

How narratives, mechanisms and media are fueling Information Disorder

The first day of the 'Information Disorder During a War Infodemic' forum explored the various channels propagandists use to reach people and connect with them.

"It is another type of war which undermines our beliefs and distorts our opinions". One could not ask for better justification for hosting such a forum than the words that Constantinos Tsoutsoplides chose to use while launching the proceedings.

'Information Disorder During a War Infodemic' ran for three days, from September 21 to 23, in a bright room with an Old World charm in the very centre of Athens, inside the European Parliament Liaison Office in Greece, over which Mr. Tsoutsoplides presides and across the imposing scenery of the Greek Parliament. Organised by Symbiosis and supported by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Thessaloniki, the forum adhered to the immediate experience of both organisations. The Moscow office of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung was evicted following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, while the founders of the Council of Europe's Schools of Political Studies, such as the one operated by Symbiosis in Greece, who began the concept in Moscow thirty years ago, are today dissidents and in exile from their own country. Next to them, the founder of the Turkish School is now serving 18 years in prison in Turkey.

"There was one criterion in selecting you as speakers and this is your ability to dare", Despina Syrri, co-founder of Symbiosis told the participants. The forum brought together journalists, academics, officials, activists and experts on the same round table, leading to fruitful exchanges on the hyperreality constructed by the online dissemination of what used to be described as 'fake news', but has now become something more sinister, violent and invasive.

This is why the term 'fake news' itself, so common it was anointed Word of the Year by multiple dictionaries a few years ago, can now be considered obsolete. At the same time when dictionary publishers were recognizing its impact, in 2018, a [report](#) by the Council of Europe that sought to establish a framework for countering disinformation, stated outright that it was time to do away with the term. The reasons given by the authors were twofold: on the one hand they began to find it inadequate to describe the complexity of the pollution that had taken over the public sphere; and it had also "begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable".

'Fake news' had been turned on its head. It was weaponized against the same free press that had made it a part of everyday conversation and suddenly, the real world it was referring to had blown up. Both the Covid-19 global pandemic, as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to an all-out war about truth and accuracy, making terms like "information warfare" or

“information frontline” more frequent and less metaphorical. ‘Information disorder’, the augmented successor of ‘fake news’ proposed by the CoE report, became a precise name for the virulence, magnitude and speed with which hyper-effective and streamlined propaganda dissemination channels intercept people’s understanding of the world until they are completely detached from it.

But how does this happen? Philosopher Mikhail Minakov of the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in the US, in the first presentation of the forum ascribes it to the power of narratives, which are anything but absent from the war in Ukraine. Narratives for Professor Minakov exceed the limits of time, they “mark, organise and clarify temporal experience”. They are not about the present, but rather the past, present and future all at once. As part of human imagination, narratives reconcile sentiment with reason and provide meaning - “they make things interesting”.

Yet in the case of the narratives that enveloped and framed Russia’s war in Ukraine, there are dynamics and directions that are not always apparent. The emergent narrative of solidarity with Ukraine among the West that Professor Minakov cited as an example, is an indication of these contradictions. “Not all states that support the West and Ukraine are democracies”, he said. “However they share the narrative that autocracies should be limited”. This narrative that emerges, though, is still about war. As is Vladimir Putin’s view of the present situation as a global war with the West, which many countries in the Global South share. The same is true of the Ukrainian narrative also: it is one of total war against Russia.

But there are other possible narratives that could be about peace and prosperity. This is for Professor Minakov an element that the European narrative has temporarily abandoned. Remembering what Europeanisation used to mean, might be a solution for the “deficit of future vision” among member-states. Although it is still lacking, looking into what a victory for Ukraine means for political freedom, social inclusion and legal order could be a starting point in order to rebuild the future.

This theoretical proposal resonated with participants of the forum and the concept of narratives as means for people to relate with their experience and also as the ideology that drives their behaviour would be repeated often for the remaining sessions.

It is precisely the capacity of narratives to drive behaviour that has led to the creation of propaganda networks across the world like never before and as such, attempts to understand how these narratives enter public consciousness have also flourished. The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) led by the European University Institute in Florence is one of the most prominent initiatives that monitor, analyse and advise against the dissemination of disinformation worldwide. An international network of fact-checkers, media literacy experts and academic researchers with hubs in many different countries that take information disorder phenomena apart and use their insights from the process to provide

fact-checkers everywhere with tools that will help them navigate this unwelcoming new landscape.

Secretary-general and coordinator of EDMO Paula Gori joined the conversation online to explain the valuable work that the Observatory has carried out. During its existence, EDMO has studied everything from disinformation patterns that repeat across the world, to the mental well-being of investigators and issues of cybersecurity. EDMO's task forces deal with specific areas of disinformation, the latest one of which is Russia's war in Ukraine and have produced guidelines and recommendations for platforms and experts who act both in the digital and the real world in favour of media literacy and accuracy. The fact that the website of the Observatory was hacked for a day, shows the importance and impact of its work.

"Disinformation is not new, the speed and impact online is new" said Ms. Gori in a lively dialogue with the rest of the participants who were keen to be informed on everything from techniques that citizens should develop to recognize disinformation to the effectiveness of national legislative attempts against disinformation, the crisis of journalism and the particularities of government propaganda. Ms. Gori's presentation and later remarks showed that the problem of information disorder was initially considered much narrower than it turned out to be. "In the beginning everyone was thinking disinformation was only about influencing elections. Then Covid arrived", she added.

Mikhail Minakov had provided the historical and social aspect of how people relate to information; Paula Gori had shown the new world taken over by information warfare. Having examined the bigger picture, the 'Information Disorder' forum moved closer to the ground looking into specific examples and aspects of how representations of the world are distorted in order to serve various agendas - often backfiring and exceeding the scope of what they initially set out to do.

It fell upon Dr. Nerijus Maliukevičius, researcher in the Department of Political Behavior and Institutions at Vilnius University to call first for a look at propaganda through the microscope. Dr. Maliukevičius has thoroughly examined Russian 'active measures', disinformation initiatives apparently undertaken by Moscow that have been used to disorient the other side in the field of combat itself. The example that he brought up was an interception of the phones of NATO fighter pilots which led to phone calls to their families and closed ones asking if their brother, son or friend is safe. The pattern was repeated prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when disinformation networks on social media circulated the 'news' that the planes NATO had sent to police the space had been called off and returned to their base.

Dr. Maliukevičius has studied the various ways through which Russian propaganda is created, reproduced and distributed. Actors posing as journalists, templates that touch upon people's feelings and monetizing opportunities for those willing to be actively involved in the disinformation market.

This of course raises the question of how such a diffuse and multi-layered system can be understood and combatted. "I am skeptical of the direction we are proceeding and how the

media environment is changing itself”, Dr. Maliukevičius said. “The information war is about initiative, being more active with your messaging.” In the end of a lively conversation with all participants, he called for people to look into the evolution of soviet propaganda; contemporary networks are similar to that era, with political extremes having taken the place of the Communist Internationale.

Terms such as ‘fake news’, ‘disinformation’ and ‘information disorder’ might not have been born strictly in the digital world, but they have become household terms of internet culture and politics in the era of social media platforms. Legacy media and journalism have been under threat on multiple fronts over the last two decades.

On the one hand, the backsliding of democracies into autocratic practices has actively undermined press freedom. Meanwhile, the eruption of social media and user-generated content has now become a direct antagonist of journalism, with the advantage of being free of the shackles of standards, ethics, accuracy and prone to being directly hijacked by political or corporate agendas. The latest [Digital News Report](#) by Reuters Institute shows that Print, TV and Radio are still following a downward trajectory, while after the Covid-19 pandemic, the internet has taken the lead and social media have been cemented as the main news source for large parts of the population globally.

Thus, it was only natural for the final part of the first day to be devoted to the everyday struggles of journalists in this uncharted and rugged political terrain they are treading. Leonid Ragozin, a former correspondent with BBC Moscow and the Russian edition of Newsweek chose to examine his own experience to navigate it and draw his conclusions. After all, as he stated from the beginning of his speech, “the best story about disinformation is that which happens to one’s self”.

Mr. Ragozin’s own story shows how journalists, contrary to the ethical obligations of their profession, are forced to take sides - or are even forcibly pigeonholed in identities that do not represent them. In 2014, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea he left his home country in protest of the action, but also fearing how it would affect the situation in Russia onwards, and moved to Latvia where he continued reporting in the region. He has covered everything from the Maidan uprising in Ukraine to the rise of Russian opposition star Alexei Navalny, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and has been investigating Russian nazi groups for a long time. This work led him to discover revolving doors and associations between nazis in different countries, even in cases when these countries are in direct conflict - like Russia and Ukraine.

In the time of Maidan, Mr. Ragozin was very enthusiastic. His enthusiasm waned when he discovered “all the things about Ukraine I didn’t want to know”, what he describes as “an unholy alliance between the mafia, secret services and politicians”. Russian nazis he was investigating led him to the infamous Azov Battalion in Ukraine only to discover firsthand that a large part of their members espoused nazism, carried nazi insignia and had even formed their own counterculture around these ideas - frequenting National Social Black Metal concerts or a bar which offered drinks for 14.88, a well-known nazi dog-whistle.

Moreover, there were ideologists who were shared between Russian and Ukrainian nazis and even mercenaries who were defecting from one side to the other, making a profit along the way. “The story of the far-right is the story of paramilitary companies” he says. “Of Russian, American, Turkish and other military companies involved in this conflict. On the Russian side you have the Wagner group which is really well-studied, on the Ukrainian side I found some people were being trained on the grounds of a Turkish paramilitary company”.

The fact that he is interested in finding the grey zones and nuances of every situation, means that his reporting has strayed as far away from partisanship as possible. He has written extensively on the actions of nazi groups both in Russia and Ukraine and as such, not fitting to the imperative of picking sides at the cost of quality reporting, he has been attacked by all. Ukrainian outlets close to the secret services have attempted to present him as a foreign agent (on the grounds that he speaks English), he has been the subject of a campaign aiming to deport him from Latvia, while in Russia, his mother’s address in Moscow was circulated online and accusations of him being a ‘traitor’ for his opposition to the invasion of Ukraine were frequent in social media.

Mr. Ragozin’s brief criticism western media’s failure to understand Vladimir Putin’ Russia in their coverage over the previous decade, might have been the perfect introduction for the final speaker of the day. Yavuz Baydar, an experienced journalist and current editor-in-chief of Ahval News, moved the conversation to an interesting parallel, strongly related to the space of the forum: the conflict between Greece and Turkey and how it is being fueled by mainstream media in both countries. “We are now in the Southeastern flank of covering – or trying to cover the Troubles”, as he said jokingly in his opening remark.

Mr. Baydar has suffered himself the perils of a political landscape that has abolished press freedom. Following the attempted coup in 2016, being one of the journalists who were targeted by the Turkish government and facing criminal charges, he was forced to flee Turkey. Ahval News which was launched in Cyprus in 2017 to provide a different coverage of Turkey was almost instantly banned and he would be accused multiple times by Recep Tayipp Erdogan’s government of everything from anti-establishment propaganda to terrorism.

Turkey’s media landscape has been the subject of criticism on nearly all international press freedom reports worldwide. “Only a few countries can compare to Turkey in terms of censorship, self-censorship and the attempts to manipulate the public through the media” Mr. Baydar says, noting that this process of “genetic modification” of Turkish media has been building up for the last twenty years. But it was only after the Gezi Park riots in 2013 that they would begin to be actively taken over by the government through direct or indirect ownership, leaving little if any room for critical reporting. Massive layoffs and hirings completely changed the landscape and seeing this, ‘opportunist’ media staff engaged in deep self-censorship, leaving only government mouthpieces and a minority of outlets that are struggling to maintain their stance.

This does not mean that all is well on the other coast of the Aegean Sea, though. The choice of words for many Greek media, including the Public Broadcaster, ERT, to present

diplomatic developments with inflammatory headlines such as “a slap to Erdogan’s face”, also serves the escalation of tensions both in public sentiment and politics. But the similarities do not stop there. Greek media seem to follow a similar trajectory to their Turkish counterparts, only at an earlier stage – a worrying sign that has been noted by many international organisations recently.

Disinformation for Mr. Baydar, is the result of “a deliberate neglect of balance and fairness. This creates a vacuum and in times of deep crisis this void serves as a perfect tool for disinformation”. Finding the root cause of the phenomenon and then examining what purpose it serves for the political picture that envelops it, was a fitting epilogue to a day which proved that Information Disorder is familiar enough for people from many different situations and walks of life to engage in the same conversation, yet complex enough to warrant distinct interpretations that enlighten one another.

And this was the lesson of the first day of the forum: Information Disorder touches upon major narratives and harnesses the power of stories. It hijacks distribution channels and builds its own when needed. It creates templates which can be easily reproduced in different situations and infiltrates the public sphere by occupying the space that proper journalism’s ethical standards do not allow it to cover. Last but not least, it is born out of long and intensive strategies that evolve over the years – and what is worse, most of the time they are meant to produce or reproduce harm and suffering. This is what makes understanding and countering them a matter of great urgency.