Winning the Information WAR

How states can marginalize hostile propaganda

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I t's not easy to differentiate between propaganda and strategic communication. Both imply systematic and deliberate activities intended to influence the views, attitudes and behavior of target audiences in the interests of the communicator. Some argue that the essence of propaganda is in its manipulative nature. However, any communication that aims to serve certain interests is manipulative to some extent. Any professional communicator will inevitably highlight some aspects of a problem while toning down others, will construct messages by choosing the most appealing words and images, will calculate the most appropriate channels and intensity of delivering the messages, and will use the most authoritative opinion leaders to attain the desired result. All of these sophisticated activities are undertaken to influence public opinion, which is the aim of both propaganda and strategic communication.

Contrasting propaganda as false information versus strategic communication as truthful information is a misleading simplification because propaganda may be based on accurate information. The skillful manipulation of correct information often determines the propaganda's effectiveness. Propaganda has been described as an emotional type of communication that lacks rational arguments. However, this description relates primarily to human nature as opposed to the belief that propaganda is a wicked form of communication. Advertising models reveal consumer behavior is determined more by emotion than by rational thinking.

This is even truer of political and military communication because it mostly covers subjects that audiences have not directly experienced. Thus, emotionality is also an inadequate differentiator because any communication must have emotional appeal to be effective. It would also be incorrect to label the information activities of non-Western international actors as propaganda — and those of Western countries as strategic communication — because the invasion of Iraq was the event that stimulated many Western academics to return to the concept of propaganda as a research subject.

Nevertheless, there is an important distinction between strategic communication and propaganda. The core idea of the strategic communication concept is to emphasize the word "strategy" rather than "communication." In other words, communication is a strategic function because every deed speaks more loudly than words. Thus, propaganda is distinguishable from strategic communication by its focus on purely communicative solutions, whereas the strength of strategic communication is in its interplay of policies and communication. Such a mindset encourages a focus on the actual needs and wants of audiences, which is a precondition for building strong relations between governments and societies. This is also a proper basis for resisting the influence of hostile foreign information because a strong society has greater immunity against information that is being used to damage its foundations. The collapse of the Soviet Union is a visible example because one of its main causes was a

False and misleading news reports are now a common tool of hostile propaganda campaigns. PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

massive loss of belief in the system. There are four pillars for countering propaganda, based on this audience-centric approach: 1) measurement-based assessment of the influence of information, 2) comprehensive critical thinking, 3) strong civil society and 4) a positive vision.

The influence of information

The public opinion warfare that escalated in the context of the Ukrainian crisis and the emergence of ISIL/Daesh in 2014 marks an important milestone in the post-Cold War international system. Western countries that exercised global dominance after the dissolution of the bipolar world order gradually found themselves challenged in the information domain by non-Western international actors. This was largely possible because of the globalized information space, which enables worldwide information dissemination. Western audiences are now confronted with narrative battles and a clash of political communication cultures. For example, the lack of public demand for accurate information in authoritarian Russia allows a scale of manipulation that is difficult to understand in the West. As the boundaries between domestic and international communication become increasingly blurred, Russia is using the same approach in its communication with global audiences.

Such developments are disturbing in the West, to the extent that many prominent voices are claiming that the West is losing the information war against its opponents, mainly Russia. Interestingly, Russia also considers itself the loser in its information war with the West. For example, when Russia established information warfare troops, information warfare theorist Igor Panarin commented that Russia is much weaker than the West in this area and that it is losing because the West is forcing Russia to take a defensive stance and to make excuses. Western supremacy in the information domain was also acknowledged by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the 2014 Valdai discussion club, where he stated that the total control of global media gives the West the opportunity "to portray white as black and black as white."

Why are both sides of the information war presenting themselves as losers? There are at least two possible explanations. One is that the position of the loser in 21st-century information warfare provides a distraction

from more important problems within society, mobilizes public support and increases funding for research projects, communication campaigns and the establishment of new institutions. This would be a purely propagandist approach. The other, more likely, explanation is that such statements are based on emotions, because there are no adequate metrics for measuring the influence of information. The West's perception of losing the information war seems to be based on the mere existence of Russia-promoted false or partly false media stories. But what is their actual impact on the total flow of information? To what extent have these stories influenced public opinion in Western societies? What is the causal link between public opinion in the West and Russia's information campaigns?

These are important questions because the target of information warfare is the cognitive dimension of society; media content is just a tool. Nevertheless, Russia's disinformation campaigns are now in the spotlight of many Western institutions and think tanks. Raising awareness of the strategy and tactics of opponents is an important precondition for resistance, but it is not exhaustive because opponents can be successful to the extent permitted by the vulnerabilities of the attacked side. It is also a matter of the allocation of intellectual and financial resources, because while focusing on opponents, the risk of losing domestic audiences exists, as revealed by a 2016 European Journalism Observatory study of Russian-speaking journalists in Latvia. One conclusion as to why it was difficult to develop pro-European media in the Russian language in Latvia was that all initiatives in this area were justified solely by the need to fight Russian propaganda, but that genuine communication with Russian audiences was not so important.

Another reason why prioritizing the debunking of disinformation is not the most effective way to counter propaganda is that there are deeper and more complicated reasons why people tend to believe false or distorted information. Numerous psychological studies demonstrate that factual accuracy is not the decisive factor in shaping people's views. One such study is social judgment theory, which explains that ideas will be accepted or rejected depending on existing beliefs and attitudes, rather than the truthfulness of the information. There are also many examples of purely false and fabricated media stories having very short life

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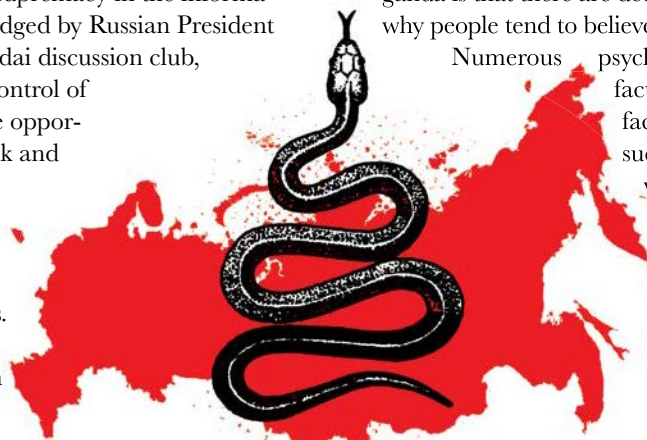
cycles, while stories based on a context that supports the message are more effective. For example, an investigation by journalists with the online news site Meduza reveals one reason Russians in Germany believed the false story of a girl named Lisa being raped by immigrants was because the official handling and reporting of the New Year's Eve sexual assaults in Cologne decreased trust in the police. Therefore, it is impossible to plan effective measures against propaganda without a thorough understanding of why people think the way they do.

Critical thinking

The importance of critical thinking as an element for countering propaganda is determined in part by the peculiarities of the globalized information space and the specific rules of the game. During the Cold War, an "information iron curtain" separated the West and the Soviet bloc, which made it possible to operate relatively autonomously within each information domain. In the current circumstances, however, there is interaction between opponents. Thus, the Russian challenge in the information domain provokes reaction in the West, which leads to restrictions that may be interpreted as a limitation of democratic freedoms. For example, the ban on Russia's RTR-Planeta television channel in Lithuania in 2015 was presented by Russia's Foreign Ministry as "complete political censorship." Furthermore, the restriction of Russian media in the Baltic states was mentioned as an indicator of "the strengthening of totalitarian tendencies and manifestations of neo-Nazism in the politics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia" in a document adopted during the 2016 Regional Congress of Russia's compatriots from the Nordic states and the Baltic Sea.

It is profitable for Russia when democratic freedoms are restricted in the West because it provides Russia specific facts upon which to base its claim that Western countries are not democratic. Undermining Western democracy as a universal value is a long-term strategic goal for Russia because it aims to establish a polycentric world order with a diversity of political and economic models in contrast with the idea of a unipolar world order characterized by the global dominance of the West and the moral superiority of Western liberal democracy. If democracy fails in the West, the moral foundation for its global dominance is lost. Therefore, it is very important not to fall into Russia's trap through a well-intentioned desire to protect our own information space. Restrictive measures are not for open societies in a globalized information space.

The only reasonable way to protect the information space of democratic societies is to enhance resistance to hostile information in the cognitive dimension of society. When people are resistant to foreign propaganda, there is no need to impose restrictions on the free flow of information, unless it violates the law. The Latvian case provides evidence that such an approach works. Despite the fact that Russian television channels and other media are widely available in Latvia and the country has a large proportion of Russian speakers, trust in the Latvian media is almost two

Ricardas Savukynas, a business consultant and blogger in Lithuania, patrols social media to expose fake news attributed to Russian propaganda attacks on his country.

times greater than in the Russian media. Studies of human psychology confirm that, although it is difficult to change established views, it is possible to take preventive measures. The inoculation theory of communication states that an audience can be made resistant to hostile information by raising the threat awareness and activating arguments to strengthen existing beliefs. The International Research & Exchanges Board's (IREX) Learn to Discern program in Ukraine is a successful example of preparing society to resist the influence of false information. According to IREX data, training in media literacy skills led to a 20-plus percent increase in checking news sources, more confidence in analyzing news, and an ability to distinguish trustworthy news from false news.

Still, comprehensive critical thinking is very important in the sense that critical evaluation is applied not only to foreign information sources, but also to internal media. Most Western disinformation-debunking initiatives focus only on Russia. For the critical thinker that raises the question: Does the Western media always provide accurate and trustworthy information? This question needs answering because it would be wrong to expect people to apply critical thinking to information provided by non-Western actors, but simultaneously be uncritical toward Western media. A one-sided approach to disinformation and other types of media manipulation risks losing credibility. Furthermore, trust in the media is already decreasing in Western societies. According to a 2016 European Commission Eurobarometer survey on media pluralism and democracy, 44 percent of EU respondents disagreed that their national media provide trustworthy information. Gallup data show that trust in the U.S. media has dropped from 53 percent in 1997 to 32 percent in 2016. People in the West are critical toward their own media, and this should not be ignored. Perhaps a sound comparison with Russian media practices may improve the Western media's image. In any case, an open conversation about these problems could improve the situation.

Marchers with posters reading "PROPAGANDA KILLS" and "FIGHT" gather near the spot where Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was gunned down near the Kremlin in 2015.

A strong civil society

A hallmark of current information warfare is the attempt by opponents to exploit the vulnerabilities in the relationship between state and societies in Western countries. Such strategies and tactics are enabled by the West's democratic freedoms and open societies. Russia's narratives about the immigration crisis in Europe are an example because they are gaining strength from a gap between popular opinions and government immigration policies. While political leaders publicly state that they welcome refugees, a Chatham House survey published in 2017 reveals that an average of 55 percent of respondents in 10 European countries believe that "all further immigration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped." Russia gains an advantage when Western governments are unresponsive to the public mood. The Pew Research Center's spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey shows greater confidence that "Vladimir Putin is doing the right thing regarding world affairs" among respondents in European countries with favorable views of far-right parties with strong anti-immigration views. During the 2016 Valdai Club discussion, Putin shared his views on this and other issues in Western countries and pointed out that the cause of the problem in the West is "that ordinary people, ordinary citizens do not trust the ruling class."

There is, indeed, a degree of truth in what Putin said. According to Standard Eurobarometer 86 data, trust in the EU decreased from 50 percent in 2004 to 36 percent in 2016; trust in national parliaments from 38 percent in 2004 to 32 percent in 2016; and trust in national governments from 34 percent in 2004 to 31 percent in 2016. Because this

presents an opportunity for the purveyors of hostile foreign information, a dilemma arises as to what should be the priority — decreasing vulnerabilities or countering the opponent. There is a temptation to focus on the opponent because it is easier than addressing long-term systemic problems within our own societies. Nevertheless, many of the problems arise not from the influence of hostile foreign information, but from trends within Western societies. The "mediatization" of politics — meaning the political struggle takes place mainly in the media environment — is an important problem. Because the logic of the media business in free market economies is guided by the principle that "good news doesn't sell," the Western media tends to be overly negative, focusing on scandals and sensations, which is also a distortion of reality and truth. These trends in the information domain reinforce distrust in political institutions and lead to a decrease in political participation. Developing a genuine relationship between state and society can solve this and other problems.

The strength of civil societies determines the strength of democratic systems. Because elites are tempted to misuse political power, civil society must impose boundaries on the impunity of politicians. Thus, tension in society and state relations is an inherent feature of democratic systems, which should not be sacrificed as part of the information battle. Instead, developing new and better platforms for dialogue between governments and societies can increase mutual understanding and

accountability. Different forms of direct communication and solutions using new media technologies can be developed to circumvent traditional media. There is also a need for education and support programs for civic activism because political participation that allows for influence on political decisions is the only way to decrease alienation and improve the system. In other words, in healthy democratic systems, it is crucial to counter both foreign and domestic propaganda.

A positive vision
The final ingredient for countering propaganda is the formulation and communication of what we stand for and what we aim to achieve. In 2013, *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman wrote the article, "The West is Losing Faith in Its Own Future." This is an accurate description of the problem in the information clash with opponents of the West. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov wrote in a 2016 article: "There has been a relative reduction in the influence of the so-called 'historical West' that was used to seeing itself as the master of the human race's destinies for almost five centuries. The competition on the shaping of the world order in the 21st century has toughened." It is important to understand that there are two levels to Russia's challenge in the information dimension. One involves communication tools, including disinformation campaigns, which seem to be the main concern of Western communication experts. But the second, strategic level is a system of worldviews that represents a much more serious problem. It consists of many interwoven narratives: U.S. global leadership is worsening global security; the West is unable to manage the refugee crisis; Western democracy is dysfunctional; post-Cold War military interventions should not be permitted; and many others. The key problem is that many of the arguments used in Russia's narratives correspond, to some degree, to the views of audiences in the West.

Therefore, successfully countering propaganda demands a vision for future development that provides solutions to problems such as rising inequality, immigration, the environment, demographics, unemployment, radicalization and others. The promotion of a positive, inspiring and appealing future vision could distract attention from the opposition's activities and even make many of their arguments useless. For example, Russia's victory in World War II is a very important instrument in building its national identity and the consolidation of its compatriots abroad. The celebration of Victory Day takes place in Russia and abroad on May 9, which is also the date of Europe Day. Thus, instead of countering Victory Day, European countries, especially those with many Russian compatriots, could promote narratives about Europe Day as a positive and uniting alternative, which could also be used as a platform for debate about the future of Europe. Successfully countering propaganda requires not just refutation of opponents' arguments, but also proactive promotion of one's own perspective.

Conclusion
Structuring counterpropaganda measures around adequate situational awareness, enhanced critical thinking, a stronger civil society and promotion of a positive future vision enables the definition of a set of practical steps. A precondition for countering the influence of hostile information is the realistic assessment of its impact, which requires:
- A comprehensive system of monitoring and analysis of hostile activities in the information environment, including such domains as cyber, the media and social media.
- The operationalization of the concept of "resistance to the influence of hostile information in the cognitive dimension" by setting up metrics to measure the level of influence of hostile information and resistance to it within society.
- Research on the factors that determine a predisposition to be influenced by hostile information, which should translate into policies that aim to diminish vulnerabilities.
- Measurement and critical evaluation of the effectiveness of activities taken to counter foreign propaganda.

In the area of enhancing comprehensive critical thinking, the following would be necessary:
- Forecasting opponents' potential reaction to Western propaganda-countering initiatives and assessment of follow-on developments.
- Informing societies about opponent strategies and tactics, including in the information domain.
- Enhancing of media literacy skills within our societies, which includes critical evaluation of Western countries' domestic and global media practices.
- Improving the educational level of society.

A strong civil society as an element for countering propaganda can be attained by:
- Prioritizing issues of primary concern to society on the political agenda — unemployment, immigration, the economy, terrorism, etc., and effectively communicating policies developed in response to society's needs.
- Building trustworthy communication channels between governments and society, including the development of direct and dialogue-based communication practices.
- Enhancing political participation.
- Improving the quality of journalism.
- Acknowledging that reasoned criticism of governments is an indispensable element of democratic systems. Therefore, restrictions on civil society activism should not be imposed out of consideration for information warfare.

The promotion of a positive future vision requires:
- Defining measures for how better political, social and economic conditions will be achieved and translating these into an appealing and easy to understand future vision.
- Enhancing societal participation in the formulation of the future vision.
- Implementing strategic communication campaigns to mobilize and unite society around positive and inclusive events and an appealing future perspective. □