Recenzje

Húsková Eva, *Súčasné trendy šírenia dezinformácií*, **Slovenský inštitút pre bezpečnostnú politiku a Inštitút strategických politík, Bratislava 2020, 28 p.**

Húsková Eva SSPI, *Current Trends in Disinformation Dissemination*, **Slovenský inštitút pre bezpečnostnú politiku (Slovak Institute for Security Policy, SSPI) and Inštitút strategických politík (Strategic Policy Institute, Stratpol), Bratislava 2020, 28 p.**

Eva Húsková from the Slovak Institute for Security Policy (SSPI) in co-operation with and under supervision by three experts from Stratpol (Strategic Policy Institute) has attempted at rather ambitious task – to provide an overview of Current Trends in Disinformation Dissemination (as the title transparently and succinctly reveals). However, although this is certainly a useful endeavour, it is also a rather challenging task. The analysis has about 20 pages of total text length, including five pages (or, in a standard format, three pages – 900 words) of sources. Sources are always a good indicator of the quality of any publication. Thus, if we would follow the promise – "current trends" – there should be included only the most recent publications or sources. Of course, exceptionally, one can include older sources, if there is a reason for that. In this case, there are indeed mostly the most recent publications cited (2020 and 2019 years).

However, there are actually three dominant sources of publications: those produced by governments and international organizations, by the media, and similar research, activist and debunking organizations. Interestingly, scientific research (e.g. Allcott, Gentzkow and Yu, 2019) is missing or reflected at a minimum in this overview. Of course, one can argue that science is slow, thus it makes sense to prefer up-to-date sources. However, some pre-prints can be used, especially those from computer and information technologies areas (as we did in this review as supporting evidence). Moreover, some non-scientific

studies that tackle similar or identical issues are missing – for example, a study by Seal (2020).

The content is divided into *Summary*, *Introduction*, *Political Aspects of Disinformation Campaigns*, *Methods of Disinformation Dissemination*, *Technological Trends*, *Components of Fight Against Disinformation*, *Conclusion*. A more scientific publication (we acknowledge that this is not a typical scientific publication, nonetheless) would include, in any case, a review of similar studies on this topic.

Summary forecasts that the future is ahead of us – however, one can argue that "combination of AI, deep fakes and big data" (p. 3) is already (almost) here (see, for example, Lyu 2020; Hussain, Neekhara, Jere, Koushanfar, McAuley, 2020; Aiman, 2020).

There are fundamentally correct observations and implicit final recommendations here, too*:* "From a long term perspective, the best solution in the disinformation fight is high quality strategic governmental communication, transparency, and relevant public policies." (p. 3).

Yet, *Introduction* states without sufficient factual proof, that "...in 2016 Russia evidently influenced the US 2016 presidential elections..." (p. 3). In fact, U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Russia did not alter actual votes during the 2016 election or, in some interpretations, even did not attempt to do so (Zetter, 2019). Maybe it is a difference in wording – there was (possibly) Russian intervention at many levels, but there was no real impact on election results. This idea is better (correctly) formulated at page 6 of the report as: "Russia evidently intervened into US presidential elections in 2016...".

Similarly, while the author cites the source that claims that: "in 2007 Russia attacked Estonia with a mixture of cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns..." (p. 4), in fact, the cited journalistic article states more cautiously:

> "No one has ever claimed responsibility, but it soon became apparent to Priisalu and many others that Russia was responsible... As the smoking gun is often missing, we shouldn't fall for every allegation of assumed Russian involvement. Still, certain patterns have emerged from these conflicts, allowing experts to draft a rough model of the techniques Russia uses to destabilise its opponents" (Grassegger, Krogerus, 2017).

Thus, although Russia was likely behind this or another subversion, we should be perhaps cautious in putting these claims rather strongly.

A section titled "Political Aspects of Disinformation Campaigns cites a source arguing that: „current trends suggest that Internet in the near future can be split into a few streams: primarily USA, China and Russia" (p. 6). This is probably from a technical point of view already an option. In fact, Russia already declared

that it is able to unplug from a global Internet (Wakefield, 2019, see also Baranec, 2021).[1]

There is an interesting argument about alleged Chinese effort to deny responsibility for COVID 19 pandemic (p. 7). This argument is supported by three not-directly related examples in a newspaper article from June 2020. These examples look more like human mistakes or human anger than part of a deliberate, well-planned and well-executed disinformation campaign. Thus, the claim about Chinese efforts to deny primarily responsibility (as different from some negative or angry Chinese journalistic or diplomatic reactions) is disputable – China officially informed the WHO about the deadly virus on December 31, 2019.[2] It is also true that a Chinese doctor was punished for circulating an early warning about the outbreak of pandemic. However, Chinese authorities apologised later for that mistake. Nonetheless, it is true that there was a battle to control the narrative about where the virus came from – mainly between China and the USA under President Trump (see Kinetz, 2021).

There is a certain conceptual misunderstanding here. It is not clear what is a legitimate nation-branding and public diplomacy effort and what is malign propaganda or, indeed, ideological subversion. For example, in the case of China, it appears that the former is true, while for Russia, possibly the latter is true. Since both these claims cited in the paper were made by the Slovak Intelligence Services, it appears that both types of activities are to be seen equally negatively. This is an analytically, politically and normatively problematic approach.

We have contacted a local expert on China, Dr Richard Turcsányi, to clarify this issue.[3] In his opinion,

> "The majority of experts on China in Europe and the USA shares consensus that China does not perform ideological subversion in our region or elsewhere. China is not interested in spreading its ideology – in part, because China does not have a coherent ideological stance. A primary goal of Chinese communist party is to stay in power, not to conduct a proletariat revolution or spread Communist ideals. This means that in foreign policy China just attempts to have the most favourable environment for this key aim. Of course, many Chinese foreign policies go against our interests or values. Indeed, China has begun to spread disinformation recently. However, this does not mean that it is attempting to destroy our democracy or market-based economy. It is simply different from Russian efforts" (see more in Turcsányi, 2020; Kironská, 2020; Šimalčík, Karásková, Kelemen, 2020).

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[1] See *Russia Is 'Ready' to Disconnect from Global Internet, Medvedev Says* (Feb. 1, 2021), https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/02/01/russia-is-ready-to-disconnect-from-global-internet-medvedev-says-a72791.

[2] BBC, Timeline of events https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52573137.

[3] rturcsanyi@gmail.com>, 17.02.2021.

If we focus on efforts by China to engage more deeply into disinformation or malign operations, there is an interesting study by Ivana Karásková, Alicja Bachulska, Tamás Matura, Filip Šebok, Matej Šimalčík (2020). Indeed, it comes out of this study that: "Until 2019, China's modus operandi focused on passively boosting its image and spreading 'positive energy' about China. The defence of Chinese positions has reached a wider audience mainly thanks to local pro-China proxies rather than due to China's propaganda effectiveness." (p. 9). Thus, it seems to be clear that Chinese and Russian propaganda motivations are rather different. Maybe it is not the best approach to use for description of Chinese efforts words such as: "the Chinese Embassy has relied on a more traditional approach to spread propaganda and disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic" (p. 17 of study by Karásková et al., 2020). There is no evidence that China disseminated falsehoods about COVID-19 (save for the first weeks of pandemic in China in late 2019 when it rather tried not to accept reality and prevent emergence of local panic – which was, obviously, wrong strategy or a mistake). Then actually authors explain further that: "Facing rejection from mainstream media the Embassy had to resort to using fringe media outlets." (p. 17 of study by Karásková et al, 2020). This effort was actually not that much about pandemic, but about Hong Kong protests. Of course, one can fairly criticize Chinese treatment of Hong Kong protests. One can also understand that China wants "to sell" its narrative here. But I personally do not see there some extreme or hidden (!) form of spreading disinformation (except, obviously, a rather unsuccessful attempt to promote their own narrative about Hong Kong events).

Anyway, the original discussion was in both papers about pandemic and disinformation. This claim does not seem to hold in the case of China.

Therefore, I would personally welcome at least an attempt to use sources – or at least to get feedback from the other side – Russian or Chinese bad actors, or Russian and Chinese authorities, experts, academics, journalists and dissidents. Of course, this might be impossible, but certainly it would be illuminating to see what would be the reaction of those actors. It is certainly questionable whom to contact on the other side. But there should be available some official materials or documents, either at the political level, or scientific level, that somehow tackle these issues from the others perspective. Considering that this is not a typical scientific publication but more an awareness raising effort, it would be an interesting approach.

There could be criticisms of some other aspects of this publication. For example, section *Methods of Disinformation Dissemination* ignores finding that: "mainstream news media in fact play a significant and important role in the dissemination of fake news" (Tsfati, Boomgaarden, Strömbäck, Vliegenthart, Damstra, Lindgren 2020).

Finally, since this is more about awareness, with due respect to a need to simplify messages, perhaps more attention should be paid to some claims. Otherwise, true enemies may easily point at some questionable narratives or explanations.

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Andrej Školkay

The School of Communication and Media Bratislava, Slovakia