How to Tackle Disinformation? Multiple Responses to an Epistemological Problem

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I.   Introduction

It has been a long time since disinformation has been firstly used as an instrument of propaganda. Indeed, Stalin already coined the term "disinformatzya" as a tool to spread the Soviet propaganda, and to maintain his totalitarian ruling steady and alive.[1] Nowadays, disinformation has never been more ebullient, this is because our modern technologies enable a much quicker and intensive spread than ever. Disinformation has re-emerged as a core instrument of information warfare, which itself has become a salient topic of research, since Russia has started to lead a disinformation offensive against the West in 2008 in the context of the Georgian war.[2] What happened at this period of time is strikingly similar to the way Russia started an 'hybrid' warfare against Ukraine. Russia launched cyber attacks, used its state-controlled media to craft a pre-invasion narrative, and then began to engage in military action. When the 2008 Beijing Olympics diverted attention from other issues, the Kremlin took advantage of the information vacuum to spread the false story that Georgia had launched a genocide against ethnic minorities in its own Tskhinvali Region, and gave a pretext for Moscow to intervene. Fourteen years later, the Kremlin claimed that Ukrainians were committing a genocide against their civilians and that Russia had the responsibility to intervene and defend them. This time, Putin anticipated that a world distracted by the pandemic would turn its back to its adventure in Ukraine.[3]

Despite a difficult evaluation of the efficiency of those disinformation campaigns, it is undoubtable that Russia's deceptive behaviour has an impact whatever its intensity. Indeed, Russia targets vulnerable actors through its disinformation campaigns.[4] Disinformation is likely to only expand now that the modernisation of technologies facilitates a spread of disinformation that becomes hardly costly and can be originated, transmitted or received by any type of actor.[5] With the emergence of developed A.I. systems such as ChatGPT or generators of deepfake images (e.g. the Pope in a Balenciaga puffer jacket), these technologies become worrying in the sense that they might cause severe societal damage.[6] In other words, disinformation-related issues and the advent of digital media are closely related. This innovation makes it possible for all types of actors - whether state or non-state political actors, for-profit actors, media, citizens, individually or in groups - to participate in campaigns of disinformation. Such actors are manipulated to manufacture, disseminate, and amplify

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[1] Ilya Yablokov, "Russian Disinformation Finds Fertile Ground in the West," *Nature Human Behaviour* 6, no. 6 (2022): 766–67, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01399-3.

[2] Elina Treyger, Joe Cheravitch, and Raphael S Cohen, *Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 14, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR4373.2.

[3] Zviad Adzinbaia, "How to Terminate Russian Disinformation," CEPA, 2022, https://cepa.org/article/how-to-terminate-russian-disinformation/.

[4] Mary Blankenship and Aloysius Uche Ordu, "Russia's Narratives about Its Invasion of Ukraine Are Lingering in Africa," *Brookings*, June 27, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/06/27/russias-narratives-about-its-invasion-of-ukraine-are-lingering-in-africa/.

[5] APC, "Disinformation and Freedom of Expression Submission in Response to the Call by the UN Special Rapporteur Association for Progressive Communications (APC)," 2021.

[6] Taylor & Francis, "Combatting Disinformation: How It Spreads, Why It's Dangerous, and the Differences between Disinformation and Misinformation," Taylor & Francis, accessed March 20, 2023, https://insights.taylorandfrancis.com/social-justice/combatting-disinformation/.

disinformation on a wider scale than ever before, frequently in novel ways that are still poorly mapped and understood in modern society.[7]

This is why it seems the appropriate moment to ask, how can we stop this flea that is the spread of disinformation? How can we resist the manipulative use of modern technologies and digital media to reach political ends through falsehoods? In that sense, this paper firstly zooms out on the concept of information and disinformation and explains why disinformation is harmful; while it appears evident, it seems important to remind why we deem essential to tackle disinformation. Then, this analysis provides several approaches, instruments and mechanisms to build more resiliency against this still poorly understood phenomenon. Finally, it looks at some of the epistemological issues inherent to our modern concept of information and media.

II.   A definition of disinformation emerging from the concept of information

In order to understand what disinformation entails, one needs to define its antagonistic concept: information. The most prominent analysis that attempted to define both concepts is Don Fallis's.[8] According to him, disinformation is a type of information, but information is firstly a representation, meaning that information has to limit itself to the realm of representations and cannot include tangible objects. As an example, if information included tangible objects, the 'dummy' tanks built by the allies during WWII would become disinformation.[9] Neither the concept covers issues arising from the creation and dissemination online of illegal content (notably defamation, hate speech, incitement to violence), which are subject to regulations. Nor does it cover other forms of deliberate but not misleading distortions of facts such a satire and parody.[10] Information can be in itself false or true, however what characterises disinformation is that its intent is to be misleading, while false information has nothing to do with an intent to be false, and is more often than not a erroneous belief of truth. Therefore, what makes disinformation an harmful type of information is that it is misleading, thus it is information that is likely to create false beliefs, to mislead people and consequently to have harmful consequences. Additionally, to be characterised as disinformation, the piece of information should not be misleading by accident but properly intended. In the end, the concept of disinformation is misleading information that has the function of misleading.[11]

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[7] Directorate-General for Communication Networks Content and Technology, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*, *Report of the Independent High Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation*, 2018, https://doi.org/10.2759/0156.
[8] Don Fallis, "What Is Disinformation?," *Library Trends* 63, no. 3 (2015): 401–26, https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014.
[9] Fallis.
[10] Directorate-General for Communication Networks Content and Technology, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*.
[11] Fallis, "What Is Disinformation?"

III.   What are the consequences of a harmful and voluntarily misleading type of information?

It has now been proven that the widespread of disinformation and fake news can cause detrimental societal effects.[12] Disinformation hurts both individuals and society as a whole, even if it is not always illegal. Threats to democratic political structures, including the fairness of elections, as well as democratic values that influence public policies across a range of areas are among the potential harms.[13] As a result, disinformation has the potential to influence both citizens' trust in democratic institutions or processes as well as their trust in one another. In fact, false information spread through traditional and social media feeds preconceived notions in people who seek out self-validating stories to support their worldview. These messages end up becoming "truths," further alienating citizens from a healthy society, and feeding a cycle of false claims.[14]

   To use a concrete example, there were campaigns operated by Russian agents in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election in the United States using anti-deliberative strategies, such as damaging falsehoods and moral denigration, to influence and disrupt the democratic processes of the elections. The Russian agents did not have to carry out the entire operation, thus this was not the product of a specifically remarkable operation. Instead, American online subcultures, notably far-right affiliated organisations sought personal interests in the Russian disinformation campaign. Hence, they manipulated news frames, established agendas, and disseminated ideas by utilising the contemporary media landscape at the time. Through the clever use of social media, memes, and bots, as well as through concentrating their efforts on journalists, bloggers, and influencers to disseminate content, far-right organisations have developed ways to raise the prominence of their views. Because of their reliance on social media, analytics, metrics, sensationalism, novelty above newsworthiness, and clickbait, traditional media outlets are in fact susceptible to this kind of media manipulation. Despite having radically different interests in these falsehoods, conspiracy theorists, trolls, men's rights activists, the "alt-right," and white nationalists all contributed to the interference in the 2016 elections.[15] This offers a lesson that the very model of contemporary disinformation depends on three kinds of actors that have, for different reasons, a common interest in a similar type of information: (1) those who deliberately create false/misleading information and images meant to mislead citizens and disrupt democratic society and deliberation (e.g. Russian agents), (2) those who pass that information along to their own social networks – because they believe it, or they just find it 'interesting', or because others in their networks are also sharing it so they think they 'should' (e.g. White supremacists, 'alt-right', trolls), (3) those who amplify disinformation because its sensationalism

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[12] Kai Shu et al., "Mining Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements," in *Fake News, Disinformation, and Misinformation in Social Media- Emerging Research Challenges and Opportunities* (Springer Press, 2020), 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42699-6_1.
[13] Directorate-General for Communication Networks Content and Technology, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*.
[14] Aaron Bailey-Athias and Abbie Richards, "How to Tackle Mis/Disinformation with a Human Centred Approach," ODI, accessed April 20, 2023, https://odi.org/en/insights/how-to-tackle-misdisinformation-with-a-human-centred-approach/.
[15] Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online," Data & Society Research Institute § (2017), https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-05/apo-nid135936.pdf.

provides an added values, or in the very process of reporting on it and trying to reveal its falsehoods (e.g. journalists).[16]

The repercussions are tremendous because they contribute largely, if not entirely to the polarisation of a society since its actors, as mentioned above, get bogged down into self-validating narratives, alienating them from discourses that match with reality. These harms undermine a polity's capacity to engage in communication characterised by the use of facts and logic, moral respect, and democratic inclusion, and shows how much modern technology is used to exacerbate disinformation on vulnerable communities and to polarise a society.[17] In other words, disinformation contributed to the creation of an era commonly named "post-truth," due to the fact that that the spread of false information and the subsequent collapse of liberal democracies have completely hampered public discourse.[18]

IV.   Bridging the gap in our societies: a visual of the new approaches and instruments

We have seen it above, disinformation is anything but a monster we have to face, a multi-headed one. Russia's most modern strategy of disinformation is the "firehose of falsehood", and it is its hardest-to-beat version: multiple channels, narratives and targets are part of its characteristics. The consequence is that it involves also a diversity of weapons and responses to respond to it. Realistically, such responses are currently too often unimodal and unilateral, hence limiting the efficiency of prevention against disinformation.[19]

A.   The need for bridging

This is not to imply that efforts to identify false information and disinformation have not made progress recently. However, there is still a lot of room for improvement with regard to the complexity, diversity, multi-modality, and costs of fact-checking or annotation related to the curation of disinformation.[20] As a result, researchers today agree that there is no one best strategy to solve the issue; instead, combating disinformation requires a multi-modal approach that involves civil society, the government, IT companies, and all other civil society actors. Therefore, the efforts could be in vain if one of these actors decides to go upstream by himself.[21] In that regard, an "adaptive governance" model, that links bottom-up approaches with traditional top-down governance, allows for a complementary and resilient relationship between the media sector, the civil society and the

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[16] Taylor & Francis, "Combatting Disinformation: How It Spreads, Why It's Dangerous, and the Differences between Disinformation and Misinformation."

[17] Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly* 74 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920938143; Marwick and Lewis, Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online.

[18] L Vianna and M T Carvalho-Mendonca, "The Poisoned Public Debate and the Limits of State Regulation: For a Digital Literacy against the Fake News," *Universitas-Revista De Ciencias Sociales Y Humanas*, no. 34 (2021): 19–39.

[19] Taylor & Francis, "Combatting Disinformation: How It Spreads, Why It's Dangerous, and the Differences between Disinformation and Misinformation."

[20] Shu et al., "Mining Disinformation and Fake News: Concepts, Methods, and Recent Advancements."

[21] Taylor & Francis, "Combatting Disinformation: How It Spreads, Why It's Dangerous, and the Differences between Disinformation and Misinformation."

governmental authorities against disinformation.[22] In that sense various regulatory, educational, and technological interventions still have to be proposed to limit the actions of "bad" actors, to make social media platforms more transparent, and to support and build resiliency among audiences.[23] Consequently, the next paragraphs provide different approaches and instruments to counter disinformation in order to have an adaptive model suited for an issue as all-encompassing as disinformation.

B.   Bottom-up: human-centred approach and digital literacy to build trust

Putting a human-centred approach at the heart of counter disinformation strategies is starting to become a practice that is regarded as highly essential in any programme countering disinformation.[24] Indeed, there is an urgent need to build a societal resilience, meaning a capacity for the civil society to act directly to remove disinformation or act against it. To use an analogy with the now-past-but-still-in-our-minds pandemic, state regulation would correspond to the imposition of measures of social distance, they were needed at the time, yet they could not, by themselves, eliminate virus contamination, but rather mitigate its spread. In that sense, information campaigns, sensibilisation, and drafting propositions taking into account the interrogations of the civil society are instruments strengthening the power of citizens to act in the 'right' way because they become aware of the consequences of their actions, this is a similar story with disinformation.[25] Moreover, people tend to respond differently to disinformation and real information, some groups with certain types of affiliations are more likely to believe a particular type of disinformation. For instance, strongly right-wing publics in the United States are exposed to false and deceptive claims at particularly high rates.[26] Or, for instance, Ukrainians with partisan and ethnolinguistic ties to Russia are more likely to believe pro-Kremlin disinformation.[27] Disinformation exploits confirmation biases, indeed sensational stories push for people's angriness, which makes disinformation go viral, and more anger a piece of fake news incites, the more contagious it is. This tie between our emotional state and the spread of misinformation is a strong argument for more consideration of a human-centred approach in digital platform design.[28] In others words, early detection about disinformation can be eased by centring the human amid the techniques to prevent disinformation and understanding which specific groups are more likely to believe particular pieces of disinformation.

In that sense, what could limit the polarisation of society is digital literacy. Indeed, in order to use another pandemic-related analogy, digital literacy is the only way to find a permanent immunisation

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[22] Marijn Janssen, "Adaptive Governance for a Resilient Digital Society," in *Electronic Governance and Open Society: Challenges in Eurasia: 8th International Conference*, vol. November (Saint Petersburg: Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 3–7.

[23] Taylor & Francis, "Combatting Disinformation: How It Spreads, Why It's Dangerous, and the Differences between Disinformation and Misinformation."

[24] Bailey-Athias and Richards, "How to Tackle Mis/Disinformation with a Human Centred Approach."

[25] Vianna and Carvalho-Mendonca, "The Poisoned Public Debate and the Limits of State Regulation: For a Digital Literacy against the Fake News."

[26] McKay and Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy."

[27] Aaron Erlich and Calvin Garner, "Is Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Effective? Evidence from Ukraine," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 28, no. 1 (2023): 5–28, https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211045221.

[28] Bailey-Athias and Richards, "How to Tackle Mis/Disinformation with a Human Centred Approach."

of the civil society.[29] Some countries have earned high marks for making their citizens into more-educated consumers of social media. While still not measured, most scholars believe that it is very likely that countries that build strong digital literacy educational campaigns suffer less from disinformation content.[30] This is why, an enhancement of the media literacy and education of civil societies is not only recommended but essential.[31] For instance, media literacy training could be included in school curricula or in companies in order to train digital citizens capable of making informed decisions.[32]

Rebuilding trust in organisations and among individuals is the ultimate goal of digital literacy and a human-centred approach because confidence between people is what disinformation threats aim to undermine.[33] Even though it is worrying, the situation in many Western countries implies that state institutions are losing their legitimacy as a result of declining public trust, which also affects people's faith in one another. Consequentially, a greater socio-political polarisation among political communities is the cause of the growth of populism in various parts of the world. This compromises not just societal harmony but also the social and political structure of a society, making it challenging to reach agreement during decision-making processes at all levels. To create lasting resilience in the face of hybrid threats that severely jeopardise the security at the state and societal levels, developing, re-building, and solidifying trust remains essential.[34]

C.   Top-down approach: actions from governments and regulation of large social media companies

Regarding the top-down approach, the choice between regulation and non-regulation of media platforms has been at the core of the debate. Indeed, some (e.g. Elon Musk) would tend to argue that freedom of expression is only reachable once media platforms are not regulated, others believe that if not regulated, freedom of expression actually overshadows freedom of expression because of the subsequent harmful content emerging from the openness of these platforms.[35]

Therefore, on the one hand, the role of governments is to regulate by putting raincoats on those at whom disinformation is being directed.[36] In that stream of thought, the policy instruments in the hands

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[29] Vianna and Carvalho-Mendonca, "The Poisoned Public Debate and the Limits of State Regulation: For a Digital Literacy against the Fake News."

[30] Treyger, Cheravitch, and Cohen, *Russian Disinformation Efforts on Social Media*.

[31] Taylor & Francis, "Combatting Disinformation: How It Spreads, Why It's Dangerous, and the Differences between Disinformation and Misinformation"; Tony. Zamparutti et al., *Developing a Handbook on Good Practice in Countering Disinformation at Local and Regional Level*. (Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs, 2022), https://doi.org/10.2863/066582.

[32] Directorate-General for Communication Networks Content and Technology, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*; Zamparutti et al., *Developing a Handbook on Good Practice in Countering Disinformation at Local and Regional Level*.

[33] Arsalan Bilal, "Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and 'Trust' as the Antidote," NATO Review, 2021, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html.

[34] Bilal.

[35] Joe Arns, "Disinformation and the Path to Rebuilding Trust in Media," ISS Insights, 2022, https://insights.issgovernance.com/posts/disinformation-and-the-path-to-rebuilding-trust-in-media/.

[36] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), https://doi.org/10.7249/pe198.

of public authorities can take the form of sanctions, fines, or other barriers against the practice of propaganda.[37] Alongside that, regulating large social media companies might provide long-term benefits by either incentivising or forcing the platforms to move away from algorithmically driven recommendation systems, and could force them to change their metrics from attention and attraction to healthiness towards their users.[38] Hence, governments might have to force social media platforms to redesign their digital spaces to prioritise high quality information since major social media giants have still now largely failed to remove disinformation, leaving 90% of posts reported for disinformation up on their platforms.[39] On the other hand, governments should produce regulation that is fully compliant with freedom of expression, free press and pluralism.[40] In that sense, a recent UN report (2021) on combatting disinformation in a manner consistent with upholding human rights highlights the need to "enhance the role of free, independent and diverse media."[41] Currently, too drastic measures and sanctions to prevent disinformation have in fact hindered the ability of democratic governments to respond to disinformation. For example, France passed the "anti-fake news" law in 2018, which aimed at false information during electoral cycles, but had the unintentional consequence of Twitter not allowing government-sponsored ads encouraging citizens to vote.[42] There is, hence, an equilibrium to be find between government regulation of the media sector, and at the same time a compliance with values of freedom of expression and free press.

With regard to the regulation of Russian media platforms, the choices made by the governments are often only a matter of ties with the Kremlin. Many western governments and private sector have banned all key Russian accounts from major digital and media platforms, which appears to be successful since it directly turns off the firehose at its source.[43] Indeed, with Russia's media machine banned, and social networks no longer serving as enablers to the Russian narratives, the Kremlin's disinformation will find it much harder to prosper. If everything is well managed, Russia would only continue to sell disinformation, and propaganda to its citizens at home, but that is ultimately a matter for the Russian people to decide if they want to conform or decide to break free from the regime.[44] Yet, efforts should also be put on governments outside the West. For instance, in the Global South many countries which have close links with Russia do not dare, or are not willing to ban Russian disinformation platforms of their countries. Many examples can be found in Latin America with, for instance, historically communist regimes such as Cuba, Nicaragua or Venezuela,[45] and where disinformation in the Spanish language is spread at high rates and avoiding the automatised English

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[37] Paul and Matthews.
[38] Taylor & Francis, "Combatting Disinformation: How It Spreads, Why It's Dangerous, and the Differences between Disinformation and Misinformation"; Gavin Wilde, "The Problem with Defining 'Disinformation,'" Carnegie Endowment, 2022, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367823153-2.
[39] Bailey-Athias and Richards, "How to Tackle Mis/Disinformation with a Human Centred Approach"; Arns, "Disinformation and the Path to Rebuilding Trust in Media."
[40] Directorate-General for Communication Networks Content and Technology, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*.
[41] Arns, "Disinformation and the Path to Rebuilding Trust in Media."
[42] Arns.
[43] Joseph W. Robbins, "Countering Russian Disinformation," in *The Diversity of Russia's Military Power* (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2020), 32–39, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2850.
[44] Adzinbaia, "How to Terminate Russian Disinformation."
[45] José Ospina-Valencia, "Russia's Propaganda War in Latin America," Deutsche Welle, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/how-russia-is-waging-a-successful-propaganda-war-in-latin-america/a-61467050.

language processing systems that are supposed to prevent Russian disinformation.[46] In Africa, where Russia has a lot of influence on domestic politics, many anti-colonial narratives are not controlled because they sometimes fit with the local powerhouses, even more when they are supported by Russian military groups like Wagner.[47] Therefore, the need to compete with Russia's narratives in 'buffer' regions becomes tremendously important to isolate Russia's 'firehose of falsehood'.

V.   Epistemological issues: exploiting the post-truth era

The post-truth era is symptomatic of epistemological issues that we do not dare to address. Post-truth means that not only we live in an era were considering for granted a piece of information as true seems impossible. But also, it comes from the acknowledgment that there is no universal truth to what is information *per se*. The next paragraphs show how we can make the best out of a flawed concept such as our modern definition of information, and consequently disinformation.

A.   The issue with reporting information

Are misrepresentations inherent to journalism? This is a question we should always ask ourselves when reading any kind of paper related to the reporting of information, and that we should answer with "information is nearly always an artificial creation". Indeed, a piece of information always originates from someone who has a bias towards a piece of information that is retrieved. We only witness the world through our eyes. That is why journalists have a tremendous role to play and responsibility to carry towards information, and any system that tries to prevent disinformation is weak against the journalistic privilege. For instance, it is impossible to know if a journalist interviewing a child in the middle of Syria is reporting real conversations they had, those conversations might have never happened (*cf.* Relotius affair). Some pieces of information in media are clear fabrications that cannot be fact-checked, even by a strong editorial line since information can become a pure hand-made creation from journalists. But, responsible journalism cannot be regulated any more than it already is without infringing on the freedom of expression. This is why the ultimate responsibility lies with the news consumers themselves. They need to be aware that the system of news reporting and journalism is essentially dependent on a human element, and is therefore bound to inherit human imperfections as such. In other words, a part of the information can be fact-checked by the civil society, yet a lot of information is dependent on the 'good will' of the person or journalist creating it.[48] This means that we should develop tools for empowering users and journalists to tackle disinformation and foster a positive engagement with fast-evolving information technologies. All

[46] India Turner, "Why Latin America Is Susceptible to Russian War Disinformation," DisinfoLab, 2022, https://www.disinfolab.net/post/why-latin-america-is-susceptible-to-russian-war-disinformation.

[47] Eero Kristjan Sild, "War in Ukraine Exposes Russia's Influence in Africa," *ICDS*, 2022, https://icds.ee/en/war-in-ukraine-exposes-russias-influence-in-africa/.

[48] Mihail Stojanoski, "When a Credible Source Turns 'Fake': The Relotius Affair and the German System for Combatting Fake News," in *Democracy and Fake News; Information Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics*, 2020, 188–98, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003037385-18.

relevant stakeholders, including online platforms, news media organisations (press and broadcasters), journalists, fact-checkers, independent content creators and the advertising industry, could be called upon to commit to a Code of Practices. This Code would reflect stakeholders' respective roles and responsibilities. The intent should be to promote an enabling environment for freedom of expression by fostering the transparency and intelligibility of different types of digital information channels.[49] This would safeguard the diversity and sustainability of the news media ecosystem, and finally provide a partial solution to the inherent issue of reporting information.[50]

B. It is only a matter of narratives

Western democracies have often fallen into the trap of simply disputing Russia's assertions, rather than competing with it.[51] Yet, by accepting that the issue is only one of competing narratives, it may be possible to concentrate on combating the consequences of Russian propaganda rather than the propaganda itself. No individual, group of people or government can prevent propaganda to be spread just by fact-checking it. That is because the notion of truth is more subjective than it appears. It speaks to hearts rather than minds. Hence, the purpose of the propagandists may be to shift a group of people's attitudes or behaviours towards something. Therefore, an approach might be to identify the intended outcomes from the propagandists and then strive to mitigate the impacts opposed to one's objectives. For instance, if Russian propaganda aims to reduce the likelihood that people in NATO nations will believe in the capacity of NATO to ensure their protection against Russia, one should concentrate on thwarting the propaganda's goal rather than trying to block, disprove, or undermine it. This may be done, for instance, by working to increase support for a response to Russian aggression, foster unity and identification among NATO countries who are under attack or reaffirm international commitments.[52]

We must also keep in mind the various pressure points that Russia has been putting forward in its pursuit of digital sovereignty.[53] Democracies that want to address this dilemma may, among other things, adopt Russian strategies. Russian agents who want to sway public opinion typically use repetition and inundation, a strategy that is frequently disregarded in the West due to the preference of media outlets for original stories over repeated facts. Nothing, however, is stopping Western officials from bringing up crucial concerns again. As an example, American officials might rehash instances of how Russians have deceived audiences or caused harm in the past to repeatedly emphasise how unreliable they are as sources, since in many ways, Russian officials and their supporters criticise past American errors.[54]

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[49] Directorate-General for Communication Networks Content and Technology, *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*.

[50] Directorate-General for Communication Networks Content and Technology.

[51] Alicia Wanless, "How Western Democracies Can Combat Russia's Ukraine Disinformation," Carnegie Endowment, 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/02/24/how-western-democracies-can-combat-russia-s-ukraine-disinformation-pub-86523.

[52] Paul and Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*.

[53] Wanless, "How Western Democracies Can Combat Russia's Ukraine Disinformation."

[54] Wanless.

Therefore, governments should rather try to push audiences in more productive directions and to compete against Russian propaganda rather than blocking it. Rather than just trying to counter disinformation with other information, it might be possible to thwart desired effects with other capabilities, or to simply apply information efforts to redirecting behaviours or attitudes without ever directly engaging with the propaganda.[55] There is a range of possibilities to inform, influence, and persuade selected target audiences. Increasing the flow of persuasive information and starting to compete, seeking to generate effects that support positive, reliable and validated narratives.[56] For instance, Russians have long painted Ukrainians as fascists, pointing to World War II and modern far-right groups as evidence. While Nazis drew support from upward of a quarter million Ukrainians, some 2 million were taken back to Germany as little more than slave laborers, and yet millions more enlisted in the Soviet Army. This is to say nothing of what Ukrainians suffered under the Soviet Union, from forced migrations to deliberate famines and the Chernobyl disaster. Moreover, Moscow has used de-Nazification as a reason for invasion while fostering a network of far-right groups abroad. Democracies need to assert that if Russia is so concerned about such elements, Putin should start cleaning his own house first.[57] This proves that countering Russia's propaganda with a competition of more solid and viable arguments can be a much better long-term solution, which would also convince audiences outside of the West. On the long-term, this tactic could even be appealing to Russians. This will be much harder, as many Russians are sceptical of Western sources. However, it is also known that the Russian invasion is not popular domestically. The ties that bind Russians and Ukrainians will make any losses incurred by Russians extremely unpopular. Amplifying those losses as much as possible will be demoralising for Putin at home.[58]

C.   *Problems inherent to the modern concept of disinformation*

The concepts of information and disinformation can be viewed as flawed from the start, even more when narratives are a matter subjectivity towards a particular subject. For instance, Chicago University teacher Prof. Mearsheimer blames the West for the War in Ukraine.[59] Many western people would tend to agree with Mearsheimer's arguments but would they if it came from a Russian source? Hence, is our fight against falsehood or against Russia? Indeed, falsehoods exist everywhere and on every side, for instance some fake pro-Western narratives have also been taken down by Facebook and Tweeter which promoted pro-Western messages in the Middle East and Asia.[60] This shows that, not every anti-Western type of information is not untrue and it not only is produced by anti-Western actors.

The problem of information and, consequently, disinformation is flawed because it equates other notions that appear via the ideological lens with a binary concept that began to work and continues to

[55] Paul and Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It.*
[56] Paul and Matthews.
[57] Wanless, "How Western Democracies Can Combat Russia's Ukraine Disinformation."
[58] Wanless.
[59] John Mearsheimer, "Why Is Ukraine the West's Fault?" (University of Chicago, 2016).
[60] Tim Starks, "A Phony, U.S.-Friendly Social Media Campaign Prompts Questions," The Washington Post, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/25/phony-us-friendly-social-media-campaign-prompts-questions/.

work solely exclusively with computers. A reductive tendency, which is the inclination for people to break down complicated systems into manageable components, is what we refer to when people define complex sets of data as binary. While there are advantages to this distillation, such as quicker decision-making, it is frequently erroneous and ignores the complexity of the issue. Therefore, we end up defining information through the prism of true/untrue while it is often much more complex than that, hence letting "truth" ultimately becoming an instrument of power.[61]

Since many of these problems are the result of actual betrayals of the public's trust by the media and governments, it is far easier to point the finger at Russia and fact-check than to solve the fundamental socioeconomic problems that produce them. Indeed, the disinformation expertise is currently more focused on the measurable and quantifiable aspects of how false narratives are transmitted rather than towards understanding why some people are attracted to opposing narratives. Perceiving information through the true/untrue prism assumes that some people are committed to the untrue, which can irritate these populations and be counterproductive This stream of thought forces to change hearts and minds at scale, which can easily take the appearance of the very colonialism it aims to refute. This is even more the case if there is no attempt at understanding the roots of why opposing discourses find legitimacy among these communities.[62]

VI.   Conclusion

If one message needed to be remembered from this paper, it is that there is no mechanical practice to tackle disinformation, it is rather a multi-modal situation through which the civil society, the government, IT companies, and all other actors of civil society have to contribute in cooperation and simultaneously. This is why, tackling the modern type of disinformation model like the 'firehose of falsehood' can only be done under a form of 'adaptive governance' to which everyone contributes. In the context of the media sector and information, governments must regulate the media sector and assist the later in funding and developing early detection mechanisms. The media sector, its journalists, press and broadcasters, fact-checkers, independent content creators and the advertising industry should be aware that they are part of the actors that either produce or spread disinformation because of the metrics and algorithms they must follow, and hence should be reminded of the responsibility they carry. Finally, the civil society is the key actor to become more resilient against disinformation. The purpose of disinformation itself is to create a gap between communities of the civil society and between citizens and authorities to atomise the society. Hence, rebuilding trust with digital literacy education and understanding the human psychology of why people are attracted by false narratives is highly important. This final suggestion is intimately linked that our resilience to disinformation is that information is itself more a matter of narratives rather than veracity. Today, the raincoats we try to put are much more about hunting falsehoods while it is sometimes impossible to argue with what is truth, it is rather more feasible to convince by accepting that we need to challenge each other's narratives. While fake stories are the 'façade' that confuses the minds of people and should be entirely shut down, narratives speak to hearts. This is why, in others words, the efforts to tackle disinformation should be focused on understanding why people are attracted by some narratives

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[61] Wilde, "The Problem with Defining 'Disinformation.'"
[62] Wilde.

and responding through more convincing narratives that equally speak to the hearts and minds of the targeted communities.

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L'analyse des éléments déclencheurs des conflits et des instruments de leur gestion - sanctions et incitants économiques comme moyens de politique étrangère; crises et interventions humanitaires; rôle de la mémoire dans un processus de réconciliation, par exemple - est combinée à l'étude empirique de différends internationaux et de processus de paix spécifiques.