FakeSpotting

GUIDELINE

Media & Information Literacy and national disinformation case-studies

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FakeSpotting

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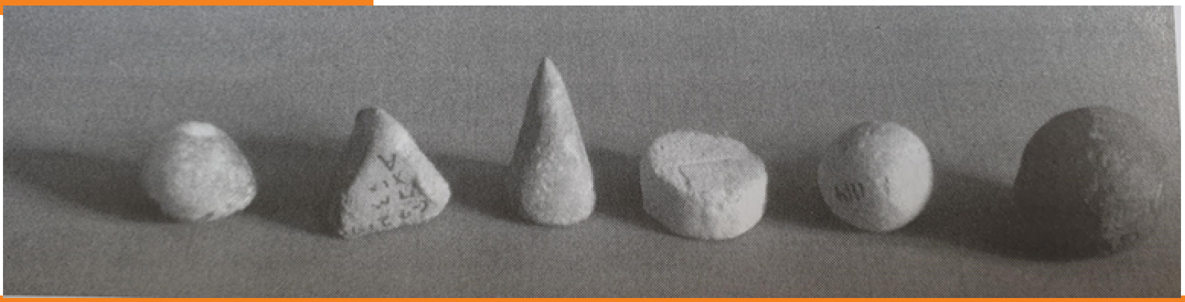

Pre-Truth: Fake News, Semiological Guerrilla Warfare, and Some Other Media and Communication "Revolutions"

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1. The Age of Fake News: Is it Really the Way We Are Told?

This is the age of fake news (see Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Tandoc et al., 2017). But not in the sense that it is an age in which false news spreads; it has always spread as we all well know (two classical examples are the "Donation of Constantine" or the "Inquisition," when women were burnt alive after being declared—obviously falsely—witches).

While it is usually framed as a negative phenomenon, the first sense could be also intended as a form of democratization of knowledge and information that is actually positive.

Because people who did not have power have always tended to endure, and only endure, fake news and have always found themselves on the wrong side of fake news, being usually witches and not inquisitors.

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As far as the second sense is concerned, it is important to note that since those responsible for spreading information, including fake news, have always been the ones in power, communities were not feeling the need to defend themselves, that is, to recognize the institution's voice among many other ones that speak in the web or inside our social media.

Once, those responsible for fake news were always those who also had a form of institutional power. Now, even someone who does not have that kind of power is able to produce fake news.

As a result, in the last 15 years, institution have felt the need to teach students and many other components of society to defend themselves from potentially unreliable sources of information and fake news (see for instance Digicomp, a framework by the European Commission for educating citizens on digital literacy and competence; cf. Vuorikari et al., 2022).

There is no need to make malicious inferences from this: Indeed, democratic institutions are inspired by the will to emancipate people, so that nowadays who holds power also wants to coach people to defend themselves against fake news.

This is a completely new phenomenon, which main cause is connected to a point I will develop later: In the past few years, inside the world of information and communication, something has decentralized the power of controlling sources, taking it away from the traditionally delegated actors which have withheld this role for centuries.

Hence, the first important point, if we really want to grasp what is happening in our society: What we generically refer to under the label of the "fake news problem" is more deeply the problem of a relationship between knowledge and power, in which, for the first time, there is a separation between types of power and the power of controlling information.

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Those who have political and cultural power no longer have control over information, or, at least, have less control over it than in the past, and therefore need to educate others to recognise their voices among the other millions of voices that circulate inside social media, while they did not have this problem before. We could frame these features of the age of fake news in a more academic way starting from the relationship between knowledge and power studied by Foucault.

Indeed, Foucault (1976) argued that power is first and foremost to be understood as the "multiplicity of relations of force immanent to the field in which they are exercised and constitutive of their organisation"(Foucault, 1976, p. 82, translation by the author), an impersonal dimension that directs social actors but, at the same time, it is reproduced and propagated through the social actions of the actor themselves. According to Foucault, knowledge is a mode through which power regulates, shapes, and legitimises itself, and has a role in managing the social body.

n the past, power and knowledge were concentrated in state institutions and apparatuses. These institutions leaned on each other through the intertwining of decision-making, punitive and cognitive power, and became the social actors in which it was most possible to

see the function of the power-knowledge pair in the management of social relations.

Today, with a phenomenon of progressive decentralisation, we are witnessing a fragmentation of the knowledge–power binomial: While on the one hand, the institutions remain the stronghold (albeit often undermined by lobbies, big finance, andinternet giants) of decision-making and administrative power, on the other hand, knowledge and its production are spreading horizontally among different and varied social actors, who are more numerous and less controllable.

Power relations within a social system are in fact the result of systemic and dynamic relations between social actors. Radical changes in social actors and their relations can therefore reconfigure the ways in which knowledge and power are articulated. As Latour (2006) has shown, not only human individuals are social actors, but also non-human actors such as animals, bacteria, materials, plants, and not least technologies. What this article will attempt to show is that the explosion of certain kinds of technologies is reconfiguring both the relationship between social actors and the ways in which power and knowledge regulate these relationships.

Summing up: The problem is not the spread of fake news and their increase in quantity, but the relationship between knowledge and power, between what we know and what we want others to know, between who produces knowledge and who has power and controls it.

In this direction, I will focus on the ways through which (a) the relationship between knowledge and power produces the concepts of truth and falsehood, and (b) how a radical reassemblation of the network of social actors (Latour, 2006) modifies these relationships.

This looks like a much more interesting and much more difficult problem.

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2. The Force of the False
and the Three Stages of “Fake News”

Before investigating how this perspective can shed a new light on what I have called the age of fake news, it is crucial to focus on the role of “fake” in our framework and how it relates to the current radical societal changes.

Three “stages” can be individuated. First, it is important to stress that a true piece of information is not necessarily good, as well as a false one is not necessarily bad.

Of course, this has nothing to do with day-to-day things, like the many small lies we tell, perhaps to a good end, but with information: Giving true information in a situation of calamity or risk, as an evacuation, a fire, or flight from a hazardous substance, may lead to carnage, and, for this reason, fake news has always been given not to unleash panic and to control the situation. Far be it from me to defend false information.

However, it is important not to polarize and split the problem between “the good” (truth) and “the bad” (false), since the aim of this article is to break down the problem and show that the point is not the fake or the defence of the truth. After all, my mentor Umberto Eco (2000) wrote a wonderful essay called “The Force of the False,” which he used to show how falsities have contributed to crucial scientific discoveries.

One of Eco’s favourite examples on this topic was Christopher Columbus: Columbus went to the King of Spain to do what today we would call “asking for a grant” to fund a scientific project after the King of Portugal had refused this very same request.

For many good reasons, we would say today, because what Columbus had in his hands was nothing other than a series of fake news:

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the maps were wrong, the calculation of the dimensions of the Earth was wrong, the credit given to certain theo- ries was wrong, the project to redeem Asian savages was wrong, and even the financial investment was wrong. And yet, from all this collection of false knowledge and full-blown fake news (Columbus had the maps drawn up by his brother and relied on seamen's tales), Columbus made the greatest European discovery of the century (see Bergreen, 2011). The name for this phenomenon is serendipity (cf. Ross & Copeland, 2022), namely a discov- ery that you make, in spite of yourself, when you are look- ing for something else. Serendipity is at the heart of the vast majority of scientific discoveries, because much true knowledge can be gained starting from what is false (on this topic, see Eco, 2000). Falsity, then, is neither bad nor good; it depends on what use you make of it. The prob- lem, on the contrary, is mendacity, which is a completely different matter.

As far as our "second stage of fake" is concerned, it is indeed important to notice that when Ptolemy used to say that the earth does not move and it is at the centre of the universe, he was not lying, he was wrong. Ptolemy said what is false but believed that what he said was true. He simply had a false belief. And this is exactly the state of mind behind the fake news produced by those who do not have cultural power: They are people that put information into circulation believing that they are right. They are not lying, they are in another state that, as we shall see, we can call "semiotic guerrilla warfare." We will come back to this in the next paragraph. For now, it is very important to distinguish two stages of fake news: serendipity and false beliefs. A totally different thing, if compared to the previous two, is mendacity, where one says what is false, but they say it knowing that it is false. Mendacity is the third stage of fake news: One believes what is true, but one says what is false.

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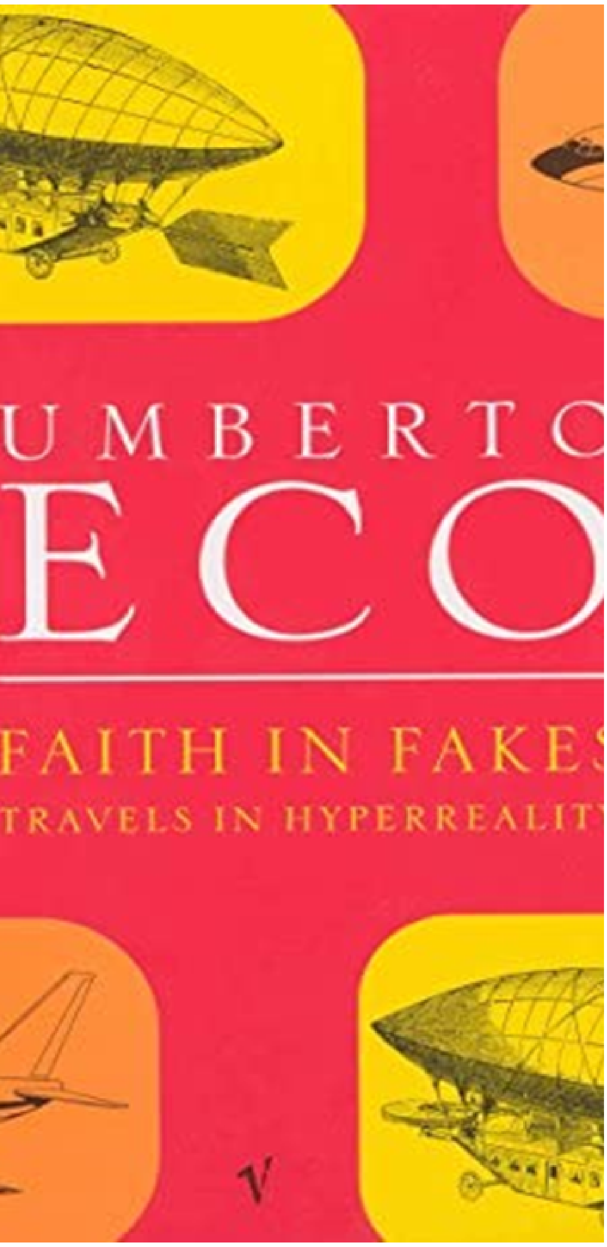

In order to take into account this third stage, let's consider an example, taking a leap of a few centuries forward: the Paris Climate Change Conference of 2015, when politicians signed an agreement on climate change. Two years later, Donald Trump gets elected as the pres- ident of the United States of America and claims, as he was already doing since 2012, that climate change is fake news, invented by China in order to put the American economy on its knees ("the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive," Trump, 2012). Trump knows that what he is saying is false, and he has a huge amount of data that refute what he is saying, but he has the advantage of telling a lie and having people believe that it is other people who are telling lies. Note the staggering subtlety of Trump, who produces a meta-fake news. Trump perfectly knew that in those years fake news was a much-discussed issue, and, while he was giv- ing a piece of fake news, he used to accuse others of say- ing what is false while they are telling the truth. So, truth still matters a lot in the so-called "fake news" problem, and there is no need to embrace its "post," as I will try to demonstrate later.

It is also important to notice that no institution sent a university lecturer to the White House to explain to Trump how to defend himself against fake news. Indeed, the most dangerous fake news do not come from people on social networks, they come from institutions that have power. All the big examples, like those in health-care, are like that: The anti-vax movement emerges from a study published by Lancet—one of the most prestigious medical journals in the world—written by a well-known English doctor, Andrew Wakefield, who issued false data concerning the children involved in his study, because, at the same time, he had patented a vaccine alternative to the trivalent, which it was in his interest to discredit in order to sell his own (cf. Eggerston, 2010). The Di Bella cancer treatment in Italy came from an oncologist with a good curriculum (see Di Bella, 2019) and was tried out by a part of the Italian scientific community headed by Umberto Veronesi, who falsified it. It was the very same for the Hamer method or that of Gerson, a German doctor who treated tumours with coffee enemas and fruit juice extracts.

And the point is precisely this. When fake news is spread by someone with cultural or political power like Wakefield or Trump, it is usually fake in our last sense, the sense of being lies: Wakefield knew that he had falsified his data and asked for the MMR vaccine to be sus- pended in order to sell his own. But the great majority of anti-vax supporters does really believe that vaccinations are harmful or that the Di Bella method can treat cancer. Why?

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3. The Semiological Guerrilla Warfare

My claim is that they are somehow living in a state of generalised semiological guerrilla warfare. Eco (1973) used to think of the “semiological guerrilla” as a local and multiple form of resistance against the centralised power of media, the one that used to build and spread the dominant “world view” (see Paolucci, 2017, 2021). At that time, the media system was reliant upon the formula “one-to-many”: Information originated from a source possessing cultural power and then flowed towards the so-called (at that time) “mass.” Eco suggested that it was better to control the outfall than the source of this flow of information, by switching focus to the direction of the message through the implementation of a semiological guerrilla made possible by deviating and non-standardised interpretations:

Usually politicians, educators, communication theorists, believe that in order to control the power of the media, it is necessary to control two moments of the communication chain: the Source and the Channel. In this way they believe they control the message; and instead, they control the message as an empty form that at the Destination everyone will fill with the meanings suggested to him by his own anthropological situation, by his own model of culture….For this…it will be necessary…to apply a guerrilla warfare solution. We must occupy, in every place in the world, the first chair in front of every television set….If you want a less paradoxical formulation, I will say: the battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Age of Communication is not won where communication starts, but where it arrives…: just as communication systems envisage a single industrialised *source and a single message that will reach an audience dispersed throughout the world, we will have to be able to imagine complementary communication systems that allow us to reach every single human group… to discuss the incoming message in the light of the arrival codes, comparing them with the departure codes. (Eco, 1973, pp. 296–297; translation by the author)*

We now live in a world where a deviant version of the semiological guerrilla has won and has become, para- doxically, the default mechanism of many contemporary forms of communication, presenting aberrant decoding, misleading interpretations, and contents aimed at decon- structing knowledge, since everyone now knows that knowledge is always connected to some form of power.

Post-truth (McIntyre, 2018), fake news and "exper- tise death" are heterogeneous terms seeking to explain the effects of a semiotic phenomenon that is actually of another type, the victory of the semiological guerrilla.

Indeed, this new generalised state of semiological guerrilla warfare is born out of two things:

(a) An unprecedented technological revolution, in which the receivers of the message become them- selves a source — if not "broadcasters," at least "narrowcasters" — and, in their turn, produce texts and documents that are recorded a priori, even if they are valueless (this is an epoch-making revolution, since, in the past, recording followed a filtering of what was of value, while, now, it precedes it; on this topic, see Hoog, 2009, and Paolucci, 2013, 2023);

(b) The fear of being manipulated, coming from the knowledge of having been manipulated in the past: now one knows (and it is important to insist on the impersonal form of the enunciation) that knowledge is always linked to a form of power and that information circulates because it is spread by those with political, cultural, and economic power. Hence, the triumph of conspiratorial thought and many other things of the same kind (on this topic, see Leone, 2016, 2020).

However, it is worth distinguishing the general idea of the semiological guerrilla from the way it was thought of in the 1960s. As previously stated, according to Eco (1973), the semiological guerrilla was meant as the local construction of deviating forms from the mainstream information. If that was the idea, the semiological guer- rilla is not just possible nowadays, but is now even more necessary than before. It simply must take a different shape. In a world where democracy has a primacy over competence, where expertise has somehow become an opinion among other opinions (cf. Marrone & Migliore, 2021) and where different, contradictory versions of the world circulate into our encyclopaedia, there is no salva- tion outside a new form of semiological guerrilla, a semi- ological guerrilla 2.0, able to emancipate people inside new media environments. Indeed, writing his essay on semiological guerrilla, Umberto Eco strongly felt that the duty of the intellectual was to work in favour of what, at the time, was called "the masses," who were the object of thorough-going manipulation on the part of élite culture, which used to build cultural products to control them (Eco, 1973). When he started his column for the Espresso, the Manifesto, and other mass media, this ped- agogical and emancipatory instinct behind his critical articles may have been even more evident, because there were the masses to "educate," teaching them the "game of the media," so that they would not succumb to the power of manipulating information and building consent. een developing as Umberto Eco might have hoped.

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This situation brought us the points highlighted in our argument's beginning: The technological revolution has led to a reformulation of the relationship between knowledge and power. When Eco wrote his ideas on the semiological guerilla warfare, there were a completely different social system and forms of knowledge that have now been altered by the introduction of new actors in the social scenery. The relationship between knowledge and the network of social actors is the basis for the production of the concept of truth in a society: The semiological guerilla proposed by Eco was based on a concept of truth and falsehood which were related to institutional power. Now, this power has been redistributed, but not, as Eco whished, thanks to the conceptual instruments provided by the high culture and cultural institutions, but due to new kinds of actors that have modified the very same idea of truth, as we will now show.

4. The Machinic Production of Documents and the Post-Truth

Within a genealogical perspective (Foucault, 1969), a clear example of the reassembling of the networks crafting the relationships between knowledge and power can be found during the Middle Ages. Indeed, the destabilising effects generated in the Middle Ages by the passage from truth as "trust in authority" (or in personal and feudal loyalty), to truth as something guaranteed by documents has already been studied (Ferraris, 2021, p. 27).

Green (2002) has shown how the very word "truth" changed meaning at the end of the 14th century. While "trouthe" previously meant something like "integrity" or "reliability" (the word "trust" comes from it), it was only at the end of the 14th century that it began to take on its present meaning of "conformity to the facts." At the same time, the meaning of its antonym, which was "tresoun" (as opposed to the integrity and reliability of "trouthe" as "trust": "tresoun" was the practice of helping the enemy)

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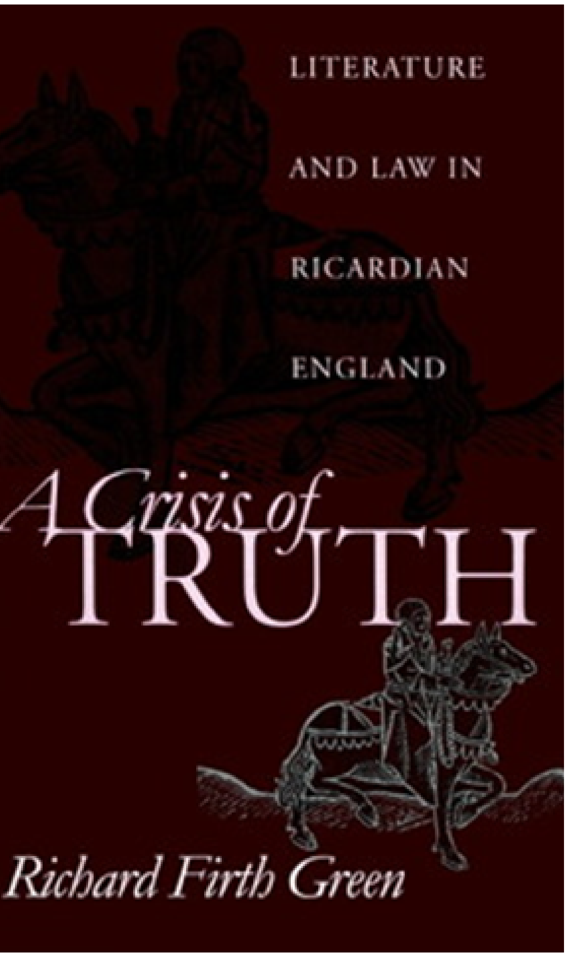
began to change from “personal betrayal” to “crime against the state.” In A Crisis of Truth, Green (2002) maintains, therefore, that these changes and alterations in meaning were closely connected with the growing emphasis on the written word, which generated documents, rather than on the spoken word, which generated promises. At the same time, these changes and alterations related to the simultaneous reshaping of thought connected to legal practices that took place in those years. According to Green (2002), the very rapid increase in the quantity of documents created by a bureaucratic, centralised, and authoritarian state like that of Richard II in England at the time contributed to bringing about the fundamental change in the attitude that, still nowadays, we have (or are “said to have” or “should have”) to an item of evidence or a proof, which has moved from an idea of truth that resides almost totally in persons to a truth that resides in and rests constitutively on documents, through which certain facts speak.



A second turning point in the conception of truth can be found in the scientific revolution, and in the Boyle versus Hobbes debate particularly. While, in the previous case, the transition from orality to writing a real technological revolution-made the meaning of truth as an idea of integrity and reliability turn into that of the conformity to facts mediated by documents, now, truth moves from conformity to facts through documents to the production of reality through machines. While, before, people produced documents, now reality is produced, but reality is not produced by us nor by one of our particular subgroups called “scientists”:

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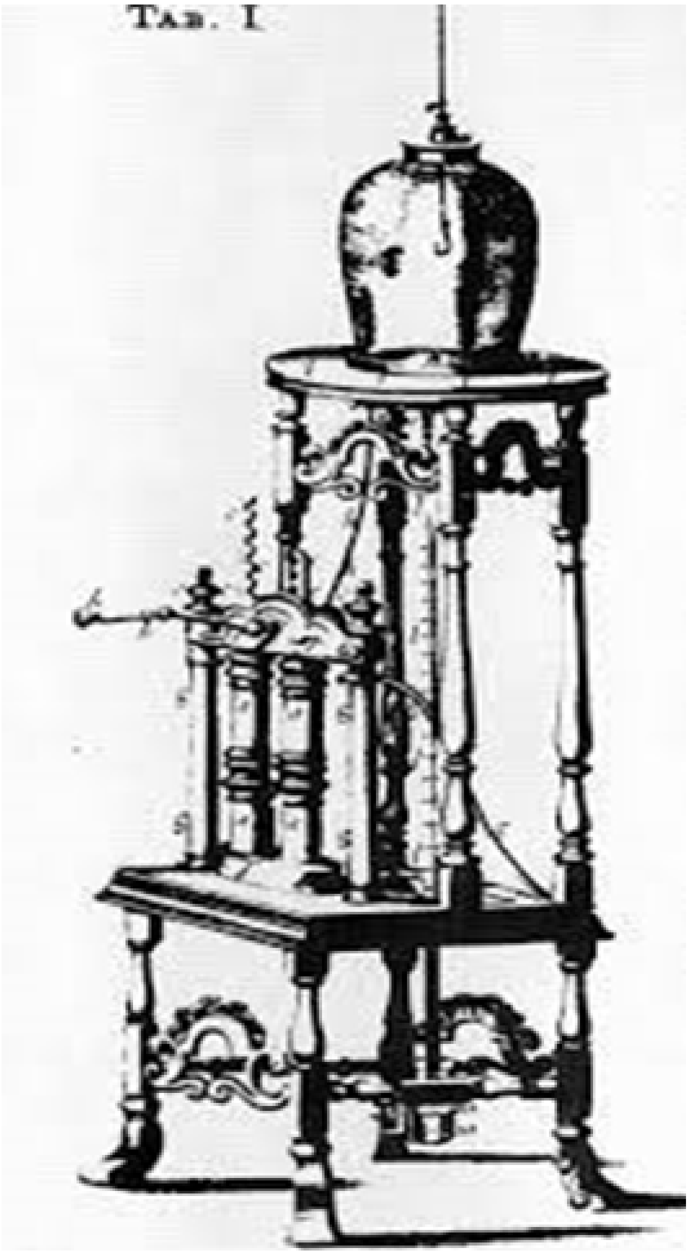
Pre-Truth

It is machines that produce reality. Truth — scientific truth — is not based on the production of documents by means of man's aids (writing) but on the production of what is real by means of machines.

In order to understand the world we live in nowadays, Shapin and Shaffer's book (1985) on the debate between Boyle and Hobbes is a must-read (the book had a huge influence on Bruno Latour's thought: see Latour, 2006). Indeed, something momentous happened with Boyle that is fundamental for grasping present-day reality. In fact, to put order in the debate between "fullists" and "emptyists" that followed Torricelli's discovery — these were the years in which the ether used to be believed—Boyle did not say a word, he did not even write a scientific treatise, but produced a machine that enclosed a Torricelli tube in the inverted glass casing of a pump and made a vacuum with a crank. Later, he suffo- cated small animals and snuffed out lots of candles in his machine. Then, with this pump, he went to the king, who, we remember, was the one who produced documents. With the king, Boyle found Hobbes, a supporter of the ether and one who had already sent the king a whole range of admonitions in the form of letters and other documents (Hobbes was a producer of documents, while Boyle was a producer of machines).



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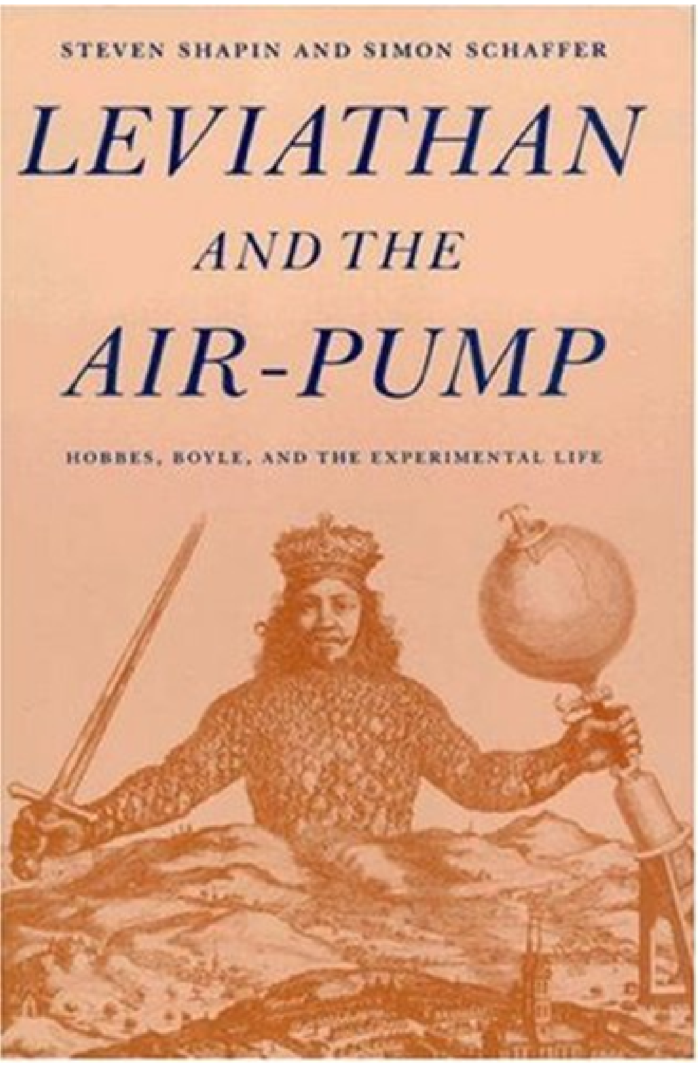
What Hobbes did not like about Boyle was his appeal to doxa to get the sup- port of his peers. Boyle did not rely on logic, mathemat- ics, or rhetoric, but on the concept that anyone could use his machine and whoever used it would produce reality, the very same reality as that produced by nature. A kind of Spinoza's ordo et connexio rerum idem est ac ordo et connexio idearum is at work behind Boyle's pump.

On the contrary, Hobbes, who believed in the ether, which was contradicted by Boyle's machine that pro- duces vacuum, said that we cannot delegate the pro- duction of the accepted version of reality to the peo- ple, because people must delegate their power to the king and the institutions, and when the king speaks and produces documents, it will be the people that speak and produce them (see Shapin & Shaffer, 1985) But Boyle replied that his machine produced the vacuum, produced reality without passing through any document, any expertise or any other delegation. The only media- tion needed is machinic. Take whoever you want from among the people, give him Boyle's machine, and he will produce the vacuum. And Boyle had a technician with a crank that produces the vacuum using a chicken feather as a sensor. Through Boyle's pump, we assist, by means of mediation through the machine, to the splitting between science and politics (see Latour, 2006). Science produces reality, and therefore knowledge, by means of the machinic production of reality, while politics pro- duces documents, and therefore knowledge, by means of a delegation to experts or sovereigns, to their narra- tions, and their meanings.

Pre-Truth

In my view, the only acceptable sense of Bachelard's (1934) by now famous slogan that "les faits sont faits" ("facts are made of"), meaning that they are constructed, is that facts are produced through machines. Vaccines are made through machines, like many other things. When, on the other hand, we say that facts are socially constructed, we are, from my point of view, exporting a principle of science to other cultural domains that work in a very different way. It is now almost a common place in the Humanities to claim that facts are socially con- structed, but this must not be taken for granted at all, since it looks like an exportation of a principle born to say quite the opposite.



STEVEN SHAPIN AND SIMON SCHAFFER

LEVIATHAN AND THE AIR-PUMP

HOBBES, BOYLE, AND THE EXPERIMENTAL LIFE

In fact, many of the problems in debates on post- truth and in the concept that facts are built through narratives and media starting from emotions arise here: Science produces knowledge through the production of reality, which is machinic, while politics produce reality through the production of texts and documents. Science reaches knowledge moving from the production and reproduction of reality, through machines, machinic perceptions, laboratories, and environments. Politics and information produce knowledge moving from the production and reproduction of texts and documents. Those, in the world of information or culture, who say that facts are built through media, in order to explain knowl- edge in the world of information and communication, are using the science model, which, following my previous remarks, is a mistake, because scientific knowledge comes through the production of reality by means of machines and not by means of texts and documents, meanings, narrations, and points of view.

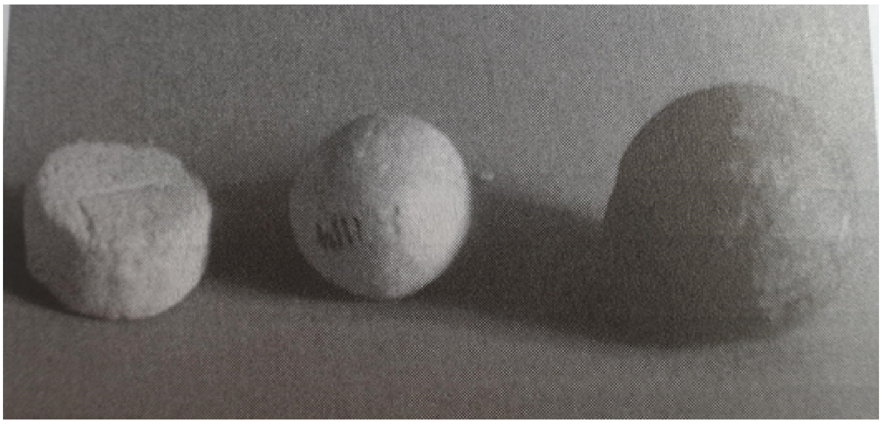
For these reasons, I suggest that this mistake has become very clear during the last 25 years, in which for the first time, due to the quantitative increase of document production and circulation (and I will come back to this later), even a document is pushed through with the mediation of a machine. Now we have machines that generate documents. Not only, for instance, in deep fakes, where the whole text is produced through machines, but also in our present-day situation, where, even when documents are produced by human beings, the machine produces new documents start- ing from these very same documents (metadata), that, afterwards, direct human beings to produce and read other documents. “Echo chambers,” “bubbles,” “algocracies” are heterogeneous names for another kind of phenomenon, which is the new machinic production of documents.

5. Pre-Truth,
or the Primacy of Experience Over Knowledge

The web and what Ferraris (2021) is calling our “documediality era” are a great pump that produces Boyle’s vacuum. And what effect does this have? The most evi- dent one is that we are returning back to a medieval idea of truth of the type that Green told us about, an idea of truth that resides above all inside the persons, in trust and reliability: a “truth” that is “trust.” This is happening in a twofold sense: On one hand, trust in experts, who mediate our access to documents which, for our medium-level competencies about the machines we use on a daily basis, are broadly inaccessible in the same way as the workings of an engine are broadly inaccessible to a person who drives a car and has a licence; on the other hand - and this second dimension is the most original one — when documents proliferate, a quantitative change becomes qualitative and truth as trust takes on the form of an anecdotal fact. And so, there are two changes: Now documents are generated not only by the king or his various substitutes (the state, institutions, intellectuals, newspapers, television, etc.). Currently, we have semiological guerrilla warfare that generates documents, but it generates them also and especially by means of machines. The other change is that this quantitative change gives rise to a corresponding qualitative change, which consists of the primacy of the anecdotal fact. The proliferation of anecdotal facts is the real novelty in the new places of information grounded on the victory of semiological guerrilla warfare. Anecdotal facts are something of the kind: “Since she became a vegan, Susy has got slimmer and is very well,” or “since Marc followed a ketogenic paleo diet and eats beefsteaks at breakfast, he has got slimmer and is very well.” Susy and Marc do two opposite things and yet they are both very well because both diets are much better than that of the average European. The problem with anecdotal facts is that instead of asking why two opposite things are both good for one’s health, one nor- mally joins the paleo diet or the vegan faction, because they back what in the social world takes on the form of their own experience. Hence, the primacy of the anecdotal fact over knowledge. Indeed, the structure of the anecdotal fact is the following: “I can accept what science says, I can accept pre-existing knowledge on a sub- ject, I can accept mostly everything, but, as far as I am concerned, it was good for me, and how can anyone but myself claim to know anything about me? I’m certainly not denying anything other people say, they may be abso- lutely right by all means—I believe them (or perhaps not)—but my experience is that it was good for me and it was right for me. Don’t you trust me and believe the simple truth that it was good for me?”

Due to their semiotic structure, anecdotal facts insti- tute the primacy of experience over knowledge. But obviously—and it is important to learn how to import what is really importable from science—knowledge has nothing to do with experience, so much so that a the- ory is not to be verified but falsified. Indeed, there will always be that anecdote about a mythological grandpa who lived to be 100 years old smoking two packets of cigarettes a day, which verifies the false theory that smoking can make you a centenary.

Pre-Truth



Therefore, instead of speaking about post-truth, we should speak of pre-truth: You have truth beforehand, it resides in you and in that multiplicity of intermediaries, often machinic, that give you access to documents that are mainly inaccessible. And what you want is to be right, that is to say, you want that others confirm what you already know and that they trust you. In this sense, Ferraris (2021, p. 32) speaks of a “privatisation of the illusion of being right.” However, this has nothing to do, as it has often been claimed, with a form of “confirmation bias” amplified by the web and its bubbles. On the contrary, it has to do with the return to a medieval dimension of truth, which precedes its conception of something that “corresponds” to the facts: a pre-truth in the sense of a return to its pre-modern dimension.

In this return to the medieval meaning of trust, in an internal, pre-existing truth which is connected to experience and not to knowledge, online enunciation is the contemporary form of St. Augustine’s “doing truth.” Indeed, as it is well known, Augustine (2008) confessed to an omniscient God and, above all, wondered why he was confessing, as God already knew what he wanted to confess. In the age of pre-truth, we confess to an omniscient machine, which records our confession and adds metadata to it. To paraphrase St Augustine in the Confessions, we want to “do truth” in front of you, omnipotent and omniscient, and in front of many witnesses. And what does the machine do? It gives us a score (numbers of likes, followers, etc.). Influencers are the new hard-core gamers good at playing The Game of Truth with the machine: They are high in score and they keep on confessing to a machinic God able to transform their information into values and money.

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Conclusion

Starting from a semiotic approach towards falsehood, we have discovered that the problem of the “fake news age” is neither the falsity of fake news per se nor the so-called “post-truth attitude,” but the structural change of the relation between knowledge and power, which has, con- sequently, produced a radical transformation of the con- cepts of false and truth. The core of this structural change can be found in the machinic production and diffusion of documents, which has led to a state of generalized semiological guerrilla.

Through the enormous amount of information char- acterizing the documedial revolution (Ferraris, 2009, 2021), which led to the related redistribution of the relationship between power and knowledge, this quantitative machinic production of texts and documents has been able to produce a qualitative change in the notion of truth and false. Indeed, truth and false are no longer concepts in the hand of institutional powers, able to cre- ate a communitarian agreement on facts, but are now located in the relationship between individuals and their confessor, the technology, the new actor that is increas- ing its power, not imposing its truth, but sustaining every- one’s desire to do truth.

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02

The fabrication machine and the threat of disinformation

Jaroslav Ušiak[1]
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1. Introduction

There is no universally agreed definition of disinformation. Nevertheless, in general terms, many scholars and practitioners do share a common view of this concept.[3] In that respect, disinformation is thought of as false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is spread deliberately.[4] It is this intentionality aspect that distinguishes it from the other nowadays also widely prominent term misinformation, which is commonly understood as false, inaccurate or misleading information that is spread unintentionally.[5]

Disinformation is undoubtedly not a new phenomenon. Humans have resorted to the deliberate spread of untrue information for millennia.

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[3] Kapantai et al., 'A Systematic Literature Review on Disinformation'.

[4] Directorate-General for Communications Networks, A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation.

[5] Directorate-General for Communications Networks.

The fabrication machine and the threat of disinformation

An exemplary illustration of this age-old capacity for the fabricated can be seen in the portrayal of Ramses II waging against the Hittite Empire in the Battle of Kadesh, which is generally dated to 1274 BC.[6] Despite strategic blunders on the side of the forces led by Ramses, the battle ending in a stalemate, and the young pharaoh even losing control over a great part of modern-day Syria, once back in his homeland, lies were quickly spread — and the battle was portrayed as a major victory for Ramses.[7] Twisting the truth or outright spreading fabrications has been arguably an innate feature of human history. Notwithstanding this ancient omnipresent disinformation reality, a major transformation to the practice of creating it has occurred in the past couple of decades. The rapid expansion of cyberspace, fueled by the development and accessibility of computing systems and the openness and inventiveness of the Internet, has forged a new reality overcoming physical and social barriers.[8]

One of the most cited explanations behind this behaviour is based on dual process reasoning — showing that while in some situations, people consider the information available to them, in other situations, they make quick decisions based on peripheral stimuli and heuristics.[26]

Despite significant societal benefits resulting from this new reality, multiple negative phenomena have set roots. Among these, one can certainly also count online disinformation. What once might have taken great resources and considerable time to spread fabricated information can now theoretically be achieved by relatively anyone, almost instantly with a few clicks of a button. It is no wonder then that the proliferation of online disinformation has in recent years emerged as a major concern on the public agenda.[9]

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6 Goedicke, ‘Considerations on the Battle of Ḳadesh’.
7 Goedicke.
8 Choucri and Clark, International Relations in the Cyber Age.
9 Nenadić, ‘Unpacking the “European Approach” to Tackling Challenges of Disinformation and Political Manipulation’.

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Stemming from the urgency of this topic, the aim of this chapter is two-fold. Firstly, to briefly outline what we term the fabrication machine — the complex mesh of elements, motives, behaviours, and tools that stand behind the creation and dissemination of never-before in history seen amounts of false and misleading content. Secondly, to briefly outline the policy response to the issue of disinformation in the EU and the way that framing this issue through the prism of securitization affects the overall fight against this phenomenon. The chapter is structured as follows. In the first part, we lay out a brief description of the several motives and modi operandi of the three categories of actors that are part of what we term the fabrication machine — the creators, spreaders, and platforms. A better understanding of the ways that disinformation is generated, and spread is especially vital for a more targeted and effective approach to countering disinformation. The last part of this chapter then continues with a discussion of the phenomenon of disinformation from a policy perspective as it takes a deeper dive into the theory of securitization, through which this chapter looks at the issue of disinformation and the ways that the framing of disinformation as a security threat mobilizes resources for countering this negative phenomenon.

Understanding the fabrication machine

The ease of creation and dissemination of disinformation is nowadays visible across multiple countries around the world.[10] In many ways, this is thanks to new media such as websites and accounts on social networking services (SNS), such as on Facebook or Twitter, that have become major avenues of spreading this harmful content.[11] Yet it is not only them. When analyzing the possibilities of combating disinformation, it is necessary to take into account a plethora of factors, including the local specifics of information spaces. A good illustration of such differences can be seen in the comparison of the information spaces of the United States of America and the Slovak Republic. In Slovakia, websites and accounts on SNSs, especially on Facebook, appear to be the major dissemination sources, with traditional media such as television appearing to only play a minor role in the spread of disinformation.[12]

[10] Nenadić, 'Unpacking the "European Approach" to Tackling Challenges of Disinformation and Political Manipulation'.

[11] An SNS account, taking into account the specifics of a given SNS, is herein understood in broader sense — including individual user accounts as well as groups, fanpagaes, etc.

[12] Dragomir, 'Media Influence Matrix: Slovakia'.

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However, the tables are somewhat turned in the USA, where local and national televisions such as Fox News or One America News play a significant role in the spread of false and misleading information.[13] This situation, among others, highlights the need for a better understanding of local infospheres — including what we term here the fabrication machine, which consists of the (i) creators of false and misleading information, (ii) disseminators of false and misleading information, and (iii) platforms enabling the dissemination of such content. The following part of this chapter directly explores these parts of the puzzle including their motives and modus operandi.

Creators

It can often be unclear who exactly and why created a particular false information.[14] Besides this, institutions and actors, be it a government agency, company, or an individual can have several simultaneous sources of motivation.[15] Among the major sources of creating disinformation one might include:

- Foreign policy motives;
- Domestic-political motives;
- Social needs;
- Financial incentives.

A good illustration of the first category of motives was the 2016 US presidential election disinformation campaign sponsored by the Russian government, which was designed to incite social discord in the American society in an effort to interfere in the presidential election.[16] However, there are also countless other examples in which various states or other types of actors have used disinformation campaigns to achieve their foreign policy goals, whether through ridiculing an enemy state or disrupting its social cohesion and with it laying the groundwork for a potential coup.[17]

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[13] Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, Network Propaganda.
[14] Mintal, 'SLOVAKIA: SNAKE OIL SPILLS ONTO THE WEB'.
[15] Buchanan, 'Why Do People Share Disinformation On Social Media?'
[16] Mueller, 'Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election'.
[17] Rid, Active Measures.

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The fabrication machine and the threat of disinformation

Similar to foreign policy motives, multiple domestic actors are spreading disinformation with the objective of achieving their local political aims. These motives can oftentimes be articulated very simply — to achieve their desired level of voter support. A good illustration of the strength of domestic grown political disinformation is the case of Slovakia, where several local political actors known to spread false or misleading content, such as Ľuboš Blaha,[18] even place among the top 20 domestic Facebook accounts with the highest interaction rate in 2021.[19]

However, it is not only politically laden motives that are behind the spread of disinformation. An oftentimes overlooked motivation for creating disinformation is meeting one's social needs, such as status, attention, or entertainment. This motivation can, for example, be observed in the multiple ways that several online influencers try to create viral content that will resonate with their followers.

Unfortunately, the intentional production of false and misleading information can be, in certain cases, an effective way to achieve one's social needs, at least in the short term.[20]

The last in here discussed, but no less important motivation for creating disinformation is monetary gain. For example, according to a study by NewsGuard and Comscore, websites with false and misleading information generate an estimated $ 2.6 billion annually in advertising.[21] Strong financial incentives can also be seen in several, for example, Slovak websites with controversial content. A study conducted at Central European University in 2019 found that up to 27 such Slovak websites out of a total of 49 surveyed earned advertising money.[22]

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18 Dragomir, 'Media Influence Matrix: Slovakia'.
19 According to data from CrowdTangle.
20 Marwick and Lewis, 'Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online'.
21 'Special Report'.
22 Mintal, 'SLOVAKIA: SNAKE OIL SPILLS ONTO THE WEB'.

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Of course, advertising was not the only source of revenue for these Slovak websites spreading false or misleading content; other important sources of revenue included (i) sales of products and services, (ii) two / three percent tax designation,[23] and (iii) crowdfunding. The combined annual revenues from such sources ranged from a few hundred euros to several hundred thousand euros per year for selected entities in Slovakia.[24]

Spreaders

Disseminators of misleading or false information, i.e., actors who are not the primary creators of a given disinformation content, generally fall into one of two categories: (i) actors knowingly spreading misleading or false information, and (ii) actors unknowingly spreading misleading or false information. The first mentioned category encompasses actors who reshare a disinformation piece. As in the case of disinformation creators, motivations behind resharing disinformation can range from foreign policy aims to fulfilling one's specific social needs. Within the second category of spreaders, a wide variety of oftentimes complementary explanations why people unknowingly share misleading or false information (i.e., misinformation) exists.[25]

One of the most cited explanations behind this behaviour is based on dual process reasoning — showing that while in some situations, people consider the information available to them, in other situations, they make quick decisions based on peripheral stimuli and heuristics.[26]

However, these mental shortcuts, which often make day-to-day life easier for people, can also have significant negative effects. Known heuristics that simplify life but are also thought to contribute to the unconscious dissemination of misleading or untrue information include, but are not limited to, authority or consensus.[1] The first mentioned heuristic occurs in situations when a person believes the opinion of an authority mainly because that person is in a position of authority.[2] An illustration can be the student-teacher dynamics, in which the student oftentimes trusts information from the teacher mainly on the basis that he or she is an authority figure.

23 Under the Slovak tax system, Slovak taxpayers can allocate 2% and in certain situations 3% of their tax liability to a qualifying entity of their choice.

24 Mintal, 'SLOVAKIA: SNAKE OIL SPILLS ONTO THE WEB'.

25 Buchanan, 'Why Do People Share Disinformation On Social Media?'

26 Pennycook and Rand, 'The Psychology of Fake News'.

27 Buchanan, 'Why Do People Share Disinformation On Social Media?'

28 Ecker et al., 'The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation Belief and Its Resistance to Correction'.

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The second inhere mentioned heuristic is observable in situations in which, for example, a person with limited knowledge of a specific subject tends to take the position held by the "majority" of people close to him.[29] An illustration of this heuristic is, for example, the sharing of a false status on Facebook that is motivated by the fact that it amassed a large number of positive reactions and shares from the person's friends. Of course, authority and consensus are only two of a large number of heuristics that, in conjunction with other complex psychological phenomena, contribute to the unconscious dissemination of false and misleading information.[30]

Platforms

While at first glance, it may seem that social networking services like Facebook are just a neutral tool for disseminating information, however, on closer inspection of how these platforms function, this notion does not hold ground. To better understand the functioning of these SNSs, it is vital to first understand their business model. This is based on advertising, and the way it functions effectively makes SNSs a specialized form of a two-sided market intermediary.[31] SNSs customers are in this equation usually not "ordinary" users who use Facebook, for example, to watch videos or post photos, but individuals and companies who pay Facebook to display their advertising — effectively enabling SNSs to convert their users' attention into revenue. But what does this tell us about the motives of Facebook, in the context of spreading false or misleading information? Assuming that the economic goal of every business is to survive and grow,[32] achieving this goal is primarily possible in the case of Facebook, but also in several other SNSs: (i) by increasing the number of users who will consume advertising, and (ii) by keeping current users on the platform longer.[33] Building on this understanding, some features of how several SNSs, including Facebook, are currently designed, such as using algorithms to sort what is displayed to the user and in what order, generally tend to give prime to content that keeps the user on the planform more engaged and for longer periods of time.[34] Such content tends to be emotionally charged and/or show a higher level of novelty, which is unfortunately also the case for misleading and false information.[35]

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29 Gilovich et al., Social Psychology.
30 Ecker et al., 'The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation Belief and Its Resistance to Correction'.
31 Wu, The Attention Merchants.
32 Osterwalder, Pigneur, and Clark, Business Model Generation.
33 Mintal, 'Digitálny Model Pozornosti: Platformová Štruktúra Sociálnych Sieťových Služieb'.
34 Mintal.
35 Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 'The Spread of True and False News Online'.

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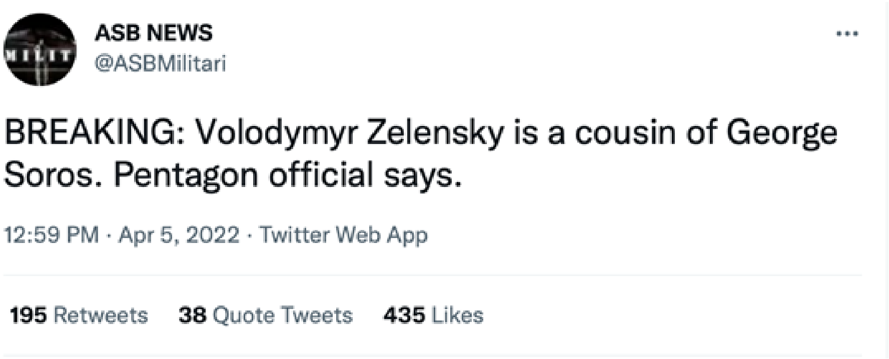
Modi operandi

In general, it can be argued that the modus operandi of individual actors in the process of targeted creation and dissemination of false and misleading content is influenced on the one side by the actor's objectives (e.g., erosion of trust in government) and on the other side by its capabilities (e.g., actor's technical skills, time, money). A specific strategy for creating and disseminating false and misleading content then seeks to bridge the means bank and the ends bank.[1] The range of tools to achieve the set goal of the actor is wide. The conscious creation and dissemination of false and misleading information, in general, abuses a wide range of heuristics, but also, for example, the technological set-up of the dissemination channels such as that of SNSs.

Within the modi operandi of actors who intentionally create disinformation content, one can often see the targeting of the authority heuristics. An illustration of this tactics can be a recent tweet falsely claiming that Volodymyr Zelensky is a cousin of George Soros (Picture 1.). In an effort to add legitimacy to the claimed information the creator of the tweet uses the authority heuristics, citing that the information stems from a respectable authority — a pentagon official.

Picture 1. An example of a false information tweet using the heuristics of authority



ASB NEWS
@ASBMilitari

BREAKING: Volodymyr Zelensky is a cousin of George Soros. Pentagon official says.

12:59 PM · Apr 5, 2022 · Twitter Web App

195 Retweets **38** Quote Tweets **435** Likes

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36 Gray, The Strategy Bridge.

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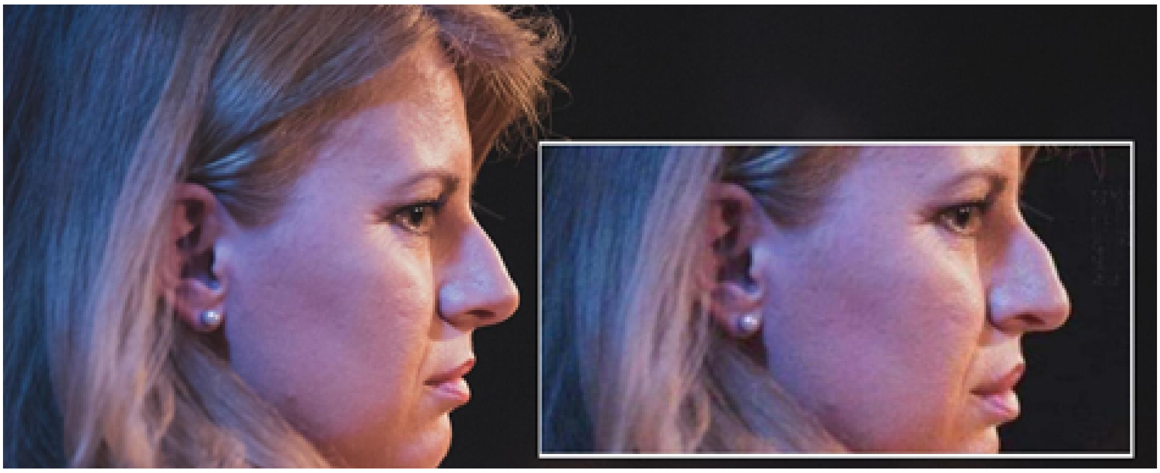
As for the modi operandi of the creation of false and misleading information, disinformation actors do not always create new content but oftentimes resort to the use of already existing content from abroad, which they then modify according to their objectives. Given this behaviour, it is thus possible to speak of disinformation content of primarily (i) domestic and (ii) foreign origin. An example of the first category is the deliberately modified photo from 2019 (Picture 2.), which shows the then Slovak presidential candidate Zuzana Čaputová. In this case, reminiscent of WWII anti-Semitic propaganda, the Slovak magazine Zem a Vek edited a photo of Čaputová's to give her a more pronounced curved nose, with the intention of pointing to her "Jewish features", thereby tapping into the “Jewish conspiracy narrative”.[37]

Picture 2. Comparison of the original photo of Caputova with the modified version aiming to highlight here “jewishness”



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[37] ‘Zem a Vek upravil nos Čaputovej ako na antisemitských karikatúrach’.

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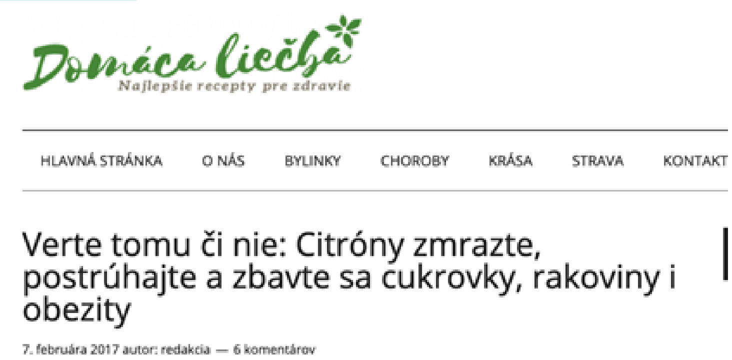
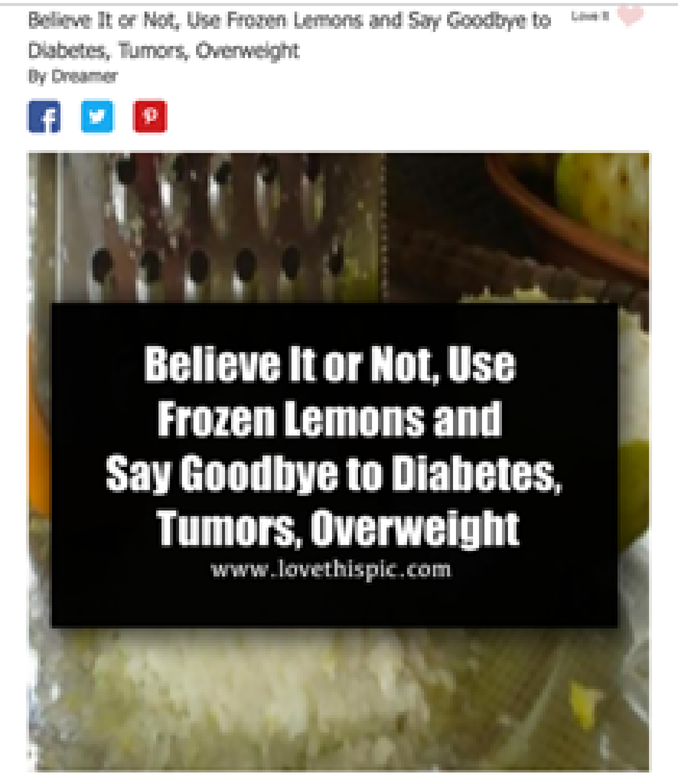
However, often times the false or misleading content is not unique to a national infosphere but is either a modification or a literal translation of disinformation content from other languages. This was, for example, the case with an article on the ability of frozen lemons to treat diabetes, cancer and obesity. (Picture No. 3).

Picture 3. Example of disinformation content of foreign origin — left in Slovak, right in English



Verte tomu či nie: Citróny zmrazte, postrúhajte a zbavte sa cukrovky, rakoviny i obezity

7. februára 2017 autor: redakcia — 6 komentárov



Believe It or Not, Use Frozen Lemons and Say Goodbye to Diabetes, Tumors, Overweight

By Dreamer

Believe It or Not, Use Frozen Lemons and Say Goodbye to Diabetes, Tumors, Overweight
www.lovethispic.com

Just as actors spreading false and misleading information have a range of approaches in designing successfully spreading misleading content, they also have at their disposal a range of tools able to distribute such content.[38] Within the category of intentional distribution of disinformation, several channels are available, be it websites, radio or social networking services. With the latter providing a strong breeding ground for the dissemination of false and misleading content, which is, inter alia, due to the digital architecture behind how SNSs are setup-up.[39]

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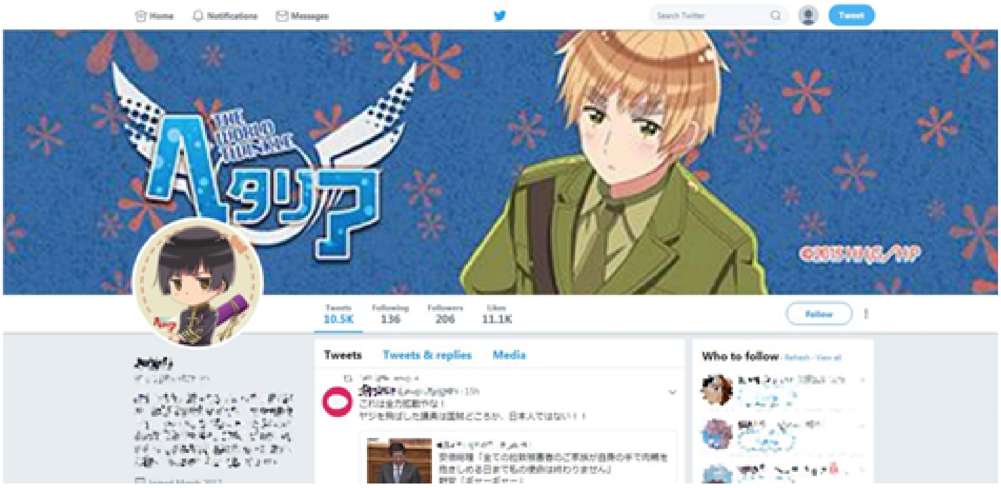
38 Howard, Lie Machines.
39 Mintal, 'Digitálny Model Pozornosti: Platformová Štruktúra Sociálnych Sieťových Služieb'.

The fabrication machine and the threat of disinformation

Within the available amplification pathways on SNSs, we can generally speak of (i) semi / automated and (ii) manual approaches to the amplification of content. For example, the option to pay for an ad can be associated with the former. Another popular tool in this toolbox category are bots, i.e., automated SNS accounts, that can, for example, send out tweets containing certain keywords. Several studies, primarily conducted on Twitter, showed that bots are a popular tool that has been used during election campaigns in several countries around the world.[40] An illustration of the usage of this tool can be, inter alia, the bot activity detected during the Japanese elections in 2017 (Picture 4.), which was estimated at roughly four percent.[41] However, automated amplification approaches are not appropriate for every situation, as these are often relatively easily detectable and traceable and oftentimes have also questionable impact.[42]

Picture 4. An example of a Japanese bot on Twitter used during the 2017 Japanese general elections



これは全力拡散やな！
ヤジを飛ばした議員は国賊どころか、日本人ではない！！

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40 Woolley, 'Automating Power'; Mintal and Vancel, '(Un)Trendy Japan'.
41 Mintal and Vancel, '(Un)Trendy Japan'.
42 Aldayel and Magdy, 'Characterizing the Role of Bots' in Polarized Stance on Social Media'.

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Given the negative aspects of using automated amplification tools, some actors opt to amplify their false and misleading information via manual approaches, whereby they engage a large number of people who manually disseminate the given disinformation. An illustration of such an approach can be, for example, the so-called Chinese 50-cent army. This fabled "army" is actually a state-sponsored group of paid and unpaid pro-government "trolls" spreading Chinese propaganda, including a significant amount of false and misleading content.[43]

The ways of deliberately creating and disseminating false and misleading information are really varied, with other new and improved ways of manipulation being added to the arsenal of actors disseminating such content. However, not all novel tools do take off immediately. An example can be the still yet currently low usage level of deepfake videos in the process of disinformation creation.

Talking the talk of Securitization

Knowing the ways of online disinformation is, however only half the battle won. To effectively tackle this issue a policy response targeting the multiple pieces of the fabrication machine is necessary. Having said that, the policy response tackling the issues of online disinformation, as argued by Tenove, has usually fallen into three governance sectors: (i) international and national security policies, (ii) electoral regulation, and (iii) media regulation.[44] In the European Union, online disinformation gained primary recognition within its key institutions in 2015, with the Russian disinformation campaigns and later the Russian meddling into the US Presidential campaign in 2016, as well as the negative role played by social networking services (SNSs) during campaigning ahead of the UK referendum on leaving the EU.

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43 Han, ‘Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace’.
44 Tenove, ‘Protecting Democracy from Disinformation’.

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All these factors undoubtfully contributed to a more urgent discussion on how to tackle information disorder. As a result of these developments, at the EU level and in some cases at the EU member states level, various policies have been proposed or adopted to better counter the issues of online disinformation, including hard and soft regulations of social media platforms. In the policy area, the European Commission enacted the Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats,[45] which set out the strategic political priorities to prevent and respond to EU security threats, in parallel with building other key interventions to foster societal resilience such as the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell within the European External Action Service, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats or the Strategic Communication Task Forces (e.g. EEAS East StratCom). Moreover, steered by the EU High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (HLEG), the European Council adopted the Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach,[46] calling for an EU wide Code of Practice on Disinformation that would effectively engage online platforms in fact-checking and preventing strategically misleading content, as well as bolster media literacy, quality journalism and the establishment of a network of independent fact-checkers.

Grounded in these actions, the Action Plan against Disinformation was formulated, advocating for a harmonized response across the EU Member States. However, as various experts warned at that time, the EU's and multiple-member states' approaches, or lack thereof, had various downsides, with critique targeted at, inter alia, the slow speed of implementation, ignorance of local member state contexts, and low financial backing.[47] In part, this lag in enacting a stronger policy response might be attributed to various issues, ranging from the controversy of defining the limits of free speech to an overall lack of policy expertise and excessive bureaucracy.

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[45] JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats a European Union response.
[46] COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach.
[47] Nenadić, 'Unpacking the "European Approach" to Tackling Challenges of Disinformation and Political Manipulation'.

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Yet, when faces with certain issues, politicians and governments can be very capable in mobilizing massive resources to tackle specific issues — security threats. With the disinformation spread during the COVID-19 pandemic, endangering the health and security of millions of citizens, or the War in Ukraine, threatening the very foundations of European security, arguably being cases of such issues.

Nowadays, we can find a number of approaches to the framing of security threats — with the reasons for this diversity being arguably rooted in the large number and complexity of views on social reality. In this sense, Buzan was one of the first to point out that security can be considered a social phenomenon that is influenced by social relations and human action within social units.[48] In their work, Buzan et al. point to the fact that every issue, that is, every public theme in society, can be placed on a spectrum from depoliticized, politicized to securitized.[49] However, the classification is never definitive because any topic on this spectrum can move from one side of the spectrum to another according to the current situation in society.[50] Securitization takes place through a speech act, where the securitization actor presents a particular topic as a social or existential threat to the relevant referent object. Securitization is, thus, according to Lasicova, the ability of an actor to present events as existential threats that threaten the referent object so much that they require immediate measures, emergency solutions, and legislative and financial measures to eliminate them.[51] The bottom line is that addressing these threats requires going beyond the standard political measures at hand.

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[48] Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, Security, 334–37.

[49] Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, Security.

[50] The scale defined by the authors of the concept of sectoral security: the depoliticized part of the spectrum - the state has nothing to do with the issue, nor is it interested in the topic becoming the subject of public debate; politicized part of the spectrum - the topic has become part of public debates and the subject of public policy, it is addressed through standard political procedures; securitized part of the spectrum - the topic is presented as an existential threat, it becomes the subject of a security agenda, steps are taken to eliminate the threat even through non-standard political procedures. (Buzan, Waever, Wilde, 1998)

[51] Lasicová, 'Bezpečnostná dynamika – Kodanská škola', 40.

By presenting the threat as highly urgent, the public will more easily accept measures that it would not otherwise tolerate. In securitization, it is crucial that the actor who presents a given issue as an existential threat through a speech act "obtains" public consent, i.e. that the problem becomes part of the security agenda. A securitization actor can, of course, misuse this process to advance its own interests to the detriment of the public interest.[52]

The speech act can be, according to Balzacq and Guzzini, divided into three categories. In this sense, each speech act aims to convey something (locational act), does something by this speech (illocutionary act), and in some cases, speaks effects (perlocutionary act).[53] In this context, securitization by speech is illocutionary because the actor with this speech act changes the social reality for the recipient(s) of that particular speech act if it is successful. At the same time, however, it is also a perlocutionary act because this speech act also causes effects, especially in securitization, when the presented problem becomes an existential and thus a security threat for them. When a problem enters the securitization stage, it becomes necessary to address the problem by adopting legislative steps, emergency solutions, and financial measures to eliminate it. An example of this approach might be the various actions taken by the EU to limit the spread of Russian propaganda, such as is the case of blocking state-owned Russian outlets RT/Russia Today.[54]

However, the securitization stage is not the last stop. Once the problem has been resolved, it enters the stage of desecuritization, moving the problem from the security agenda to the arena of normal day-to-day political negotiation and consensus finding, changing the issue to a depoliticization stage.[55] Usually only ordinary attention is paid to a problem in this stage, but the measures taken to address a problem may still remain in force. For example, after September 11, 2001, and the resulting fight against terrorism, governments framed many issues as existential threats, resulting in multiple restrictions on the freedom of movement, or the right to arrest, with multiple of these restrictions still remaining in force.[56]

[52] Danics, Bezpečnostní Politika
[53] Balzacq and Guzzini, 'Introduction'.
[54] 'EU Imposes Sanctions on State-Owned Outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's Broadcasting in the EU'.
[55] Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, Security, 4.
[56] Reynolds, '20 Years Later'.
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For an issue to become a security threat, one might argue that it should meet three conditions — if an actor identifies an existential threat, convinces of its urgency (convinces of a crisis situation in society), and can break the otherwise binding rules and procedures in society to solve it, we witness a successful securitization.[57] The existential threat is presented by the securitization actor in such a way that if it is not resolved quickly, there will be nothing left to solve in the future because the threat will completely annihilate the given referent object. AsBalzacq argues, in securitization it is necessary to emphasize (i) the context, (ii) the cultural and psychological disposition of the audience, (iii) and finally, (iv) the power relations between the speaker and the audience[58] emphasizing that the perlocutionary act is at the heart of securitization theory.[59] Here we come to the essence of current problems with defining threats, where it is necessary to consider the notion that speaking causes effects, thus leading various actors to shape the framing of a problem, and thereby trying to influence the audience's perceptions.

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57 Taureck, 'Positive and Negative Securitisation – Bringing Together Securitisation Theory and Normative Critical Security Studies'.
58 Balzacq, 'The Three Faces of Securitization', 171–93.
59 Balzacq and Guzzini, 'Introduction', 98–100.No Reference

Conclusion

The deliberate spread of false and misleading information has been present in human communities for millennia. However, the expansion of cyberspace in general, and social networking services in particular has arguably helped to create a new reality that overcomes physical and social barriers with unforeseen consequences for the diversity, volume and speed of spreading false and misleading information.

As Lewandowsky puts it, "if a majority believes in something that is factually incorrect, the misinformation may form the basis for political and societal decisions that run counter to a society's best interest."[1] Our common goal should, therefore, likely be to find effective ways to prevent the misinformation of individuals and society at large. However, in order to achieve this goal, it is first necessary to better understand the full range of actors and processes present in the creation and dissemination of such content. Whether it is the financial benefits of creating disinformation, psychological heuristics helping to spread false and misleading content, or the digital architecture of platforms that amplifies novel and emotionally laden content. Yet, understanding these complex dynamics of creating and spreading online disinformation is only half the battle won. To effectively tackle this issue, a policy response targeting the multiple pieces of the fabrication machine is necessary. As shown in this chapter, this might prove to be problematic at times, marked by a slow introduction of new policies and insufficient enforcement of already existing policies, oftentimes due to limited resources and bureaucratic processes. Yet, as shown in this chapter, governments are able to counteract this issue, inter alia, by framing it as a security threat, which if accepted by the relevant public can enable them to put forth a robust response. Such a speech act becomes key to legitimizing extraordinary measures that would usually not be taken up by the recipients. This approach can however also pose a grave danger if left unchecked, potentially leading to lasting restrictions that might at times run counter to ideals of freedom and democracy.

60 Lewandowsky et al., 'Misinformation and Its Correction'.

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03

Aspects of Media Literacy Education in Albania:

Youngsters caught in between new technologies and conventional media abandonment [1]

1. Authorship and empirical data gathering

Between November 2021 and March 2022, eight professors of the Department of Journalism and Communication, under the coordination and direction of Academic Prof. Dr. Artan Fuga, undertook a study that aimed to reveal the state of Media Literacy among youngsters in Albania. The authors, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alban Tartari, Prof. Dr. Artan Fuga, Dr. Elvin Luku, Dr. Ervin Goci, Dr. Holta Shupo, Dr. Loreta Axhami, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mark Marku and Dr. Raimonda Nelku, studied in a nonlinear research method, the subject in a wide range of approaches, that resulted in an academic organized in 8 focus points (See section 3. Results).

The methodology of this scientific research was based on: direct observations of the reality in higher secondary education institutions; interpretation of national poll data organized by The Department of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tirana; detailed analyses of opinions collected through the questioning of a vast panel of students regarding their upper secondary education experience; analyses of content and communication strategies in social media used by youngsters; comparison of poll data in and out of the territory of Albania; conducting scientific researches with the active participation of youngsters on social media; in-depth textbook reviews, etc.

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[1] University of Tirana, Department of Journalism and Communication, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alban Tartari, Prof. Dr. Artan Fuga, Dr. Elvin Luku, Dr. Ervin Goci, Dr. Holta Shupo, Dr. Loreta Axhami, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mark Marku and Dr. Raimonda Nelku

The author's goals were not to achieve a linear scientific research, nor did they have the pretension to integrally review the whole thematic related to media literacy. This would have required a deeper approach than this. Their scientific interest here was to give a substantial overview and profile of the thematic taken into consideration. Instead of a horizontal review, expanded widely, the authors opted to make vertical researches, in concept node points, which allow a dynamic alignment to the media literacy issue in the education of young audiences.

2. Main hypothesis, keywords and empirical processes and terrains studied

The scientific research presented here concerns the way media literacy is accessed in the upper secondary education system and in the pedagogical and media strategies and practices in Albania.

In order to highlight aspects of this problem, firstly, it is deemed necessary to present the meaning of the term media literacy. This concept has had a dynamic content, which in the past three decades has changed over time, in accordance with the evolution process itself of the new media and information and communication technologies, and also in accordance with the level of their influence over the society.

A second issue has also been in the focus of this presentation. The latter is connected to how do young audiences behave in Albania towards conventional and new media?

During many years authors have conducted several scientific projects on the overall behavior of the Albanian audience, the young audience, specifically towards linear and new media. They have processed and interpreted data regarding the usage of digital platforms in information and communication technologies by different age groups, or they have reflected over big data obtained by monitoring the audio-visual media program in Albania, etc.

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The main hypothesis of this scientific research is: The disconnection from the linear conventional media and the spontaneous and intuitive usage, oriented towards the imitation and empirical experience of the new media and online digital technologies, has produced kind of isolation of young audiences towards the civic issues, social, cultural and political dynamics in the country, also the participation of youngsters in building up a strong public opinion and in displaying an active social behavior in the democratization processes has been poor and low. A poor access in media literacy brings about the social exclusion of youngsters, and this social exclusion restrains their access in media literacy.

Meanwhile, the evolution of upper secondary education cannot integrate in its totality the values of media literacy; thus, it cannot educate the students towards media without a complete reform of education strategies, curricula, textbooks, teacher's training; school devices with a developed infrastructure and adequate new information and communication technologies; radical renewal of learning methods, etc.

3. Results

The Study concluded with a paper that approached the subjects from many perspectives and consulting bibliography form different sources, national case studies and recommendations as well as different guidelines published by international organizations, a summary of which's main topics and results are as follows:

3.1 Media Literacy, a misunderstood knowledge in the albanian education system.

The present debate on the approaches to this new knowledge – the media literacy in Albania – and the actors involved in it, often display misunderstandings on a basic level, that can although deepen and derail with the advances of the processes' development. These are the four main misunderstandings on how the education systems, and the actors of the public debate themselves, approach the subject:

First misunderstanding: Media education is considered only as a technological ability. Even though the institutional and other actors may have no knowledge on McLuhan and Inniss's theories, which are deeply marked by a strong technological determination, they both reflect precisely the Canadian school of communication approach, seen vastly as the main approach of the influence media exerts on how the individual perceives reality.

Naturally, their theses regarding the role that technology plays in forming media content, the individuals' perception of reality, or in creation of global communication systems, are still fairly useful in the study of media and society, but they do not provide an answer to the many problems and dilemma regarding the nature of the media and its relation with the individual and society.

Second misunderstanding: Media education is mainly contemplated as a possibility to create a critical stand to media messages, which is a result of the influences deriving from the theories of the Frankfurt School, the English Cultural Studies or the Semiology School of Barthes and Eco. The philosophers of the Frankfurt School, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Habermas etc., by trying to transform Marx's critical theory of capitalism and his successors, into a critical theory on modern society, see media as an instrument the upper class uses to brainwash the masses.

By some degree, even the scholars of the English cultural school, Hogart and Hall, share the same orientation, together with semiologist Barthes and Eco, who are a bit less orthodox in their stand.

This latter proposes not only a critical stand towards cultural and media content, but also a reader's 'semiological guerrilla' against them. The critical consciousness that they aim to create is impressive, but does, naturally, by reimaging in the margins of an ideological comprehension of the relation between media and society, and fails to fully grasp its dynamics.

Third misunderstanding: Media education seen as a propaganda against the negative impact of media and other technologies in the life of the individual and society, a consequence of the impact that Laswell and Lazarsfield theory on unlimited impact of media (explained above) has even nowadays.

Fourth misunderstanding: Media education is looked upon as a general culture for media and new communication technology, which comes as a reflex to the positivists approach of the Soviet model of education that still prevails in the albanian education system.

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Another misunderstanding, is that the framework of awareness for the need to include media education in albanian schools, has only begun in the last years (last couple of years at the most) and that those involved lead its avant-garde, while the Department of Journalism and Communication, has indeed approached and been studying the subject since 2013, starting with the 33 reflections of its Scientific Conference entitled Media Literacy and its Role in the High School Curricula, as part of the civic education of youngsters, published as studies that would and should serve as recommendations for the institutions that would be involved in approaching and responding to the problem, including the Ministry for Education and Science.

3.2 Youth and technology, a challenge for albanian schools

Theoretical approach:
Faced with the growing influence of technology, the education field has now still to adapt to the needs of educating the citizen of a democratic society. Hobsbawm's "digital self" – the point in which the youngster meets technology in search of its own identity, the Ribble & Bailey's digital citizenship in schools, as the need of teaching students (and parents) how to deal with this technology, come in focus.

Empirical approach:
Interviews with 6 upper secondary education principals in Albania, equally selected between the 3 regions of the country.
Guidelines and their application.
Data from different empirical studies over time.

Results:

-Youngsters use mobile technology and internet as their main medium of information and communication. (72% very frequently, 93% in various rates).
-Schools are equipped with at least one computer lab. Mobile devices are prohibited as per school regulations. 5 of the schools had on average a computer for 2 students, while their update remains a constant major problem
-All schools have an ICT subject, but its main objective is teaching the basics of technology (networks, Java, C++ etc. operating on Microsoft Windows – while their private mobile devices operate on Google Android or Apple iOS) and not the media interaction and production (editing video, audio content, etc.)
-Schools do not have a digital library, nor a digital space where to save the contents of their works.

3.3. The missing interaction between school and dailiness as an absent guarantor of media education as a continuity

Theoretical approach:
In a world where the circulation of information has transcended the media boundaries, beyond media as an industry or technology, museums, bookstores, libraries can also mediate, or became media on their own. In a homogenized space with over-stepped boundaries, freedom of speech is as important as the literacy to survive this tangled reality. Beyond knowledge lies the Digital Citizenship achieved by acquiring the practical skills needed to understand and use media and technology.

Empirical approach:
The Department of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tirana, realized a questionnaire compiled of 4 sections: Access to technology, Level of teaching, Knowledge acquisition and Degree of awareness, with 80 first year students equally distributed according to their fields of study, with the objective of understanding if the state of media education depends on school education dynamics or on events totally unrelated to school and that are projected as challenges for the institution.

Results:
-The dominant mean of communication on a personal level was the mobile phone, whereas in school there are only desktop computers. Media consumption appears completely dissipated (20% state that they had no device provided from school; only 1/3 claimed to have "frequently" or "daily" used them for lessons purposes).
-The linkage between textbooks and the information acquired through internet almost not existent (only 10%).
Thus, it can be concluded that the education system in Albania shows a lack of cohesion, which as underlined by Hobbs, makes it impossible to spread knowledge on equal and strategic expected outcome.

3.4 Usage of social platforms by youngsters: TikTok as a form of expression

Theoretical approach:
The usage of Tik Tok by young Albanians, who according to studies are increasingly rejecting traditional media, is approached with these three main research questions:
1. What knowledge do young generations have about this form of communication and how much do they manage to use it to express their concerns on public national spaces?
2. What obstacles do youngsters encounter when performing these concerns in productions like Tik Tok? 3. Does the conventional media accept this form of expression?

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Empirical approach:
Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the productions of “Tik Tok Corruption Albania” editorial of the MediaLook Center published during May-December 2020, and some critical discussions from the weekly meetings of this editorial.
Interviews with new Tik Tokers.

Results:

-Gen Z has found in TikTok a new space to express themselves, as more than a social media native generation, by inverting the previous ratio and being firstly creators and then users and distributing their own video productions, rather than those produced by traditional media.

-Youngsters are more prone to make videos that are funny, motivational, displaying everyday social issues (more than 82% of free thematic production), rather than other national issues related to politics, poor governance, civil rights, level of corruption, etc.

-The audience of Tik Tok productions is not sufficient for becom part of the traditional media agenda. According to audience data on the profile Tik Tok Corruption (4473 to 162K), f.e. only one of “Top 15” videos with the highest audience was re-published by Balkanweb online media.

-The productions do not excel in terms of visual and rhetorical or analytical skills, and their overall opinion of mainstream media as a source of their production, is one of refusal because they are considered untrustworthy (30%) or not of interest (30%).

3.5 Institutional high school social media channels: how does the youth frequenting these schools perceive, use and identify with them?

Theoretical approach:
In trying to understand if and how the young pupils (age 15-18), are being helped to understand and use the cultural and intercultural spaces of communication, using the official institutions' channels as "exercising" spaces, three questions oriented this research:
1. What is the identity "standard" template manifested and offered from platforms under the institution's logo, do they encourage the development toward a deepening sense of their own identity while forming it, or does it foster the approach of Ghost consuming of public communication, and distancing from whole parts of this discourse when it happens in spaces where authority is present?
2. What are the strategies for influencing and encouraging this identity through teaching a sense of generational change in thinking, life perceiving and idea forming processes allocated in the new spaces and platforms of the social media.
3. Is there an intention, a strategy aiming to nurture the approach toward a "transcultural citizen", an active, reflective individual, able to contextualize and critically understand and construct reality through the use of media products or platforms as stages for?

Empirical approach:
Interviews with the teachers, principals and pupils 9 high schools within the Tirana Municipality.
Analyzing data from their social media and confronting these with the perception of the managers of these accounts with regard to their function, scope and effectivity.

Results:
-Their reality is not present the official Social Media contents, which serve as mere PR tools for the institution itself.
-The interaction of pupils with this content is scarce and only as a form of collegial support by likes of images, with a deep deficiency of verbal or constructive discussion.
-These platforms do not serve as for discussion of ideas, school life, cultural or social topics but remain archaic as the school life itself not serve as a prolongation of it.

3.6 Audiovisual content for young adults and its relevance in media literacy

Theoretical approach:
Media is a determining factor when speaking of the behaviours, education and mass -information of a society and acts as a role model to be followed in the preservation of the culture heritage qualities of a country. It must be critical against all manipulative forms it presents, and support the abilities of young adults in understanding and learning media genres by doing. It is made possible by giving to the youngsters the chance to experience media production and genres.
The aim of this study is to understand the relationship between audiovisual traditional media and young adult, by analysing the presence of the tv programs dedicated to the young adult part of the TV content broadcasted by Albanian national public, private and online television channels.

Empirical approach:
Framework of audiovisual regulators in media education of young people in Albania and Europe.
DJC's studies on audiovisual media services in Albania (2018-2020)
Monitoring of broadcast television programs.
Interviews of editors and presenters of public, private and online broadcasters.

Results:
-Although the public broadcaster RTSH 1 is obliged by law to produce and broadcast quotas for young people, it is engaged only to quantity not to quality. There are no projects of participating young adults in production experiences, using RTSH academy as a tool.
-Private broadcasters having no legal obligations regarding content for young people and AMA-s has not taken any step to the self or coregulation of the private activity to guarantee program quality.
-Albanian broadcaster has much work to do in media education of young people, allowing them to understand media process by creating it, and by doing so, encouraging them to become proactive young citizens that play an active role in their society.

3.7 Media education in high school textbooks

Theoretical approach:
Media education in high school takes on a primary importance, especially in countries such as Albania, with a fragile democracy, where the democratic education of youngsters, as well as the tradition of a free independent media is missing. Through this study we aim to provide an answer to research questions as: What is the quality of textbooks treating the whole issue of media, information, public opinion, etc.? How do these textbooks shape the practical skills and competences of youngsters in their behavior towards traditional and new media?

Empirical approach:
Qualitative analysis of textbooks 21 textbooks of the compulsory and elective curricula based on the UNESCO curriculum framework (2011)

Results:
-The analyses of the textbooks under review shows: Absence of the interdisciplinary focus and little space dedicated to media, communication and ICT issues; Textbooks provide knowledge on media, but not instruments on how to relate to the digital era; The specter of media genres is limited in the description of 3-4 main information genres, such as: chronicle, interviews, news, articles; A lack of knowledge update regarding new technology developments; Predominance of authors approach and subjects.
-In the existing form, textbooks in upper secondary education do not provide accurate and relevant knowledge on media, communication and ICT for the media education of youngsters. The implementation of media literacy as an education process appropriate for the 21st Century, which requires a radical redesigning of curricula and textbooks; the implementation of contemporary methods of teaching and learning while also integrating new information technologies; ongoing teachers training, etc.

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National
Case - Studies

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04

Building Resilience in North Macedonia: Leveraging Media and Information Literacy to Combat Disinformation

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1. Introduction

Nowadays when information is easily accessible, the danger of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, noninformation as well as overinformation is real. In the new era when the world is becoming unpredictable and the threats are being globalised, disinformation is becoming both a weapon and a tactic of modern warfare. Online disinformation represents today one of the major threats to liberal democracies in Europe and especially those in transition as Western Balkans societies are.

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Building Resilience in North Macedonia

Disinformation is used for destabilizing, irritating, polarizing society, creating conflicts, initiating hate speech, and influencing decision making. As recently acknowledged, disinformation is also used to distrust science and doubt the functionality of the institutions and media. All of which contribute to creating a state of apathy, where the society has no will to take action and make true decisions for themselves.

In a new era, resilience has become the key skill we all crave. However, building societal resilience is not an easy task, and the process itself is conditioned by several factors depending on the level of democracy, economic development, and (geo)political environment.
This article is thought to be an exploratory research for defining the threat of online disinformation to democracies and especially those in transition as North Macedonia is, the challenges of building resilience, and the key role that media and information literacy plays in building this resilience in the new era. We argue that media and information literacy serves as a main tool in countering disinformation. Moreover, it represents a skill to be acquired by people of all ages in order to be able to read information, news, advertisements, and communicate effectively, as well as be critical thinkers.

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Undermining Democracy: The Menace of Online Disinformation

In this digital era, individuals have greater access to information than ever before. The widespread use of the internet and social media platforms has made it easier for people to not only access but also create and share information. However, the abundance of information available online has also led to an increase in disinformation and misinformation, which can have harmful effects on individuals and society as a whole. As a result, there is a pressing need to promote media and information literacy education as a means of equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge required to critically assess the accuracy and reliability of the information they consume. Living in an era of information overload it has become difficult to distinguish the truth from the untruth each day. The amount of content that users produce every second is so tremendous that, as a society, we are constantly bombarded with new information, the veracity of which is often highly questionable (O'Shaughnessy, 2020). Therefore, the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation has created a fertile ground for testing their impact.

Disinformation is a deliberate message aimed at deceiving and manipulating, whereas misinformation is the unintentional spread of false or inaccurate information. While misinformation may stem from disinformation, the reverse is not true. Nevertheless, both phenomena have significant societal implications. The current age of disinformation has necessitated the development of new protective mechanisms. Disinformation seeks to sow discord and confusion and hinder a country's progress. Woolley and Joseph (2020) have defined disinformation from the intent's perspective as a broad term usually referring to the "purposeful use of non-rational argument to undermine a political ideal, inflame social division, or engender political cynicism".

The term "disinformation" is commonly associated with the Soviet KGB, despite its use being traced back to Nazi Germany's German Disinformation Service in the 1930s. In fact, the original terminology of disinformation was derived from the Russian word 'dezinformácija' (Merriam-Webster, 2022). The dissemination of disinformation remains a critical issue in contemporary times due to its potential for significant and broad-ranging impacts on both individuals and the wider society.

In recent years, disinformation has emerged as a pervasive and easily accessible mechanism for influencing people's perceptions and attitudes. This phenomenon has a long history, dating back at least as far as the 1870s when the New York Herald newspaper published fabricated stories of animals escaping from the Central Park Zoo (Uberti, 2016). In recent times, disinformation has been used in a range of contexts, from the Pizzagate and Hillary Clinton health story during the 2016 U.S. election campaign, to the promotion of anti-immigration and pro-Brexit stories during the Brexit Referendum in the UK (2016), the anti-refugee Lisa-Case in Germany (2016), False narratives during the election campaign in Italy for involvement of Five Star Movement leader Luigi Di Maio in a banking scandal (2018). The proliferation of such fabricated stories around the world has made disinformation a truly global phenomenon.

The U.S. parliamentary elections of 2016 serve as a prominent case study for researchers, governments, and regulatory bodies investigating the phenomenon of computational propaganda and its potential to interfere in democratic processes. A whistleblower from Cambridge AnalyticaBrittany Kaiser (2019), brought to light the secrets of computational manipulation through the misuse of data obtained from up to 87 million Facebook users who took a personality test. This weaponized user data was then used for political campaigning, employing behavioral micro-targeting tactics by companies, which have been utilized by various countries to influence election outcomes, as seen in both the UK Brexit Referendum and the U.S. 2016 Presidential elections.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has gone beyond what many had predicted, with a disinformation campaign playing a significant role in the ongoing conflict. The use of disinformation as a weapon by the Russian government and aligned actors has escalated, with false claims and conspiracy theories being spread in an attempt to distract, confuse, and subvert opponents. The use of systematic information manipulation and disinformation has been a key tactic in Russia's assault on Ukraine, according to the Council of the European Union (2022). Disinformation narratives have escalated from propaganda to false claims about neo-Nazi infiltration in Ukraine's government and conspiracy theories about Ukraine/US bioweapon laboratories. (OECD, 2022)

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Understanding the Complexities of Disinformation Vulnerabilities in North Macedonia

Based on the multiple country reports of malign foreign influences, no state can be entirely resilient to disinformation. However, the susceptibility varies depending on the states internal factors and its geostrategic orientation. According to the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021 Report, North Macedonia was classified as the most resilient of the Western Balkan countries examined by the Index, with a score of 40/100. Its society, however, finds itself polarized into antagonistic political camps and remains vulnerable (GLOBSEC, 2021). This vulnerability is present due to various factors, the most important of which are: the EU accession fatigue and pro-Russian attitudes due to its Slavic population.

Other internal factors that make the society susceptible to disinformation are: the multiethnic character of society, which has not been reflected fully into the functioning of the state, the multi religious character of the society which gives space to foreign actors, mostly states to interfere through various ways and methods, two strict lines that divide the political landscape: the ethnic line and the ideological line being more present at the Macedonian political camp, and which often merges with the geostrategic alignments.

The information space in North Macedonia is characterized as vulnerable to foreign influence. Russian disinformation campaigns have found their way to the Macedonian audience through various portals and traditional media. The unregulated space of online media facilitates the implementation of these malign campaigns. According to Freedom House's report (2022), North Macedonia became a partially free country for the first time in 2022, evading the transitional period with hybrid-regime countries.

Building Resilience in North Macedonia

Despite North Macedonia climbing 33 spots in the 2022 World Press Freedom Index and the media's freedom to exercise their profession, it is stated that: "Although journalists do not work in a hostile environment, widespread misinformation and the lack of professionalism contribute to society's declining trust in the media, which exposes independent outlets to threats and attacks" (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). The conditions for a country to be vulnerable to disinformation rely primarily on its internal predispositions than on foreign factors, as Greene et al. (2021) indicate. High levels of polarization, with low levels of trust in media and institutions, populist communication, increased social media use, and a fragmented environment are some of the requirements that make a country more vulnerable to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). Striving for democratization and EU accession, North Macedonia, a NATO member since 2020, still struggles with a highly polarized and fragmented society, mainly on ethnic and political lines. The political spectrum is boldly divided into ethnic Macedonian and Albanian blocs. The Macedonian bloc is further divided along ideological lines, which often merge with the geostrategic ones: social-democrats (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia [SDUM])

and conservatives (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity [IMRO- DPMNU]). The Albanian political bloc consists of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), fithe Alliance for Albanians (AA), the Democratic Party of Albanians, Besa, and Alternativa. Pro-Russian sentiment is present in the Macedonian community due to their common Slavic origin and religious affiliation. The opposite is true for the Albanian population in North Macedonia. However, we cannot claim that they are resilient to malign influences. In an already fragile environment, disinformation in North Macedonia finds a suitable landscape for dissemination and amplification by deepening the polarization and divisions in society. In The Global Disinformation Order, Bradshaw and Howard (2019) revealed social media manipulation campaigns in 70 countries, 48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017. Among other democratic and non-democratic states, in this report, North Macedonia was examined as one of the countries where cyber troop activity took part through social media manipulation, Facebook and Twitter fake accounts: automated (bots) and human. These strategies were used in North Macedonia to attack the opposition, spread polarizing messages, and suppress participation through personal attacks or harassment (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

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Moreover, during the 2016 US presidential election, the small Macedonian city of Veles became the epicenter of generating and disseminating a global disinformation campaign on social media (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2020). Otherwise, in the country's most decisive times, North Macedonia experienced orchestrated foreign disinformation campaigns, supported and disseminated mostly by domestic online media outlets and mainly Macedonian conservative and far-left political parties (Denkovski, 2020). Some of the most active and aggressive disinformation campaigns recently affecting Macedonian citizens took place during the 2018 referendum for NATO and EU accession respectively, the country's name change (Metodieva, 2022), and the 2021 census (Trajanoski, 2022), which was organized after 19 years (the last one was from 2002). Elections in North Macedonia are also affected by disinformation. However, this is a shorter term aimed internal campaign than a strategic foreign campaign, unless it is a question of significant changes that impact the country's geostrategic and ideological orientation, as was the case with the 2016 parliamentary elections when the pro-Russian authoritarian regime failed (Tsalov, 2020). The Russian Federation used the referendum to issue an aggressive disinformation campaign to boycott the vote. Moscow openly opposed Macedonia's NATO aspirations (Veselinovic, 2018). Internal factors also overlap with the challenges coming from external influences. Despite North Macedonia's 2017 regime change which brought about an overall democratic transformation, still: Reform fatigue, clientelistic pressures from the political domain toward media (and vice versa) and party- political confrontations, coupled with structural pressures not exclusive to North Macedonia, such as the disinformation and misinformation flooding of the public sphere, exacerbated by health challenges concerning the Covid-19, have all partaken in the assessment that the media system in this country needs a new impetus for constructive change (Micevski & Trpevska, 2022). Moreover, Micevski and Trpevska (2022) argue that the risks to media pluralism in the digital sphere critically affect the overall state of the media system in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Building Resilience in North Macedonia

According to leaked intelligence files, Russia has been actively fueling political unrest in North Macedonia since 2008, in a bid to destabilize the country and undermine its ambitions to join NATO. The files reveal how Russian agents have been secretly financing and directing conservative groups and media outlets in North Macedonia to spread propaganda and disinformation in support of Russia's political agenda (Harding et al., 2017). North Macedonia has experienced several high-profile disinformation campaigns in recent years. One notable example is the 2016 "Colorful Revolution," a series of protests against government corruption and media censorship. During the protests, false information was spread through social media, including claims that the demonstrations were organized by the U.S. government and that protesters were being paid to attend (Metamorphosis, 2022). One of the darkest moments for democracy in North Macedonia was marked by the events of April 27, 2017, when a group of protesters, believed to have been instigated by Nikola Gruevski, the leader of the VMRO-DPMNE party, and foreign actors with links to Russia, forcibly entered the parliament, causing injuries to several members of parliament, and journalists. Subsequent investigations revealed that Russian interference was involved in the planning and coordination of the event simultaneously through spreading propaganda and disinformation in the media to create political instability in North Macedonia (Metamorphosis, 2022). Following these examples, North Macedonia has been a target of numerous disinformation campaigns, including during the 2018 Referendum on changing the country's name from FYROM to the Republic of North Macedonia. The referendum was aimed at resolving a long-standing dispute with Greece that had prevented Macedonia from joining the European Union and NATO. Despite 94% of voters supporting the name change, the opposition spread disinformation, portraying it as a loss of national identity and sovereignty. The opposition also used social media to spread false information, such as alleged irregularities in the voting process, and accused the government of vote-rigging. This disinformation campaign resulted in a low voter turnout, falling short of the required 50% threshold, and created a polarized and divisive political climate in the country.

These cases illustrate the destructive impact of disinformation on democracy and the need for effective strategies to counteract it.

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Deception and Manipulation: Unveiling the Disinformation Campaigns that Tried to Derail North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic Path

The political landscape in North Macedonia is characterized by fragmentation, resulting from a variety of factors such as ethnicity, ideology, and religion. The country's society is multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious, which is at odds with the mono-ethnic constitutional system still in place. North Macedonia gained independence from the Yugoslav federation in 1991 through a referendum in which only Macedonians participated. However, Albanians, who represent almost a third of the population (State Statistical Office, 2022), boycotted the referendum and held their own vote on political and territorial autonomy a year later, with a majority of eligible voters supporting autonomy. Despite this, the results were disregarded by Macedonian officials and were not recognized by the international community due to the context of the Yugoslav wars in the Balkans.

The political terrain underwent a transformation subsequent to the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001, which marked the resolution of an armed conflict between the Albanian National Liberation Army and the state army. Despite the integration of the agreement's provisions into the constitution, complete implementation remains outstanding even after the passage of over two decades. The Albanian population as well as language remains subordinated in the constitution and Law on the use of languages (2019). The Albanian language is referred to as "Another language that is spoken by at least 20 % of the citizens (Albanian language and its alphabet) is also an official language" which can be used only in addition to the Macedonian language and Cyrillic alphabet. North Macedonia has faced challenges from neighboring countries over its name, language, and identity. Greece contested the country's name, Bulgaria claimed that the Macedonian language has Bulgarian origins. North Macedonia resolved its dispute with Greece by changing its name to North Macedonia, paving the way for the country's accession to NATO in 2020.

Building Resilience in North Macedonia

The political spectrum is divided into the Macedonian and Albanian blocs, with the Albanian presence in the government mandated by the Badinter principle. The Albanian political bloc was unanimously pro-NATO, while the Macedonian political parties were divided along ideological lines, with the social democrats in favor of NATO accession and the conservatives strongly opposed.

The long-standing dispute over the name of the Republic of Macedonia also drew the attention of international actors, who sent a special envoy to try and find a solution. The relationship between Macedonia and neighboring Greece had been strained for years due to the dispute, and efforts to find a joint solution had been hindered by the respective governments of the two countries. In 2017, the new Macedonian government led by SDSM made the resolution of the dispute a priority and engaged in intensive talks about the name of the state.

However, the opposition (VMRO-DPMNE) did not agree with changing the constitutional name of Macedonia. This led to the idea of a referendum on whether to accept or reject the proposed constitutional name change from FYROM to the Republic of North Macedonia.

On September 30, 2018, the Republic of Macedonia held a referendum asking voters whether they supported EU and NATO membership by accepting the Prespa Agreement between Macedonia and Greece. The agreement resolved the 27-year-old dispute over Macedonia’s name, which had prevented the country from joining the European Union and NATO. Despite 94% of voters supporting the proposal, the voter turnout was only around 37%, which fell short of the 50% threshold required to validate the results. Both the opposition and the government claimed victory, with the opposition arguing that the proposal was rejected due to low turnout and the government arguing that the non-binding result meant that the turnout requirement was irrelevant.

The referendum was not mandatory and included constitutional changes, so it had to be ratified by two-thirds of the Assembly of the Republic. On October 19, 2018, Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev managed to push through the changes in the Assembly when 80 out of 120 MPs voted in favor of the renaming proposal, narrowly achieving the required two-thirds majority.

After the constitutional change was approved, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia officially changed its name to the Republic of North Macedonia, thus ending a longstanding dispute with neighboring Greece through the Prespa Agreement. This agreement also paved the way for North Macedonia's integration into NATO and the EU with international approval. However, despite this resolution, the opposition continued to build narratives on the loss of identity and Macedonian supremacy. In the next chapter, the focus will be on how the media, narratives, and information coordinated the processes during and after the 2018 Referendum in North Macedonia.

The narratives and the Boycott campaign

The disinformation campaign during the referendum in North Macedonia was primarily driven by nationalist and ethnic-based narratives that threatened the country's identity and undermined its Euro-Atlantic perspective. The campaign was characterized by the divide between the ruling SDSM party and Albanian parties in support of the name change, and the opposition VMRO-DPMNE party, the Macedonian diaspora, and Russian interference in objection and boycott. The disinformation was primarily spread through social media, with nationalist narratives.

The analysis of the name referendum within the country has been one-sided, with media polarization between those who support it and those who boycott it. This has made it easy for parties with vested interests to spread false news, disinformation, and manipulate public opinion. During this period, numerous articles and social media profiles promoting the boycott of the referendum spread false information. Opposition media outlets and newly created portals were particularly guilty of transmitting such misinformation. The use of controversial figures, both domestic and foreign, to spread fear and insecurity among citizens was also prevalent, with little concrete evidence to back up their claims.

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Building Resilience in North Macedonia

The boycott campaign of the North Macedonia name change referendum was organized through various means. Authoritative persons and public figures were used to persuade the audience to boycott the referendum. Social media was also employed as a tool to disseminate posts against the referendum, using bots, trolls, fake profiles, and real accounts on Twitter and Facebook. Additionally, traditional media was divided into two blocks, the government and opposition, with each side using their respective media outlets to promote their narrative and influence public opinion.

The language used in the campaign was highly divisive and inflammatory, with strong nationalistic and ethnic overtones. Examples of slogans used included "Време е да се исчисти здравото македонско ткиво од предавниците (It is time to clean the healthy Macedonian tissue from the traitors)" and "Никогаш Северна, секогаш Македонија! (Never Northern, always Macedonia!)", "Дали ке ги оставате Албанците да ви го сменат името? (Will you let Albanians change your name?) There were also claims that the government was illegitimate and treacherous, with calls to lock up officials for high treason. The use of terms like "Nazi agreement" and accusations of Albanians seeking to change the country's name further exacerbated tensions. The overall effect of such language was to create an atmosphere of fear and suspicion among the electorate, undermining the possibility of a constructive debate and informed decision-making.

North Macedonia is a complex state with a history of non-consistent geostrategic orientation, resulting in a polarized and fragmented society that is divided along ethnic, religious and ideological lines. This vulnerability affects important processes such as EU and NATO membership and undermines democratic values. This vulnerability has made North Macedonia a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns, which find a receptive audience and can spread rapidly.

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During the 2018 referendum campaign in North Macedonia, the traditional and online media outlets were also deeply divided into two opposing camps, reporting on the issue based on their political orientation rather than objective facts and arguments.

Disinformation campaigns during the 2018 referendum in North Macedonia had a fertile ground to operate and exploit to the fullest extent. Political parties, non-governmental organizations, citizens, intellectuals, and artists who had doubts about the country's direction were all susceptible to manipulative pro-Russian information that incited fear, division, and hatred through nationalist folklore. The Macedonian party itself, which falsely claimed to preserve Macedonian identity and state, labeled those who supported the referendum as traitors. The disinformation campaigns were mainly supported and initiated by Russia, which openly opposed North Macedonia's NATO membership. The campaigns employed manipulative information, misinformation, conspiracy theories, and fear-mongering to delegitimize the Prespa agreement, derail North Macedonia's path to NATO membership, undermine democratic processes, and discourage citizens from participating in the September 30, 2018 referendum.

The 'Boycott' campaign was mainly led by 'United Macedonia' and its pro-Russian leader Janko Bacev, but it was also supported by other Macedonian parties such as 'Levica' and 'VMRO-DPMNE', as well as over 70 other organizations. They became part of the 'Macedonia boycott' campaign, creating an environment that undermined the democratic values of the EU and NATO, incited fear of losing state identity, and created paranoia about the 'taking over' of the state by Albanians, citing the 'Platform of Tirana' or the "Tirana platform" as they called it, which was invented by them. This referred to the meeting of the leaders of Albanian political parties in RMV in Tirana in 2017 (Sakam da kazam, 2022). While VMRO-DPMNE officially did not boycott the referendum, it played a double game by alluding to not going to the referendum in the background (mkd.mk, 2018).

The media's excessive focus on the opposition leader, Hristijan Mickovski, has led to the dissemination of incomplete and unprofessional news. In fulfilling their duty to uphold journalistic standards, the media must present both sides of an issue. Unfortunately, some articles exhibit a clear bias towards the opposition leader, failing to provide a balanced perspective that incorporates the views of the ruling party and other ethnic groups, such as the Albanians.

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This trend is evident in other media outlets as well, with party leaders' speeches being broadcast in full and turning the media into mere mouthpieces for political parties rather than impartial news sources that accurately reflect the state of affairs.

During the campaign against the 2018 referendum, protests and different activities were mobilized on the ground, primarily in the capital city, but also in other cities. However, the most aggressive and widespread campaign took place on social media and online platforms. The German Marshall Fund (2018) notes that the hashtag #Бојкотирам (#Boycott) was first used on Twitter and Facebook to encourage voters to boycott the referendum. This hashtag generated over 24,000 mentions on Twitter, with approximately 20,000 retweets. Furthermore, during the first few weeks of the campaign, approximately 40 new Facebook profiles emerged each day that repeatedly spread the boycott message (Metodieva, 2022). Finally, hundreds of websites disseminated manipulative information to advocate for the boycott.

False information was spread during the campaign, including the claim that the government was granting Macedonian citizenship to Kosovar citizens so that they could vote in the referendum. This claim was accompanied by manipulative photographs, such as one showing a long line of citizens waiting to obtain citizenship. However, this photograph was actually taken at a different event and was manipulated to deceive people (Zhezhova, 2018). The spread of such false information incites interethnic tensions.

During the 2018 referendum boycott, there were similarities to the online manipulative tactics used by the extreme right in Europe and the United States. The Atlantic Council's Digital Legal Research Laboratory analyzed the organization and engagement of the #boycottiram campaign on Twitter and discovered that some posts used the Q-anon hashtag (Karan, 2018). Q-anon is a conspiracy theory that mobilized and frightened people in the United States by demonizing government structures while simultaneously protecting former President Donald Trump. In 2021, Q-anon was linked to the attack on the US Congress on the day of President Joe Biden's inauguration (Rubin, 2021).

Building Resilience in North Macedonia

The use of manipulative information to demonize NATO and the EU is prevalent, with the goal to return to pro-Russian orientation. Research has shown that Russia had a significant influence and interference in the dispute over the referendum and the name change of the state in North Macedonia (Trajanovski, 2022). Fact-checking agencies in North Macedonia, as well as prestigious American and European news agencies, analyzed and verified the Russian influence through propaganda and disinformation. The New York Times headline for example highlighted: 'In the Balkans, Russia and the West fight a disinformation-age battle (Santora and Barnes, 2018). After the referendum, traditional and online media reported conflicting information on its success, with some emphasizing the number of citizens who supported it, while others who boycotted it claimed that the numbers were manipulated to conceal the low turnout.

The epilogue

The 2018 referendum was not the only instance of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns leading to a widespread division. However, the impact of this campaign resulted in only 37 percent of citizens exercising their right to vote, with 94 percent of those who voted in favor of the referendum. Nonetheless, in March 2020, North Macedonia was able to join NATO.

Despite the low turnout, the majority of those who did vote favored the name change and joining NATO and EU. This signaled a shift in North Macedonia's geopolitical orientation towards the West and away from Russia, which had been actively opposing the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. The successful resolution of the name dispute with Greece and North Macedonia's subsequent accession to NATO and EU membership have had a positive impact on the country's economic and political stability, as well as its regional influence

Building Resilience in North Macedonia

TIn North Macedonia, disinformation campaigns often coincide with important state processes such as elections, referendums, and censuses. The connection of the Macedonian people with Slavic peoples and the Russian Orthodox Church leads to an unclear development path and impedes the state's movement towards Euro-Atlantic orientation. Albanians have shown support for democratic values and solidarity with their fellow Macedonians, recognizing the sensitivity of identity issues.

During the 2018 referendum campaign, the Albanian media largely reported fairly and supported the right to vote. The informational war covered in sensationalism, sowing lies, inciting inter-ethnic hatred and intolerance, mistrust of state institutions, and undermining the Euro-Atlantic processes occurred in the Macedonian camp, both in traditional and online media.

Building Resilience: Advocating for Media and Information Literacy Integration in Higher Education Curriculum

The quality of the information space in North Macedonia is further influenced by various factors, including the dearth of professional and investigative journalists, the existence of one-person portals, insufficient study programs in media and communication studies at universities, and the lack of information and media literacy courses at both university and high school levels. The aforementioned information environment presents a conducive setting for various forms of disinformation and misinformation, including deliberate campaigns orchestrated by actors such as Russia and China, who seek to undermine the Western order in the Western Balkans.

Nevertheless, the media landscape in North Macedonia has improved compared to the period before 2017, when media outlets were under total control by the governing party (VMRO-DPMNE). Since then, attempts for free information and free media are continuing, but political parties who daily propagate democratic values fail to implement them, especially regarding to media freedom, by constraining them to pursue day-to-day politics in their favor.

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This is also true with the government. Different draft-laws are proposed, some are approved, strategies and plans are created, but surprisingly the process of the same is dragged and delayed (EU Commission Report on North Macedonia, 2020).

The discrepancy of the development of media freedom after 2017, is also shown by the Media Literacy Index (2021), which was created in 2017 as a response to the 'post-truth' phenomenon, where North Macedonia has been added + 5 scores compared to 2017 and remained with the same scores until then. In 2021, North Macedonia was ranked 35th out of 35 countries analyzed in this report, where Scandinavian states are the first in the ranking. North Macedonia is the last one compared to neighboring countries in the ranking (Lessenski, M. (2021). Based on most cited research data, where the vulnerability to disinformation is often linked to the educational level of a society, this report calls on the emergency for functional education and especially for education in Media and Information Literacy, which will make society more resilient. To a large extent, the process of media and information literacy has been left at the forefront of civil society, journalists' societies, media self-regulatory organizations, and educational institutions.

The deficit in digital media literacy has been identified as a critical factor explaining widespread belief in online misinformation (Brisola & Doyle, 2019). While we will not explore the motives behind these actions, we will examine the significance of Media and Information Literacy in today's world. Media and Information Literacy (MIL) education is a process that enables individuals to access, analyze, evaluate, and reflect on information faced. This process has become an essential life skill to navigate in the digital age. MIL education also engages in knowing how to critically evaluate the information that is shared and how to use it to make informed decisions through accessing digital technology.

The importance of MIL education has been recognized by many stakeholders, including governments, educators, and international organizations, who have been working to promote MIL education as an essential life skill for citizens. UNESCO defines MIL as "the knowledge and skills required to find, analyze, critically evaluate and generate information in various media and contexts." and emphasizes that MIL education is crucial for "promoting a culture of peace and sustainable development" (Singh et. al., 2015). An already accepted definition for Media literacy is that "Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in all its forms" (Pernisco, 2020). Democratic countries worldwide attach great importance to media education in school curricula. Among primary and secondary schools, universities play a crucial role in developing specific curricula for establishing youth professionals ready to face new technological challenges in the information space. Adding to this, the responsibility of the universities to foster a culture of critical thinking through MIL that will help to combat disinformation and contribute to broader resilience.

A society that is media and information literate "fosters the development of free, independent and pluralistic media and open information systems" (UNESCO, 2011, p. 20).

In the new digital environment, everyone can be the author of i.e., create public convictions, where the lack of filters without a proper editorial office and not respecting the journalistic code raises the risk of misinformation for each individual. Following this trend, educational institutions find it reasonable to do something about it, including theoretical and practical formal education for a critical approach to information. The need for Media and Information Literacy has been discussed many times, in various conferences and symposia and it has been concluded that Media and Information Literacy is an indisputable need of the time, especially in vulnerable societies such as that of North Macedonia. With the transformation of the concept of the traditional school, the need arises to follow new forms of learning, turning the university into a "laboratory" where knowledge is transformed into new work practices, much needed in a society with market and production competition. In this context, media education needs to be included in a university curriculum adding not only the basic overview of the general knowledge but also a more synchronized theoretical-practical education for its impact on society.

This is because it is necessary to critically evaluate the information. There is no one-size-fits-all formula for evaluating false information... But what assembles all is critical thinking, including detailed analysis and evaluation of the information. According to Astleitner, critical thinking is a mental activity that includes evaluation, suggestions, and judgments that guide the development of beliefs and actions (Astleitner, 2002). Media and Information Literacy should be seen as a necessary part of our educational-university system, not only for the fact that we are now living in the digital age, but also for the many implications that are being created in everyday life by the spread of "journalism without an editorial", where everyone can influence the creation of media realities. This would make it a good practice to approach the news with skepticism. This is very close to Burkard's psychological approach, according to which, information should be treated in two ways - through acceptance and credibility. The need to include Media Literacy as a compulsory subject within university curricula should go beyond the administrative-legal meaning, and more as part of the cultural formation of contemporary man (academic citizen) who would achieve that through acquired theoretical-practical knowledge, equipped with the necessary mechanisms for building personal attitudes and views, without necessarily being influenced by the media.

As a controversial topic at the international level, Media Literacy has been selectively included in the school systems of different countries. And, as a notion and content, Media Literacy has been defined since the International Conference to mean 'The ability to access, analyze, evaluate and transmit messages through the media'(National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, 1992). It is worth mentioning that the idea was initiated in the 1970s by UNESCO on the need for media education. This had also prompted discussions by many scholars to consider the possibility of including media education within the international education system. Moreover, it produced a Declaration of Media Education in 1982. The Declaration had rendered great service not only to professionals, but also to citizens for media education (Declaration of Media Education, 1982).

Building Resilience in North Macedonia

The inclusion of media and information literacy in university curricula raises the question of its necessity. An interpretation of the scope of media and information literacy would encompass the acquisition of critical and creative skills. This definition acknowledges the crucial role that media play as sources of information and entertainment, requiring individuals to possess knowledge and skills for their effective use. North Macedonia faces challenges in this area, and the initiatives that would include media and information literacy in university education, could help prevent the negative consequences of media misuse.

Maximizing the Potential of Universities in Tackling Disinformation: Lessons from SEEU

Universities serve as catalysts for social changes, propelling innovative ideas and creating behavioral trends that shape society. Equipped with appropriate infrastructure, enthusiasm, and conducive environments, they are well-positioned to generate and implement practical solutions that have a profound impact on communities. Universities are the primary drivers of many social changes and policies implemented locally and globally. In the current era of disinformation, the role of universities in educating a generation equipped to confront information challenges and promote critical thinking as a democratic value of a resilient society is more critical than ever. Media and Information Literacy has become an essential life skill that enables individuals to critically evaluate information and make informed decisions.

The South East European University (SEEU) is widely regarded by its students and faculty as a distinctive academic and scientific setting, distinguished by its integration of interdisciplinary study programs, local and international frameworks, scientific and research institutes, and a diverse student population hailing from the Southeast European region and beyond. This dynamic environment empowers the institution to address pertinent societal concerns, and for some time, SEEU has been at the forefront of implementing new trends in higher education, pioneering various initiatives in this field, including Media and Information Literacy (MIL).

Notably, since 2019, SEEU's research institute, Max van der Stoel, has established the Media Literacy and Disinformation Research Cluster within its Social Sciences Group, undertaking research projects in this interdisciplinary area. The cluster has further advanced the idea of Media Information Literacy education as a means of fostering resilient students who are equipped to counter disinformation. In an article “Media and Information Literacy Education in the Age of Disinformation: SEEU Professor and Student Perceptions”, the authors explored the perceptions of professors and students on the necessity and implementation of MIL education in the age of disinformation (Halili et al., 2023). The study focused on professors’ and students’ perceptions of MIL education at South East European University and its importance in the age of disinformation.

The research also explored their opinion on addressing the information disorder phenomenon by introducing the new course of Media and Information Literacy. The outcome of the need assessment with key stakeholders (SEEU students, staff, management) provided accurate feedback about the perception and attitudes of the students, staff, and stakeholders regarding the introduction of the Media and Information Literacy course at the university curricula. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for MIL education in South East European University and help increase a consensus for implementing MIL in all higher education institutions in North Macedonia. The research also provided insights into the opinion of professors and students on the need to build societal resilience through MIL. The findings of this study are particularly useful for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the field of MIL education, but also in the higher education field in general. This research has been conducted within the framework of the project activities titled "SEEU Students 5.0: Media and Information Literacy in the Age of Disinformation," which is implemented by the Max van der Stoel Institute at South East European University.

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Building Resilience in North Macedonia

The project is part of the broader initiative USAID's Media Literacy Project YouThink. Its primary objective is to develop and enhance media and information literacy skills among South East European University students through formal education. To achieve this goal, Media and Information Literacy has been introduced as an elective course for students of all faculties at South East European University starting from the 2023/2024 academic year. This pioneering initiative among higher education institutions in North Macedonia seeks to equip students with the necessary skills to combat disinformation campaigns orchestrated by malicious actors targeting vulnerable countries such as North Macedonia.

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05

The 2018 Italy general election “The ballot sheets case”

Pierpaolo Salino [1]
The Fact-Checking Factory

1. Introduction: the international scene (2016 - 2018)

The case the report will take into account is a disinformation content appeared during the Italy’s general election in 2018: it’s a 100% fabricated content, made to disrupt the electoral process during Italy’s general election: “The ballot sheets case” appeared the day before the election day and it was mainly spreaded the day after, while the pools were open.

Although no direct correlation can be established between the spread of this rumor and the italian general election results, it is possible to understand the reason why such disinformation content had found fertile ground and widespread among the italian public opinion.

The report gives an overview on the international scene, the Italian backdrop in 2018 and the dynamics of the online dissemination of the content whose headline was: “Sicily: 500000 pre-completed voting sheets with the PD (Democrats) logo have been found. New voting sheets will be printed”.

[1] Pierpaolo Salino designs and implements training courses on media literacy and disinformation in collaboration with Italian and European upper secondary schools and universities. Graduated in Communication Sciences at the University of Bologna, carried out a specialization in audiovisual language gained at the Luchino Visconti Civic School of Cinema in Milan. He works also for social innovation ventures and inclusive teaching.

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The 2018 Italy general election
“The ballot sheets case”

The concept of information disorder or disinformation: the set of “propaganda, lies, conspiracies, rumors, hoaxes, hyper-partisan content, falsehoods or manipulated media” contents.
“Content deliberately created with the intent to disrupt electoral process” (Giglietto, Iannelli, Rossi, Valeriani, 2016): a political strategy adopted by a variety of actors, either domestic or foreign.
The report will examine the period of time starting from the 2016 US Presidential election to the 2018 Italy general election

- The 2016 United States presidential elections: it has been proven the meddling of the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) during the electoral period in 2016; there are several evidences that show how russian propaganda was operative since 2014;

- The 2017 French elections: Macron leaks and the Bahamas rumor. The EU DisinfoLab project claims that a Russian influence took place during the electoral period: “Our results showed 75% of correlation between the Russian ecosystem and the ecosystem of people that spread [at least] 3 disinformation pieces during the elections. For people that have spread 5 different pieces of disinformation, the correlation went up to 92%” claim the researchers”;

- The 2017 UK general election: During the UK general election a large percentage of Facebook’s advertisements paid by the three main parties focused on facts that were manipulated to confuse users: “[...] while ads by these other parties conveyed simplifying messages, portraying adversaries as weak, immoral or pro-elite”, said the researchers “28% of ads by the Conservative attacked Corbyn using facts that appear to be false or are clearly manipulated to confound the reader – and sometimes both”;

As the three cases listed above show, it should be recalled that not all electoral interference comes from abroad. In Facebook’s latest report on assets taken down for coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB), many concern political disinformation that often originates in the target country, such as the 2017 UK general election case.

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The 2018 Italy general election
“The ballot sheets case”

The Italian Backdrop in 2018

On 28 December 2017 the Italian Parliament was dissolved by President Sergio Mattarella and a new general election was called for 4 March 2018.
During the three months of the electoral campaign the public debate was strongly influenced by two main events:

- The murder of Pamela Mastropietro committed by a 29-year-old failed asylum seeker;

- The subsequent Macerata shooting committed by a young guy, Luca Traini;

Result: Huge media coverage sparked anger and anti-immigrant sentiment in Macerata as well as all over the nation.

Complicating things: Traini was a former local candidate for the right-wing political party “League”: many political commentators, intellectuals and politicians strongly criticized party leader Matteo Salvini, in connection with the attack, accusing him of having "spread hate and racism" in the country. Salvini, in turn, accused the center-left government of responsibility for Mastropietro's death through allowing illegal immigrants to stay in Italy[2].

These two facts inevitably polarized and weaponized the public debate and the electoral campaign: while some journalist categorized the attack as an act of “political terrorism with fascist origin”[3], foreing observers claimed that these two events “set to become a decisive factor”[4] in the national election.

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[2] https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/02/03/news/raid_razziale_a_macerata_salvini_chiunque_spari_e_un_delinquente_-187953469/
[3] https://www.valigiablu.it/macerata-terrorismo/
[4] https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/921076/Italy-election-2018-immigration-weak-economy-Salvini-Silvio-Berlusconi-debt-Luca-Traini

The 2018 Italy general election

“The ballot sheets case”

The information background

The information contents generated by media outlets during 2018.

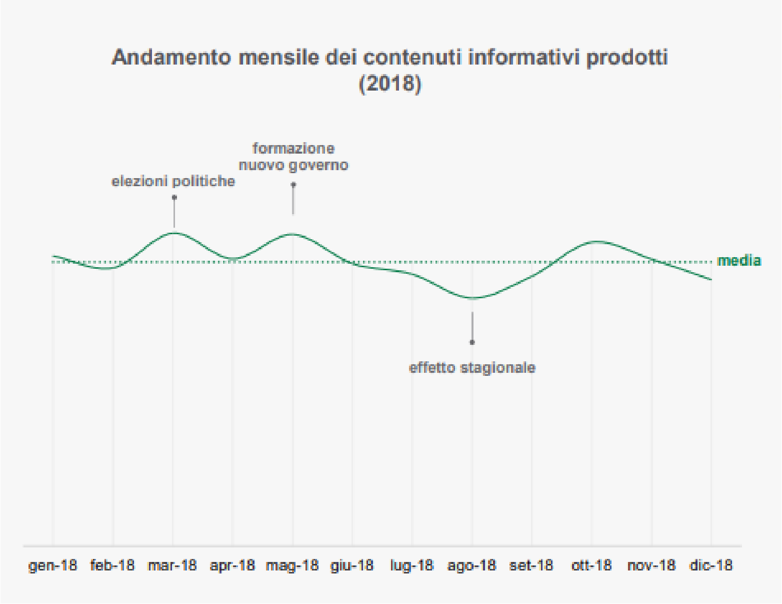
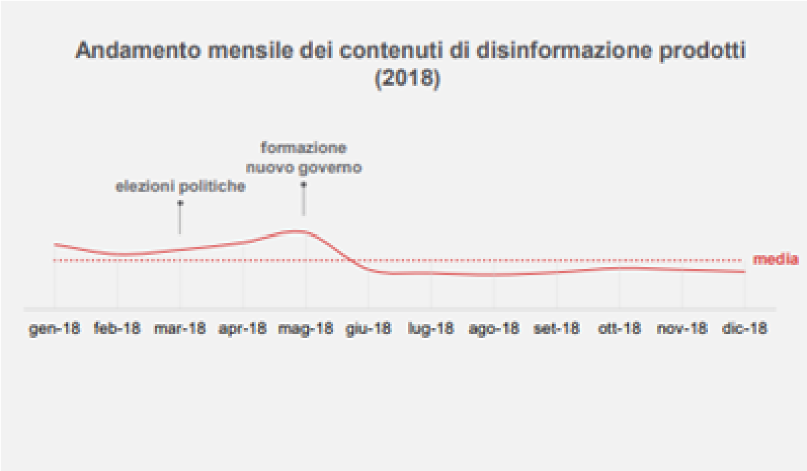


Fig.1: Information trend, Agcom, 2018

Two main peaks of information contents:
- Italy’s general election on the beginning of March;
- Formation of the new government at the end of May;

The disinformation background

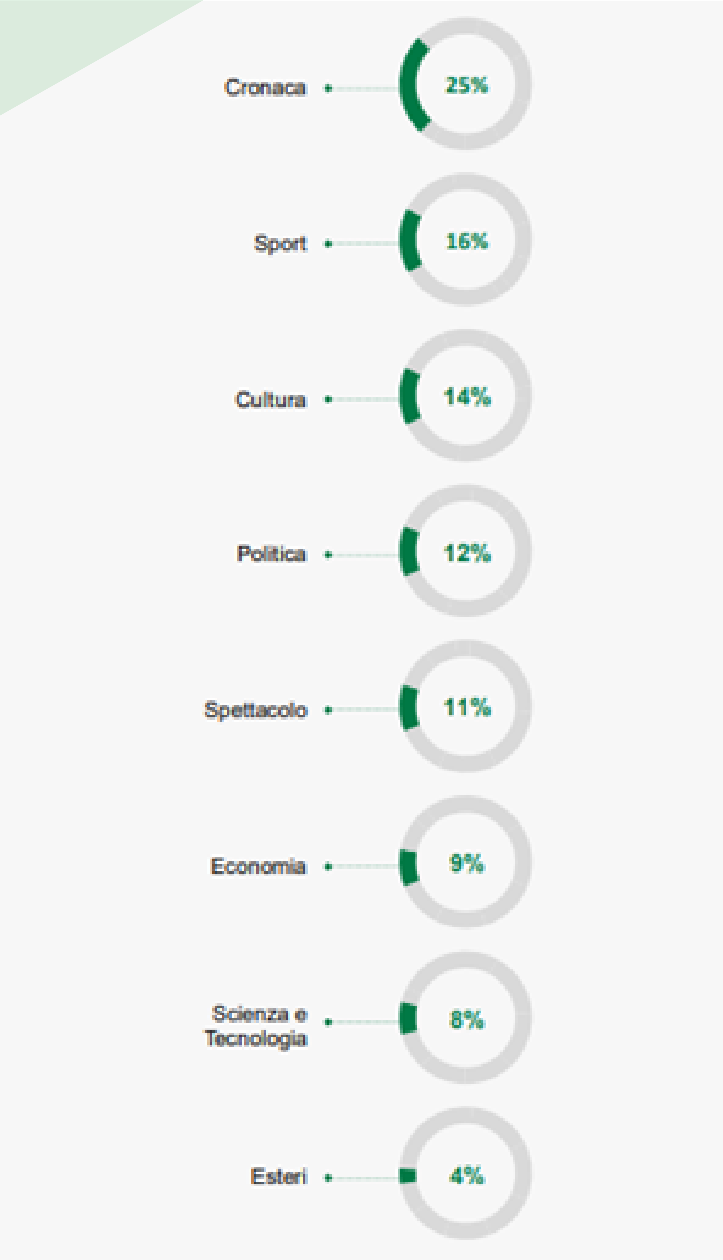
The disinformation contents published follow the same strategy. It’s possible to recognize the same two peaks seen in Fig.1:

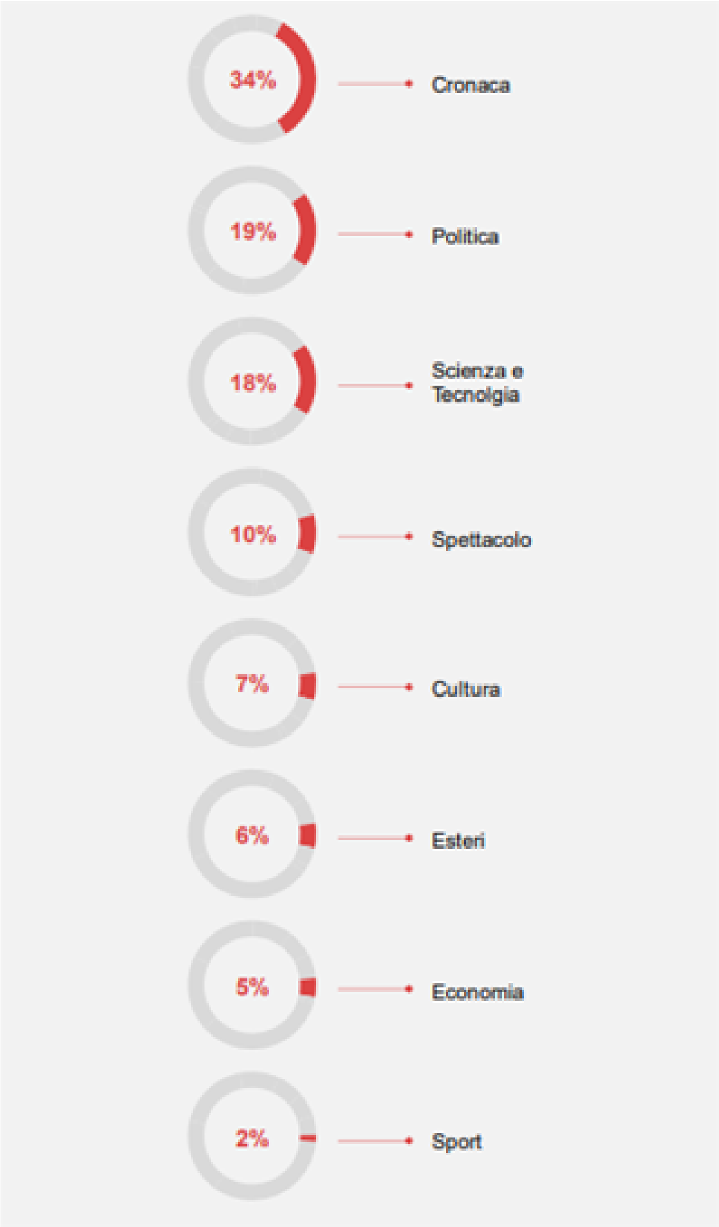


The 2018 Italy general election “The ballot sheets case”

Information contents:
News section (25%)
Sports, culture and show business (41%)
Politics (12%)

Disinformation contents:
News section (34%)
Politics (19%).
Disinformation does not affect sports, culture and showbiz categories (only 19% of the total).





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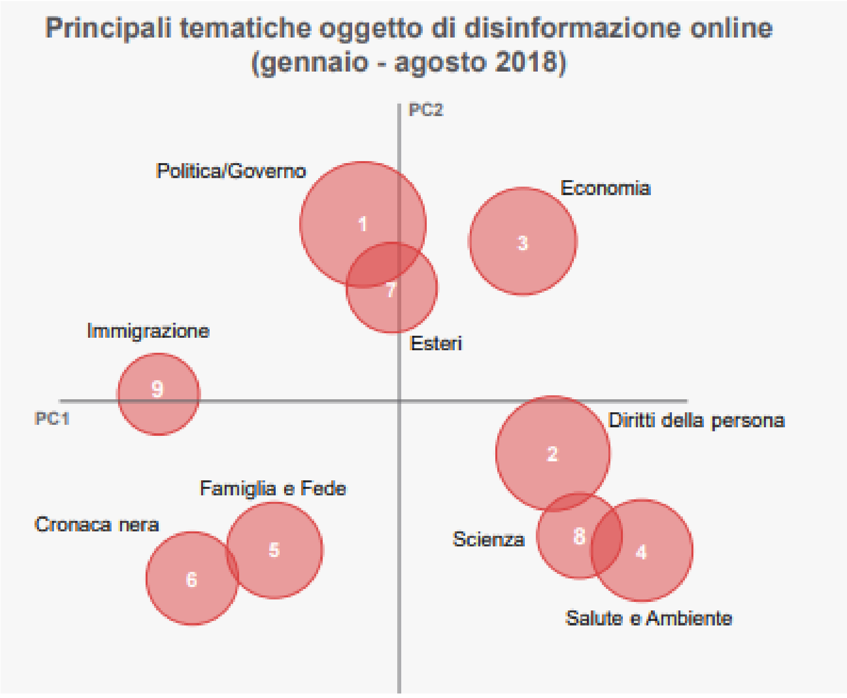
The 2018 Italy general election
“The ballot sheets case”

The disinformation environment from January to August 2018:



Disinformation concerns mainly:
Politics/Government (1),
Rights of the individual (2)
Economics (3).
Immigration topic holds the last position among the disinformation contents produced during the electoral period, although immigration is considered one of the main topics for the Italian public opinion - 59% of the entire population, according to the SWG 2018 survey.
Disinformation concerning politicians and politics takes roots even more in the Italian public opinion.

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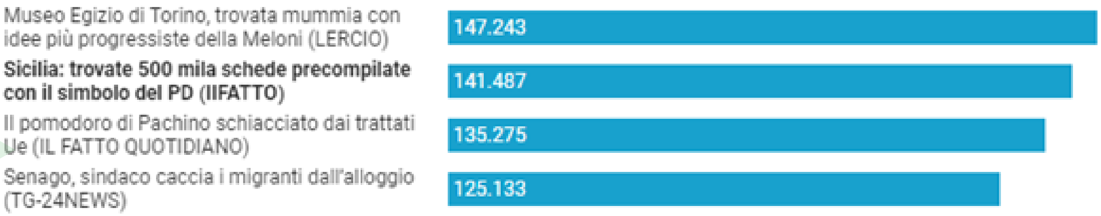
The 2018 Italy general election “The ballot sheets case”

The first three months of the 2018 news shared::



1) A satirical content by the popular site Lercio.it :“Tourin: a mummy was found with more progressive ideas than Giorgia Meloni[5]” reaches around 147,000 interactions;

2) 3)4) All these contents fall in the disinformation area:

2) “Sicily: 500.000 already-filled-in ballot sheet has been discovered” is a fabricated content type (published by the imposter website “Il Fatto”), 100% false, made to deceive and to do harm;

3) The Pachino’s news by the popular media outlet “Il Fatto Quotidiano” contains a misleading information, meaning that part of this news was unreliable according with the subsequent retraction supplied by the Ministry of the Agriculture[6];

4) Senago major act news concerns immigration and it is misleading: in this case the news was real[7] but it has been proposed again after one year[8], just a week before the vote;

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[5] Giorgia Meloni is the leader of the national-conservative party “Brothers of Italy”, ed.
[6] Pachino, il ministero agli agricoltori: "Mai importato pomodori dal Camerun". Ma le etichette del supermercato dicevano il contrario - Il Fatto Quotidiano
[7] https://www.ilgiorno.it/rho/cronaca/migranti-sindaco-senago-1.3285216
[8] Senago, sindaco “caccia” i migranti dall’alloggio e ci mette i senzatetto italiani: “Prima i miei cittadini” – TG-news24 (archive.is)

The 2018 Italy general election “The ballot sheets case”

The evolution of the misleading narratives: a close look from December 2017 to March 4th 2018

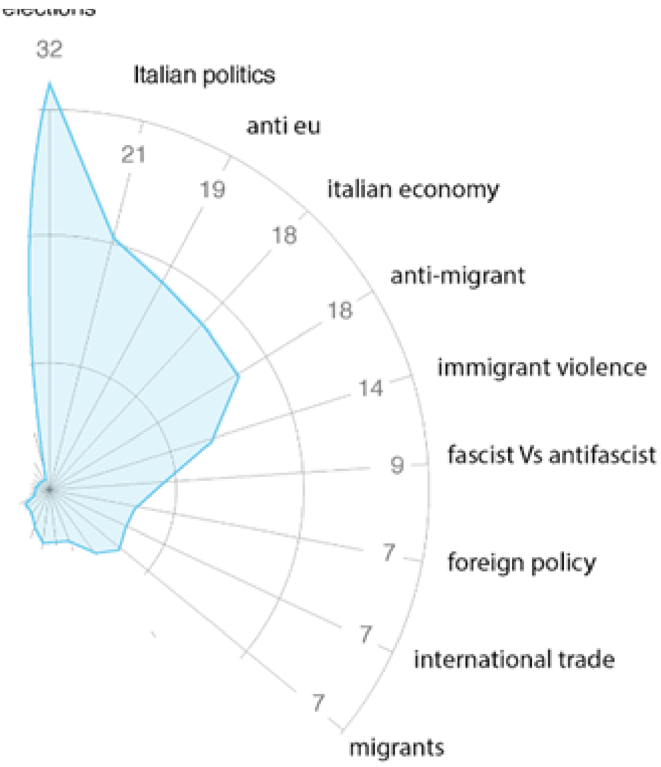
In December 2017 Eu DisinfoLab launched the implementation of a monitoring system in order to identify the types of online disinformation contents during the Italian general election.

The project was based on analyzing news from an identified ecosystem which consisted of a series of accounts spreading pro-Russian narratives in Italy. The main aim of the researchers were to (i) confirm or disprove the theory of a Russian influence during the electoral process, as previously observed during the 2016 US campaign and the 2017 French campaign[9], (ii) to find a correlation between disinformation spreading and the Russian ecosystem, (iii) to monitor the Russian ecosystem in order to detect disinformation in real time.

Between December and March the monitoring system analyzed 171 news from various media outlets, both mainstream and suspicious, originating from the “pro- Russian” accounts in Italy: 54 of them were recognised as fake, misleading, manipulated or biased at least.

The main narratives detected:

- The italian elections and italian politics;
- The migrant issue;
- Euroscepticism and anti-EU sentiment;
- Fascist and Antifascist;



[9] In 2017 EU DisinfoLab conducted a pilot project during the French elections: the results showed a correlation between the “pro-Russian” ecosystem and the false information spreading online;

The 2018 Italy general election
“The ballot sheets case”

How the narratives evolved:
At the beginning the disinformation contents revealed anti-EU and anti-migrant sentiments;
then the anti-EU sentiment disappeared while the anti-migrant narratives reached their peak from the end of January.

The Italian elections narrative lasted the whole monitoring[10], having its peak just a few hours before the closing of the pull.

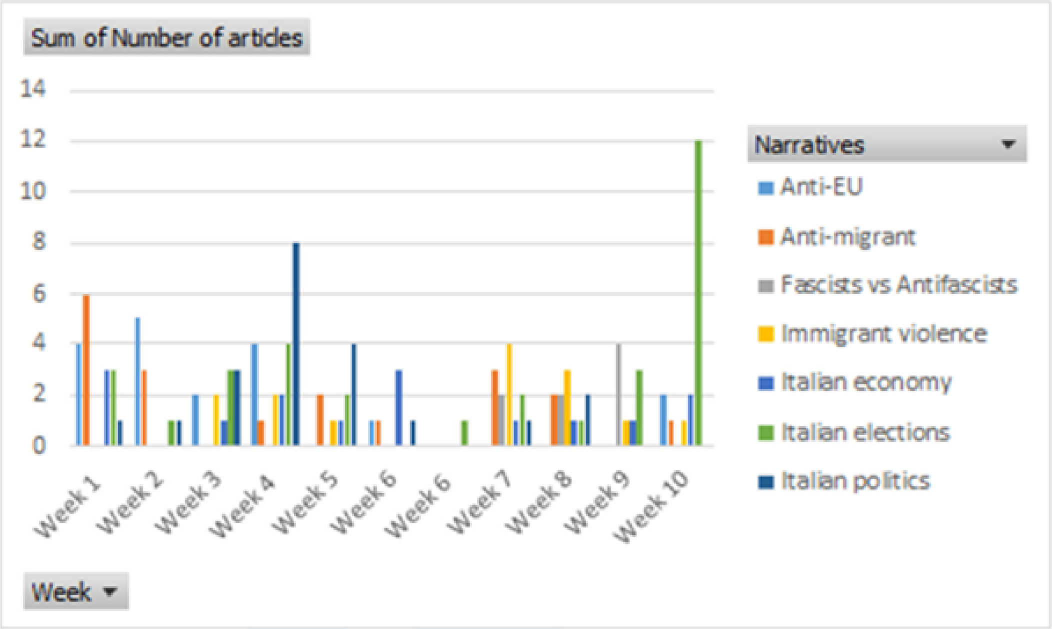


Figure 6: Chronological evolution of the principal narratives during our monitoring project

At the beginning of February the report shows also the spread of a fascist/anti-fascist narrative never occurred before.
“Most of the news spotted between February and March concerned either racist violence and verbal attacks, or the clash between fascist and anti-fascist movements”.
The demonization between fascist and antifascist that affected also the italian election narrative.

---

[10] This trend is also along the line of the already mentioned Agcom report

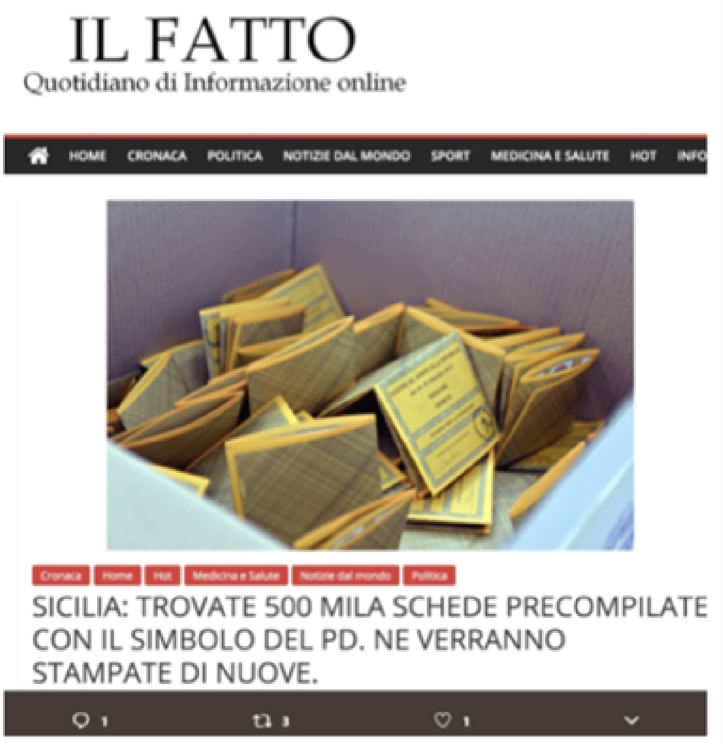
The 2018 Italy general election
“The ballot sheets case”

The Italian case study: the “ballot sheets affair”

As a result of this situation, Italy was a country on edge when the election day arrived. On 3rd March 2018 (just the day before the election day) a last-minute attempt of a disinformation operation trying to meddle with voting spreads online.

The article explains the story of the voting sheets found:

“Sicily: 500,000 ballot sheets were found for the political elections to be held tomorrow, March 4, already pre-filled with the symbol of the Democratic Party. The package with the ballot sheets was found near Europa street in Palermo [...] No doubts about who the so-called “strong powers” want to lead Italy [...]. Marcello, a 44-year-old worker, found the sheets [...]”



IL FATTO
Quotidiano di Informazione online

SICILIA: TROVATE 500 MILA SCHEDE PRECOMPILATE CON IL SIMBOLO DEL PD. NE VERRANNO STAMPATE DI NUOVE.

As can be seen, there are at least three main issues in the three statements reported:

1. A clearly false information: it’s easy to spot that Via Europa in Palermo does not exist;
2. The language adopted: this statement is a biased opinion/point of view, highly questionable; moreover the reference to “strong powers” recalls conspiracy theories such as New World Order, Deep State, etc.
3. The main character of this story: according to “Il Fatto”, thanks to “Marcello the worker” the fraud was unveiled, but a question steps forward: who is Marcello? Except for age and name, no references, evidences or other sources are given.

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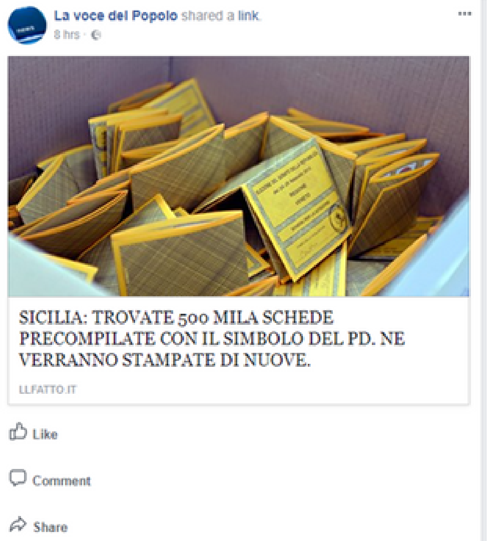
The 2018 Italy general election "The ballot sheets case"

Fig. 7: Screenshot from "La voce del popolo" Facebook's page. The source of the post is just below the headline: "Il Fatto.it"



La voce del Popolo shared a link.
8 hrs ·

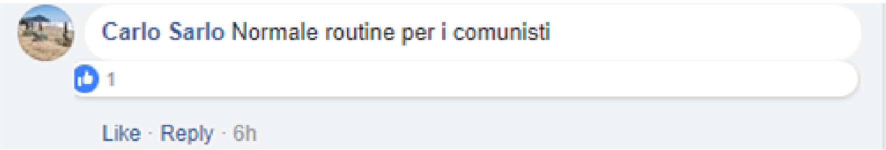
SICILIA: TROVATE 500 MILA SCHEDE PRECOMPILATE CON IL SIMBOLO DEL PD. NE VERRANNO STAMPATE DI NUOVE.

ILFATTO.IT

The Facebook page of "Il Fatto" called "La voce del popolo" (The voice of the people) posted the article one hour after, on March 3rd at 10:22 pm.

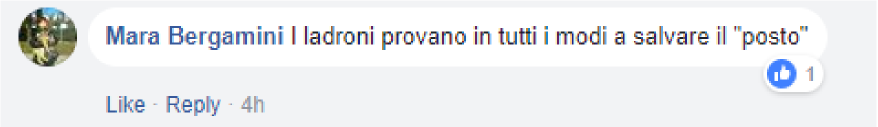
Starting from this moment, the content began to collect interactions and shares.

Comments:



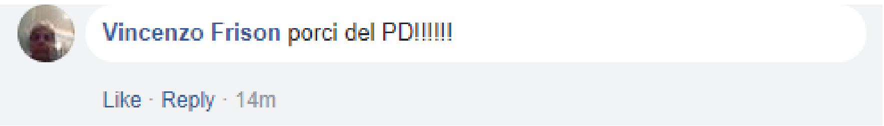
Carlo Sarlo Normale routine per i comunisti

"Regular routine for communists"



Mara Bergamini I ladroni provano in tutti i modi a salvare il "posto"

The thieves try to keep "the chair" in every way



Vincenzo Frison porci del PD!!!!!!

Slobs of Democratic Party !!!!!

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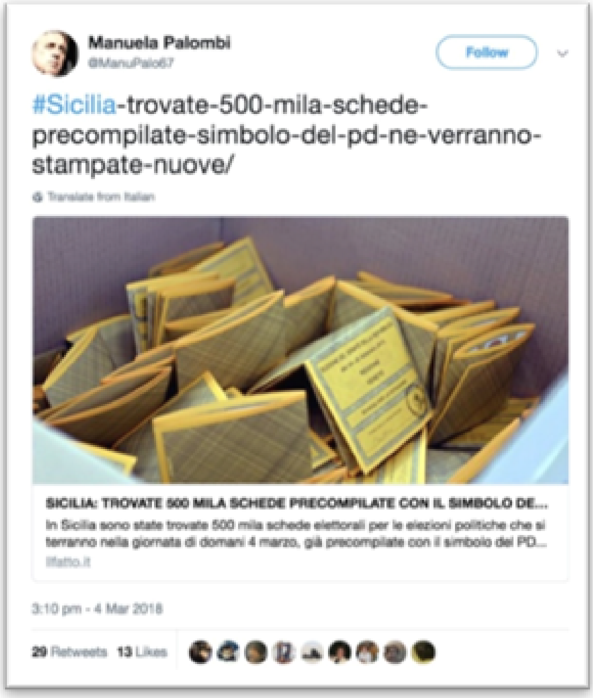
The 2018 Italy general election "The ballot sheets case"

The first comment listed above: this comment recalls also the clash between fascist and anti-fascist observed by Eu DisinfoLab research.

Followers of "The voice of people" also started to share the fake on March 4th, while the polls were open, both in Facebook and Twitter accounts.

The first tweets started to be published in the early afternoon of March 4th, mainly from Five Stars Movement supporters:



Manuela Palombi
@ManuPalo67

#Sicilia-trovate-500-mila-schede-precompilate-simbolo-del-pd-ne-verranno-stampate-nuove/

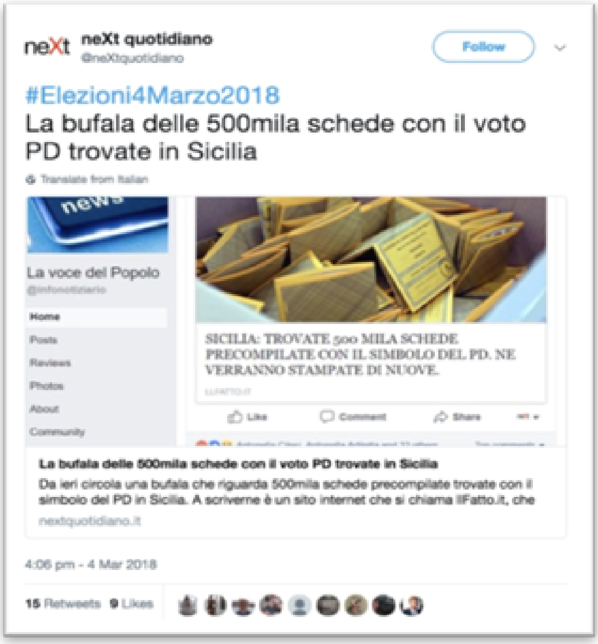
Translate from Italian

SICILIA: TROVATE 500 MILA SCHEDE PRECOMPILATE CON IL SIMBOLO DE...
In Sicilia sono state trovate 500 mila schede elettorali per le elezioni politiche che si terranno nella giornata di domani 4 marzo, già precompilate con il simbolo del PD...
ilfatto.it

3:10 pm - 4 Mar 2018

29 Retweets 13 Likes

Italian fact-checkers and debunkers were "round the corner": at 4:06 pm on March 4th, less than an hour later from the first tweet by Five Stars supporter Manuela Palombi, "NextQuotidiano" published the fake from "Il Fatto" debunked:



neXt quotidiano
@neXtquotidiano

#Elezioni4Marzo2018
La bufala delle 500mila schede con il voto PD trovate in Sicilia

Translate from Italian

La voce del Popolo
@infonotiziario

SICILIA: TROVATE 500 MILA SCHEDE PRECOMPILATE CON IL SIMBOLO DEL PD. NE VERRANNO STAMPATE DI NUOVE.
ILFATTO.IT

La bufala delle 500mila schede con il voto PD trovate in Sicilia
Da ieri circola una bufala che riguarda 500mila schede precompilate trovate con il simbolo del PD in Sicilia. A scriverne è un sito internet che si chiama IlFatto.it, che
nextquotidiano.it

4:06 pm - 4 Mar 2018

15 Retweets 9 Likes

Tr: "The fake news of the 500,000 voting ballots with votes for PD found in Sicily."

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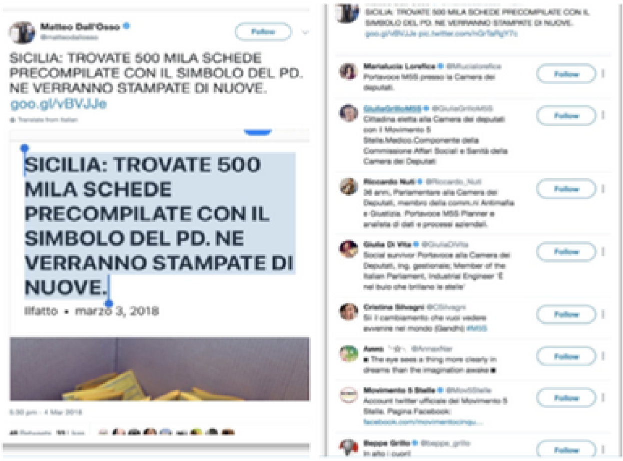
The 2018 Italy general election
"The ballot sheets case"

The spread does not stop.
The article was shared by the M5S spokesperson, Matteo Dall'Osso, who tagged several M5S leaders in his tweet, contributing to disseminate the fake among the Five Stars community.



Matteo Dall'Osso

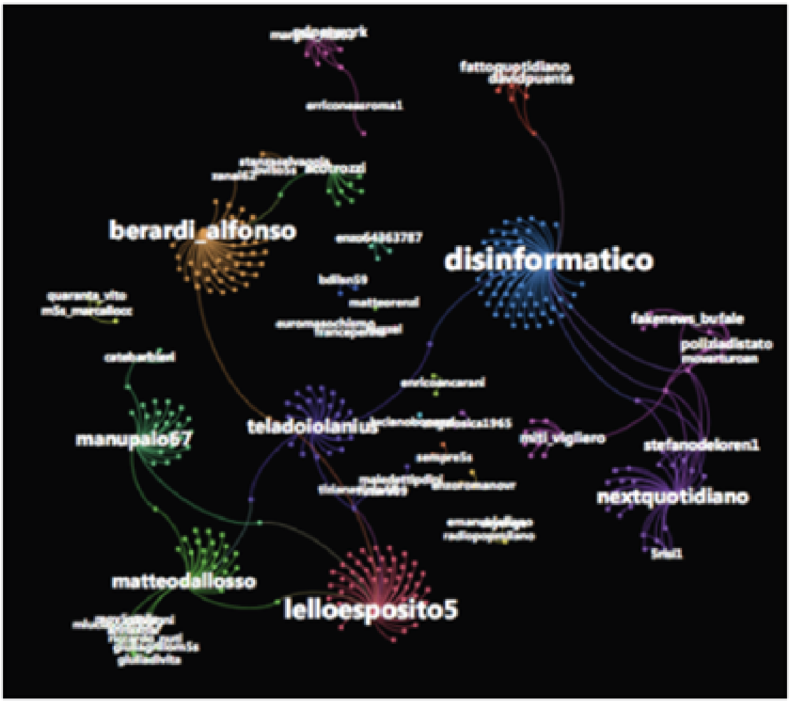
SICILIA: TROVATE 500 MILA SCHEDE PRECOMPILATE CON IL SIMBOLO DEL PD. NE VERRANNO STAMPATE DI NUOVE.
goo.gl/vBVJJe

SICILIA: TROVATE 500 MILA SCHEDE PRECOMPILATE CON IL SIMBOLO DEL PD. NE VERRANNO STAMPATE DI NUOVE.

ilfatto • marzo 3, 2018

Dell'Osso was very popular thanks to his campaigns in favor of persons with disability (he also suffered from multiple sclerosis). In addition to this, Dell'Osso tagged several Five Stars deputies, the official Five Stars Movement page and also the account of the Five Stars founder, Beppe Grillo.

Map of the spreading of the content on Twitter: please not how the fact-checkers such as "Disinformatico" and "NextQuotidiano" mobilized their own communities (right side of the map below); at the left side it's possible to see the spreading of the fake by Twitter accounts.



EU DisinfoLab map of the spreading

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The 2018 Italy general election
“The ballot sheets case”

The “ballot sheets fake news” was the most shared news during the electoral period: at 6:35am of March 4th, just on Facebook, the story counted 26037 reactions, 21221 comments and 18067 shares.
On 8th March 2018 the “ballot sheets case” had reached more than 141,000 shares on social networks.

Who’s behind the “ballot sheets fake news”?: the success of a fake news

It’s possible to outline two main reasons of the successful spread of this fake news:

- The website’s name. It’s a well-known technique used by the agents of disinformation: false contents exploit established news brands to deceive users, the so-called imposter content[11].

- The sharing via social networks (especially Facebook), supported also by famous accounts. The wide spread of the article is due - mainly - to the sharing occurred in Facebook: “In Italy the preferred platform used for conducting disinformation and misinformation operations is Facebook, which is also considered a trustworthy source of information for the Italian public” (Russo,2015).
- On the other hand, in Italy “Twitter is used less as a channel to spread disinformation and more as a debunking echochamber” (EU DisinfoLab report, 2018);

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[11] https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/

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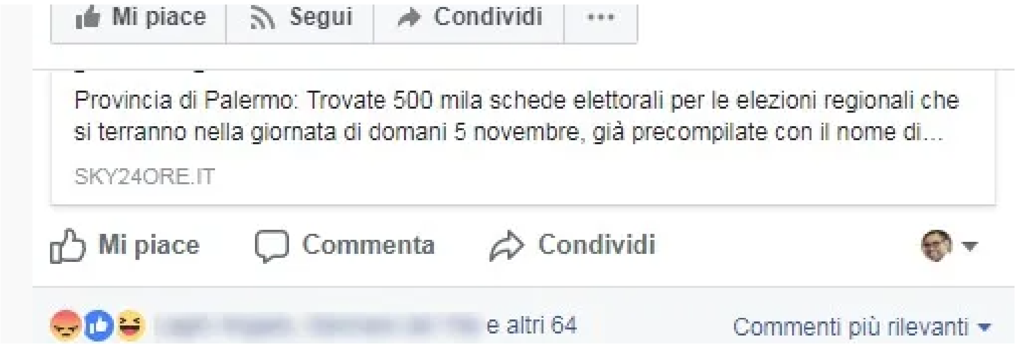
The 2018 Italy general election "The ballot sheets case"

Focus on: tracing back the source. A possible origin of the fake news.

The website "Il Fatto" that firstly broked the story was owned by Giovanni Fornaro (probably a fake nickname, no matches on search engines) and also the website "Sky24Ore" (another example of imposter website that resembles the well-known media outlet Sky News[12]) was owned by the same (fake) person[13].

A few months before the general election, on 4 November 2017, during italian regional election in Sicily, Sky24Ore published this article:

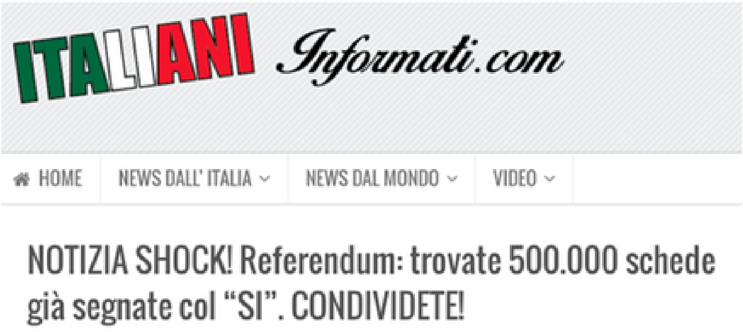


Provincia di Palermo: Trovate 500 mila schede elettorali per le elezioni regionali che si terranno nella giornata di domani 5 novembre, già precompilate con il nome di...

SKY24ORE.IT

Tr: "Palermo: 500,000 pre-completed voting sheets with the name of a candidate have been found."

It's possible that both of the articles concerning Palermo and Sicily were originated by another fake content spreaded in 2016 by the website "italiani-informati.com":



NOTIZIA SHOCK! Referendum: trovate 500.000 schede già segnate col "SI". CONDIVIDETE!

Tr: "SHOCK! Referendum: 500,000 pre-completed voting sheets already signed with "Yes!" have been found."

---

[12]] https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/
[13] At the time of writing this report, both "Il Fatto" and "Sky24Ore" are already shutted down

The 2018 Italy general election
"The ballot sheets case"

This content was the most viewed and shared during the referendum campaign in 2016: the content reached more than 233,000 interactions[14].

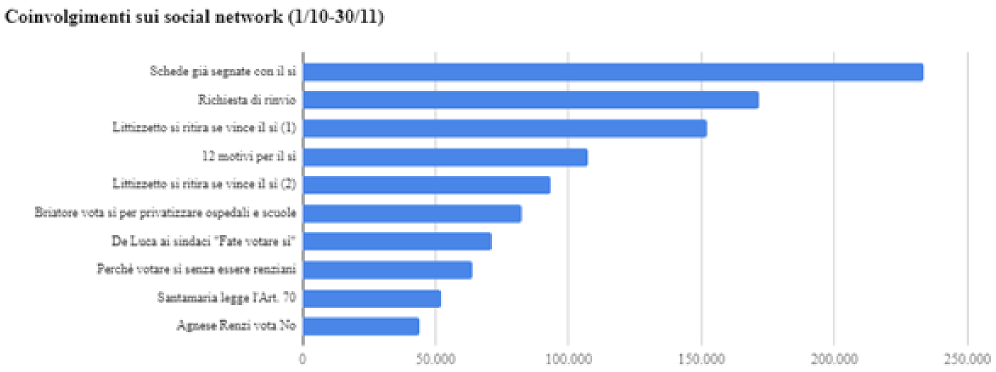


Fig 7: Number of interactions per content. On top the "pre-completed voting sheets" content.

The Italy's general election results

It is therefore impossible to establish a certain correlation between the disinformation case of the pre-completed voting sheets and the course of the election, it could be interesting to have a look at the results of Italy's general election:

The party whose supporters (and a spokesman) spreaded the fake news, the anti-establishment Five Stars Movement founded by the comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo become the largest individual party with 32.7% of the vote;

The party whose member committed the Macerata shooting, the League, become the third largest party with a 13.3% percentage increase (17.4% of the vote): in the constituency of Macerata (were the shooting committed by Traini took place) Tullio Patassini, the League candidate, was elected: the League itself showed an increase from 0.4% of the vote in 2013 to 21% in 2018.

The target of the fake news concerning the ballot sheets, the center-left Democratic Party obtained its worst result ever: PD obtained 18.7% of the vote.

[14] La notizia più condivisa sul referendum? È una bufala | Pagella Politica

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06

Reporting on Refugee crisis on Social Networks and Online Portals in Serbia

Milica Janjatović Jovanović
Novi Sad School of Journalism
[1]

Context

Since the beginning of the refugee crisis, Serbia has been only a transit country with a low number of asylum requests submitted by the refugees. As Belgrade Centre for Human Rights reported[1], in the period between 2012 and 2020, more than 700,000 persons expressed their intention to request asylum in Serbia, while 194 persons were granted asylum. The big difference in numbers is due to administrative procedures, which require refugees to express their intention to request asylum, even if they are just passing through Serbia, and this procedure should be distinguished from the submission of an asylum request.

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[1] Milica Janjatović Jovanović works as a media researcher and educator at the Novi Sad School of Journalism since 2018. She is a student of Interdisciplinary Doctoral Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Serbia.

[2] http://www.bgcentar.org.rs/bgcentar/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Pravo-na-azil-u-Srbiji-2020.pdf (p. 17)

Reporting on Refugee crisis on Social Networks and Online Portals in Serbia

At the beginning of 2022, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration reported that in 2021 a total number of 68,308 migrants stayed in reception and asylum centres. Average stay was 30 days and they received accommodation, food, clothing, medical care and humane access from those who work with them.[3]

Since the beginning of the migrant crisis and the first refugees arriving in Serbia, the duality of media and online discourse can be traced.

State policy for crisis management remained in the domain of supporting migrants to travel safely through Serbia and to provide them with a safe temporary stay in reception centres. This kind of policy can be considered as a result of the small number of submitted asylum requests, so there was no need to make different strategies in terms of crisis management. Help and support for migrants is provided primarily through international funds, with the European Union providing the most financially valuable support with 98,000,000 EUR since 2015.[4]. As several research reports published by Novi Sad School of Journalism showed, most of broadcast channels with national frequency are supportive towards the Government[5][6][7], so their reporting on migrant crisis stayed in the domain of professional, most often, factual reporting on the most important information, such as the current number of migrants in reception centres, the support provided by public institutions, the situation in the region, and the like.

At the beginning of 2022, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration reported that in 2021 a total number of 68,308 migrants stayed in reception and asylum centres. Average stay was 30 days and they received

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[3] European Union Support to Migration Management in the Republic of Serbia (2022). During 2021, 68,308 migrants stayed in reception and asylum centres. (online). Available at: http://euinfo.rs/podrska-eu-upravljanju-migracijama/tokom-2021-u-prihvatnim-i-centrima-za-azil-boravilo-68-308-migranata/

[4] Humanitarian Centre for Integration and Tolerance (2020). Influence of media in the Republic of Serbia on Increase of Xenophobia Towards Refugees and Migrants. UNHCR – Belgrade.

[5] https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/sr/publication/medijski-sistem-u-srbiji-obelezen-delovanjem-medija-koji-sistematicno-sire-dezinformacije-govor-mrznje-i-propagandu/

[6] https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/sr/publication/monitoring-informativnih-emisija-komercijalnih-televizija-sa-nacionalnom-frekvencijom/

[7] https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/sr/publication/monitoring-informativnih-emisija-komercijalnih-televizija-sa-nacionalnom-frekvencijom/

accommodation, food, clothing, medical care and humane access from those who work with them.[8]

Since the beginning of the migrant crisis and the first refugees arriving in Serbia, the duality of media and online discourse can be traced.

On the other hand, as the crisis continued, the number of unregistered online portals, social media groups and individuals who publish unverified news, opinions and false and manipulative information regarding the crisis and individual refugees, started to grow. These information included conspiracy theories about secret Government plans for migrant settlements in the Serbian empty villages, building new mosques in regions without Muslim population (which indicated that the Muslim population would soon move there), and how the state of emergency during 2020, was not declared due to COVID 19, but in order to transport large groups of migrants across all regions of Serbia[9]. The reach and influence of such narratives is clearly visible through different actions, initiatives and statements by officials who proposed various racist activities in order to protect the local population from, in their opinion, dangerous migrants. The self-organized group "People's Patrol" that communicates with citizens through the Facebook page "People's Patrol" was created as a direct response both to the state's policy for managing the migrant crisis, as well as to the numerous disinformation that were continuously published on social networks and online portals. This group continued with the practice of creating and disseminating media content that was presented in a manipulative manner, generalising the entire group of refugees and presenting them as an existential threat to the local population, primarily of Serbian nationality. The Facebook group "Stop the settlement of migrants" during the crisis period was one of the main sources of negative narratives, false and manipulative information regarding migrants, which gathered the largest number of members (317,000), who actively followed the news published in the group, which can be seen by the extremely high number of reactions and supportive comments on the posts.

Down in the text, the narrative strategies that were most often used to portray refugees as a dangerous social phenomenon will be presented.

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[8] https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-52524776

[9] https://novitreciput.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Antisemitizam-u-modernim-teorijama-zavere.pdf (p. 14/15)

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Narrative Strategies

By highlighting different narrative matrices of negative portrayal of refugees on certain online portals and social networks in Serbia, we want to show that the dehumanisation of this social group takes place on several different levels, which ultimately contributes to the general prejudice about migrants as a danger that needs to be fought against. This is a topic of utmost importance because, in the long term, the persistence of such narratives harms both the targeted group of individuals, i.e. refugees, and the society which supports intolerance, uncritically access the manipulative information and in which the initiation of actions against different social groups is normalised. Finally, this leads to the collapse of the freedom of individuals who represent the local population in this case, while it brings immigrants to a state of existential threat. It should be emphasised that these narrative strategies should be seen as an integral part of the broader concept of spreading conspiracy theories:

"*Like the Jews, the current migrants are largely just a means of discrediting the institutions of the European Union and the liberal and multicultural concept of society on whose values it was founded. As opponents of this concept of society and advocates of a more traditional and conservative model, members of the extreme right use conspiracy theories and fake news as a means of dealing with members of the so-called 'Brussels elite'. Tolerance and support for migration by the aforementioned elite is interpreted as an orchestrated plan and conspiracy to Islamize Europe and destroy it from the inside.*"[9]

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[9] https://novitreciput.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Antisemitizam-u-modernim-teorijama-zavere.pdf (p. 14/15)

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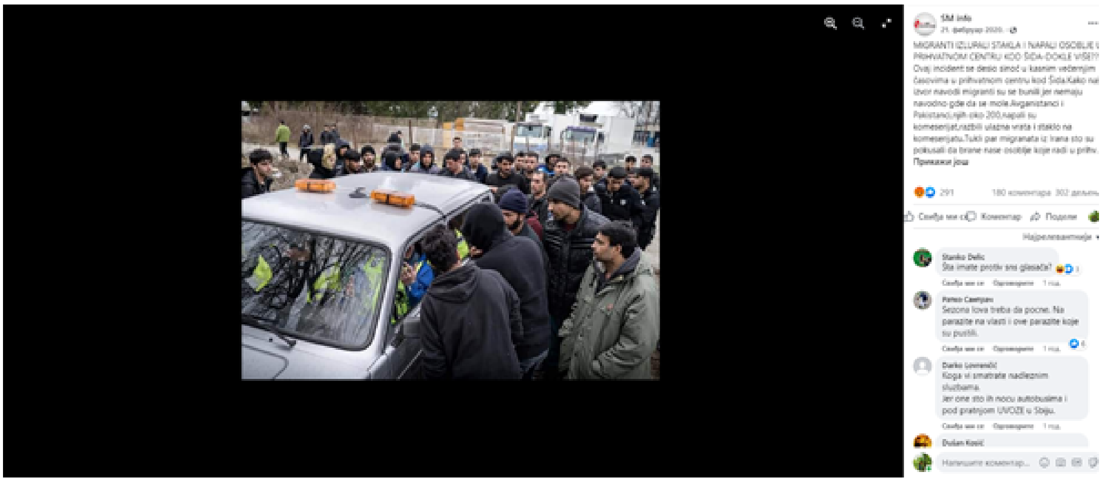
Reporting on Refugee crisis on Social Networks and Online Portals in Serbia

Portal FakeNews Tracer regularly monitored and deconstructed false and manipulative information regarding the migrant crisis. Articles published on this portal will be used as a material for mapping negative narratives that will be presented in the forthcoming chapters.

1. Migrants are violent and dangerous, especially toward women

EXAMPLES OF FAKE NEWS AND MANIPULATION REPRESENTING THE NARRATIVE

- **Migrant attacks in Reception Centre**



Translation of the FB post:

“MIGRANTS BROKE THE GLASS AND ATTACKED THE STAFF IN THE RECEPTION CENTRE NEAR ŠID – HOW LONG DO WE HAVE TO TAKE THIS??? According to our source, the migrants protested because they allegedly have nowhere to pray. Afghans and Pakistanis, about 200 of them, attacked the Commissariat staff, broke the front door and the glass on the Commissariat. A couple of migrants from Iran were beaten in an attempt to defend our staff working in the reception centre. None of our competent services reacted to this serious incident.”

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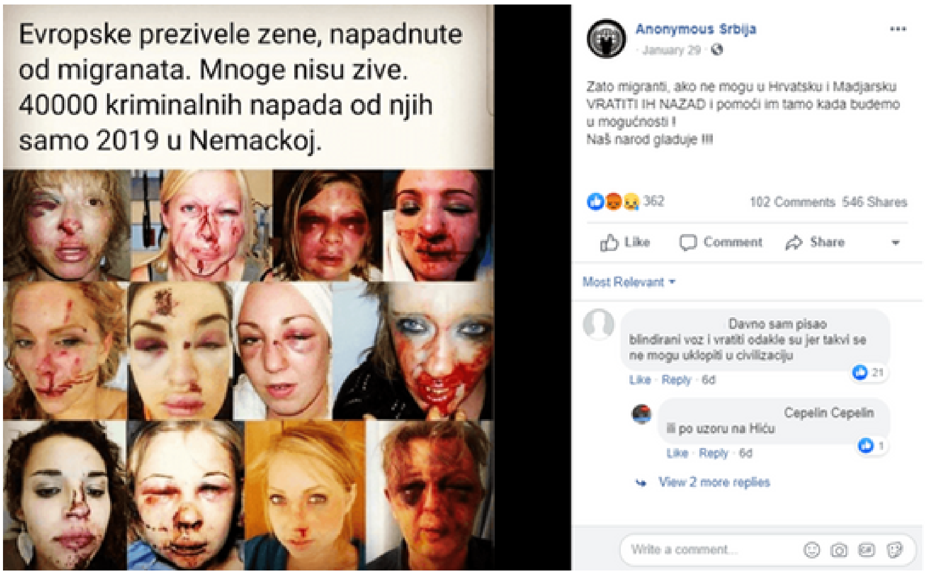
FakeNews Tracer deconstructed this false and manipulative information and published an article[10] in which the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia stated that there was a minor fight between migrants in which one glass was broken, but the staff of the reception centre was not attacked. They also denied that about 200 migrants took part in the alleged incident, emphasizing that the number of migrants was significantly smaller, and added that such announcements and news serve only to spread panic.

- **Migrant attacks on women**



Evropske prezivele zene, napadnute od migranata. Mnoge nisu zive. 40000 kriminalnih napada od njih samo 2019 u Nemackoj.

Anonymous Srbija
· January 29 ·

Zato migranti, ako ne mogu u Hrvatsku i Madjarsku VRATITI IH NAZAD i pomoći im tamo kada budemo u mogućnosti !
Naš narod gladuje !!!

362 · 102 Comments 546 Shares

Davno sam pisao
blindirani voz i vratiti odakle su jer takvi se ne mogu uklopiti u civilizaciju
Like · Reply · 6d · 21

Cepelin Cepelin
ili po uzoru na Hiću
Like · Reply · 6d · 1

View 2 more replies

Picture text translation: "European women who survived migrant attacks. Many of them are not alive anymore. 40 000 criminal attacks only in Germany during 2019."

Post translation: "This is the reason why migrants, if not allowed in Hungary and Croatia, should be brought back and we should help them in their countries, but only when we are able to do that. Our people are starving!!!"

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10 Subotić, I. (2020). Commissariat: Migrants did not attack the staff of the reception centre. (online). FakeNews Tragač. Available at: https://fakenews.rs/2020/02/24/komesarijat-migranti-nisu-napali-osoblje-prihvatnog-centra/

The FakeNews Tracer portal published a deconstruction of this fake news[11], proving "that there is no evidence that the women in the images are victims of migrants, and that most of the photos date from before the start of the migrant crisis in 2015." Through the analysis of individual images from the collage, it was found that women in the picture were victims of various types of attacks (intimate partner violence, police violence, street attacks, etc.), while the last photo shows a man attacked by a burglar.

The above examples represent intentionally created disinformation and manipulations that portray a certain social group as violent and dangerous. It is important to point out that although these posts report about concrete incidents, none of the individuals who participated in the incident were mentioned, but they were using the strategy of labelling the entire migrant community. Carrying out this kind of stigmatization is the first step in the normalization of the hate narratives towards an entire social group, which as an end result can have direct persecution and murder of members of that group: "Negative labelling is the first step towards the suppression of groups of people from the society, their ostracism, often legalized violence against them or even physical destruction".[12]

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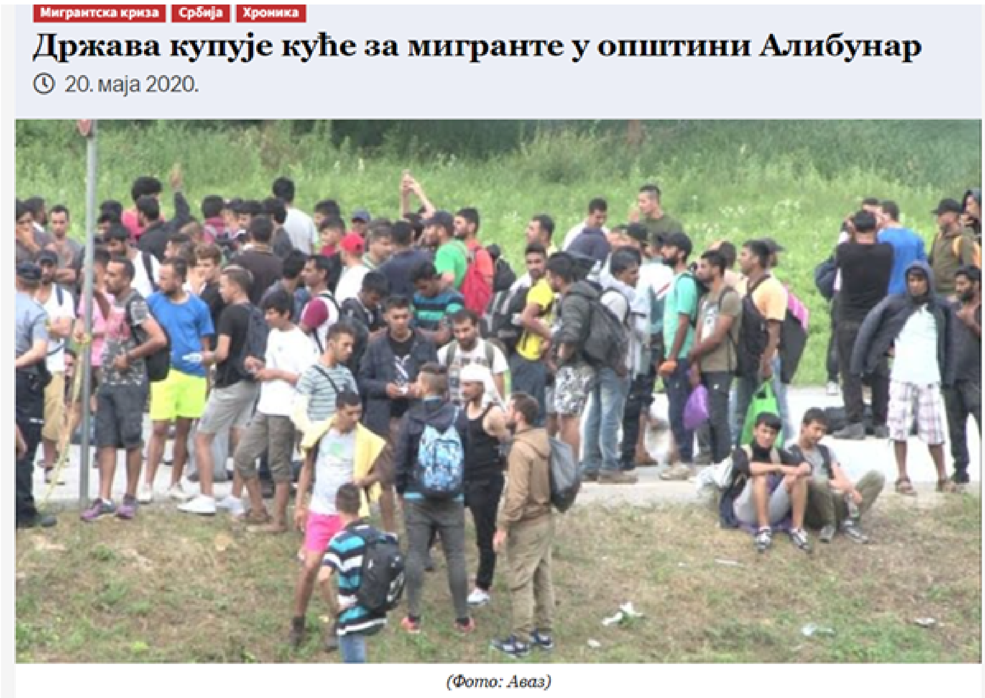
11 10 Subotić, I. (2020). Commissariat: Migrants did not attack the staff of the reception centre. (online). FakeNews Tragač. Available at: https://fakenews.rs/2020/02/24/komesarijat-migranti-nisu-napali-osoblje-prihvatnog-centra/

12 Šare, S. (2004). Kako pisati za novine. Medija centar. Beograd: 167

2. Government betrayed their people and actively work on Islamization of Serbia through settling migrants in Serbian villages

EXAMPLES OF FAKE NEWS AND MANIPULATION REPRESENTING THE NARRATIVE

- **Settlement of migrants in abandoned Serbian villages**


Мигрантска криза Србија Хроника

Држава купује куће за мигранте у општини Алибунар

20. маја 2020.

(Фото: Аваз)

1Translation of the headline:
“State buys houses for migrants in the municipality of Alibunar”

Several portals, including vaseljenska.net, reported false news that the state is buying houses for migrants in the municipality of Alibunar. FakeNews Tracer deconstructed this manipulative information by contacting the Commissariat for Refugees, from which they confirmed that the houses were indeed bought for refugees, but for Serbian refugees from the period of the wars of the 1990s, who came from Bosnia and Croatia. [13]

[13] https://fakenews.rs/2020/05/21/drzava-migrantima-sa-bliskog-istoka-ne-kupuje-kuce-u-alibunaru/

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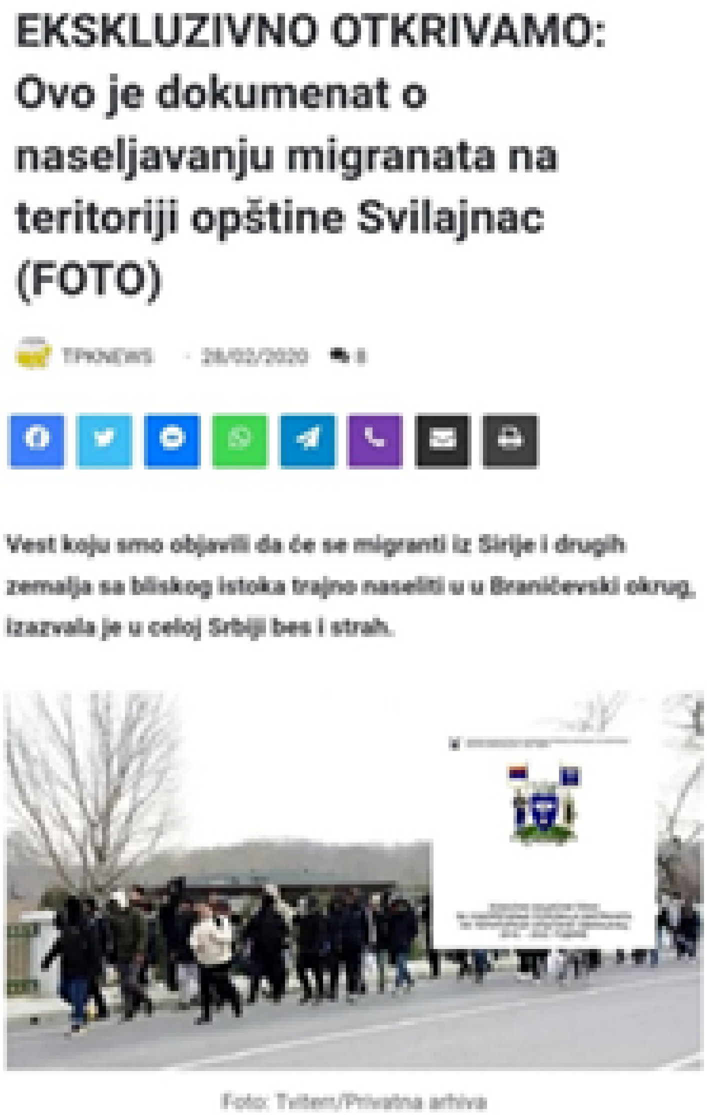
Reporting on Refugee crisis on Social Networks and Online Portals in Serbia

Translation of the headline:
“WE REVEAL EXCLUSIVELY: This is a document about the settlement of migrants in the municipality of Svilajnac”

The journalists from FakeNews Tracer also deconstructed this fake news , proving that in the Local Action Plan for the Improvement of the Migrants' Position in the Territory of the Svilajnac Municipality for the period from 2018 to 2022, "there is no mention of confiscating abandoned households and assigning those households to migrant families, as well as on the settlement of migrants on the territory of Braničevski or any other district in Serbia. The statements of the Tpknews portal that refer to the settlement of one thousand migrants in the municipality of Žabare and eight hundred migrants in the municipality of Veliko Gradište are also incorrect: the document does not even mention the municipality of Veliko Gradište, while only the reconstruction of the centre for social work is foreseen for the municipality of Žabare.”



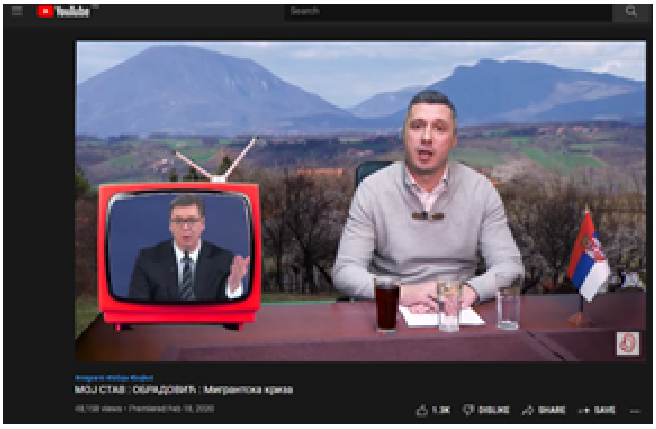
EKSKLUZIVNO OTKRIVAMO: Ovo je dokumenat o naseljavanju migranata na teritoriji opštine Svilajnac (FOTO)

TPKNEWS · 28/02/2020

Vest koju smo objavili da će se migranti iz Sirije i drugih zemalja sa bliskog istoka trajno naseliti u u Braničevski okrug, izazvala je u celoj Srbiji bes i strah.

Foto: Tviter/Privatna arhiva

- **Racist narratives placed by one of the opposition leaders**



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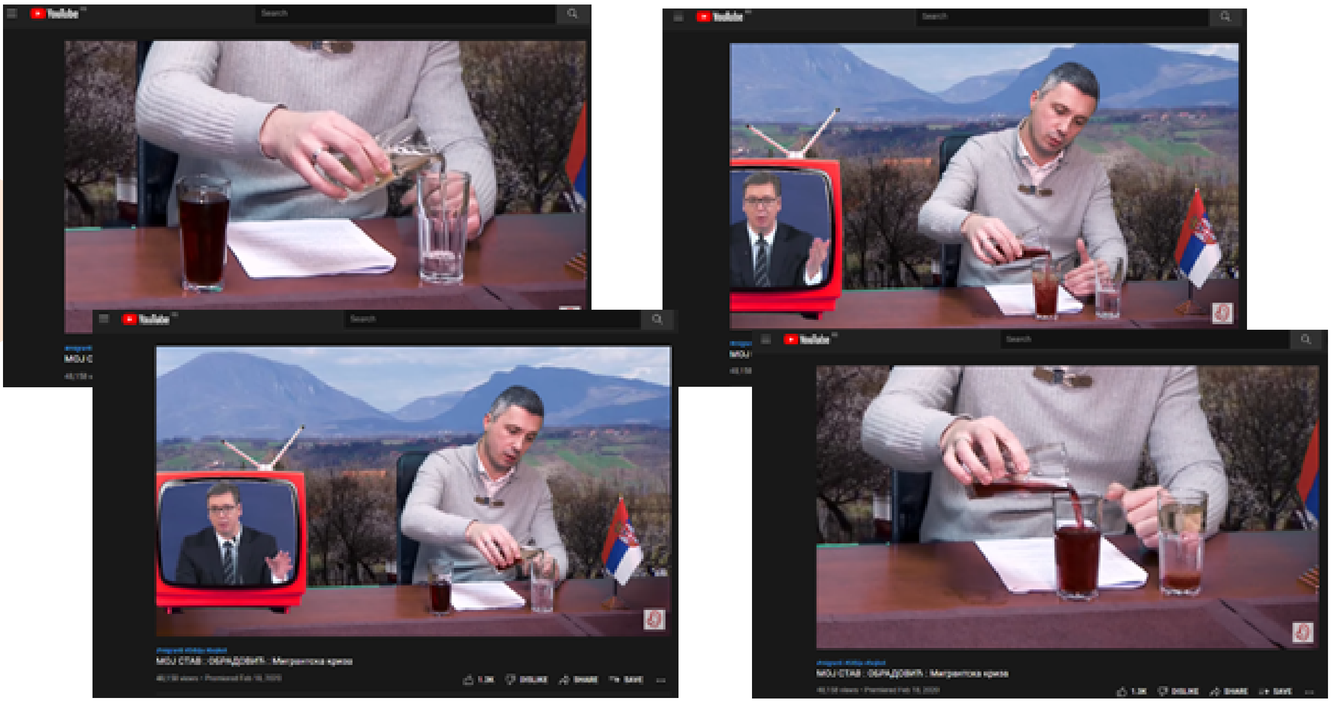
Reporting on Refugee crisis on Social Networks and Online Portals in Serbia

- **Racist narratives placed by one of the opposition leaders**



Source: YouTube channel called “Српски покрет ДВЕРИ”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-LU54cqiEA

Boško Obradović, one of the opposition leaders, and president of the “Serbian movement Dveri”, known as right-wing politician, conducted an analysis of the speech of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, in which the projections for the migration balance of the population until 2030 and after that period were presented. Boško Obradović's reaction referred to the president's statement that by 2030, the same number of people will immigrate to and leave Serbia, while it is expected that after 2030, the number of people immigrating will increase compared to those leaving the country. Obradović's reaction to the statement was released in the form of an experiment published on YouTube in which clear and dark liquid are poured from glass to glass, until the glass representing Serbia is completely emptied of clear liquid (representing citizens of Serbia) and filled with dark liquid (representing migrants). Although he ends his experiment with the words "I wouldn't say that everything will remain the same" (when the number of those who immigrate becomes greater than those who emigrate, ed.), and does not directly warn against the Islamization of Serbia, his speech/experiment has several logical and rhetorical fallacies and racists connotation that are implemented for manipulative purposes.

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Firstly, by choosing the colour of liquids representing different groups of people (clear liquid – Serbian population, dark liquid – migrants), he clearly shows his attitude towards the settlement of migrants in Serbia, who will symbolically get the state and its population “dirty”. Furthermore, in the analysed speech, President Vučić does not specify which people will immigrate to Serbia after 2030, so Boško Obradović's analysis could be characterised as well as a strawman argument that was carried out for demagogic purposes.

The previous three examples are united in the narrative that the Government of Serbia has betrayed its citizens by financially and logistically supporting the settlement of migrants in Serbia, while not preventing or even helping the local (mostly highly educated or professionally specialized) population to leave the country. The publication "Anti-Semitism in Modern Conspiracy Theories" provides a historical overview of the creation of extreme narratives and the creation of racist ideologies through anti-Semitism and in general through the feeling of the threat of the nation and traditional values, whereby Jews were most often identified as the threatening other. Since 2015, right-wing parties from all over Europe have been copying the anti-Semitic narrative, placing migrants in the place of the other, who threatens and from whom the Christian peoples of Europe need protection:

“*After 2015, the same methods are used to target migrants from the Middle East and war-torn countries as the 'enemy' by the European far right. In the discourse of the extreme right, migrants are generalized into the image of the Muslim Other whose ultimate goal is the Islamization of Europe. Therefore, migrants are presented as a threat to the existence of the Christian and secular European tradition. Far-right organizations and political parties use alternative media and social networks to spread false news about the 'rape caravan' and the upcoming Islamist invasion of Europe, thereby spreading fear among the European and predominantly Christian population.*”[14]

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[14] https://novitreciput.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Antisemitizam-u-modernim-teorijama-zavere.pdf (p. 13/14)

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Users' Comments

The report of the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights "Right to Asylum in the Republic of Serbia 2021" indicates that "cruelty and illegal treatment of migrants is very often approved by readers and is considered the only correct way in which they should be treated. This population is often depersonalised and not treated as a group of individuals, but as part of a 'horde' that needs to be dealt with as soon as possible".[1] Audience comments on social networks and online portals that publish false and manipulative information regarding the migrant crisis can be classified into sub-narratives that represent a direct affirmative response to the narrative that was promoted by false or manipulative information. In this sense, it is possible to distinguish sub-narratives: 1) hate speech and direct calls for persecution and murder of migrants, 2) direct criticism of government representatives and 3) warning against the Islamization of Europe. In the following text, examples of audience comments below the previously shown deconstructed fake news will be shown, sorted by different sub-narrative categories:

1) Hate speech and direct calls for persecution and murder of migrants

"They should not be returned, but for each subsequent arrival by boat, an order for sinking should be issued. Those who are already there, let the night "eat" them!!!"

"The gas chambers built by the Nazis as a hotel for Jews should be slowly rehabilitated in Poland and Slovakia. It's time for the migrants to be hosted there. Because Serbia does not have the capacity."

"Ten guards to one migrant, a machine gun, two, three per guard, a wire with electricity and then you call it a centre for migrants, that is, foreign bodies in an aggressive state!"

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15 http://azil.rs/azil_novi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Pravo-na-azil-u-Republici-Srbiji-2021.pdf (p. 172)

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2) Direct criticism of government representatives

"Strange that this happened without it being published anywhere and that a lesbian (prime minister Ana Brnabić) ed.) did not appear to inform the people about it, the opposition must have made it up."
"Now AV (president Aleksandar Vučić, ed.) will build mosques, right away, with our money, of course! He is so generous..."
"Who do you consider to be the competent services? Those who IMPORT them to Serbia at night by escorted buses?"

3) Warning against the Islamization of Europe

"Well, that's the goal, they sent them ... paid them to Islamize Europe, especially Orthodox Serbia.. And all those guys are soldiers capable of defending their homeland, they came to enslave someone else's,,,,,, all mercenaries,,,,,, those are not refugees nor migrants."
"Very good thing. Keep it up bro! even I came out of that sect of Islam and my father was a hodja. an Islamic wave must not happen. FOR JESUS CHRIST, FOR SERBIA...POZZ FROM NOVI PAZAR."

The research report "Influence of the media in the Republic of Serbia on the increase of xenophobia towards refugees and migrants", published in 2020, showed that 50% of respondents feel unsafe in the presence of a group of refugees/migrants."[16] Comments on social networks below published fake news indicate that citizens are generally not inclined to check information from social networks. This is evident primarily from the number of comments that call for the expulsion, even the killing of migrants, expressing hatred and intolerance towards any form of humane treatment of this social group.

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[16] https://kirs.gov.rs/backoffice/images_arhive/original/UTICAJ-MEDIJA-U-REPUBLICI-SRBIJI-NA-POVECANJE-KSENOFOBIJE-PREMA-IZBEGLICAMA-I-MIGRANTIMA.pdf (p. 19)

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This additionally warns that today's society does not have the ability to adequately respond to the contemporary phenomenon that has occurred with the possibility that each individual publishes and spreads information without the obligation of prior verification and without immediate and effective sanctioning in the case that false information was intentionally spread.

IMPACT ON LOCAL/NATIONAL LEVEL

The impact of negative narratives that have been placed towards refugees and migrants has become visible in both online and offline environments. The first, immediate impact of posts on online portals and social networks could be visible in the comments of readers presented in the previous chapter. The fact that people posted direct hate speech and calls for murder under their full names and surnames, as well as the fact that some of those comments are still under the texts after more than two years, speaks in favour of the fact that a public discourse in which such speech is normalized and passes without consequences or accountability has already been created. The normalisation of such discourse soon materialised in real life, and in this context it is important to point out two cases.

1) “People's patrol”

Self-organised group of radicalised young men, patrolled the streets of Serbian cities, stopping migrants on the streets and threatening them not to attack women and girls. Also, they gave instructions to migrants when they are allowed and when they are not allowed to walk the streets, where it was not a matter of rules set by some institution, but a rule set by the "People's Patrol" themselves. Their first appearance on the streets was on February 2020, and on that occasion their leader Damjan Knežević said for the media:

"From today on, thousands and thousands of people will be the people's patrol. We have the right to conduct civil arrests, we have the right to defend our children and our streets."[17]

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[17] https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/crtaju-mete-ometaju-novinare-ko-su-narodne-patrole-i-zasto-ih-vlast-ne-vidi/

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Shortly after their official appearance in public, the People's Patrol participated in organising an anti-migrant protest in Belgrade on March 6, 2020. During the protest, shouts of "We don't want migrants", "Serbia to Serbs", "Fences for migrants, freedom for citizens" were heard[18], while the participants carried banners with the inscriptions "Terrorists not welcome" and "You will not replace us".

During the following months, the actions of this group were expanded to various areas of promotion and support of far-right ideologies and ideologies based on conspiracy theories (anti-vaccination protests, support for Ratko Mladić, support to Russia for the war in Ukraine)[19][20]. Although the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia warned that this group obstructs the work of journalists in the field, attacks and insults them, it can be concluded that there is no political or institutional will or intention to sanction the work of this group. This is also clear from the statement of the President of Serbia that he "has no idea" what the "People's Patrols" are and that those who mistreat and beat others will end up behind bars[21]. Still, the fact that the institutions still did not sanction organised gatherings with the aim of practising extremist ideology, during which hate speech towards different social groups occurs, speaks in favour of the fact that this kind of practice is tolerated on purpose. At the same time, the group's involvement in various extremist activities (such as defending war crimes and supporting Russia for the war in Ukraine) again indicates that it is a unique narrative of anti-globalist, extreme-nationalist ideologies based primarily on false and manipulative information and conspiracy theories.

2) Intrusion by car into the reception centre for migrants in Obrenovac

On May 6, 2020, F.R. drove his car at full speed through the fence of the reception centre for migrants in Obrenovac, broadcasting the event live on his Facebook profile. During the drive and break into the reception centre F.R. stated:

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18 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30476286.html
19 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-narodne-patrole-mural-srbija/31556482.html
20 https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/501141/Skup-podrske-ruskom-narodu
21 https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/501141/Skup-podrske-ruskom-narodu

"Let's see what the migrant brothers are doing. I don't want my girlfriend to be attacked by migrants, I don't want to see people who don't run away from anything in their city, I don't want to see them, I don't want a Muslim state, I don't want to put up with this. The punishment will be great for sure. I'm going out now."[22]

F.R's speech unifies different narratives based primarily on false and manipulative information about how migrants are a threat to the local population, especially to women, and that there is a secret state plan to settle migrants, which would lead to the Islamization of Serbia. This shows that such narratives cause consequences in real life and can be a reason for various criminal acts. F.R. was arrested immediately after causing the incident. He was prosecuted and sentenced to eight months in prison in early June 2020 after admitting the crime of violent behaviour. As stated in the publication of the Novi Sad School of Journalism "Narratives of Hate in Online Media in Serbia", "The prosecution missed the opportunity to characterise this act as a criminal act of inciting national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance."[23]

Framework of National Media Contents' Regulation

Regulation of media content is defined by a set of media laws (Law on Public Information and Media[24], Law on Public Media Services[25], Law on Electronic Media[26]) and they define what kind of media content is inadmissible - lies, manipulations, hate speech, threats, biased reporting, and similar to that. Therefore, all types of content that could be observed as a practice of unregistered online portals and groups on social networks, when it comes to spreading information regarding the migrant crisis. Given that in theoretical discussions and media discourse, these platforms are increasingly being talked about as new forms of media, while at the same time the legislation does not recognize them as such, here will be presented legislative provisions that can be referred to in the case of previously analysed narratives in online media.

[22] https://insajder.net/arhiva/vesti/tuzilastvo-za-insajder-muskarac-koji-je-kolima-uleteo-u-migrantski-centar-tereti-se-za-nasilnicko-ponasanje (p. 8)
[23] https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/sr/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Narativi-mrnje-u-novim-medijima-u-Srbiji.pdf (p. 8)
[24] https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_javnom_informisanju_i_medijima.html
[25] https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_javnim_medijskim_servisima.html
[26] https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_elektronskim_medijima.html

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The Constitution is the highest legal act in the Republic of Serbia and in Article 50 it is stated that the competent court can prevent the dissemination of information and ideas through means of public information if this is for the purpose of "preventing the propagation of war or incitement to direct violence or for the purpose of preventing advocacy of racial, national or religious hatred, which incites discrimination, hostility or violence"[27]. Also, Article 21 of the Constitution regulates the prohibition of discrimination:

“Any discrimination, direct or indirect, on any basis, especially on the basis of race, gender, nationality, social origin, birth, religion, political or other belief, property status, culture, language, age and mental or physical condition is prohibited.”[28]

The online space in the Republic of Serbia is partially regulated by the Law on the Organisation and Competence of State Bodies for the Fight against High-Tech Crime[29]. Article 3 of this Law defines that the law is applied for the purpose of discovery, criminal prosecution and trial, among other things, for:

"Criminal acts against the freedoms and rights of citizens, sexual freedom, public order and peace and the constitutional order and security of the Republic of Serbia, which due to the method of execution or the means used, can be considered criminal acts of high-tech crime"[30]
The law does not define in detail the types and forms of criminal acts that are carried out in the online space, and after the suicide of YouTuber Kristina Đukić in 2021, an online petition was launched to introduce "Kika's law" in order to define the issue of "cyberbullying" and punish violence on the Internet.

[27] https://kirs.gov.rs/backoffice/images_arhive/original/UTICAJ-MEDIJA-U-REPUBLICI-SRBIJI-NA-POVECANJE-KSENOFOBIJE-PREMA-IZBEGLICAMA-I-MIGRANTIMA.pdf (p. 19)
[28] Ibidem
[29] https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_organizaciji_i_nadleznosti_drzavnih_organa_za_borbu_protiv_visokotehnoloskog_kriminala.html
[30] Ibidem

On this occasion, the special prosecutor for high-tech crime Branko Stamenković stated that it is not possible to observe such phenomena only in the online space, adding that "the current Criminal Code provides sufficient protection to persons whose safety is threatened through various posts on social networks or exposed to the persecution of 'online bullies'."[31]

Article 387 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia defines that "who spreads or otherwise makes publicly available texts, images or any other presentation of ideas or theories that advocate or incite hatred, discrimination or violence against any person or group of persons, based on race, skin colour, religious affiliation, nationality, ethnic origin or some other personal characteristic, shall be punished by imprisonment from three months to three years."[32]

As it could be seen in the presented examples, hate speech, threats, calls to kill migrants took place in the online space as a direct response to fake and manipulative information, while the narrative of bigotry and hatred was transferred to the streets in the form of anti-migrant protests and actions of groups like "People's Patrol". It shows that the online space should not be seen as a virtual environment without any consequences in real life. Also, it is particularly important to react to incidents that happen in the online space and that are then transferred to real life. The non-reaction of the competent authorities to fake and manipulative news, conspiracy theories, the emergence of groups on social networks and narratives of hatred and intolerance indicates that either the institutions are not effective enough or the legislation is not clearly defined. Otherwise, the observed phenomena in the online space would be sporadic incidents, and not normalised discourse and behaviour that institutions cannot do anything about.

[31] https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/30892/posebni-tuzilac-za-visokotehnoloski-kriminal-kikin-zakon-o-nasilju-na-internetu-ne-moze-da-se-razmatra-u-sajber-svetu/vest
[32] https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/krivicni-zakonik-2019.html

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07

Weaponizing Narratives: Fake News, Disinformation and Separatism around the Illegal Referendum in Catalonia (2017)

Dr. José Antonio Muñiz-Velázquez -Dr. Fernando Delage-Carretero [1]
Dr. Pedro Eduardo Rivas-Nieto
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1. The disinformation front of Catalan separatism

1.1. False arguments used by Catalan secessionists to produce fake news.

1.1.1. Generic arguments

False argument 1: Spain is not a true democracy.

Truthful arguments: Spain is part of the same international institutions as the rest of the members of the EU. In the International Democracy Index of 2018 of the Intelligence Unit of The Economist, Spain appeared in 19th place in the exclusive group of full democracies, with an index of 9.17 points out of 10 in pluralism and electoral processes and 8.82 in civil liberties (Freer, 2019).

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False argument 2: Spain is a country with outdated institutions.

Truthful arguments: The current Spanish Constitution was approved in 1978 in a referendum throughout the country. It was also approved in Catalonia, with 91.09% of the votes cast for approval (Pérez, 2017).
Regarding some international indexes Spain always obtains high results in freedoms of association, movement and press. Furthermore, civil rights are protected by the Spanish Constitution, as stated in Article 1.

False argument 3: Spain does not have a true separation of powers.

Truthful arguments: There are no recognized international bodies that question the separation of powers in Spain. Similar to the majority of the members of the EU, the three powers of the State fit into a parliamentary system.
The GRECO Report of December 2017 of the Council of Europe did recommend that the weight of political parties should be reduced in the elections of members of the highest governing body of the judiciary.
The GRECO Report for Spain was similar to that for other EU countries, and the report expressly stated that "there are no doubts about the high quality of the judiciary in Spain" (GRECO Report, 2017).
The Spanish courts considered that any Spanish citizen can participate in elections without restrictions, as long as she or he has not been convicted by a court. Because he was not convicted, Mr. Carles Puigdemont, former president of Catalonia, was able to flee from the Spanish Judiciary after committing crimes and was able to be a nominee for the European Parliament despite pending accusations.

Dr. Fernando Delage-Carretero. Director del Departamento de Estudios Internacionales de la Universidad Loyola Andalucía. Anteriormente ha sido profesor en la Universidad Pontificia de Comillas ICAI-ICADE y en otros centros como el Centro Superior de Estudios de la Defensa Nacional (CESEDEN), el Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado de la UNED, y la Universidad Nacional de Yokohama. Asimismo, ha detentado cargos como subdirector de la revista Política Exterior, director de Casa Asia en Madrid, y director general de Relaciones Internacionales del Ayuntamiento de Madrid.

Dr. Pedro Eduardo Rivas-Nieto. Vicedecano de la Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Políticas de la Universidad Loyola Andalucía, anteriormente profesor e investigador en la Universidad Pontifica de Salamanca, ha estado vinculado con asuntos relacionados con la violencia política, especialmente con el terrorismo, la guerra y sus formas conexas - paramilitarismo, insurgencia, guerrillas -. Entre otros cometidos, ejerce de colaborador, asesor y consultor externo de las Fuerzas Armadas, gobernantes en ejercicio, candidatos electorales y de departamentos especializados en seguridad en Iberoamérica.

False argument 4: In Spain, there is no freedom of expression.

Truthful arguments: If Spain is among the select group of countries with full democracies, all accounting for 430 million of the 7.3 billion people on the planet, the right to freedom of expression, would be difficult to deny.

According to an annual report released by Freedom House, Spain, in 2017, the year of the illegal referendum, received 94 points out of 100 for democratic quality, 38 out of 40 points for political rights and 56 out of 60 points for civil liberties (Freedom House Report, 2018). The scores for Spain were higher than those for the United States of America - Freedom House is an American organization and has its headquarters in Washington - and similar to those for Germany.

To be a member of the EU, it is a condition sine qua non to fulfill and enforce democratic freedoms and concur in equal conditions with full democracies in the most relevant international organizations.

In Spain, with the approval of the Constitution in 1978 and the decision to not be a militant democracy, it became legal to defend alternative models tothe existing Spanish Parliament, to demonstrate in the streets in favor of independence (El País, 2018), to organize political parties whose manifest objective is the independence of a territory and to defend from any political platform, media or regional parliament—the 17 territories have both executive and legislative powers in a decentralization practice unparalleled among full democracies—whatever is desired (La Vanguardia, 2018).

The case of Catalan independentists is a clear example of the possibility of exercising freedom of expression because they can produce fake news without being punished under Spanish law.

False argument 5. The Spanish Constitution prevents Catalans from having sufficient autonomy.

Truthful arguments: Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country are part of the so-called "historical communities," meaning that they have more powers and autonomy than the other territories, as stated in Article 151 of the Constitution (Title VIII, Spanish Constitution).

Catalonia is recognized as a "nationality", having historical, linguistic and cultural particularities because in Spain, these territories also have official languages, in addition to Spanish. The Constitution recognizes in Article 3.3 that the richness of the different languages of Spain is a joint cultural heritage that should be protected by public authorities (Preliminary Title, Spanish Constitution). Therefore, Catalan is the co-official in Catalonia, the autonomous community has full powers in education and, since 1984, a policy of unparalleled linguistic immersion has been applied in Spain, where that language is taught in education.

In the case of Catalonia, not only executive but also legislative powers have been transferred from the central State to the regional parliament, whose capacities extend, in addition to the fiscal sphere, to the police itself - with judicial police functions - to the management of prisons, health, education, public media - three regional television channels in Catalonia - and even trade delegations abroad. In 2020, 190 competencies were transferred from the central State (Ministry of Territorial Policy, 2021).

False argument 6. Spain impoverishes and even robs Catalonia.

Truthful arguments: In Spain, as in the rest of the EU members, the tax contribution system of the Autonomous Communities is proportional. However, if Catalonia is, along with Madrid, the territory with the highest GDP in Spain, it is logical and fair that it contributes more than do other poorer communities (BBC Mundo, 2017).

When Catalonia has experienced moments of economic weakness, the central State has helped the Catalan Government face debt maturities and bill payments. The Autonomous Liquidity Fund (FLA) of the Ministry of Finance has disbursed more than 70,000 million euros since 2012 to meet these needs (BBC Mundo (2017b), and taking into account the population of Catalonia, the amount of aid has been higher for Catalonia than that received by other territories. It is usual that Catalonia receives a third of the entire amount of regional aid (Portillo, 2019).

Therefore, the idea spread by secessionist sectors that if Catalonia were independent it would be a rich country and would have a surplus is false because in addition to the fact that it should suffer the effects of international isolation, especially with its immediate exclusion from the EU, which would see this declaration of independence as an illegal decision, it is the most indebted community in Spain (Viaña, 2016). It has a debt of approximately 80,000 million euros. The Spanish State has helped the Catalan Government overcome the situation.

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1.1.2. Specific arguments

False argument 1. In Spain, the self-determination of the Catalans is not allowed because there is no democracy

Truthful arguments: Throughout Spain, citizens are allowed to freely decide at polls with the only limits of conditions set by law. In Catalonia is possible to vote in a referendum, as has been done in referendums on autonomy and national endorsements. There is also the possibility of reforming the Constitution through the usual procedures of modern constitutionalism.

It is true that self-determination is not allowed. However, it is not allowed in any country of our closest environment—the EU—nor in other Western countries because the UN understands that self-determination, when it is synonymous with independence, is a factor of instability, even belligerent, when applied in consolidated democratic States. It is common for those who defend it from nationalist positions to confuse it with the self-determination of the people, in a clear attempt to assimilate them and confuse citizens. Self-determination is a concept applicable to situations of a colonial nature or of unfair and continuous treatment of the population of a specific territory (UN, 2021), something that, of course, does not exist in Catalonia or the rest of Spain nor in any EU country. To believe that Catalonia encourages the right to self-determination would be to accept a falsehood, i.e., that Catalonia is a colony occupied by a foreign country and thus should be decolonized in accordance with the principles of the UN.

False argument 2. It is undemocratic for elected officials to go prison, and thus, many politicians have had to go into exile.

Truthful arguments: The law in Spain is the same for all citizens, and if a politician violates the law, she or he must accept the consequences. In Spain, one does not go to jail for giving an opinion but rather for the commission of illegal acts included in the Penal Code.

Politicians involved in the independence process, something similar to a coup, fled from Spain knowing that having committed a crime, the Judiciary would act to ensure compliance with the law (Pérez and Ríos, 2017).

The laws in Spain are guarantors; as proof, according to the Criminal Procedure Law, it is not possible to judge fugitives in their absence (Legal Guides, 2021) - as it is possible in other democracies of the EU.

The Spanish Judiciary, i.e., the Supreme Court, the highest Spanish judicial body, decided, when politicians who committed crimes in the illegal referendum were going to trial, that the trials be public. The trials could be "streamed," thus ensuring maximum transparency (Arechederra, Villanueva & Hierro, 2019). Therefore, criticisms by secessionist groups that international observers were denied accreditation to observe the trials were unfounded (Pérez, 2019).

False argument 3. Those who were in prison for the referendum of October 1, 2017 were arrested and convicted only for allowing Catalans to exercise their right to vote.

Truthful arguments: Those who were imprisoned while awaiting trial "for providing ballot boxes" were accused of organizing and carrying out a plan to achieve, outside the law and by means of the fait accompli, a Catalan State in the territory of present-day Catalonia. Nine of the politicians who were tried were unanimously convicted by the Supreme Court for the crime of sedition (Supreme Court, 2019).

Citizens accused of committing crimes classified in the Spanish Penal Code, such as occupying schools designated by relevant institutions as voting centers to prevent the police from enforcing the law and evicting them (Cía and Mouzo, 2017), to hide and destroy evidence necessary to launch a criminal investigation and to confront public authority (Noger, 2017), were also imprisoned. Resisting compliance with the law and those who have the obligation to enforce it is not an "act of resistance" but an illegal act in Spanish law and in full democracies.

In addition, the so-called referendum of October 1, 2017, was not democratic. It did not have legitimacy of origin, nor was its procedure. Without a "no" campaign, with tendentious and persecutory campaigns for those who were against the referendum

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(Piñols, 2017), without a clear electoral census, without impartiality of the Catalan public media and with express pressure so that the published information was favorable to the referendum (La Vanguardia, 2019), without support from the Venice Commission (ABC, 2017), the illegal referendum did not have the slightest guarantees for it to be democratic. Furthermore, it violated the internal law of EU member States and, through a nonexistent “right of secession,” aspired to break national unity to force the birth of a Catalan republic.

It was deeply undemocratic. When the Parliament of Catalonia approved the so-called Referendum Law (Cordero, 2017) and the Law of Legal Transience (Legal News, 2017), approved on September 6 and 7, 2017, all guarantees were broken (Puente, 2017).

Some sectors of the independence movement concerned about the legal effect of this decision, later argued that the so-called UDI did not have a legal character - as the body that proclaimed it for this purpose - but only political (Casals, 2017). However, on September 6 and 7, 2017, the independence group in the Catalan Parliament, violating the internal regulations of the Chamber, approved a transitional law that repealed the Spanish Constitution and the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, clearly violated the law. When the UDI was published in the Official Gazette of Catalonia, it was not only a symbolic act; it was made official (Martín, 2015). Moreover, former president Puigdemont, a fugitive from Spanish justice, has reaffirmed on several occasions that the UDI is still in force (Rivera, 2020).

Those who claim that the referendum of October 1 resulted in a democratic mandate of the people of Catalonia in favor of independence ignore that it was prohibited by the Constitutional Court and that it had a participation that ranged from 38% to 43% of Catalans with the right to vote (Romero, 2017), according to the autonomous government that organized it, without any validation of the data (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2017). They also forget that in the absence of an electoral board, there were people who voted several times in different places (El Confidencial, 2017).

False argument 4. Imprisoned politicians are political prisoners

Truthful arguments: In Spain, there are no political prisoners because no one can be put in prison for their political ideas, even if they express them publicly and are undemocratic. There are politicians who are imprisoned for committing crimes, as would happen if they did not hold public office. Ideas are expressed freely in Spain, even from prison, as evidenced by the many statements made by some independence leaders.

No international body or nongovernmental organizations recognized for their defense of human rights - Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch - have proposed that politicians in prison are political prisoners or prisoners of conscience (Ríos, 2019). If anything, as is usual with agencies that ensure compliance with guarantees, they have raised doubts regarding the terms of provisional imprisonment, which they have considered prolonged and have requested the release of two convicts (Martín, 2019). However, this legal figure exists in the majority of EU countries, sometimes with terms longer than those provided for in Spanish law, and its adoption is not the responsibility of the political authorities but of the judges by virtue of the possible risk of escape. Seeing what has happened with many pro-independence politicians who participated in the events, who quickly fled Spain knowing that they had committed a crime (La Vanguardia, 2019), it is not surprising that judges are prudent. Importantly, this prudence extends to the fact that in Spain, it is not possible to prosecute those who are not present.

When pro-independence sectors have claimed that public officials—such as the former president of the regional parliament Carme Forcadell—have been imprisoned just for organizing parliamentary debates, they falsify reality (AELPA, 2018). Mrs. Forcadell actively participated in the adoption of laws that repealed the Constitution and the Statute of Autonomy in Catalonia and, in doing so, deprived both the Catalans and 47 million Spaniards of rights in addition to failing to comply with the mandates of the Constitutional Court. She, along with other defendants, ignored the opinions of the legal services of the Catalan Parliament that noted the illegality of what was intended to be undertaken by that same parliament (Sastre, 2016). In addition, it was part of a plan whose goal was to achieve the independence of Catalonia and use the economic means and human resources of the autonomous government - including the 17,000 agents of the autonomous police - to start the new State.

To this must be added some falsehoods emanating from propaganda campaigns. For example, Catalonia would automatically be a member of the EU after independence, a clear misinterpretation of the Treaty of Lisbon. To be part of the EU, Catalonia must formally request admission, and for the request to be accepted, the decision of the Member States would have to be unanimous. The president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, similar to other European politicians on different occasions, reiterated that Catalonia would be left out of the EU if secession occurred (La Vanguardia, 2017).

False argument 5. The police used force savagely and with impunity against peaceful citizens who only wanted to exercise their right to vote

Truthful arguments: Not all independence is peaceful, nor is everything violent. However, some radical groups have been investigated by the police for exalting violent behavior, inciting hatred and possessing dangerous materials and detailed plans of public institutions (20 Minutos, 2019; El Economista, 2019), both before the illegal referendum and after. There were disturbances, riots and intimidating acts in the streets in support of the independence of Catalonia (El Confidencial, 2017). The Prosecutor's Office affirmed that there was violence, and the State Advocate reported that tumultuous public disorder prevented the application of the law. Apart from the existing legal differences between the concepts of violence and public disorder in the Spanish system, the fact is that the peaceful lives of citizens were altered, politicians and party leaders were harassed (Ordaz and Carranco, 2017), and public institutions were surrounded - such as the Ministry of Economy of the Generalitat of Catalonia, where the Civil Guard was brutally attacked (Olmo, 2018) in September 2017 and public property and police vehicles were destroyed.

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When the police tried to enforce the laws and, following the judicial mandate, prepared to remove the ballot boxes from the polling stations to prevent the referendum declared illegal by the Constitutional Court, they found both citizens who resisted passively and citizens - some of whom were well organized - who resisted violently. The police leadership of the regional police insisted that there were hardly any police offensives but rather evictions from schools (Parera, 2018).
However, the figure that echoed in the international media (Barry, Minder and Karasz, 2017; BBC Mundo, 2017) of more than 800 injuries caused by police repression came from the autonomous government (Congostrina and Rodríguez, 2017), which prepared the referendum, and from sectors in favor of independence (YouTube, 2020). Secessionist organizations produced technical-looking reports that contained ideological content and reported more than 1,000 injuries (Pujol-Moix, 2019).

That day, biased news (El País, 2017) and false news (CubaDebate, RT, Telesur (2017) were published with abundant images of police violence (#This is the Real Spain, 2017) that were not linked to the October 1 referendum but to other dates and other events. The Guardian - whose director acknowledged having published uncontracted data and fraudulent images and later apologized for it (Tercero, 2017) - and Le Monde (Sénécat, 2017) denounced these spurious acts, but their approach caused controversy in the international press (BBC Mundo, 2017; Travieso, 2017), despite having sided with the holding of illegal referendum, as a general rule (El Mundo, 2017). There was little mention of the National Police and Civil Guard who required immediate medical attention and of the many others, i.e., 431 – according to the Ministry of the Interior – who were attacked (RTVE, 2017).

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False argument 6. The growing Spanish extreme right is behind the persecution of Catalonia

Truthful arguments: The extreme right does not have the strength in Spain as in other European countries. Although there are organized groups, the extreme left has the most support and has more relevance both in the number of supporters and in institutions (Ortega, 2021). The Vox party, which is often labeled in the ultraright media (Sopena, 2019) in an imprecise way (Junquera, 2018), is a party linked to the “Radical Right”, and some of its ideologues coincide more with movements of this nature in the United States than with movements of this nature in Europe (Méndez, 2019). Its electoral rise largely coincides with the events that occurred around the illegal referendum of independence in autumn 2017.

Regardless of its growing electoral strength, it is true that Vox initiated a popular accusation procedure against high officials of the autonomous administration for the events that occurred on October 1, 2017. Vox did it, but any other party or group could have done so. In Spain, the law allows individuals and legal entities to exercise public prosecution as a form of citizen contribution to the administration of justice.

1.2 Main disinformation artifacts around October 1, 2017

To a large extent, Catalan separatist nationalism is based on blatant falsehoods, disinformation and pseudohistory. In addition, this is accomplished in a premeditated, planned and generously funded way. In 1990, Jordi Pujol, then president of the regional government and the last head of Catalan nationalism (Ucelay-Da Cal, 2018), proposed a document titled Program 2000 (Alandete, 2019), would serve as a roadmap to build, based on fallacies and half-truths, a Catalonia not only completely different from the rest of Spain in all possible orders but also a backbone story where a modern and advanced Catalan nation is oppressed by a retrograde Spain (Benítez, 2020).

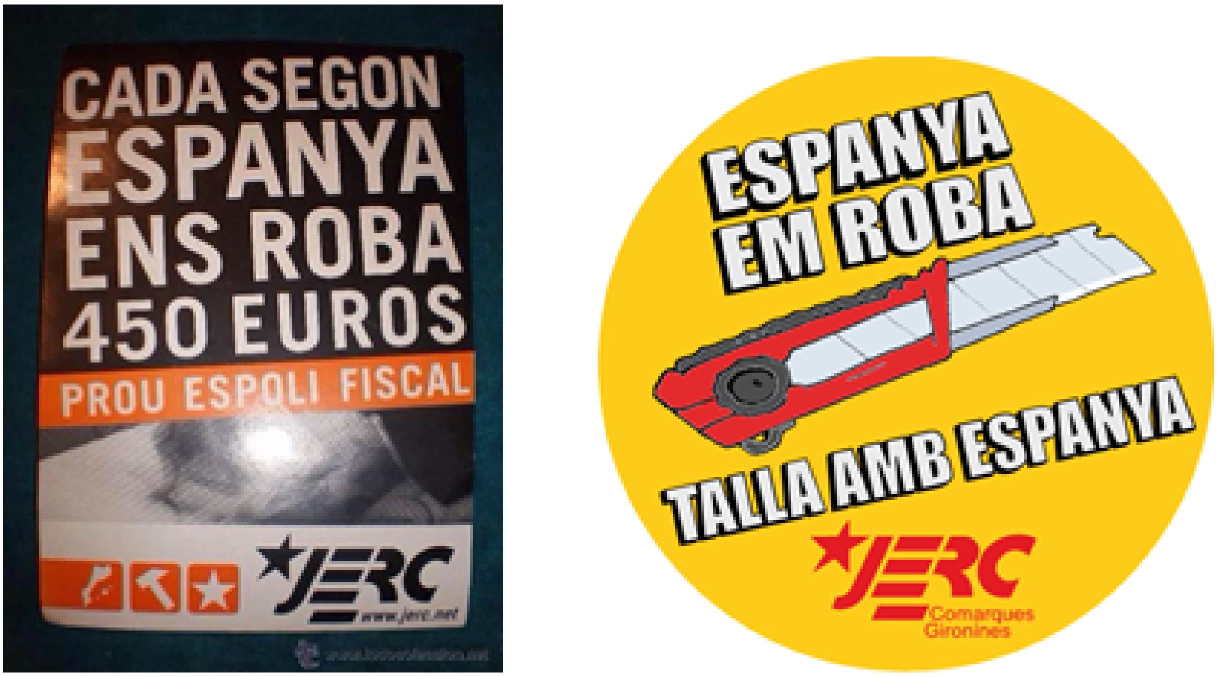
After revealing the arguments above, as a sample, it is worthwhile to dwell on certain examples that have marked this nationalist process and nationalization in general, in particular the so called “el procés” and the mock referendum of October 1, 2017, illegally called by the autonomous government.

1.2.1. Examples of notable disinformation separatist campaigns before October 1, 2017

1. Disinformative campaign "Espanya ens roba"

The (false) economic argument that the rest of Spain steals the money that belongs to the Catalans has already been explained above. Let us see several campaigns in that sense. "Espanya ens roba" is an expression formulated for the first time in the Catalan Parliament by the nationalist parliamentarian Alfons López Tena in November 2011.

Using that slogan as a base, or also the claim "fiscal plunder," nationalist parties articulated various campaigns through graphic and digital material, conferences, events, newspaper articles, television interventions, social networks, etc. (see images 1, 2, 3 and 4). Thus, in a repeated and orchestrated way, they convinced or converted a good part of the citizenship of Catalonia to accept this fallacy through a supposedly rational argument



Images 1 and 2. Graphic elements for the disinformation campaign "Espanya ens roba" of the Republican Youth of Catalonia. The text in the first poster reads as follows: "every second Spain robs us of 450 euros; enough fiscal plunder." The second says, "Spain robs me; cuts away from Spain."

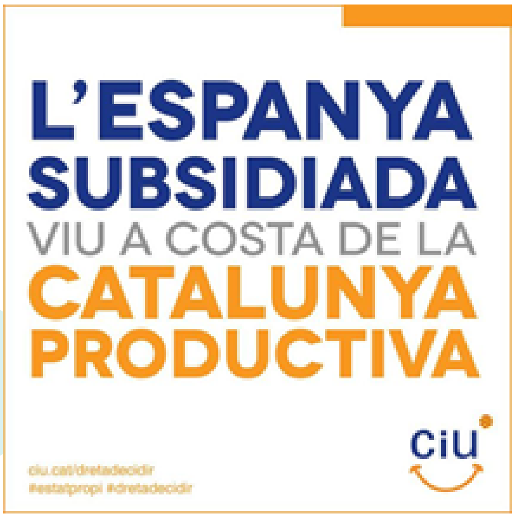
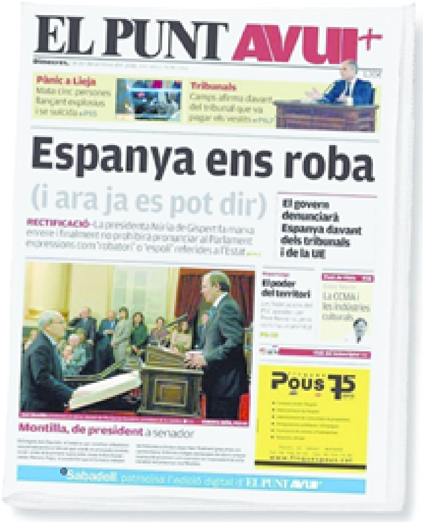


Image 3. Poster for the disinformation campaign “Espanya ens roba” of Convergence i Unió. The text says, “Subsidized Spain lives at the expense of productive Catalonia.”



EL PUNT AVUI+

Pànic a Lleja

Tribunals

Espanya ens roba

(i ara ja es pot dir)

El govern denunciarà Espanya davant dels tribunals i de la UE

Montilla, de president a senador

Image 4. Catalan newspaper El Punt Avui of December 14, 2011; the disinformative slogan “Spain robs us” is the headline.

2. Disinformation campaign “Catalonia is not Spain”

Taking advantage of the fact that the focus of the world was going to be on Barcelona during the 1992 Olympic Games, the party at that time in the autonomous government, Convergence i Unió (CiU), launched a campaign with the aim of claiming, to the whole world, that Catalonia is a nation and not part of the Spanish nation. Catalonia is not Spain was the clear, simple and forceful slogan that articulated it. Today, this slogan continues to appear in stadiums and sports fields on banners, flags, posters and various other graphic means. Such banners appear not only in the Catalan territory but also in other parts of Spain and outside of it, in particular when a team from Catalonia participates in a competition, especially FC Barcelona during its international matches.
For example, and as reported at the time by the news agency Europa Press, the youth of CiU distributed more than 2,000 “Catalonia is not Spain” banners in Rome for the 2009 Champions League final in which FC Barcelona played and won (Image 5; Europa Press, 2009). This is a disinformation campaign that tries to present a desire of a part of Catalan society as a fact; importantly, Catalonia is Spain, and it always has been.

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1.2.2. Main disinformative artifacts on October 1, 2017

Image 5. Source: www.libertaddigital.com.

October 1, 2017, was intended to culminate in a fluid way, in the words of Bauman, in what Gascón (2018) describes as a postmodern coup. The real events that occurred throughout the Catalan territory were posted in real time by different disinformation devices that, through networks and multiple digital media, sought to influence the evolution of the events themselves. The hoaxes have been analyzed from different perspectives by authors such as Aparaci, García-Marín and Rincón-Manzano (2018), Coromina and Padilla (2018), and Hernández-Santaolalla and Sola-Morales (2019). among others.

Among the multiple hoaxes and misinformation that appeared then, those for which the protagonists were the bodies and security forces of the State stood out for their number, media impact and dissemination as well as for the emotional intensity they gave to the story. Funke (2017) states that digital hoaxes about the illegal Catalan referendum focused on police action, especially in Barcelona.

1. Audio by Marta Torrecillas Domènech

Due to its media coverage, its emotional imprint, and its impact on the behavior of many citizens on October 1, it is worth noting the audio that Marta Torrecillas Domènech, at the time councilor of the separatist party ERC in Gallifa, a small municipality in Barcelona, launched on WhatsApp denouncing the alleged aggression it had suffered by agents of the National Police. Her words were as following:

“Laura, listen, I was defending the elderly because they hit children, they hit older people, they threw me down the stairs, they kicked me, they broke my fingers one by one, in the middle of the stairs. With my clothes up, they touched my breasts and laughed, and they hit me ... while everyone recorded it. Explain it, let everyone know, they broke my fingers one by one; this is a lot of evil [ends up sobbing]. Much evil, much evil, much evil. A lot..” (In English, 2017)

The audio went viral quickly, much more quickly than the actual diagnosis from the medical report. Marta suffered capsulitis or inflammation, without anything broken, after a struggle with a police officer to remove her from the school where she was blocking the action of the police who were following court orders. She herself would soon recognize the falsehood of her own story (El Mundo, 2017), but the fake news had already spread across and outside of Catalonia.

2. Citizens injured and bloodied allegedly at the hands of the police

There were many tweets on that Sunday in which, from the early hours of the morning, claiming that citizens were wounded at the hands of the “Spanish police,” as was commonly specified, who confronted their Catalan citizenship in a forceful way and foreignized them, so to speak. It is true that there were clashes between the State security forces and the mass of people who occupied streets, schools and other public offices by way of polling stations. Sometimes, the degree of firmness necessary for the police to comply with the judicial mandate required expeditious methods for the eviction of people from schools or other agencies. In this sense, justice was served if in some cases the police response was not appropriate, as in any democratic State.

Importantly, this was magnified from the beginning through social networks.

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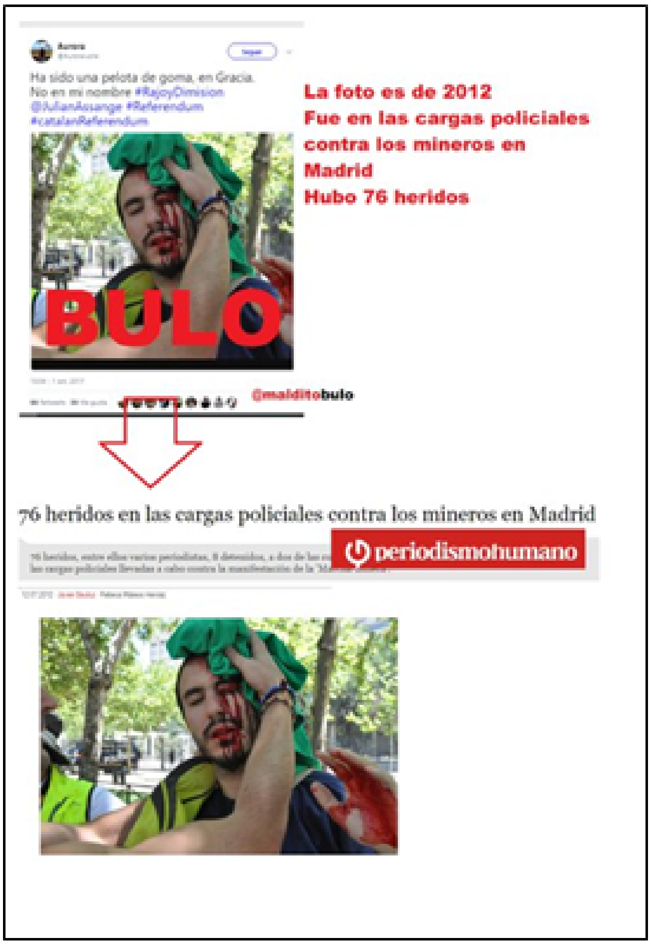
The story of the confrontation between people who peacefully wanted to vote on a Sunday in autumn, who rose not in arms but through voting before an oppressive and foreign State, and a police of that State that prevented it from voting with extreme violence was constructed by an intense disinformation campaign of hoaxes and fake news.

Image 6 is a tweet with a real photo but decontextualized because it corresponds to a confrontation between Spanish miners and the police in a 2012 demonstration in Madrid. Photographic decontextualization also occurred in a tweet of a bloody child (image 7) and many others.

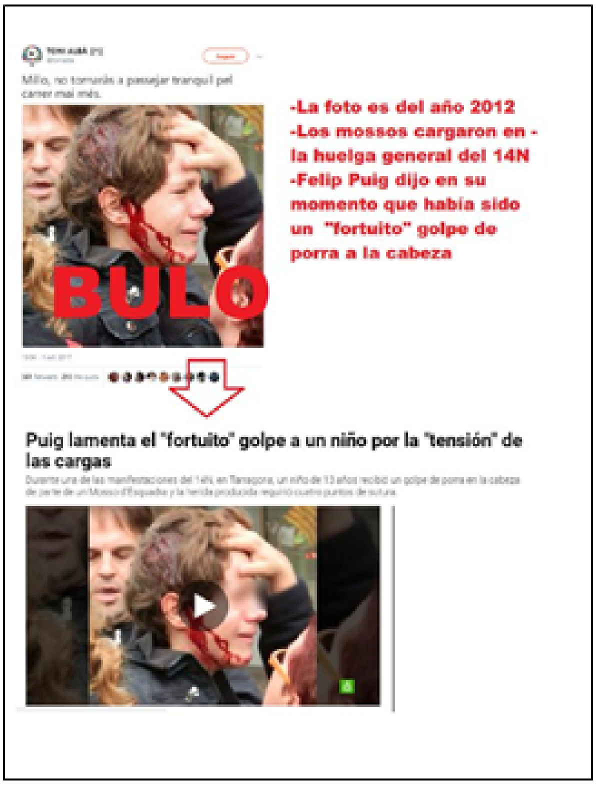


Ha sido una pelota de goma, en Gracia. No en mi nombre #RajoyDimision @JulianAssange #Referendum #catalanReferendum

La foto es de 2012
Fue en las cargas policiales contra los mineros en Madrid
Hubo 76 heridos

76 heridos en las cargas policiales contra los mineros en Madrid

Image 6. Source: www.maldita.es



Millo, no tornarás a passejar tranquil pel carrer mai més.

-La foto es del año 2012
-Los mossos cargaron en -
la huelga general del 14N
-Felip Puig dijo en su momento que había sido un "fortuito" golpe de porra a la cabeza

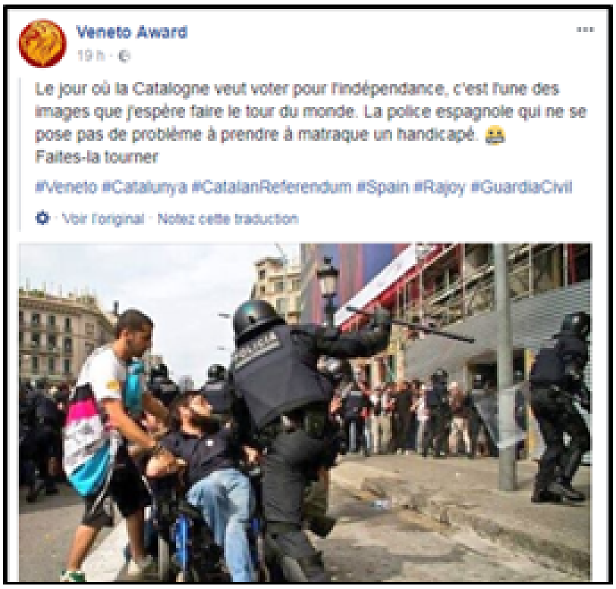
Puig lamenta el "fortuito" golpe a un niño por la "tensión" de las cargas

Durante una de las manifestaciones del 14N en Tarragona, un niño de 13 años recibió un golpe de porra en la cabeza de parte de un Mosso d'Esquadra y la herida producida requirió cuatro puntos de sutura.

Image 7. Source: www.maldita.es

3. Photograph of police beating a protester in a wheelchair

In addition to blood, a photograph appeared in different Twitter accounts (image 8), with all the relevant hashtags, of the "Spanish police" beating a disabled person in a wheelchair. The photograph was actually taken in 2011, when the Mossos d'Esquadra (Catalan regional police) evicted 15-M protesters from the Plaza de Cataluña in Barcelona.



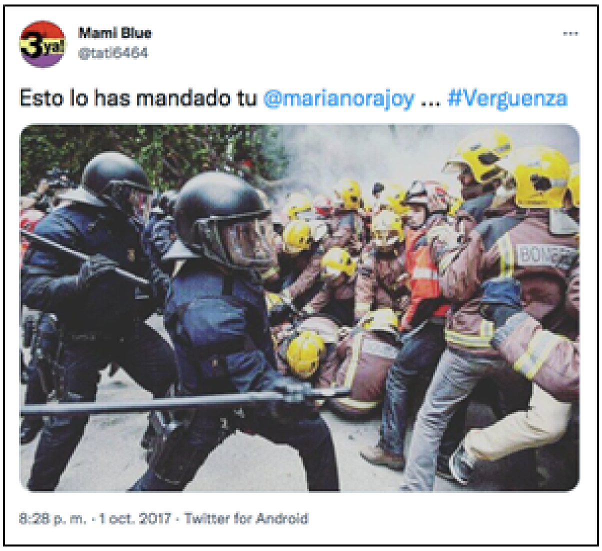
Veneto Award
19 h ·

Le jour où la Catalogne veut voter pour l'indépendance, c'est l'une des images que j'espère faire le tour du monde. La police espagnole qui ne se pose pas de problème à prendre à matraque un handicapé. 😬
Faites-la tourner

#Veneto #Catalunya #CatalanReferendum #Spain #Rajoy #GuardiaCivil

Image 8. Source:www.abc.com.

4. Photograph of police beating firefighters in Barcelona



Mami Blue
@tati6464

Esto lo has mandado tu @marianorajoy ... #Verguenza

8:28 p. m. · 1 oct. 2017 · Twitter for Android

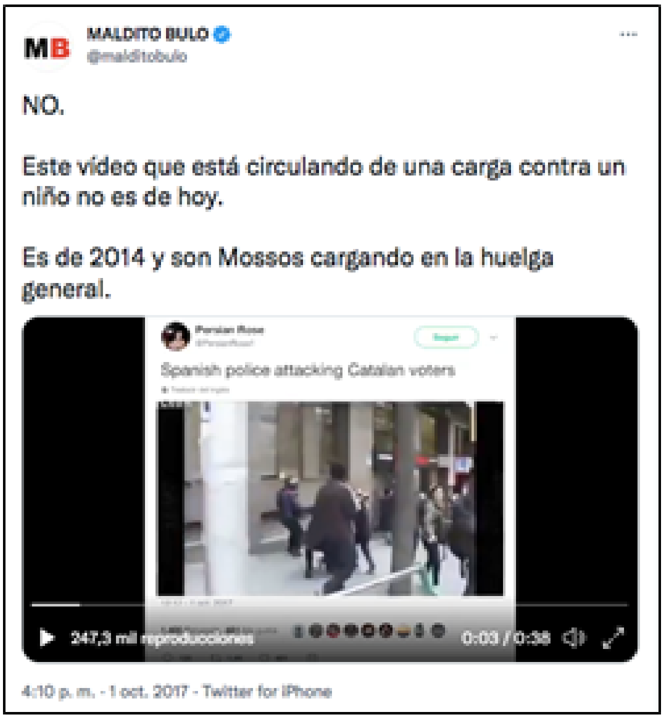
Image 9. Source: www.maldita.es.

Another picture with enormous circulation that day was the one that showed riot police beating a group of firefighters. This nuance is interesting because it reveals the confrontation between two bodies of public servants and, therefore, of two opposing legitimacies and, incidentally, symmetrical; in reality, this did not occur, as has already been commented.

In some of the tweets in which this photo appeared, the president of the government at the time, Mariano Rajoy, was blamed (Image 9). The reality was that the photo was taken in 2013 during a confrontation between firefighters during street protests against economic cuts and, again, the Mossos d'Esquadra, which is the autonomous police force, as has been noted, which has been assigned most duties related to citizen security in Catalonia. Apart from the fact that it was denied by www.maldita.es, in the photograph itself, it can be seen that the uniform is that of said autonomous body.

5. Videos of disproportionate police charges on October 1

In addition to tweets and other formats with photos such as those previously mentioned, messages with videos were also circulated in which viewers were made to believe that the police beat and attacked completely peaceful voters or protesters on that day. This is the case of a tweet that denies www.maldita.es (Image 10), in which the police officers who are seen are again Mossos d'Esquadra intervening in the general strike of 2014. Tweets and accounts of users such as @PersianRose1 and many others involved in that disinformation front of the illegal referendum are no longer available.



MALDITO BULO
@malditobulo

NO.

Este vídeo que está circulando de una carga contra un niño no es de hoy.

Es de 2014 y son Mossos cargando en la huelga general.

Persian Rose

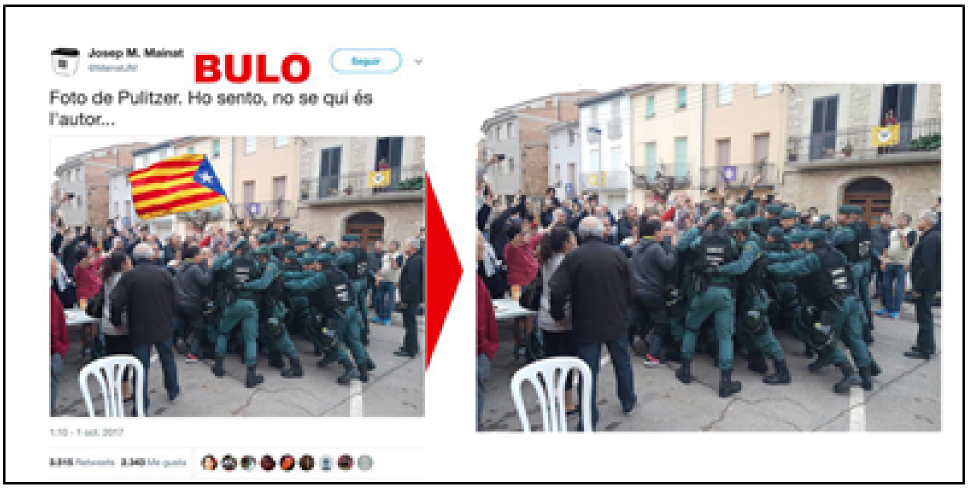
Spanish police attacking Catalan voters

4:10 p. m. · 1 oct. 2017 · Twitter for iPhone

Image 10. Source: www.maldita.es

6. The separatist flag epically added a posteriori

Another false image of enormous repercussions and dissemination by the networks during the first hours of October 1 was the one that showed a group of civil guards blocking the passage of a group of citizens who carried the independence flag (Image 11). The photograph was false or falsified, as the flag was digitally added a posteriori to make the image more symbolic and more iconic and convey a greater story by evoking scenes from other historical situations. The image was disseminated, among many other profiles, real and bots, by a Catalan actor, Josep M. Mainat, who enjoyed considerable notoriety.



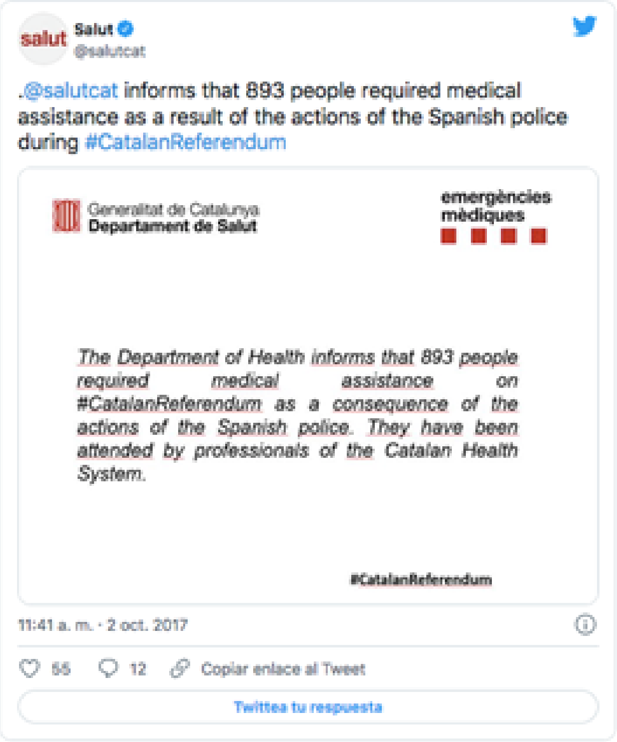
Josep M. Mainat

Foto de Pulitzer. Ho sento, no se qui és l'autor...

Image 11. Source: www.maldita.es.

7. Almost 900 injured at the hands of the "Spanish police"

On the night of October 1, the alleged number of injured as a result of police interventions began to be disseminated by the independence leaders through networks and media. The Department of Health of the autonomous government of Catalonia estimated that 900 individuals were injured (Image 12). Later, this body admitted that it was actually the number of people "who have been treated by doctors." Importantly, being treated is different from being injured or sick. The Generalitat itself would later state that four who had been injured were hospitalized, with two injuries being serious. One individual was hit in the eye with a rubber ball thrown by the National Police at a Spanish citizen after a metal fence was thrown against the police (Tercero, 2018). The other individual suffered a heart attack during a police intervention (El País, 2017).



Salut
@salutcat

.@salutcat informs that 893 people required medical assistance as a result of the actions of the Spanish police during #CatalanReferendum

Generalitat de Catalunya
Departament de Salut

emergències mèdiques

The Department of Health informs that 893 people required medical assistance on #CatalanReferendum as a consequence of the actions of the Spanish police. They have been attended by professionals of the Catalan Health System.

#CatalanReferendum

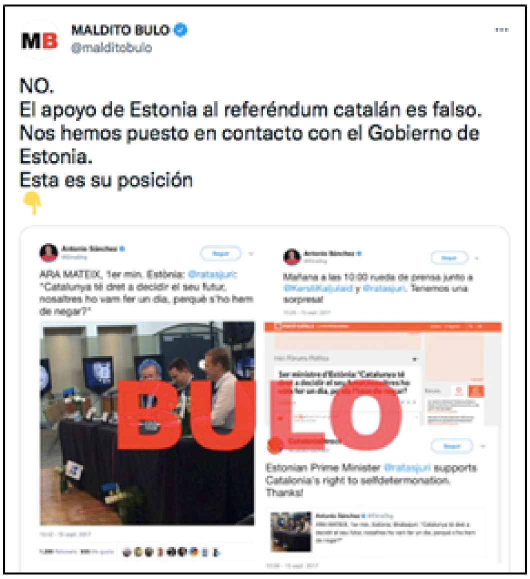
11:41 a. m. · 2 oct. 2017

Image 12. Source: https://twitter.com/salutcat.

Confusing the injured for deliberate care was another key component of the disinformation campaign by the pro-independence authorities regarding the events. It is not surprising that, at first, even the national press, following official statements, spoke of "wounded" individuals (Europa Press, 2017). The agents who suffered injuries were not counted, and the Ministry of Interior estimated 39 at first and later 431, including bruises, scratches, kicks or bites (La Vanguardia, 2017).

8. Estonian support for the illegal referendum in Catalonia

As a result of the Generalitat's contact with Estonian companies regarding equipment and digital infrastructure, a hoax circulated days before October 1 that the government of the Baltic country supported the illegal referendum. In some tweets, the Estonian prime minister himself was allegedly quoted in a press conference (Image 13). After the denial tweet by www.maldita.es, it was discovered that the profile did not correspond to anyone who worked in the delegation of the autonomous government in Estonia but rather to a young man from Gavá (Barcelona) with no connection to any official body who was dedicated to stimulating the illegal referendum and other matters.



MALDITO BULO
@malditobulo

NO.
El apoyo de Estonia al referéndum catalán es falso.
Nos hemos puesto en contacto con el Gobierno de Estonia.
Esta es su posición
👇

Antonio Sánchez
ARA MATEIX, 1er min. Estònia: @ratasjuri: "Catalunya té dret a decidir el seu futur, nosaltres ho vam fer un dia, perquè s'ho hem de negar?"

Antonio Sánchez
Mañana a las 10:00 rueda de prensa junto a @KerstiKaljulaid y @ratasjuri. Tenemos una sorpresa!

Estonian Prime Minister @ratasjuri supports Catalonia's right to selfdetermination. Thanks!

Image 13. Source: https://twitter.com/malditobulo.

9. Police attacked by kicking

Although most of the hoaxes that appeared during October 1 tried to benefit the separatist positions (Maldita.es, 2018), there were also some which harmed them. Such as an image of a policeman being beaten by a group of people, supposedly independentists (image 14). That photo had actually been taken years before, in 2008, during a protest by farmers in Almería. Although it seemed initially to denounce the violence by the separatists, the text accompanying the hoax was used to denounce the Spanish government, sending to prime minister Rajoy the message that "this should never have happened."

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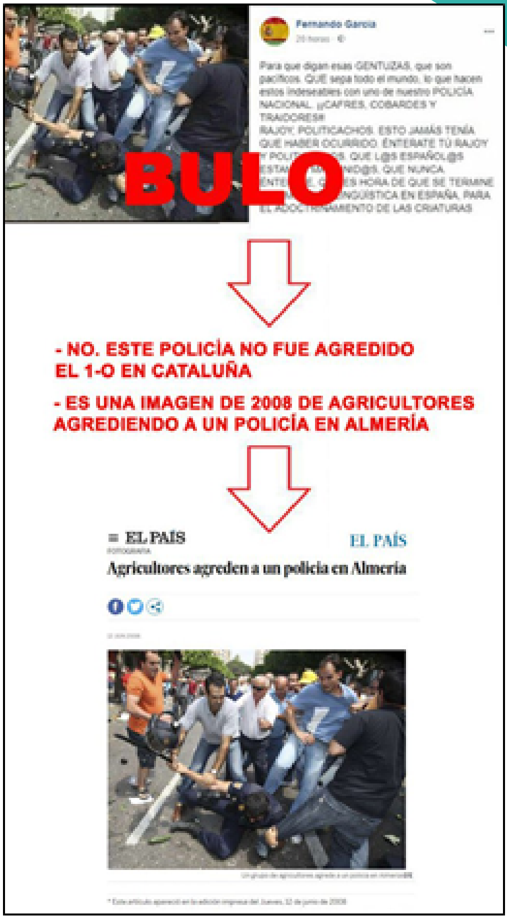
It is a huge fallacy therefore to speak of hoaxes from “both sides,” as some analysts have done (Aparaci, García-Marín and Rincón-Manzano, 2018; Coromina and Padilla, 2018; Hernández-Santaolalla and Sola-Morales, 2019). Without the in-depth tracing of the origins of some fake news and without a clear beneficiary of the hoaxes that apparently attacked pro-independence positions with falsehoods and tried to delegitimize the national government, speaking of two sides is at the very least risky. It is true, though, that there were exceptions to this, as will be seen below.



- NO. ESTE POLICÍA NO FUE AGREDIDO EL 1-O EN CATALUÑA
- ES UNA IMAGEN DE 2008 DE AGRICULTORES AGREDIENDO A UN POLICÍA EN ALMERÍA

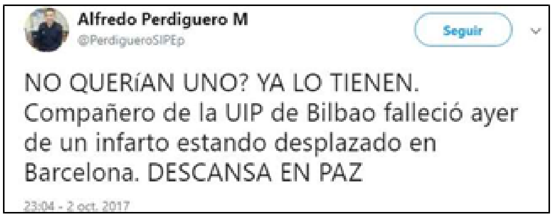
Agricultores agreden a un policía en Almería

Image 14. Source: https://twitter.com/malditobulo.

10. Policeman killed on October 1 in Barcelona

This hoax has a clear origin and aimed at accusing independentist of the death of a national police officer during the illegal referendum. The tweet, from a police officer known for slander and false accusations, announces the death on October 1 of a police officer dispatched to Barcelona from Bilbao (Image 15): “Didn’t they want one? [He refers to the independence activists wanting a dead national police officer] They already have one.”

But the policeman stationed in Bilbao had died on October 1 not in Barcelona during the altercations: he died in Valladolid, several hundred kilometers away from Catalonia, from a heart attack (Vera, 2017). The subinspector recanted immediately. It is not known if the tweet was a mistake or premeditated, but once captured, it continued to circulate for a while. (BBC Mundo, 2017).



NO QUERíAN UNO? YA LO TIENEN. Compañero de la UIP de Bilbao falleció ayer de un infarto estando desplazado en Barcelona. DESCANSA EN PAZ

23:04 - 2 oct. 2017

Image 15. Source: https://www.bbc.com

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1.2.3. Main disinformation campaigns after the illegal referendum

1. Video Help Catalonia, Save Europe

The separatist association Òmnium Cultural disseminated the video Help Catalonia, Save Europe. In it, they made the false accusation that the Spanish State trampled on the fundamental rights of the citizens of Catalonia and that this equated to an attack on all of Europe.

The narrative structure of the video was copied literally from another video from 2014 of pro-European citizens (YouTube, 2017) of Ukraine who asked the EU for help in the face of the imminent civil war instigated by Russia. In the case that concerns us, a young woman, with an anguished tone, addresses the camera on behalf of all Catalans, asking that the EU not abandon Catalonia in the face of the repression of the Spanish State. “In Catalonia” -the protagonist says– “the values of freedom, democracy, human rights, social rights are being attacked [by Spain]."

The video (YouTube, 2017) received an almost immediate response by the media, experts and civil associations who refuted with subsequent videos the falsehoods of the Òmnium Cultural video (Blanco, 2017; La Sexta, 2017)

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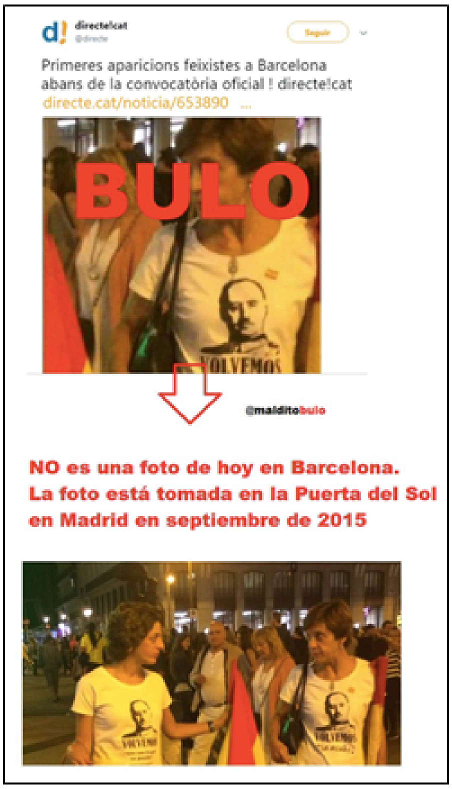
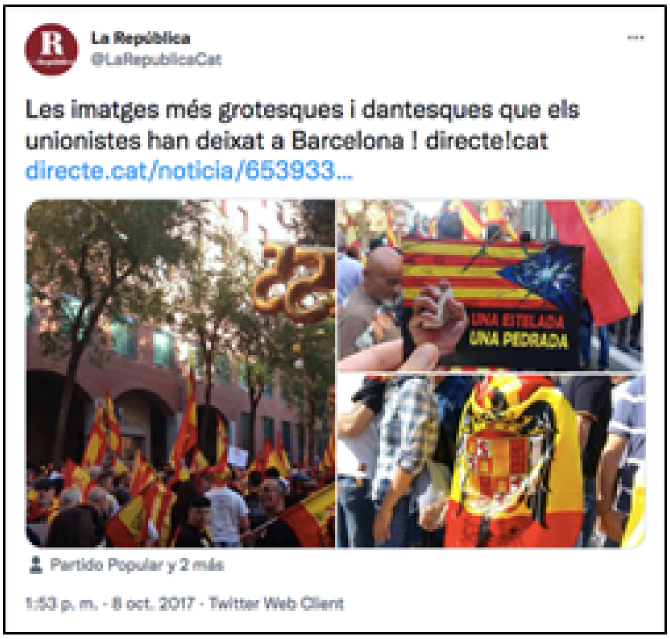
2. Francoists in the demonstration for the Constitution of October 8, 2017

Following the illegal referendum, a number of civil associations and political parties called for a demonstration in Barcelona in defense of the Constitution. Visual hoaxes associating this demonstration with far-right ideologies and with Francoism were recurrent, as seen in Images 16 and 17. The image in the tweet "La República How do you label the Popular Party, which was in the Spanish government at that time?" is identical to and appears simultaneously in the tweets of different users, as in other cases.
The motivation was clear: to identify all those who opposed the independence of Catalonia as authoritarian. If you are against independence or against the "right to decide," you are fascist or Francoist.


directe!cat
@directe

Primeres aparicions feixistes a Barcelona abans de la convocatòria oficial ! directe!cat directe.cat/noticia/653890 ...

NO es una foto de hoy en Barcelona. La foto está tomada en la Puerta del Sol en Madrid en septiembre de 2015


La República
@LaRepublicaCat

Les imatges més grotesques i dantesques que els unionistes han deixat a Barcelona ! directe!cat directe.cat/noticia/653933...

Partido Popular y 2 más

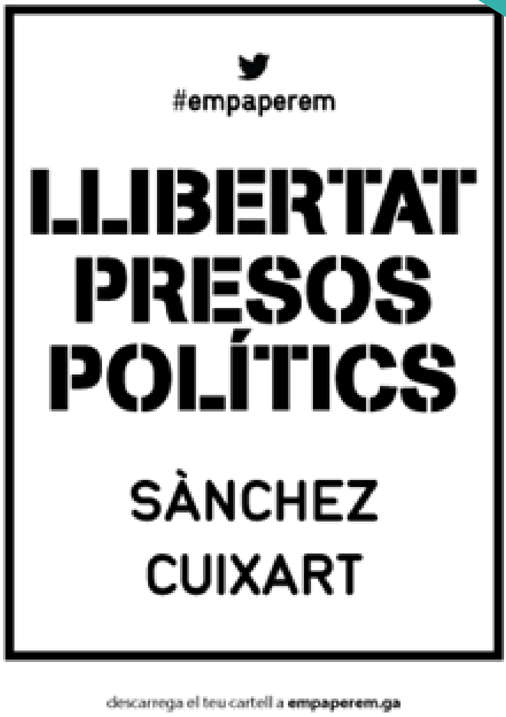
1:53 p. m. - 8 oct. 2017 · Twitter Web Client

Image 17. Source: Sánchez, 2017.

Image 16. Source: Sánchez, 2017.

3. “Llibertat Pressos politics” campaign

In September 2017 emerged Empaperem, a platform to campaign for the illegal referendum. They had simple designs that anyone could print and paste them anywhere. Beginning on October 17, 2017 (Elnacional.cat, 2017), they launched a new design requesting freedom for the “political prisoners” Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Cuixart, another recurring fallacy of the separatists. Additionally, a yellow ribbon was used as a symbol of demand for the freedom of both separatist leaders, imprisoned for sedition after being convicted by the courts of justice.



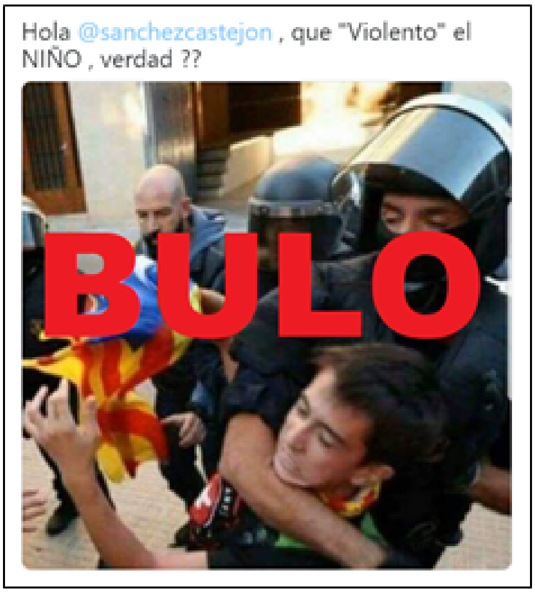
#empaperem

LLIBERTAT
PRESOS
POLÍTICS

SÀNCHEZ
CUIXART

descarrega el teu cartell a **empaperem.ga**

Image 18. First poster produced by the Empaperem platform (Empapelamos), with warlike or military font and typography calling for the freedom of the supposed “political prisoners” (source: www.elnacional.cat)

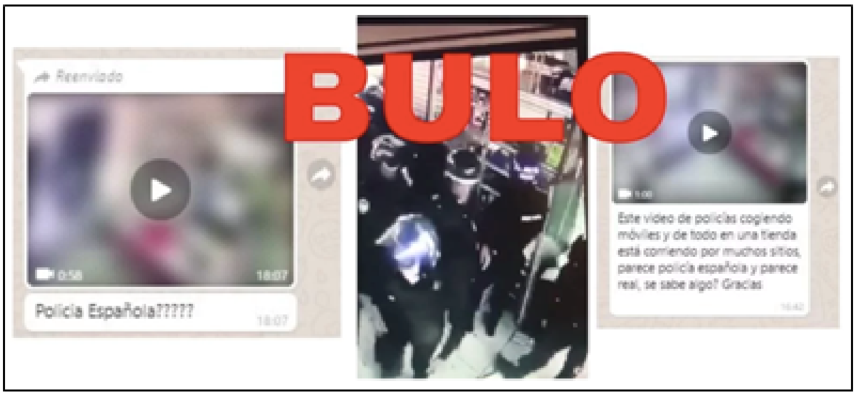


Hola @sanchezcastejon , que "Violento" el NIÑO , verdad ??

Image 19. A police officer holding a young pro-independence activist and mentioning the prime minister Pedro Sánchez (source: www.maldita.es).

4. Hoaxes regarding the protests based on the Supreme Court ruling

Hoaxes on October 1, 2017 were instrumental in the unfolding of events. However, a new turning point in the disinformation campaign was yet to come: two years later, following the ruling of the Supreme Court that condemned the leaders of the sedition, protests and street riots were organized, resulting in violence and urban guerrilla warfare, especially in Barcelona. There were no deaths, but a police officer was severely injured. On Maldita.es (2019), you can find a profuse analysis of the action and disinformative reactions that accompanied those events.



Policía Española?????

Este vídeo de policías cogiendo móviles y de todo en una tienda está corriendo por muchos sitios, parece policía española y parece real, se sabe algo? Gracias

Image 20. Denial tweet by maldita.es regarding a video of Mexican police officers entering a store and stealing objects (source: www.maldita.es).

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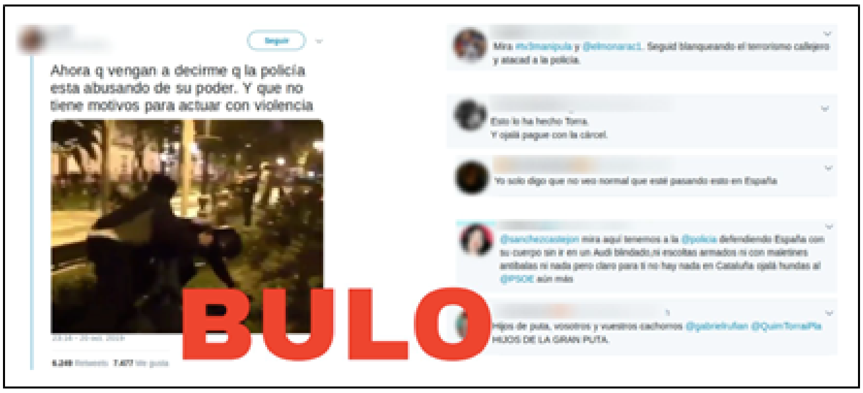
3. “Llibertat Pressos politics” campaign

From the analyses done by different fact checking organizations on the protests against the Supreme Court ruling, several things stand out. First, the quantitative increase in disinformation with respect to the events of October 1. In any case, the greater virulence between what happened in the streets and what was said on networks seemed to be clear.

Secondly, there was a greater number of hoaxes that sought to magnify the action of radicals and violent people engaged in urban guerrilla warfare. In those hoaxes there was the apparent intention of arousing not only Spanish citizenship in general and nonnationalist Catalan citizens in particular but also the security forces of the State. Image 21, for example, is a denial posting by www.maldita.es regarding a video in which a national police officer is supposedly shot in Barcelona in the altercations of October 2019. The video had actually been shot in Madrid in 2014.



Ahora q vengan a decirme q la policía esta abusando de su poder. Y que no tiene motivos para actuar con violencia

Mira #x3manipula y @elmonarac1. Seguid blanqueando el terrorismo callejero y atacad a la policía.

Esto lo ha hecho Torra.
Y ojalá pague con la cárcel.

Yo solo digo que no veo normal que esté pasando esto en España

@sanchezcastejon mira aquí tenemos a la @policia defendiendo España con su cuerpo sin ir en un Audi blindado,ni escoltas armados ni con maletines antibalas ni nada pero claro para ti no hay nada en Cataluña ojalá hundas al @PSOE aún más

Hijos de puta, vosotros y vuestros cachorros @gabrielrufian @QuimTorraiPla
HIJOS DE LA GRAN PUTA.

Image 19. Source:
www.maldita.es

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Conclusions

In Catalonia there has been a clear case of disinformation which poses a major for the EU. The regional authorities and some civil society organizations declared to act according to the will of the "majority," but in fact they have used false arguments and promote actions incompatible with democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights, the values explicitly stated in Article 2 of the EU treaty. Disinformation further erodes trust in institutions, damages the legitimacy of political representatives and favors polarization.

This work has accounted for the systematic disinformation promoted by Catalan separatist groups, the violation by regional authorities of the rights of nonindependentists (who constitute the majority of the population of Catalonia), and the procedures and rules of a democratic system. In Catalonia, the principle of legality has been repeatedly breached: judicial rulings are not respected (high-ranking officials of the regional government have often been charged with disobedience, and a former president had to leave office for the same reason); institutions ignore the imperative of neutrality; academic freedom is not tolerated, and nonseparatist teachers are purged; the Spanish language is persecuted; and parliamentary procedures are violated.

In September 2017, for the adoption of the disconnection laws, the regulations of the Catalan Parliament were unilaterally modified to prevent the presentation of amendments and deliberation with opposition groups, that is, with political representatives elected at the polls. The laws passed — immediately annulled by the Constitutional Court— recalled the practices of authoritarian regimes. Not only were they completely incompatible with European values, but they also violated another basic principle of international law, that of the territorial integrity of States (also included in Article 4 of the European Union treaty). Separate consideration invokes the dangerous claim of resorting to "emotions and feelings" as superior to legality.

The absence of limits and sanctions to the illiberal forces that threaten democracy and the principle of legality can cause these practices to be extended to other governments—those inclined to remain in power at all costs without being limited by constitutional and legal rules—while at the same time damaging the exercise of individual rights in the Union as a whole.Moreover, a secession from Spain -the objective pursued by the separatists- would automatically imply their self-exclusion from the EU and would make residents i n Catalonia lose their status as European citizens and, therefore, the recognition of their individuals rights and their protection by the Union.

To summarize, in a process built over several decades and that led to the events of 2017, the secessionist movement has reinvented history through an epic alienation of facts and truth; it has endangered democracy and the rule of law, and has constrained the rights of all Catalan, Spanish and European citizens. Regardless of the legitimate nationalist sentiments of the population, the story they have developed is false and responds to a strategy aiming at gaining de facto positions to create a situation that is irreversible in favor of their cause.

08

The Murder of Ján Kuciak and the Disinformation Narratives that Accompanied His Killing

Katarína Klingová, Globsec[1]

Introduction

Investigative and independent media play an important role in our societies. Journalists inform about what in happening in the world, watchdog journalists gather and analyse information about corruption or wrongdoing of people in power. Journalists are also those who ask unconformable questions attempting to bring the truth to the light, so the public can understand what happens in society and stop wrongdoings. Being an investigative journalist can in many countries be a dangerous work.

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[1] Katarína Klingová is a senior research fellow for the Centre for Democracy and Resilience at GLOBSEC. Katarina has led and managed several large-scale projects and research including open-source investigations of disinformation, election monitoring, analysis of foreign subversive influence and malign narratives, analysis of the impact of influence operations and disinformation and successful counter-measures in CEE region and the Western Balkan countries. She is an active member of various expert working groups including the European Hybrid Centre of Excellence, EEAS' Expert Roundtables on Threat Assessment and EU's Joint Research Centre.

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The Murder of Ján Kuciak

AMany journalists are often verbally attacked for their work. In Slovakia many public representatives have called investigative journalists “presstitutes” (press prostitutes), other derogatory words. Strategic lawsuits against public participation attempting as a tool to silence journalists, stop investigative work or suppress political dissent are increasingly used not only in Europe.[2] Attempts to ruin media houses by expensive lawsuits and thus shut down the critical and opposition voices are common.

Whether it’s the verbal attacks, intensive smear campaigns[3] or publicized lawsuits, all these things influence public’s trust in media. According to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer 46% of respondents from 26 countries think that media is a divisive force in society. Two-thirds (67%) of respondents globally declared they believe that journalists and reporters purposely try to mislead people by saying things they know are false or grossly exaggerated – an increase of eight percentage points on the company’s last report published in 2021. [4] Increase in distrust in media is possible to observe also in Central and Eastern Europe.[5]
However, many times the attacks against journalists are physical. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists 1437 journalists were killed

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2 Miyandazi, F. (2019, December 23). How to stop SLAPPs – the intentional silencing of critical. European Centre for Press and Media Freedom. https://www.ecpmf.eu/how-to-stop-slapps-the-intentional-silencing-of-critical-voices/
3 How to stop SLAPPs – the intentional silencing of critical voices. (2019, December 23). European Centre for Press and Media Freedom. https://www.ecpmf.eu/how-to-stop-slapps-the-intentional-silencing-of-critical-voices/
4 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer. (n.d.). Edelman. https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer
5 Hajdu, D., Klingová, K., Milo, D., & Sawiris, M. (2021, June 3). GLOBSEC Trends 2021: Central and Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic. GLOBSEC. https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2021-central-and-eastern-europe-one-year-pandemic
6 Explore CPJ’s database of attacks on the press. (n.d.). Committee to Protect Journalists. Code of Practice on Disinformation that would effectively engage online platforms in fact-checking and preventing strategically misleading content, as well as bolster media literacy, quality journalism and the establishment of a network of independent fact-checkers.

between years 1992 and 2022, were either murdered, died in combat or dangerous assignment. 921 out of 1437 were murdered.[6]The numbers of killed journalists as well as cases of physical violence against journalists in European countries are rising. The Council of Europe Platform for the Protection of Journalism recorded 242 serious violations of press freedom in 2021, including 74 cases of attacks on physical safety and integrity of journalists. The countries most affected by this wave of violence were Turkey, France, Ukraine, Greece, Georgia, Spain and the Netherlands.[1] Persecuted for their work journalists often do not find the support of authorities.

Ján Kuciak

Ján Kuciak was an investigative journalist working for Slovak investigative media Aktuality.sk. He specialized in organized crime and corruption. Before Ján was killed, he was investigating the influence of the Italian mafia in Slovakia, working in collaboration with Czech and Italian investigative reporters under the mentorship of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).Months before his death he was looking in the ’Ndrangheta, a notorious Calabria-based organized-crime group that dominates the European cocaine market.

He was investigating links between the ’Ndrangheta and at that time Slovak Prime Minister Róbert Fico and his secretary, former beauty-contest winner Mária Trošková. According to OCCRP findings, Trošková was a business partner of a Slovakia-based Italian with direct links to the ’Ndrangheta. Many suspected that Kuciak was murdered because he had discovered some important details about the ’Ndrangheta in Slovakia.[8] His previous work looked at the activities of various Slovak oligarchs and businessmen. Jan has written dozens of articles on financial crime, including VAT fraud. Several of his investigations focused on the activities of Marián Kočner, a Slovak businessman.

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7 Six journalists killed in Europe in 2021, 95 more in prison. (n.d.). European Federation of Journalists. https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2021/12/30/six-journalists-killed-in-europe-in-2021-95-more-in-prison/#:~:text=Since%201%20January%202021%2C%2045,are%20in%20prison%20in%20Europe

8Ján Kuciak: Faces of Assassination. (n.d.). Faces of Assassination; Assassination Global Initiative. https://assassination.globalinitiative.net/face/jan-kuciak/

The Murder of Ján Kuciak

A couple of months before Ján was murdered, he was tipped off that Marián Kočner was angered by some of the articles he had written about him. He had a threatening phone conversation in September 2017 with Kočner, which he recorded. Ján Kuciak went to police. He filed a criminal complaint against the businessman for dangerous threats, but the police rejected him without even hearing out Kočner. Ján also complained about the inaction of the police on Facebook. [9]

The assassination of Ján and Martina

On 21st February 2018, the Slovak investigative reporter Ján Kuciak and his fiancé Martina Kušnírová were murdered in their home. According to information provided by the public prosecutor on 26th March, the murder bore the hallmarks of an assassination or execution. Kuciak was killed by two bullets to his heart, his fiancé shot in the head. Police investigators worked with several possible motives for the murders.[10] The wider public and Kuciak's colleagues assume that he and his fiancé were murdered due to his investigative work. This theory was later voiced by the former President of the Slovak police, Tibor Gašpar,[11] who declared at a press conference on 28th February that "the most likely motif of the killing, is that it is related to the investigative activities of the journalist". The same message was expressed in the President of the Slovak Republic Andrej Kiska's report[12] on the state of the republic delivered to Members of the Slovak National Council on 13th June.

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[9] #AllForJan: Prestanete písať, hrozil novinárovi Kočner (kompletný prepis rozhovoru). (2018, April 8). Aktuality.sk. https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/579295/allforjan-prestanete-pisat-hrozil-novinarovi-kocner-kompletny-prepis-rozhovoru/?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=post&&utm_campaign=fbaktualne&fbclid=IwAR3WY-oqWhm60ux8NtrS5e5dc6n-RNkWuiUmu27iZrbYbr_V4jZ5SO9wdrU

[10] Tódová, M. (2018, March 26). Prokurátor o vražde Jána Kuciaka a Martiny Kušnírovej: Išlo o vraždu na objednávku. Denník N. https://dennikn.sk/1076851/prokurator-o-vrazde-jana-kuciaka-a-martiny-kusnirovej-islo-o-vrazdu-na-objednavku/

[11] Kapitán, P., Cuprik, R., & SITA. (2018, February 26). Gašpar: Vražda Kuciaka pravdepodobne súvisela s jeho prácou. SME. https://domov.sme.sk/c/20768811/vrazda-jan-kuciak-tibor-gaspar-vysetrovanie-zurnalistika-investigativa.html

[12] Celý prejav prezidenta Andreja Kisku. (2018, June 13). Aktuality.sk. https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/598364/cely-prejav-prezidenta-andreja-kisku/

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The apparent execution style of both murders suggested that they were related to Kuciak's investigative work aimed at uncovering business and corruption ties between top politicians and members of the Italian mafia. Irrespective of the motive, the killings caused public outrage and large demonstrations across Slovakia. In the days and weeks that followed peaceful protesters regularly gathered to express concerns over the findings uncovered by Kuciak's last article, which he did not get to finish. The Slovak public was also shocked that a journalist writing about corruption could have been murdered for his work and called for a just and independent investigation. Slovaks living abroad, fellow journalists and members of European Parliament joined the protests with commemoration of Jan and Martina's lives through the hashtag #AllforJan.[13] However, a unique point of view on the situation and explanation of the murders was provided by disinformation outlets in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

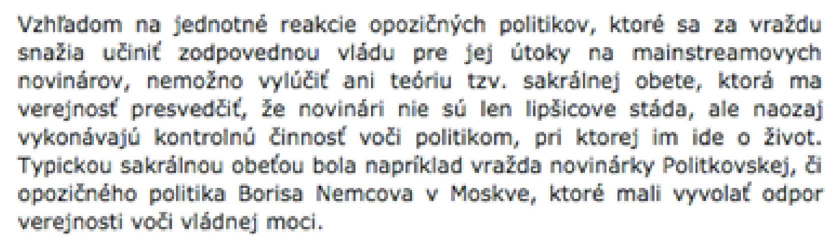
Death of Ján Kuciak according to the disinformation outlets

On 26th February the online disinformation portal Hlavné správy (Main News) published an article "Assassination of the journalist of Aktuality portal: Police consider his journalistic work as the most likely motif" (Úkladná vražda novinára Aktualít: Polícia považuje za najpravdepodobnejší motív jeho novinársku činnosť)[14] by an unknown author who claimed that the "unified reaction of the representatives of the opposition, who proclaimed the government to be responsible for the murders due to its attacks against mainstream media, indicates that the murders fit the theory of sacral sacrifice. The murders were supposedly conducted to convince the public that the mainstream media are not under the thumb of the former Minister of Justice and Interior, Daniel Lipšic, but rather were overviewing the work of the government and that their work is life-threatening."

[13] Euronews. (2018, March 14). https://twitter.com/euronews/status/973912842154979328

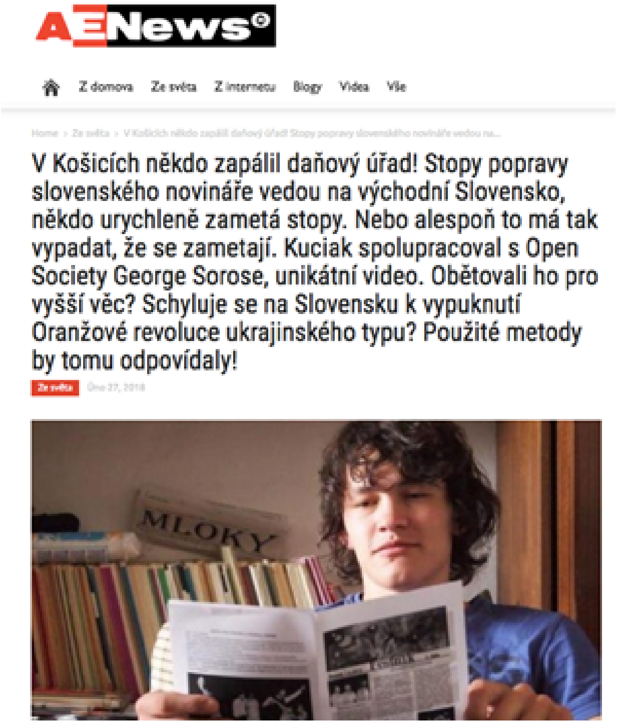
[14] Úkladná vražda novinára Aktualít: Polícia považuje za najpravdepodobnejší motív jeho novinársku činnosť. (2018, February 27). Hlavné správy. https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/zavrazdili-novinara-aktualit-ktory-sa-zaoberal-danovymi-kauzami/1325454

The author also claimed that “other examples of sacral sacrifice were the murders of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and Russian opposition politician, Boris Nemtsov, which purpose was to cause rebellion against the ruling power.” Over 1450 readers voiced their opinions and participated in a debate under the article. The article was also highly shared on Facebook as well as on the social platform VKontakte.



Vzhľadom na jednotné reakcie opozičných politikov, ktoré sa za vraždu snažia učiniť zodpovednou vládu pre jej útoky na mainstreamovych novinárov, nemožno vylúčiť ani teóriu tzv. sakrálnej obete, ktorá ma verejnosť presvedčiť, že novinári nie sú len lipšicove stáda, ale naozaj vykonávajú kontrolnú činnosť voči politikom, pri ktorej im ide o život. Typickou sakrálnou obeťou bola napríklad vražda novinárky Politkovskej, či opozičného politika Borisa Nemcova v Moskve, ktoré mali vyvolať odpor verejnosti voči vládnej moci.

Figure 1: Snapchot of the Main New’s article talking about sacral sacrifice.



V Košicích někdo zapálil daňový úřad! Stopy popravy slovenského novináře vedou na východní Slovensko, někdo urychleně zametá stopy. Nebo alespoň to má tak vypadat, že se zametají. Kuciak spolupracoval s Open Society George Sorose, unikátní video. Obětovali ho pro vyšší věc? Schyluje se na Slovensku k vypuknutí Oranžové revoluce ukrajinského typu? Použité metody by tomu odpovídaly!

Figure 2: Title of Aeronet’s article about Ján Kuciak with his picture.

February 27, 2018

A similar narrative was pursued by an article in the Czech disinformation outlet Aeronet.cz. [15]
Writing under acronym “the headman of carousel”, the author contemplated several issues and narratives regarding Jan Kuciak, his work and murder. These include:

- It was suspicious that a 27 years-old journalist had already written 138 investigative articles
- Kuciak was supposedly fed sensitive information for his stories from well-connected people. His death was planned in advance to be purposefully interpreted and labelled as a murder for political reasons.

[15] VK. (2018b, February 27). V Košicích někdo zapálil daňový úřad! Stopy popravy slovenského novináře vedou na východní Slovensko, někdo urychleně zametá stopy. Nebo alespoň to má tak vypadat, že se zametají. Kuciak spolupracoval s Open Society George Sorose, unikátní video. Obětoval. AENews. https://aeronet.news/v-kosicich-nekdo-zapalil-danovy-urad-stopy-popravy-slovenskeho-novinare-vedou-na-vychodni-slovensko-nekdo-urychlene-zameta-stopy-nebo-alespon-to-ma-tak-vypadat-ze-se-zametaji-kuciak-spolupracoval/

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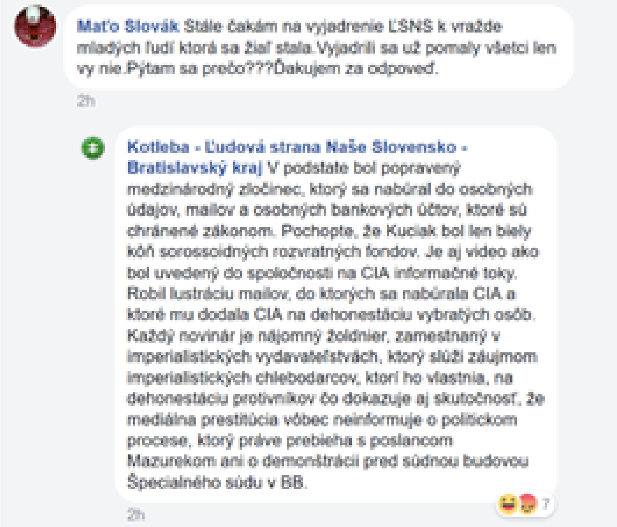
The Murder of Ján Kuciak

- The killings resembled the murders of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, which were staged to point out the perpetrators ordering the hit.
- The assassinations and consequent protests followed the Euromaidan script.
- Jan Kuciak was sacrificed for the sake of a "bigger thing".
- Jan's youthful appearance and murder made him a perfect martyr for a Soros' group.
- The order came from the other side of the Atlantic. The whole NGO sector in Slovakia had been
- infiltrated by the current US administration and George Soros' people. Jan Kuciak was sacrificed, because he did not have a family. His murder was supposed to cause an outbreak of riots and demonstrations against the government.

February 28, 2018



Maťo Slovák Stále čakám na vyjadrenie ĽSNS k vražde mladých ľudí ktorá sa žiaľ stala.Vyjadrili sa už pomaly všetci len vy nie.Pýtam sa prečo???Ďakujem za odpoveď.

2h

Kotleba - Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko - Bratislavský kraj V podstate bol popravený medzinárodný zločinec, ktorý sa nabúral do osobných údajov, mailov a osobných bankových účtov, ktoré sú chránené zákonom. Pochopte, že Kuciak bol len biely kôň sorossoidných rozvratných fondov. Je aj video ako bol uvedený do spoločnosti na CIA informačné toky. Robil lustráciu mailov, do ktorých sa nabúrala CIA a ktoré mu dodala CIA na dehonestáciu vybratých osôb. Každý novinár je nájomný žoldnier, zamestnaný v imperialistických vydavateľstvách, ktorý slúži záujmom imperialistických chlebodarcov, ktorí ho vlastnia, na dehonestáciu protivníkov čo dokazuje aj skutočnosť, že mediálna prestitúcia vôbec neinformuje o politickom procese, ktorý práve prebieha s poslancom Mazurekom ani o demonštrácii pred súdnou budovou Špecialného súdu v BB.

2h

Figure 3: Comment of political party Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia – Bratislava region about Ján Kuciak being a CIA agent.

The administrator of Kotleba – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko – Bratislavský kraj (the Facebook page of the far-right extremist political party Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia – Bratislava region) offered a different perspective on the reasons behind the double killing. In response to a question on the stance of party representatives concerning the murders, the administrator declared that the death of Ján Kuciak was "basically an assassination of an international criminal, who rummaged through personal information, emails and personal bank accounts that are protected by the law. You have to understand, Kuciak was just a Soros' patsy [sponsored from his] disturbing funds".[16]

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[16] Benčík, J. (2018, February 27). Blog N: Bratislavskí kotlebovci a dvojnásobná vražda. Denník N. https://dennikn.sk/blog/1043190/bratislavski-kotlebovci-a-dvojnasobna-vrazda/

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The author of the post also declared that there was a video that proved that Kuciak was "introduced to the public to serve the CIA's information network." This was eventually followed by the comment that "if calling the things by rightful name is bad, then he/she does not know... hearing the truth can be difficult. These sacral sacrifices will serve the purpose of Euro-centrists who will use the killing to strengthen the power of Brussels and the Brussels' institutions will take over the investigation."

Later a member of the "Slovak Parliament for Milan Uhrík" Facebook group (Mr Uhrík was a member of the same far-right extremist party) wrote on his Facebook page that "this [was] just a bullshit somewhere from Facebook and not an official declaration of the People's Party Our Slovakia". The posts and responses of party representatives were documented by the Slovak blogger Ján Benčík.[17] This Facebook page was eventually suspended.

March 3, 2018

Disinformation outlets had also expanded upon expert claims that Kuciak's murder was meant to destabilise the Slovak state. According to "What kind of game are we playing in the "Kuciak game"? (Čo sa hrá v hre Kuciak?) article published by Hlavné správy on March 3rd "we [needed] to look at the picture from the above, from the geopolitical point of view." In the Visegrad countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – as well as Austria, an "anti-Brussels, anti-Muslim and anti-liberal movement had grown, and this is a problem for the European Union and Western elites.

The destruction of the cooperation and unity of the Visegrad countries was for some very important, and they did not object to even bear human sacrifices." The author claimed that "the goal [was] to replace the government by people who have similar opinions as President Kiska has. The power-driven opposition [was] (supposedly) sending people into the streets and Soros-controlled mainstream media [were] supporting this narrative."[18]

[17] Ibid.

[18] Macko, Ľ. (2018, March 3). O čo sa hrá v hre Kuciak?. Hlavné Správy. https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/o-co-sa-hra-v-hre-kuciak/1331274

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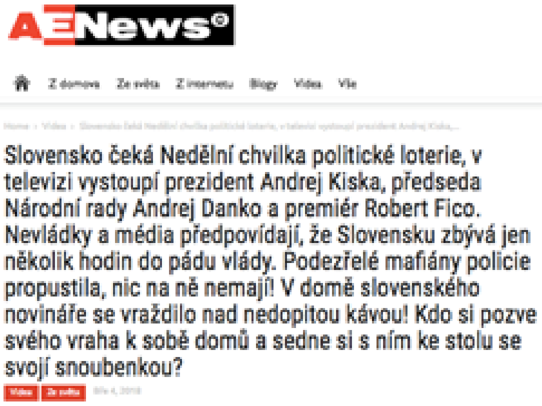
The Murder of Ján Kuciak

March 4, 2018

The Czech disinformation outlet Aeronet published a story[19] that offered various narratives and stipulations regarding the life and death of Ján Kuciak. Once again, the article stressed that “the murdered journalist certainly did not use information only from public sources” and this was a “hoax and disinformation of the Slovak mainstream” media. The author then elaborated that three unfinished cups were found at the scene prompting speculation as to who could have been the third person in the house. The mother of Martina Kušnírová declared[20] that while the couple was drinking coffee from two cups, the third cup was her daughter’s tea. This information obviously did not reach the author, who suggested that the third cup of coffee indicated that the young couple knew their killer. From there, the author contemplated whether the bodies were tested for the presence of drugs, because Kuciak and Kušnírová were both young, and young people often use drugs. It was also claimed that drugs are common and widespread among journalists, singers, actors, authors, and other people with creative bohemian professions. That’s why the couple’s death at the hands of drug a dealer should not have been discounted.



Slovensko čeká Nedělní chvilka politické loterie, v televizi vystoupí prezident Andrej Kiska, předseda Národní rady Andrej Danko a premiér Robert Fico. Nevládky a média předpovídají, že Slovensku zbývá jen několik hodin do pádu vlády. Podezřelé mafiány policie propustila, nic na ně nemají! V domě slovenského novináře se vraždilo nad nedopitou kávou! Kdo si pozve svého vraha k sobě domů a sedne si s ním ke stolu se svojí snoubenkou?

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[19] VK. (2018, March 8). Slovensko čeká Nedělní chvilka politické loterie, v televizi vystoupí prezident Andrej Kiska, předseda Národní rady Andrej Danko a premiér Robert Fico. Nevládky a média předpovídají, že Slovensku zbývá jen několik hodin do pádu vlády. Podezřelé mafiány policie propustila, nic na ně nemají! V domě slovenského novináře se vraždilo nad nedopitou kávou! Kdo si pozve svého vraha k sobě domů a sedne si s ním ke stolu se svojí snoubenkou? Aeronet.News. https://aeronet.news/slovensko-ceka-nedelni-chvilka-politicke-loterie-v-televizi-vystoupi-prezident-andrej-kiska-predseda-narodni-rady-andrej-danko-a-premier-robert-fico-nevladky-a-media-predpovidaji-pad-vlady/

[20] CHO, & ERT. (2018, March 3). Prehľadne: Čo vieme o vražde Jána Kuciaka a jeho snúbenice Martiny Kušnírovej? HNonline.sk. https://hnonline.sk/slovensko/1704659-prehladne-co-vieme-o-vrazde-jana-kuciaka-a-jeho-snubenice-martiny-kusnirovej

The Murder of Ján Kuciak

March 6, 2018

Blogger and author article “Weird Similarities Between (the Parkland) Florida Shooting and Two Murders in Veľká Mača”[21] (the village where Ján Kuciak lived with his fiancé) compared the killings with the Parkland Florida shooting. As the unknown author saw it, both experienced a professional storytelling of events, involved young victims and were followed by political counter-messages that played on the emotions of the public. Comparisons were made between videos of students talking about the Parkland shooting and advocating gun control, and declarations made by the parents of Ján Kuciak Jan and Martina Kušnírová in the aftermath of the killings. The author claimed that there were too many similarities and was worried that this was only the beginning. However, it is unclear what the latter part of this statement meant. The blog was published at Main News (Hlavné správy) and taken over by another problematic outlet Earth and Age (Zem a vek).

March 8, 2018

The narrative of igniting regional geopolitical instability was outlined by“Ján Čarnogurský: They are dragging Slovakia to chaos” (Ján Čarnogurský: Ťahajú Slovensko do chaosu), published by the Slovak-Russian Association on 8th March and the disinformation website Main news a day later.[1] Ján Čarnogurský is the chairman of the Slovak-Russian Association, former Prime Minister of Slovakia (1991-92) and former chairman of the Christian Democratic Movement. He is also a frequent organiser of protests “against neo-liberalism” and NATO. According to Čarnogurský, George Soros was destabilising Central Europe. “Since Viktor Orbán resisted Soros successfully now Soros [was] attempting to disrupt the unity of Central Europe via Slovakia and his agents organising demonstrations.”

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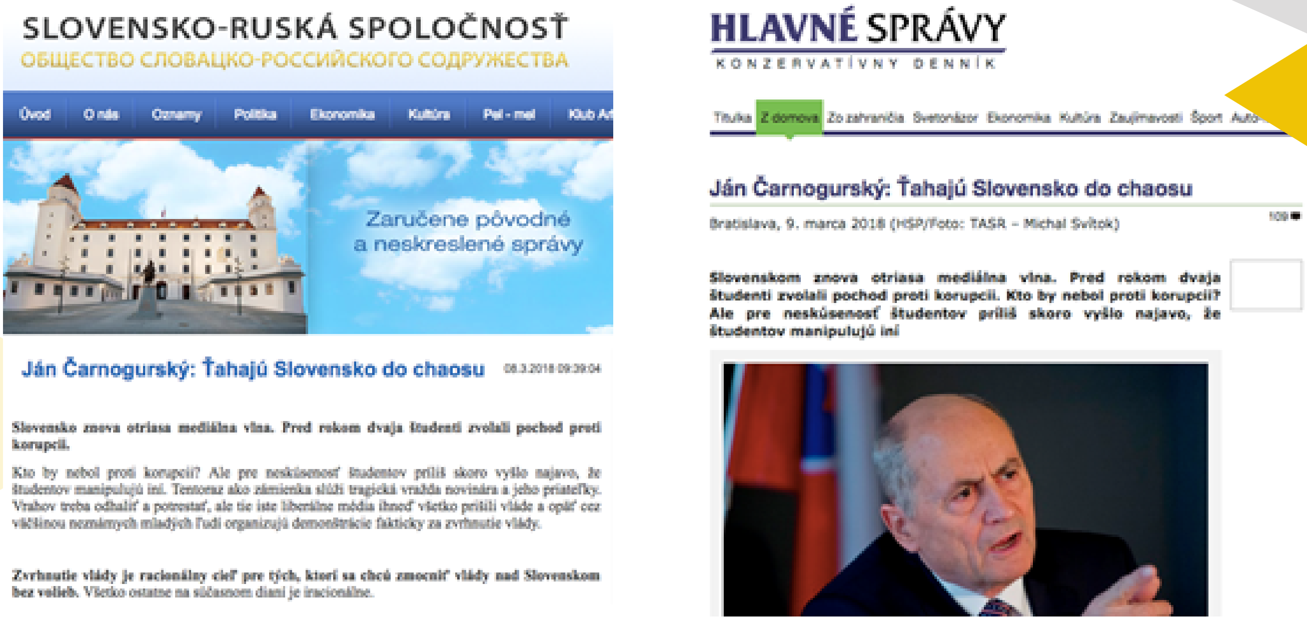
21 Moravčík, M. (2018, March 5). Zvláštne podobnosti streľby na Floride a dvojnásobnej vraždy vo Veľkej Mači. Hlavné Správy - Blog. https://blog.hlavnespravy.sk/3391/zvlastne-podobnosti-strelby-na-floride-a-dvojnasobnej-vrazdy-vo-velkej-maci/ and http://zemavek.sk/zvlastne-podobnosti-strelby-na-floride-dvojnasobnej-vrazdy-vo-velkej-maci/

22 Čarnogurský, J. (2018, March 9). Ján Čarnogurský: Ťahajú Slovensko do chaosu. Hlavné Správy. https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/jan-carnogursky-tahaju-slovensko-chaosu/1337552



Ján Čarnogurský: Ťahajú Slovensko do chaosu 08.3.2018 09:39:04

Slovensko znova otriasa mediálna vlna. Pred rokom dvaja študenti zvolali pochod proti korupcii.

Kto by nebol proti korupcii? Ale pre neskúsenosť študentov príliš skoro vyšlo najavo, že študentov manipulujú iní. Tentoraz ako zámienka slúži tragická vražda novinára a jeho priateľky. Vrahov treba odhaliť a potrestať, ale tie isté liberálne médiá ihneď všetko prišili vláde a opäť cez väčšinou neznámych mladých ľudí organizujú demonštrácie fakticky za zvrhnutie vlády.

Zvrhnutie vlády je racionálny cieľ pre tých, ktorí sa chcú zmocniť vlády nad Slovenskom bez volieb. Všetko ostatné na súčasnom dianí je iracionálne.

Ján Čarnogurský: Ťahajú Slovensko do chaosu

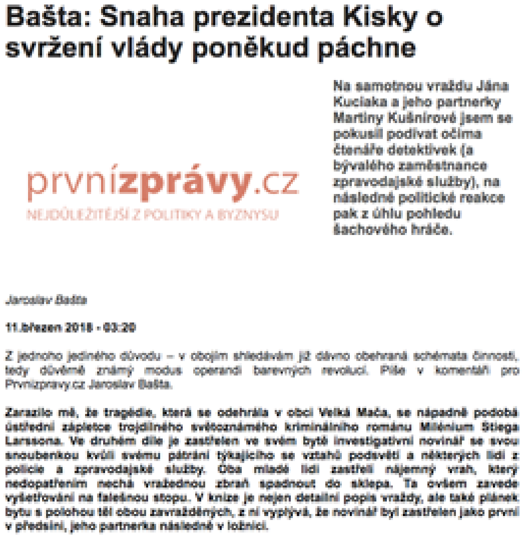
Bratislava, 9. marca 2018 (HSP/Foto: TASR – Michal Svítok)

Slovenskom znova otriasa mediálna vlna. Pred rokom dvaja študenti zvolali pochod proti korupcii. Kto by nebol proti korupcii? Ale pre neskúsenosť študentov príliš skoro vyšlo najavo, že študentov manipulujú iní

Figure 4: Article of Slovak-Russian Association taken over by the Main News

March 11, 2018

A different perception of the killing was provided on 11th March by Jaroslav Bašta for prvnizpravy.cz (first news). In “Bašta: the Attempt of President Kiska to Overthrow the Government Smells”,[23] a Czech politician and the former Czech ambassador to the Russian Federation and Ukraine suggested that the killings resembled the plot of the world-famous Millennium crime trilogy written by Stieg Larsson. Bašta suggested that if the killer was an amateur he/she “could have needed a script” which could be found in the trilogy. He also declared that the reaction of media and political



Bašta: Snaha prezidenta Kisky o svržení vlády poněkud páchne

Na samotnou vraždu Jána Kuciaka a jeho partnerky Martiny Kušnírové jsem se pokusil podívat očima čtenáře detektivek (a bývalého zaměstnance zpravodajské služby), na následné politické reakce pak z úhlu pohledu šachového hráče.

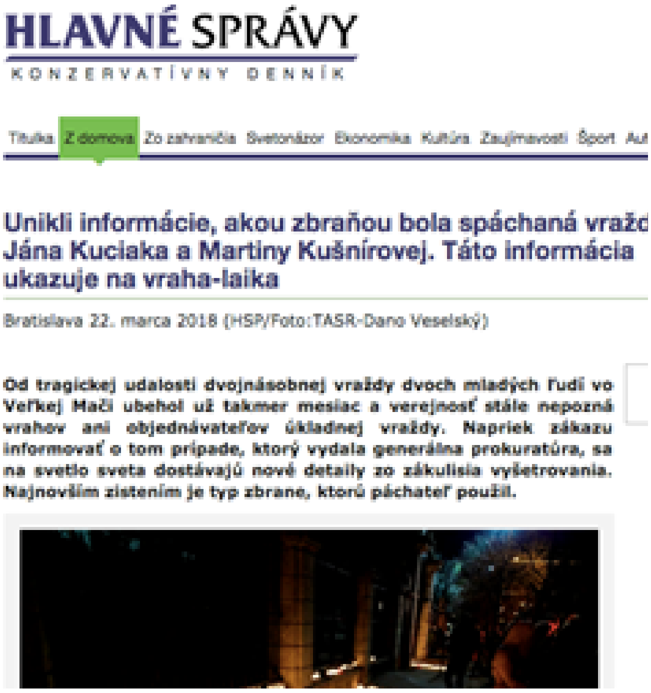
Jaroslav Bašta

11.březen 2018 - 03:20

Z jednoho jediného důvodu – v obojím shledávám již dávno obehraná schémata činnosti, tedy důvěrně známý modus operandi barevných revolucí. Píše v komentáři pro Prvnizpravy.cz Jaroslav Bašta.

Zarazilo mě, že tragédie, která se odehrála v obci Veľká Mača, se nápadně podobá ústřední zápletce trojdílného světoznámého kriminálního románu Milénium Stiega Larssona. Ve druhém díle je zastřelen ve svém bytě investigativní novinář se svou snoubenkou kvůli svému pátrání týkajícího se vztahů podsvětí a některých lidí z policie a zpravodajské služby. Oba mladé lidi zastřelí nájemný vrah, který nedopatřením nechá vražednou zbraň spadnout do sklepa. Ta ovšem zavede vyšetřování na falešnou stopu. V knize je nejen detailní popis vraždy, ale také plánek bytu s polohou těl obou zavražděných, z ní vyplývá, že novinář byl zastřelen jako první v předsíni, jeho partnerka následně v ložnici.

[23] Prvnizpravy.cz. (2018b, March 11). Bašta: Snaha prezidenta Kisky o svržení vlády poněkud páchne Majdanem. InfoVojna. https://www.infovojna.bz/article/basta-snaha-prezidenta-kisky-o-svrzeni-vlady-ponekud-pachne-majdanem?fbclid=IwAR1V81OiFUMNhbFn_hpw61CTqnkj9MoqDFjtGJrd7YjOq95DEoiecnHkPNo



HLAVNÉ SPRÁVY
KONZERVATÍVNY DENNÍK

Unikli informácie, akou zbraňou bola spáchaná vražd Jána Kuciaka a Martiny Kušnírovej. Táto informácia ukazuje na vraha-laika

Bratislava 22. marca 2018 (HSP/Foto:TASR-Dano Veselský)

Od tragickej udalosti dvojnásobnej vraždy dvoch mladých ľudí vo Veľkej Mači ubehol už takmer mesiac a verejnosť stále nepozná vrahov ani objednávateľov úkladnej vraždy. Napriek zákazu informovať o tom prípade, ktorý vydala generálna prokuratúra, sa na svetlo sveta dostávajú nové detaily zo zákulisia vyšetrovania. Najnovším zistením je typ zbrane, ktorú páchateľ použil.

Figure 5: Articles with headlines indicating attempted coup d'état and conspiring about the murder.

representatives, the speed with which demonstrations were organised, and the amount posters with messages written in English language "[smelled] of Euromaidan" that required "sacral sacrifice". The murder of Ján Kuciak Jan and Martina Kušnírová led to the resignation of several ministers and eventually the establishment of a new Slovak government. While the trials with alleged masterminds are still ongoing, the perpetrators, one of whom is a former policeman, Tomáš Szabó, confessed to the murders of Ján and Martin and of preparing of assassinations of several prosecutors. [24]

Quantifying the Spread of Disinformation Narratives

The murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová shocked not only Slovak society but also the wider international community, as demonstrated by the extensive coverage of their deaths in media outlets around the world. Closer to home, the assassination of the investigative reporter and fiancé resulted in the publication of 12773 articles in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia up to 1 May 2018. The following chart provides an overview of the intensity of articles produced in these countries during our monitoring period.

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[24] Kellöová, L. (2022, October 25). Príprava vrážd prokurátorov: Szabóa uznali vinným, priznal sa aj k účasti na vražde Jána Kuciaka. Aktuality.sk. https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/THpUTuq/priprava-vrazd-prokuratorov-szaboa-uznali-vinnym-priznal-sa-aj-k-ucasti-na-vrazde-jana-kuciaka/

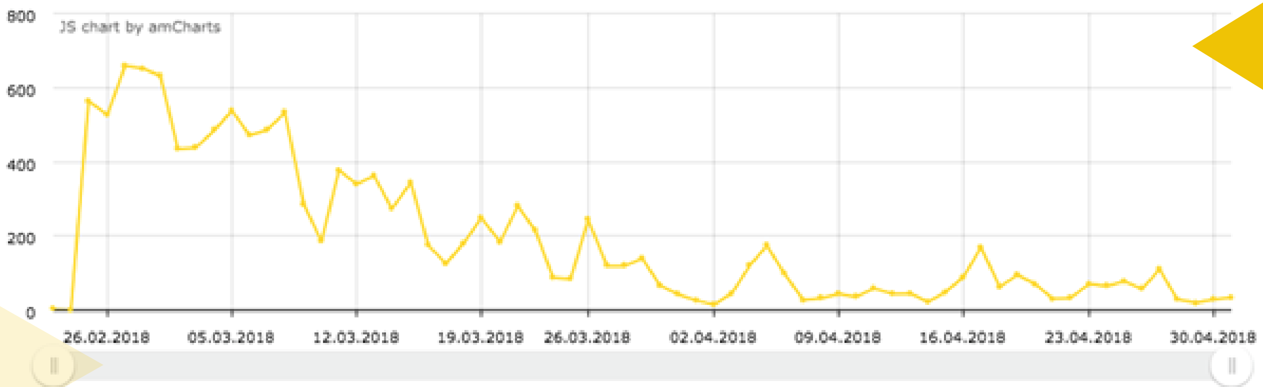

Chart 1: Number of articles published in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia with the term "Ján Kuciak" between 20 February – 1 May 2018 (Source: >versus<)

As is common with such sensitive and highly publicised issues, a lot of disinformation narratives were spread about the murders and peaceful protests that occurred in cities throughout Slovakia in the weeks that followed.[25] These narratives also spread from Slovakia to its neighbours, specifically the Czech Republic and Hungary. Out of 12773 articles, 1922 included the terms "Ján Kuciak" and "protests" and 174 included "Ján Kuciak" and "(Euro)maidan".[26]

In Hungary, 1076 articles were published about "Ján Kuciak" within the monitored period. However, the incident was neither featured in pro-Russian outlets nor wider disinformation discourse. There were only two articles published by the Hungarian Workers Party claiming that "international, liberal circles" are upending Slovakia's "national sovereignty" by forcing the resignation of then-Prime Minister Robert Fico, the Minister of Interior and Chief Police Officer.

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[25] The public protests in Slovakia eventually led to the abdication of several ministers and eventually the establishment of the new government.

[26] In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the term "Majdan" is also used as the reference to the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine.

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The main Hungarian-language coverage came from the Slovak site bumm.sk, whereas most articles published in Hungary were in independent media, like mno.hu, nepszava.hu and index.hu, which mostly elaborated on the political implications of the murders. On the other hand, highly centralised pro-government media must have deemed the issue too politically sensitive to cover prior to the April 2018 Hungarian elections when the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition faced its own domestic corruption scandals. These outlets either did not report about the murders at all or provided a very limited interpretation.

In the Czech Republic, 2680 articles mentioning "Ján Kuciak" were published within the monitoring period, of which 309 were published by disinformation outlets. George Soros was mentioned in 59 articles and 65 connected the murders to the (Euro)maidan. On 27 February Aeronet published the first disinformation article to spread the conspiracy theory of an upcoming revolution in Slovakia.

Disinformation outlets in the Czech Republic also pushed forward two main narratives about the protests in Slovakia: 1) that they were organised by George Soros; or 2) the European Union under the leadership of France and Germany, who want to destabilise Central Europe. Indeed, some articles suggested that parallel protests in the Czech Republic against the appointment of the Communist Party MP Zdeněk Ondráček as Head of the General Inspectorate for the Security Corps[1] were organised by non-governmental organisations controlled by Soros.

In Slovakia, 9127 articles mentioning "Ján Kuciak" were published in the monitored period. Out of those, 1053 were published by the most read disinformation outlets, mentioning Kuciak and other spurious narratives. From there, 457 articles speculated on the prospects for a coup, 246 mentioned George Soros and 61 contained both Ján's name and the term "(Euro)maidan". The comparatively high number of articles in both mainstream media and disinformation outlets was

27 The General Inspectorate for Security Corps is a Czech government agency tasked with investigating crimes of the officers of the Police of the Czech Republic, customs protection, prison guards, inspection workers or employees of these services.

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hardly surprising given that former Prime Minister Robert Fico also speculated on a coup and Soros's influence on several occasions.

On 28 February 2018 the Czech disinformation outlet Aeronet published an article claiming that George Soros' right hand man, Marcello Fabiani had arrived in Slovakia to witness the protests for himself. It was an article that received over 3000 comments and numerous shares on social media. Yet it was also a hoax. Marcello Fabiani does not exist.

The hoax about Marcello Fabiani

"Marcello Fabiani" was mentioned 13 times in Czech disinformation outlets, 12 in Slovakia (8 in disinformation outlets, 4 in mainstream media – including a Hungarian language newspaper published in Hungary) and twice in Hungary within the monitored period.[28] The number of outlets to mention his name remains small in comparison to conspiracy theories and narratives linked to George Soros (59 articles in the Czech Republic and 246 in Slovakia mention his name and Ján Kuciak's). However, to have 11 disinformation outlets in 3 different countries spread one particular hoax about a fictional persona within a very specific and short time period indicates a very targeted and intense campaign.

When it comes to measuring the impact of articles that spread the Marcello Fabiani hoax, the following chart demonstrates that Aeronet – which published the story first – received the most responses (4320 comments and social media shares). According to data provided by the ICT tool >versus<, this article was the third most shared article on this topic within Czech media circles. Moreover, Aeronet also ranks number 1 and 2 on the list of articles with the biggest social engagement. With over 998 comments and shares on social media, Slovak disinformation outlet Zem a vek's "Maidanization of Slovakia" had the third biggest outreach.[29]

[28] Categorization of online outlets in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as spreading disinformation is based on the ranking of websites provided by konspiratori.sk.

[29] ICT media-monitoring tool >versus< was used for data collection and analysis in the time period from February 20, 2018 till May 1, 2018. The tool monitors social engagement of articles for the first 48 hours from their publishing.

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The Murder of Ján Kuciak

The chart below outlines the weighted hierarchy of outlets that wrote articles about Marcello Fabiani based on social engagement and outreach, with blue representing disinformation outlets and beige mainstream media. As it is possible to observe, mainstream media had significantly smaller outreach to outlets that spread the hoax.

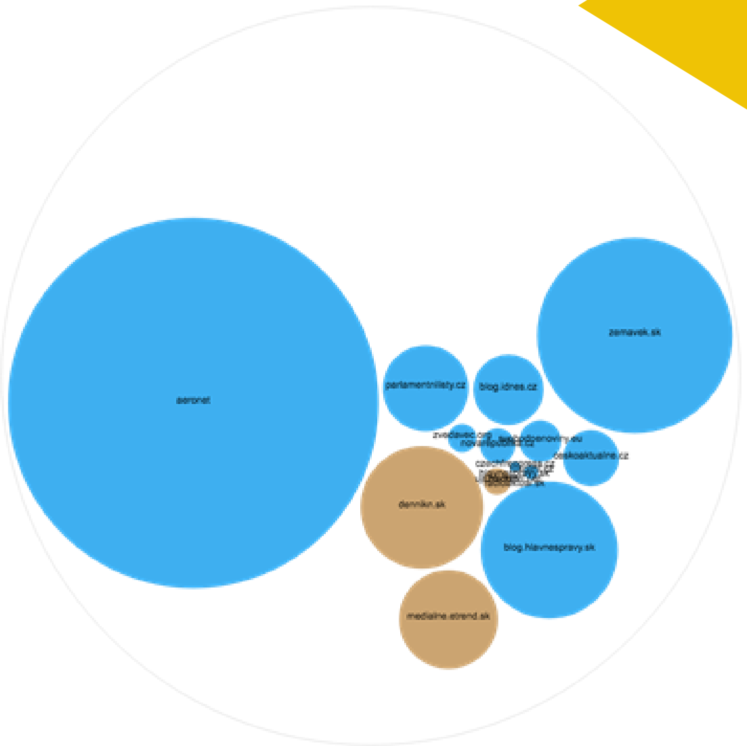

Chart 2: Weighted hierarchy of outlets spreading hoax about "Marcello Fabiani" in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia based on the number of articles published and social engagement

Investigation of the killings and Marián Kočner

The killings of investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová and their investigation have uncovered multiple cases of corruption and hidden ties between Marian Kočner, one of the wealthiest Slovak businessmen, charged with ordering the journalist's murder, and other Slovak politicians, businessmen, members of the police and civil servants, including prosecutors, judges and the former State Secretary of the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic. While the trial still continues, the leaked conversations from Kočner's telephone also revealed him financially supporting Slovak most influential disinformation outlet – Hlavné správy (Main News) and even suggesting topics for articles against his opponents.

The assassination of Ján Kuciak and consequent investigation made many question the transparency and independence of public institutions, and the checks and balances on the government. Arrests and indictments of 13 judges in March 2020 show the attempt to cleanse the public administration.[30]

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30 TASR, Pravda, & SITA. (2020, March 11). NAKA zadržala 13 sudcov, obvinenia padli pre korupciu a ďalšie trestné činy. Pravda. https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/545208-naka-zasahuje-u-viacerych-sudcov-z-kocnerovej-threemy/

Impact of disinformation and conspiracy theories

In 2020 GLOBSEC, Slovak think tank, conducted public opinion polls and found out that 54% of Slovaks believed that protests against the government in Slovakia, which resulted in changes in the government and other crucial institutions in the country, were controlled and paid for from abroad. Similarly, 49% in Hungary and 56% in Czechia believed George Soros orchestrated and financially supported the anti-government protests in the previous years.[31] George Soros has been used as a convenient target of various smear campaigns and conspiracy theories of populist political representatives in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). For example, In Hungary, the prelude to the 2019 election to the European Parliament a “You have the right to know what Brussels is planning” campaign[32] was conducted by the government, which spread anti-Brussels and anti-Soros narratives.[33]In 2022 GLOBSEC’s polls[34] revealed 41% of CEE respondents believed that “world affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order” and 45% agreed with the statement that “democracy does not exist, because in reality, hidden elites rule the world.” Such beliefs are not unique only to Central Europe but follow the global trends of the loss of trust in public institutions and democratic processes that are further supported by various conspiracy theories.

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[31] Hajdu, D., & Klingová, K. (2020, June 23). Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of democracy & governance in 10 EU countries. GLOBSEC. On 26th February the online disinformation portal Hlavné správy (Main News) published an article “Assassination of the journalist of Aktuality portal: Police consider his journalistic work as the most likely motif” (Úkladná vražda novinára Aktualít: Polícia považuje za najpravdepodobnejší motív jeho novinársku činnosť)[14] by an unknown author who claimed that the “unified reaction of the representatives of the opposition, who proclaimed the government to be responsible for the murders due to its attacks against mainstream media, indicates that the murders fit the theory of sacral sacrifice. The murders were supposedly conducted to convince the public that the mainstream media are not under the thumb of the former Minister of Justice and Interior, Daniel Lipšic, but rather were overviewing the work of the government and that their work is life-threatening.”

[32] Magyarország Kormánya. (2019, February 18). Facebook. On 26th February the online disinformation portal Hlavné správy (Main News) published an article "Assassination of the journalist of Aktuality portal: Police consider his journalistic work as the most likely motif" (Úkladná vražda novinára Aktualít: Polícia považuje za najpravdepodobnejší motív jeho novinársku činnosť)[14] by an unknown author who claimed that the "unified reaction of the representatives of the opposition, who proclaimed the government to be responsible for the murders due to its attacks against mainstream media, indicates that the murders fit the theory of sacral sacrifice. The murders were supposedly conducted to convince the public that the mainstream media are not under the thumb of the former Minister of Justice and Interior, Daniel Lipšic, but rather were overviewing the work of the government and that their work is life-threatening."

[33] Bayer, L. (2019, March 2). Hungary to end anti-Juncker campaign on March 15. POLITICO. On 26th February the online disinformation portal Hlavné správy (Main News) published an article "Assassination of the journalist of Aktuality portal: Police consider his journalistic work as the most likely motif" (Úkladná vražda novinára Aktualít: Polícia považuje za najpravdepodobnejší motív jeho novinársku činnosť)[14] by an unknown author who claimed that the "unified reaction of the representatives of the opposition, who proclaimed the government to be responsible for the murders due to its attacks against mainstream media, indicates that the murders fit the theory of sacral sacrifice. The murders were supposedly conducted to convince the public that the mainstream media are not under the thumb of the former Minister of Justice and Interior, Daniel Lipšic, but rather were overviewing the work of the government and that their work is life-threatening."

[34] Hajdu, D., Klingová, K., Kazaz, J., & Kortiš, M. (2022, May 31). GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Central and Eastern Europe amid the War in Ukraine. GLOBSEC. On 26th February the online disinformation portal Hlavné správy (Main News) published an article "Assassination of the journalist of Aktuality portal: Police consider his journalistic work as the most likely motif" (Úkladná vražda novinára Aktualít: Polícia považuje za najpravdepodobnejší motív jeho novinársku činnosť)[14] by an unknown author who claimed that the "unified reaction of the representatives of the opposition, who proclaimed the government to be responsible for the murders due to its attacks against mainstream media, indicates that the murders fit the theory of sacral sacrifice. The murders were supposedly conducted to convince the public that the mainstream media are not under the thumb of the former Minister of Justice and Interior, Daniel Lipšic, but rather were overviewing the work of the government and that their work is life-threatening."

The deep state

The deep state conspiracy theory claims the existence of a secretive and powerful group within the government or other institutions that operates behind the scenes to manipulate events and policies. The specific details and scope of the deep state conspiracy theory can vary depending on the context and beliefs of those who espouse it. However, there are some common elements:

- Shadow Government: According to the deep state conspiracy theory, this alleged group operates as a shadow government or a "state within a state." It is said to wield significant influence over decision-making processes, regardless of which political party or individuals hold official positions of power.
- Undemocratic Control: The deep state is often portrayed as working in opposition to democratic processes and the will of the people. It is believed to exert control over key institutions, such as intelligence agencies, bureaucracies, and the media, to shape policies and outcomes to serve its own interests.
- Manipulation and Global Influence: Proponents of the deep state conspiracy theory argue that this hidden group uses its power to manipulate events on a global scale. They claim that the deep state orchestrates geopolitical conflicts, economic crises, and other major events to advance its agenda, which is often portrayed as elitist and anti-populist.
- Resistance to Change: The deep state is often depicted as resistant to change and hostile to outsiders who challenge its authority. It is seen as actively undermining or sabotaging politicians or movements that threaten its influence or challenge its status quo.

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Conspiracy theories often appear with various crises, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic. While people were dying worldwide from COVID-19, disinformation about a yet-to-be-launched COVID-19 vaccine, including the conspiracy theory document Plandemic, 19 was already being disseminated months before it even existed. One conspiracy theory, spread by anti-vaxxers and QAnon members, claimed that Bill Gates allegedly planned to vaccinate the whole world with microchips to track and control people.[35] However, corruption and state capture of institutions in many countries plays into the hand of these beliefs of certain groups controlling everything and pulling the strings. The case of Jan Kuciak's murder revealed Kočner's good connections in public institutions. The belief certain elite groups working behind the scenes to control the world is also the base of another conspiracy theory, QAnon.

QAnon

QAnon is a far-right conspiracy theory that originated on internet forum 4chan in October 2017. Its central claim is that a secret cabal of deep-state liberal elites, including politicians, celebrities, and other prominent figures, are engaged in a global child sex trafficking ring. The conspiracy theory gained traction through anonymous online posts by "Q Clearence Patriot" claiming to have insider knowledge, known as "Q". The user claimed to have a level of US security approval known as "Q clearance".[36] QAnon followers believe that former President Donald Trump was working to expose and dismantle this cabal. QAnon believers, for example, also claimed Mr Mueller's inquiry into Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election was really a cover story for an investigation into paedophiles.[37]

[35] Lynas, M. (2020, April 20). COVID: Top 10 current conspiracy theories. Alliance for Science. https://allianceforscience.org/blog/2020/04/covid-top-10-current-conspiracy-theories/

[36] Greenspan, R. E. (2021, February 11). History of QAnon: How the Conspiracy Theory Snowballed Into Mainstream. Insider. https://www.insider.com/qanon-history-who-is-q-conspiracy-theory-what-does-believe-2021-2

[37] Wendling, M. (2020, July 22). QAnon: What is it and where did it come from? BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434

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The Murder of Ján Kuciak

QAnon has also fuelled polarization and division in society. The conspiracy theory promotes an "us versus them" mentality, labelling those who don't subscribe to the theory as part of the alleged deep-state conspiracy. This can and has led to the breakdown of constructive dialogue and hindered democratic processes that rely on cooperation and understanding. Many QAnon supporters raised the US Capitol in January 2021 believing that President Joe Biden stole the elections.[38]

QAnon's influence has eroded trust in institutions, as it often portrayed governments, media organizations, and other established institutions as part of the alleged deep-state conspiracy.[1] By promoting a worldview that rejects mainstream information sources, QAnon led to the polarization of society and a breakdown in societal trust. While this conspiracy theory was initially spread in the United States, cells of QAnon supporters are present in various countries, including Slovakia.

Even 5 years after his murder and Ján Kuciak as a person and the killings are used by various Slovak actors to spread false and misleading information or in the attempt to undermine the trust in public institutions, fair trial and media[2]. Influence operations based on disinformation aiming to polarise societies and create internal divisions are tools of various malign domestic and foreign actors. Such tactics are common tools of subversion and control. “Question everything” has been the slogan of RT, former Russia Today, a Kremlin-controlled outlet used to wage information operations in numerous countries of the world. Societies swayed by disinformation and distrust are easy to control. Creation of the external or internal enemy, whether it is George Soros, secret cabal groups of liberal elites or just a “political opponent”, is an integral part of conspiracy theories and societal polarization.

38 Roose, K. (2021, September 3). What Is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?. New York Times. 35 Lynas, M. (2020, April 20). COVID: Top 10 current conspiracy theories. Alliance for Science. https://allianceforscience.org/blog/2020/04/covid-top-10-current-conspiracy-theories/
39 Ibid.
40 Mazúch, A. (2023, March 22). Konšpirácie o vražde Kuciaka pretrvávajú. INFOSECURITY.SK. https://infosecurity.sk/domace/vrazda-jana-kuciaka-a-jeho-snubenice-je-nadalej-cielom-konspiracnych-teorii/
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The Murder of Ján Kuciak

The murder of Ján Kuciak and the disinformation narratives surrounding it underscore also the risks faced by investigative journalists and the importance of independent and trustworthy media in society. It is crucial to support and protect journalists who work tirelessly to uncover corruption and hold those in power accountable.

Source: HNonline.sk
https://strategie.hnonline.sk/news/blogy/1863876-rok-v-slovenskych-mediach-smrt-jana-kuciaka-a-jeho-priatelky-navzdy-poznacila-slovensku-zurnalistiku

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