

Fighting disinformation: the truth is still the truth

Countering disinformation through inclusive dialogue

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As the magnitude of disinformation grows, so does the fight against it. As Europeans, we need a constructive and inclusive conversation to face this challenge.

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. Quite the contrary: It has been with us for quite a long time. In the fifth century B.C., one of the greatest military strategists of history, Sun Tzu, wrote that all warfare is based on deception. However, in the recent years, we have been observing that it has become easier to create and disseminate disinformation owing to the popularization and the consolidation of social media. In the Information Age, disinformation has even surpassed the boundaries of being a theoretical threat and verifiably determined the fate of many European societies by influencing election and referendum outcomes.

As European societies, one of our distinguishing characteristics is that we are organically grown, bottom-up democracies: Our state structures receive their legitimacy from the *dēmos*. Another thing which distinguishes us from many other societies in the world is that one of our values is the freedom of speech: Everybody can express their opinion freely.

However, just like all the freedoms, these pillars of the Euro-Atlantic institutions and structures can easily be manipulated, often by manipulation itself. The more we are in position to express our opinion, the greater the room malevolent sociopolitical actors have to disseminate disinformation for various purposes. Especially social media platforms provide them with an endless ocean of possibilities. An intoxicated public sphere serves the goals of the challengers to the Transatlantic alliance. They are trying to im-

prove and expand their influence in European societies through their efforts to shape the public opinion. These efforts include increased investment in state broadcasters to propagate personified state policies or direct involvement in elections or referenda to influence or determine their outcomes.

As an example, fake news have played a decisive role in the Brexit referendum, which led to United Kingdom leaving the EU. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean,

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disinformation led to or helped the election of a President of the United States. Disinformation campaigns and fake news are emerging as a long-term threat to the values and the security of the Transatlantic alliance and the EU, as the line between information and disinformation is fading.

As a journalist, political scientist and citizen, I have observed that the recent years have been marked by the normalization of disinformation. The extent to which this phenomenon has become mundane is concerning. It has become so ordinary that the newsworthiness of disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and various developments regarding fake news have decreased. We are becoming insensitive to it. Over the course of the past five years, the issue has been discussed on every level and certain political steps have been taken, yet I argue that these are not sufficient to overcome the problem. Neither qualitatively nor quantitatively.

The issue has indeed become a main topic of discussion at NATO meetings. While the world leaders are trying to find a solution to the existing problem of foreign perpetrated disinformation within our societies, we should be asking ourselves the following pressing questions: How come the Transatlantic alliance has not been able to efficiently prevent disinformation campaigns before they arrived and infiltrated the European and American public spheres?

Are we not capable of disarming these threats beyond our borders? Is disinformation, by its very nature, unstoppable? Or is it that we are just not doing enough?

When we talk about the EU, we talk about one of the most successful supranational organizations in human history, the majority of EU members (21 out of 27) constitute the main body of the NATO. The EU is also a major world trading power. Furthermore, we, as Europeans, have the aspiration to have a more influential say in global politics. Under these circumstances, how come we almost exclusively blame the hackers employed by foreign governments for determining our election results but not search for the deficiencies in ourselves and improve them?

Disinformation and fake news affect all of us in our daily and professional lives, regardless of our occupations, identities and political beliefs. The burning topic which we will talk about in Bled is about the future, it's about strategy and it's about conversation.

This is a conversation we have to have as Europeans. And the best way to have this conversation is to have it in a constructive, interactive and inclusive manner. Our goal is to constructively contribute to the existing strategy against disinformation in an inclu-

sive forum in collaboration of experts, professionals and citizens from diverse backgrounds for the future of Europe.

What we want to achieve at this year's Bled Strategic Forum is an interactive debate, in which we will develop solutions that will improve the European defense against disinformation and fake news.

We might have the best technologies, the best engineers, doctors, journalists, philosophers, poets, machines, bridges... The lingua franca of the world, which the entire world is eager to learn, might be a European one. But if the basis of our society is highly vulnerable to manipulation by the post-truth or alternative facts, none of that will matter. That's why we immediately need an inclusive conversation to co-develop a sustainable, long-term solution to the undeniable problem of disinformation. By doing that, we need to consult with actors from various fields who are dealing with this problem on a daily basis: Politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, fact-checkers, decision-makers on cybersecurity issues, researchers, and most importantly, citizens.

This is not an easy task, especially when MIT researchers find that lies spread faster than the truth, owing to their novelty. We won't be able to decontaminate the European public sphere overnight. It is going to cost us time and energy. But it's worth it. Let's not forget one thing: The post-truth might be attractive, but the truth is still the truth. ♦

