bomb dropped in Pancevo.

His experience of reporting on the war led Mr. Vrancev to understand the importance of journalistic ethics in covering conflict and this was the subject of his presentation at the Information Disorder Forum.

It all begins with the ownership of media, for Mr. Vrancev. He is still thankful that the owners of the station he worked for allowed its employees to be objective, professional and unbiased at the peak of a very difficult situation. Later on, after the conflict had ended, he contemplated this experience and turned it into a code that sets the ethical standards for war

reporting, built on the ideas that journalists should be committed to the truth, that information by military and paramilitary groups is very likely to be propaganda and that reporting should not hide or exaggerate the causes, consequences and context of each war.

The objective reporting that Mr. Vrancev's station followed, which abstained from any qualifiers on the subjects of conflict, was very well-received and people started tuning in to follow their coverage of the war. The journalistic roster of the radio thought about everything from the privacy that grief deserved to the importance of the journalist having available the financial and transportation means needed to cover the war. Even the music they played in breaks was carefully chosen to be only instrumentals, since any lyrics could be interpreted as picking sides. "Raising the temperature of the public is not good for the media itself that wants to pass its message", Mr. Vrancev said.

Their preparedness allowed them to survive the collapse of the electricity grid, as they had secured electricity generators that could keep them going. "You would turn on the radio and it would be only us and then silence".

Pancevo is located only 10 Km from Belgrade which was the center of the war in Serbia and since the radio station also reached Belgrade, the state was quick to react. In the first days of the bombings, all independent media in Belgrade were shut down by the police. The editor and owner of the biggest independent newspaper was killed on Christmas of 1999 by what appears to have been a secret service operation. The murder had been announced before it happened in another newspaper.

"Extreme pressure had been exerted by the state and of course, very soon, the police came to close us", Mr. Vrancev remembers. It was the personal connections of the director and the chief editor with the Army that stopped the police – military personnel deterred the police and allowed them to continue broadcasting. "We made sure not to provoke any repression. We knew that we could be closed at any time", something which was helped by the standards on objectivity they were following.

"It was a real experience to live through this" he concluded. "The commitment of the people that were listening to us was really strong. It was really important for us, we got a lot of support and it really proved that following standards and being professional **is** the way to create an environment in which people really trust you".

Thodoris Chondroyiannos is an investigative journalist with Reporters United, but his presentation was not about any specific aspect of journalism. Instead, as a fitting send-off to the three-day event, it became a conversation on an issue that had not been adequately touched upon: free speech.

Mr. Chondroyiannos works as a journalist in a country that Reporters Sans Frontieres have ranked at the bottom among European countries in their annual Press Freedom Index in 2022. As one of the journalists who uncovered the government wiretap scandal in this environment, he was "honored" with a SLAPP lawsuit from the director of the Greek Prime Minister's office, Grigoris Dimitriadis.

In this suffocating atmosphere for journalism, Mr. Chondroyiannos might be right to be worried about the criminalization of 'fake news'. In 2021, the Greek government, under whose time the already problematic conditions in Greece for journalists have imploded, amended the Greek penal code so that everyone who is judged to have been disseminating fake news that spread "concern or fear among citizens" or "shake public confidence in the national economy, the country's defense capacity or public health" will face imprisonment and a fine. The law also includes a special provision for the press, in which, if the action has been committed repeatedly, the penalty will be heavier and also extend to the owner and publisher.

"For me this is not the way to tackle fake news", Mr. Chondroyiannos said of the tendency to criminalize fake news that is becoming popular all over Europe, but other places too, like Russia in which it has been used to tackle opinion and information that goes against the Kremlin. "It is first of all, ineffective – you don't talk to people", he adds. "It's also quite dangerous in a democracy to give the authorities the capacity to decide what is fake news and what is not. I don't know why anyone would think this is a good idea."

This criminalization of fake news goes against the fundamentals of liberal democracy in which citizens and not the state are the subject and this is why rights like the freedom of speech and the right to be informed were established. "If we seriously take into account these rights, it goes against the practice of a government saying I will punish what I think is fake news. We should instead move in the opposite direction, giving citizens, activists, journalists, everyone the opportunity to tell the truth and this is the way to tackle fake news."

His speech ended by citing multiple aspects of the Greek institutional framework that undermine free speech and especially journalism: whistleblowers are not legally protected, SLAPP lawsuits are completely unfettered and the surveillance of journalists by the secret services leads to the limiting of their sources, since they are afraid to talk to a journalist who they presume is being followed. What Greece needs for Mr. Chondroyiannos, is "a real framework for the protection of free speech."

Mr. Chondroyiannos' presentation had touched the deepest layer of the conversation on fake news. As such, the debate on whether the limits of this free speech should exist and where they should be placed reached at the heart of modern democracy. After three days, the Information Disorder During a War Infodemic forum had managed to take the quest for truth from the ground of war zones to established and independent media, to ethics, politics and beyond.

"I think we have entered very dangerous times", Despina Syrri from Symbiosis who organized the forum said in her closing remarks. "The kick-off of the match might have been the invasion of Ukraine but it brought to the fore that really liberal democracies and all the post-World War II agreements, arrangements and negotiated settlements have proved to be wanting and out of touch".

“It’s a changed way of life and we still don’t know how to deal with it”, she added. “Big part of it is on the one hand the clampdown on the most vulnerable which is becoming a clampdown on citizens, the shrinking of civil society and the attacks on investigative journalists. But also this goes hand-in-hand with driving the public into apathy, indifference and non-participation – and these are very worrying things”.