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Countering disinformation and protecting journalists

David ALANDETE^[2]

Russian propaganda media are already working full out to influence the European elections in May 2019^[1]

During a press conference on 6th November 2018 with his Spanish counterpart, the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister announced that he had accepted the creation of a cybersecurity group to counter the problem of disinformation which had caused so many problems during the recent elections on either side of the Atlantic. He said he was pleased with this agreement, the result of a Russian initiative, which aimed, according to him, to “create special security mechanisms on the internet” and prevent “EU and US relations with Russia from deteriorating any further.” And yet the headlines published by the Russian state media during the Catalan referendum crisis in October 2017 must have surprised more than one Spanish politician. Here are a few examples:

- [Why doesn't NATO bomb Madrid for 78 days?](#)
- [Tanks in the streets of Barcelona: Spain and Catalonia on the verge of violent endgame](#)
- [Independent Catalonia will recognise Russia Crimea](#)

The Russian government invests more than 400 million € yearly in Россия сегодня (Rossia Segodnia), the parent company comprising Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, to offer the world (according to its own lines of approach) an alternative, watered down version of reality, but which is still in accordance with the Kremlin's interests. Amongst the many examples of this re-interpretation of reality, of which the Russian propaganda media are so proud, we recently saw the following examples:

- The poisoning of the spy Serguey Skripal in the UK? There is no proof, the suspects, two Russian agents, were on holiday.

- The chemical attacks by Bashar el Assad's regime in Syria? An orchestration on the part of the European media like the BBC.

- The MH17 crash over Ukraine in July 2014? In all likelihood, it was shot down by the Ukrainian army in a bid to incriminate Russia.

Margarita Simonián, editor of RT and Sputnik, declared in a column published in 2016^[3]: « It seems that RT, which is often accused of targeting the creation of an alternative reality, is one of the rare media companies to be aware of reality.”

She describes RT as the informative equivalent of a Defence Ministry, and therefore as a weapon of war. “It is impossible to start manufacturing arms when the war has already started!” she declared. RT, Sputnik and Russia are therefore ready, but for which battle?

Primarily, the battles that Vladimir Putin needs are the ones that reveal the weakness of his rivals. Anna Politkovskaya quite accurately talked of this in the unfinished diaries she left behind prior to her assassination in 2006. Putin's position grows stronger as the others are weakened. To do this he has the support of an entire court of ministers, legislators and journalists. “The only thing that now counts in Russia, is loyalty to Putin. With this personal devotion you receive the papal bull, amnesty, for all the successes and failures, both past and present^[4],” she wrote.

According to James Harding, a former director at the BBC^[5], “their independence is not guaranteed, and they do not behave independently. A good way of checking this is to note how often they criticise their own government with legitimate arguments, and to

1. The author is expressing his own opinion here.

2. https://www.amazon.es/Fake-news-destrucción-alternativos-desestabilizar/dp/8423430197/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1545061173&sr=1-1&keywords=alandete

3. <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/304151-us-medias-false-narrative-of-russian-election-influence>

4. Politkovskaya, Anna. *A Russian Diary: A Journalist's Final Account of Life, Corruption, and Death in Putin's Russia* (Kindle Locations 1264-1265). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

5. https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/02/09/actualidad/1518198695_212485.html

see how far they are prepared to go. It is a good way to test the independence of any media.”

Following my investigations into their interference in Catalonia, the Russian media defended themselves by pretending that Russia had nothing to gain in Catalonia and RT published an unsigned article in September 2017 which revealed, possibly without meaning to, its editorial line[6] : “As in the Cold War, Russia, whose influence was ridiculed until very recently due to its low GDP (equivalent to that of Italy, whilst the country is much bigger), is once again the one to blame for all the ills in the West which has no apparent response to this terrible threat. Of a West which has witnessed its political classes and its media lose the trust of their citizens day after day due to the errors they have made systematically, roughshod, and as we now see, intentionally. Some media seem to deem their audience to be completely stupid: so stupid that they are being influenced by “the crude lies on the part of the Kremlin.”

If Russia has nothing to gain in Catalonia, why did Putin devote a major part of his speech to it at the Valdai Forum, (a Slav Davos forum of major international importance) on 19th October? “The situation in Spain clearly shows just how fragile stability can be, even in a prosperous, stable State, which might have expected, even until recently, that an old debate over the situation in Catalonia would lead to a serious political crisis : in Catalonia’s case we saw how the EU and several States unanimously condemned the supporters of independence,” declared the Russian President, adding “In this regard I cannot but say that they should have thought about it earlier, was no one aware of this secular discord in Europe? Of course, they were! However, they were extremely pleased to witness the disintegration of several other European States. Why were they so precipitate, driven as they were by transient political considerations and their desire to please their superiors in Washington, when they provided their unconditional support to the secession of Kosovo, causing similar processes in other regions of Europe and the world? When Crimea also declared its independence, and then after the referendum its decision to join Russia, it was not seen with such a

benevolent eye. Now we have Catalonia. There is a similar problem in another region, Kurdistan. This list is far from being exhaustive. But we should wonder what we are going to do. What are we supposed to think?”

This comparison between European nationalisms and the injuries inflicted on Russia by the independence of Kosovo – recognised by 23 of the EU’s countries – and the sanctions for the annexation of Crimea are a constant in RT’s and Sputnik’s coverage, likewise the other media within their orbit.

The Kremlin’s line is repeated by these media through chronicles, columns and interviews. Such is the true nature of disinformation, whoever signs them, whatever the date, the genre, sources or quotations. Because everything is carried out according to a plan: that of presenting an alternative version to reality, but which is in line with the Kremlin’s interests.

There is a great deal of evidence of this journalistic manipulation. We might quote William Mallinson for example, who is often referred to by RT and who the Russian media present as a “former British diplomat”. Here we just a few of the headlines published by RT:

- [America will do everything it can to create problems between Russian and China.](#)
- [The USA reflect their two-faced diplomacy in the Syrian conflict.](#)
- [Johnson’s clown simply fuels anti-Russian hysteria.](#)
- [German hypocrisy: not so long ago Angela Merkel said that multi-culturalism had failed.](#)

William Mallinson however is not a former diplomat. The status of his diplomatic services simply indicate that he was a civil servant, serving as a third secretary (chancellery) and interim second secretary (information) in London and in the embassies of Nairobi and The Hague. Placing the floodlights on his opinions with such provocative headlines is just an exercise in confusion, designed to spread the idea on

6. <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/250999-pais-referendum-cataluna-maquina-injerencias>

the social networks that Europe is in decline. The only thing that makes Mallinson a valid source for RT is that he constantly expresses ideas that are close to those of Moscow.

Does the Kremlin dictate these outrageous titles, does it select its sources? Does it choose the subjects? Of course, it doesn't. It doesn't have to. Anna Politkovskaya saw this: "Self-censorship is now the business of trying to guess what you need to say and what you should not mention in order to stay at the top. The purpose of self-censorship is to keep your hands on a large, very large, salary. The choice is not between having a job or being unemployed, but between earning a fortune or a pittance. Any journalist has the option of moving over to Internet publications, which are more or less free to say what they want, while there are still a couple of newspapers that enjoy relative freedom too. Where there is freedom, however, there is low pay, irregularly paid. The big time is the mass media that play ball with the Kremlin."

The creation of this parallel world in which news is dictated by the interests of those in power and not by the supervision of its abuses, forms the centre of Russian disinformation. This focuses in particular on EU integration. Russia Today and Sputnik recently published the following titles:

- [EU's <dangerous> move to punish Hungary 'reveals its authoritarian grip'](#)
- Italy's deputy PM predicts 'political earthquake' for European Union
- ['It's an invasion!': UKIP leader blasts Brussels' migration policy in the European Parliament](#)
- [Soros and his '226 EU friends' thrust into spotlight by Farage – so who are they?](#)
- [Is Salvini the new Juncker? Eurosceptics push Italian minister as a president of European Commission](#)
- [Nigel Farage calls on EU to investigate George Soros funding, collusion.](#)

The line for the European elections in May 2019 has already been launched. The "stars" in this information are the leaders of the populist parties, who have set the goal of bringing the European to an end from the inside, described by them as a decadent, ineffective, corrupt institution. Viktor Orban's government in Hungary is always victimised, Nigel Farage is an idol and Matteo Salvini, a statesman who can save Europe from itself.

Haven't Vladimir Putin's party, United Russia sign agreements with the Lega in Italy and the National Assembly in France? Don't they share the same ideology and the same proposals? The Kremlin propaganda machine is at their service: it is logical.

Disinformation is spreading like cancer across the freedom of expression and information. The source of the problem lies in the fact that the law of supply and demand has reshaped the information market. Readers no longer buy paper newspapers, no longer listen to the radio and no longer watch TV as they did ten years ago. Everything is channelled today through telephones and computers. It is infinitely more practical to bring yourself up to date by consulting the headlines on Twitter, Facebook and Google. Yet the content which is selected by algorithms can be manipulated. There are many more or less sophisticated means, depending on the budget, to manipulate an algorithm. There are many studies on the use of "bots", automated accounts which aim to share content en masse thereby making it go viral. If tens of thousands of Facebook and Twitter profiles spread an RT title like "Napoleonic era redux? Europe should become an Empire says French Minister[7], it is highly likely that this will finally impact readers greatly. Ultimately, these algorithms reward popularity. The more information is shared, the more it will be made available to the users.

The real explanation for the spread of disinformation is however much simpler: human behaviour tends to privilege it. An important study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology recently concluded that "false political news travelled deeper and more broadly, reached more people, and was more viral than any other category of false information. False political news

7. interview with Bruno Le Maire for the Handelsblatt commented by RT on 12th November 2018

also diffused deeper more quickly, and reached more than 20,000 people nearly three times faster than all other types of false news reached 10,000 people.”

Why is there such a fascination with this? According to the authors[8], “What could explain such surprising results? One explanation emerges from information theory and Bayesian decision theory: People thrive on novelty. As others have noted, novelty attracts human attention, contributes to productive decision making, and encourages information-sharing. In essence, it can update our understanding of the world. When information is novel, it is not only surprising, but also more valuable-- both from an information theory perspective (it provides the greatest aid to decision-making), and from a social perspective (it conveys social status that one is ‘in the know,’ or has access to unique ‘inside’ information).”

Journalists are not just working for private or public enterprises. They administer, as a collective, a right that does not belong to them: that of a well-informed society, obliging the political and economic authorities to give account. The problem is that the technological revolution has allowed propagandists, who do not serve the general interest, but the interest of a few, some of whom might be the enemies of democracy, to disguise themselves as journalists.

The panel experts convened last year by the European Commissioner responsible for economic society and digital, Mariva Gabriel, to give its opinion on disinformation recommended in January 2018 that any new law targeting the control of disinformation should be shelved because in its opinion: “The final goal should be the creation of an open market for fact-checking that avoids a “monopoly of truth” which could be potentially abused in some countries and might not carry public approval in other countries. Such cooperation could be promoted through a joint public and private effort, for instance in the form of a public/private partnership. The entity managing such a network should have a board composed of experts and operate autonomously and independently, without interference by public powers.”

But there is a major pitfall: fact checking necessarily takes place after the publication of the fake news.

However, what is the point of a digital service checking the truth of something declared by Sputnik like “an independent Catalonia will recognise that Crimea is Russian? This information will already have been published. It will already have reached thousands of people. It will already have been shared on Twitter. It will be too late. The damage will have been done.

The Commission and Mariva Gabriel’s fear of entering the murky waters of legislation involving the freedom of information is legitimate. But it does not justify inertia in other areas. There are remedies other than new legislation. The Commission and the European Parliament can declare, as the USA has done, that the Russian state media are agents of propaganda. It does not mean prohibiting them from anything, but demanding that they respect the most basic rules of journalism: that they distinguish information from opinion, that they admit to their mistakes in good faith and that they show clearly where their information has come from. If they lie the authorities can, as French President Emmanuel Macron did, take the exceptional step and reject their accreditation, because this is reserved to professionals working with information and not to propagandists.

In addition to this, in the ilk of the UK, the institutions must have strategic communications departments which detect disinformation attacks and take steps to counter them. The action taken by Theresa May’s government during the failed poisoning of the spy Serguey Skripal in Salisbury is a perfect example of this. The British institutions provided reliable information, were totally transparent and did not falter in the face of the customary Russian threats. The result was that the truth prevailed, and RT was obliged to publish an embarrassing interview by its director with the two suspects. [9]

After the damage done by the disinformation spread during the Brexit referendum campaign Theresa May created a special unit, with her own budget and warned Russia: “[we know what you’re are doing, and you will not succeed.](#)”

However, the European institutions are sadly impotent. Nearly everything we now about Russian disinformation is due to the memorable work by the Union’s “StratCom

8. *The spread of true and false news online* Soroush Vosoughi1, Deb Roy1, Sinan Aral2, * Science 9 March 2018: Vol. 359, Issue 6380, pp. 1146-1151

9. <https://www.rt.com/news/438350-petrov-boshirov-interview-simonyan/>

Est” Task Force, a unit that fights to counter fake news created in 2015, whose achievements are all the more laudable in view of the extremely limited resources provided to it: only 1 million € granted by the European Parliament. It is certain that we can do more.

Moreover, initiatives that aim to protect investigative journalists are minimal. Any press organisation or journalist that realises that there is Russian interference in democratic processes is exposed to a formidable and implacable campaign of defamation. My own experience bears witness to this: after publishing my research on Russian interference during the Catalan referendum, which was taken up by the British Parliament and NATO’s General Assembly, I was accused of being a secret agent, of working for the CIA, of being in the pay of George Soros. The founder of Wikileaks, Julian Assange, called me a propagandist and went as far as asking for my dismissal from the newspaper I was working for until June last year. Finally, the Press Association of Madrid, the biggest of group of journalists in Spain, had to protect me against these attacks, which it qualified as a “breach of the

freedom of the press and a bid to deprive the citizens of information of general interest.”

This is the heart of the matter. The enemies of democracy know that journalists are not just employees of a company like any other. Whether they are aware of it or not, they have a collective right given by moral obligation and privilege. Thanks to their powers they have access to parliaments, speeches, courts and even to war fronts.

But they need to be protected against growing interference in their work and against the attacks that aim to undermine the institutions via the denigration of their work. The question regarding what the EU is prepared to do to defend its journalists remains unanswered.

David Alandete

Journalist and author of the book 'Noticias Falsas: La Nueva Arma de Destrucción Masiva'; (éditions Deusto) – (Fake News: the New Weapon of Massive Destruction).

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