Special Conference 1

Countering disinformation and misinformation in light of the changing face of modern media platforms

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Introduction

The past few decades have been prone to rapid digital developments and the rising importance of media in our world. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook etc. have increasingly affected our views and through many active political discussions and sharing of news reports, we ourselves have all become journalists. Furthermore, it is evident that through globalization and new means of communication, we can now spread information, false or true, and reach instantly an audience of billions of other citizens. Thus, one tweet, one post or one comment can influence the public opinion very deeply. Before, it was propaganda that manipulated the collective opinion and memory, and citizens often did not have the opportunity to verify the validity of information broadcasted. Later, issues like global warming, although scientifically proven to be correct, were dismissed as false by a single statement shared multiple times across all sorts of platforms. It often did and still does not matter whether the information was incorrect, causing many misleading rumors to become popular. However, despite many so-called "fake news", there are many professional ways in which trustworthy information is being shared, which could – unintentionally – mislead their readers through misinterpretation. It is a chain reaction, causing one information being changed into a disinformation over time, regardless of its initial good intention. Furthermore, another problem modern media platforms face today is the freedom of expression and its consequences. Although the latter is a basic human right and should be guaranteed to everyone, it also poses the threat of disinformation being shared more easily without control. And if oppressive laws impose censorship on their media, their news sources are limited and not impartial. However, the first case often forces users to decide by themselves what is "good" and what is "right" in their opinion, slowly losing their trust in the overwhelming quantity and not proportionate increase of quality. Electric devices such as smartphones represent a hub in which all information gathers and only education can help us to differentiate between information and disinformation. However, when looking at long-term solutions, one issue we will have to face in the near future is the rising amount of artificially

created bots. They have, and they will steal account credentials, compose "information" of their own and meddle in the advertising industry during elections in the near future. Last, as Pope Francis has stated during one of his prayers in December of 2016, disinformation is "probably the greatest damage that the media can do" (BBC). Thus, this issue is essential to support the combat against dis- and misinformation and rising to the challenges of exponential change of social media platforms in the 21st century.

Definition of Key Terms

Misinformation

Incorrect or misleading information spread unintentionally.

Disinformation

False information spread intentionally to mislead or manipulate the public opinion.

Social media

Websites, and applications facilitating the share of user content, communication, and social global networking.

Hoax

Disinformation produced deliberately to trick somebody into believing a false statement.

Fake news

Neologism referring to the intentionally fabricated and spread false information on all forms of media targeted at influencing the recipient's view.

Propaganda

Disinformation spread in all forms of media to promote and influence (political) views.

General Overview

In 1923, the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) began using disinformation "with the intention to deceive [the] public opinion", meaning that censorship and state-controlled propaganda used false information to manipulate people's mind. They were taught to believe in false facts and Russia was by far not the only example. Every form

of censorship and propaganda used in other countries in dictatorships or other authoritarian regimes is relevant. Furthermore, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party and Goebbels's "Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda" used all available means of convincing their audience of their own truth. Millions of citizens were told lies and such state-controlled censorship still exists today.

One other important aspect to keep in mind when looking at the historical development of dis- and misinformation is the evolution of technology. First, people had to speak directly to others to convince them of their own words. Later, it was made possible to distribute printed pamphlets and under the administration of Hitler, the radio was also used as a mean of spreading information. Now, after we have established a network of servers based on computers, we are able to access all information we request through one single click on a search engine. We send our search terms and get immediately thousands of different site links, all claiming to say the truth. We trust the algorithms used by search engines and are exposed to the first ten to twenty suggestions. However, we often solely rely on those search engines and do not have the time or knowledge to research our question more thoroughly. And yet all sources have one in common: we do not know what carries information, misinformation or even disinformation.

Furthermore, as social media platforms are often used as daily online news sites, we are also exposed to a new threat: Everybody is able to compose a message to the world. Even though platforms increasingly strengthen their efforts to combat AI bots and posts showing abuse, hate or misleading content, it is still not enough. Far too many posts featuring conspiracy theories or misleading "facts" proving that the earth we live on is flat, are able to reach the surface and popularity of highly regarded news sources. Thus, a tweet from an impartial newspaper or scientist is sometimes put on the same page with an organization or discussion amongst social media users featuring disinformation.

Nevertheless, the question remains to what extent one can define an information as correct or incorrect, as we are taught by philosophy that there is no state of absolute knowledge, thus always ensuring that everything might be wrong. And the history of mankind itself has taught that many views we shared hundreds of years ago are heavily opposed in the 21th century. Thus, scientific developments or other achievements for society were first considered a hoax and later accepted as valid. But throughout all uncertain debates on the issue of disinformation and information, one fact remains clear: An information remains correct until proven otherwise. Therefore, disinformation itself is a very dangerous threat due to its validity which might not always be checked by impartial third-parties. Thus, it is vital and will be of utmost importance in the near future, that every user of social media has access to

other sources. If not, as seen in history, groups in society form which believe in the same initial disinformation and try to convince the rest of its validity.

Another example of disinformation is the one used in the Ukraine crisis relating to Russian's role in its nation's political development and especially in the meddling of the presidential elections of the United States in 2016. Although the latter has been denied by the President of the United States and the Russian President as well as by his top officials, several investigations unveiled disinformation being spread to indirectly manipulate the outcome of the vote. Allegedly, Russian hackers were not only able to steal identities from US citizen and thus manipulate other voter's opinions through advertisements, they also promoted information criticizing Hillary Clinton, his former competitor (The Guardian, BBC). These two only represent a fraction of what has been said to have happened.

In Addition, one recent example of disinformation as well as misinformation is the alleged affair Trump is said to have with Stormy Daniels (Stephanie A. Gregory Clifford). So-called "hush agreements" were said to have been made in conjunction with payments from his lawyer Michael Cohen. However, since multiple allegations were denied by the President and the transactions being investigated upon lead to many theories, misinformation spread vividly. Therefore, this is exactly the problem modern media platforms face, since statements by Daniels and by the President cannot be directly verified and millions of comments can start a discussion based on a limited amount of "real" facts. Whether the allegations may be true or false, it is certain that either misinformation, based on initial good intentions, or disinformation, aimed at gaining attraction, pose a severe threat to our digital society.

Major Parties Involved

United States of America (USA)

As the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump has already condemned several statements as "fake news", causing disinformation and misinformation to be an important issue in the United States. The media are allegedly manipulating his audience through disinformation, of which one example could be the "concept of global warming". Before becoming President, he dismissed it with the following tweet on Twitter, which was spread very quickly amongst its users and media platforms: "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive." (@realDonaldTrump 6 Nov 2012) and is currently still defending his anti-global warming policies. Later in 2014, he condemned it as an "expensive hoax" (Twitter, 29th of January 2014). Furthermore, his election was allegedly said to have been manipulated by

Russians in order to strengthen the outcome of its votes in his favor. Thus, the USA have been exposed multiple times to misinformation and disinformation by media companies and only a limited amount of media anchors can be trusted (e.g. Fox News). In Addition, during his correspondence with the Russian Federation and DPRK, his tweets often sparked controversial debates and false theories; through indirect or direct threats with his nuclear missiles being fired if the other nation did not comply with his demands, misinterpretation was very common and still is. Thus, misleading information was spread relating to his plans and the US remains a "victim" to modern media platforms and their disinformation.

Russian Federation

As mentioned before in "General Overview", the Russian Federation used disinformation in the past as a mean of propaganda. Later, in 2014, new laws were passed, expanding the control of the Russian government over its mass-media. Now, it faces difficulties at its borders with Ukraine, since it remains unclear after the annexation of Crimea which parts of Ukraine should belong to Russia. Thus, disinformation like the fake story about a Russian-German girl (also called the "Lisa case"), which allegedly was raped by an Arab migrant, show that the Russian Federation is fabricating news stories and its alleged meddling in the US elections re-iterates its important role in this issue.

People's Republic of China

The People's Republic of China is very crucial to this issue because it differs from other nation's use of media. It has banned multiple media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.), but many other platforms like WeChat emerged and its users are sometimes able to spread disinformation very rapidly despite strict keyword regulations. Furthermore, it is expected that Chinese authorities will make it more difficult for their citizens to access foreign apart from domestic news sources.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has restricted media access since its foundation. News Agencies like the state-run Korean Central News Agency and Korea Post and Telecommunications Corp. make access to foreign independent news sources very difficult. In Addition, the DPRK has its own substitute "internet" which is regulated very carefully, allowing no information to get out of or to the nation itself. Therefore, the government spreads propaganda through disinformation and convinces its citizen of its "truths", promoting their leader and his policies. However, due to recent meetings between North and South Korea, it is uncertain how their government and its media policies will change in the near future.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of Event
26 April 2018	The European Commission publishes its communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions titled "Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach", outlining the context and main causes of disinformation and proposing 5 measures.
26 March 2018	The President of the United States of America posts a tweet on Twitter: "So much Fake News. Never been more voluminous or more inaccurate. But through it all, our country is doing great!" after Stormy Daniels (Stephanie A. Gregory Clifford) spoke in an interview on CBS about her alleged involvement with the President, which he has denied strongly so far.
27 February 2014	The Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Federation, during the Russian annexation of Crimea, used their accounts on Facebook to spread "commentaries informing the population of the Crimean Peninsula of a threat from Nazi organizations".
6 November 2012	Donald Trump dismissed global warming as a hoax, "created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive", despite being proven as accurate by leading scientists.
7 October 2016	The Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence affirmed that the hacking of e-mails by the Russian Government was intended to interfere with the election process of the President of the United States.
13 March 1933	Joseph Goebbels's "Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda" was formed, a Nazi government agency, spreading propaganda and supporting Nazi ideology and its policies.
15 November 1923	The "Joint State Political Directorate" of the USSR was formed and disinformation was increasingly used "with the intention to deceive [the] public opinion"

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Joint Declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news", disinformation and propaganda, 3 March 2017 (**FOM.GAL/3/17**)

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The most important previous attempt and involvement of the United Nations is a "Joint Declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news", disinformation and propaganda". It was composed by a UN Special Rapporteur, a representative of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in (OSCE), a special rapporteur sent by the Organization of American States (OAS) and a special rapporteur sent by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). It states in its third sub-clause of its second clause that "state actors should not make, sponsor, encourage or further disseminate statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda)" and aims to eliminate the possibility of disinformation being spread in all nations.

In Addition, it declares that "media outlets should consider including critical coverage of disinformation and propaganda as part of their news services in line with their watchdog role in society, particularly during elections and regarding debates on matters of public interest" (5.b.) and highlights the issues mentioned before in "General Overview".

However, no UNSC or UNGA has yet attempted to combat disinformation and misinformation and as a plenary debate in European Parliament on the 5th of April 2017 has shown, no clear consensus has been reached yet by its members. Furthermore, one issue debated upon was the question of who has the right to categorize information and posts. European People's Party (EPP), a conservative and Christian democratic political party, German member Monika Hohlmeier said: "We do have freedom of opinion, but you don't have alternative facts, you just have facts. It's essential that we take legal measures at the EU level so that we can react effectively." Thus, many global actors and communities have thoroughly debated the issue at hand and intelligence agencies, as well as media platforms, have improved their regulations to combat disinformation and misinformation.

Possible Solutions

When debating on the issue of countering disinformation and misinformation in light of the changing face of modern media platforms, one has to keep in mind that especially long-term measures are needed. As media platforms change and new ones emerge, it will be very hard to tackle all forms of false information being spread. And the more citizen gain access to the Internet, the more parties they will involve. Each resident who possesses a phone, tablet, PC or other sort of electrical device and is online will be able to compose, share and comment on posts and gain popularity with his views. Thus, despite propaganda still being

used in several countries and minor amounts of disinformation being shared in others, Internet users are already and will be able to initiate conspiracy theories or mislead others with false information.

As Special Conference Committee, it is your task to ensure that regulations are kept targeted at disinformation and that all necessary measures are taken to avoid information from being falsely interpreted. As the theme for this year's annual MUNISH states you are facing the challenges of exponential change in our modern society. Twenty years ago, the words Facebook or Twitter were not even known. In the last decade hundreds of new media platforms emerged on the Internet and millions of tweets and posts were composed and shared in fractions of a second. Therefore, unbiased third-party fact check agencies and NGOs are vital in this continuously altering climate.

However, education is by far more effective: The youth needs to be taught the process of filtering information. They need to learn how to verify content they see on media platforms. Thus, their judgement needs to be enhanced in order to critically look at a source of a public statement. If it corresponds with other news sources, which do not necessarily have to be within the same region or country of the initial statement and if possible not politically biased, a small chance remains that the information is false. Remember that a group of society can only claim to tell the ultimate truth, a concept of uncertainty which you should keep in mind as well.

Furthermore, it is possible and highly recommended to provide incentives for media platforms which invest in combatting disinformation through personnel validating its content. Transparency is important as well, since misinformation can be dealt with this way. Hence, all parties should either decide to speak out clearly about a matter or not release any press statement, since many misleading information can turn into disinformation by other parties if no transparency is ensured.

Apart from existing regulations on content composed or shared by humans, artificially created bots should be dealt with as well. New algorithms need to be developed hindering the spreading of false information fabricated by machines.

Last, it is advisable to strengthen collaboration between member states and their intelligence agencies, since the Internet is relevant to the global community and modern media platforms affect us all very deeply in the 21st century.

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