

## Identifying disinformation: an ABC

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### Definitions of disinformation

Definitions of disinformation are widely available and largely agree on the essence. The Oxford English dictionary, for example, defines it as 'False information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media'. Online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, based on the Merriam-Webster dictionary, defines it similarly, as 'Intentionally false or inaccurate information that is spread deliberately. It is an act of deception and false statements to convince someone of untruth. Disinformation should not be confused with misinformation, information that is unintentionally false.' A research paper in *American Psychologist*, meanwhile, defines disinformation as 'information that is incorrect by intent', contrasting it with misinformation, which is 'information that is incorrect by accident' (Lewandowsky et.al., 2013).

These definitions all agree that there are two key aspects of disinformation:

- The falsehood of the information
- The intention to mislead

While defining disinformation is relatively easy, identifying it in

One of the key challenges in countering information warfare is identifying when it is taking place. The concept of disinformation is widely understood and has been exhaustively defined; however, the currently available definitions do not allow for the operational identification of disinformation in a sufficiently rapid manner to allow for effective countermeasures. This paper argues that the essence of disinformation is the intent to deceive. While such an intent is difficult to prove, it can be inferred by reference to three key criteria, termed the "ABC approach". These criteria are: the accuracy of factual statements, balance in reporting and the credibility of the sources chosen. This ABC approach is intended to give academics, analysts and policy-makers an operational method to determine whether disinformation has been committed in a given case.

practice is a more challenging problem. The truth or falsehood of the information given can generally be proven in time, through reference to sufficient evidence; this has especially become the case with the advent of social-media analysis, which has opened

up new avenues of evidence and greatly enlarged the available palette of witnesses (Czuperski et al, 2015). While establishing that falsehood in an operationally significant timescale is challenging (Nimmo, 2015), the accuracy of the information can generally be identified.

It is much harder to identify the intention to mislead, as this requires, at the extreme, an insight into the mental processes of an individual. Yet it is crucial to be able to distinguish between deliberate and accidental falsehood, because the deliberate spreading of false information is, in essence, an attack on the integrity of the institution concerned. Deliberately spreading lies about the performance of a publicly-listed company is an attack on that company and the integrity of the investment market; deliberately spreading lies about a person is an attack on that person; deliberately spreading lies in the course of a debate on government policy is an attack on the integrity of the democratic process. It is important for the integrity of those institutions to be able to identify the attacks and respond to the attackers.

Across Europe, governments and international organisations are grappling with the question of how to identify and respond to disinformation. The European Union's External Action Service has begun coordinating a network of journalists, non-governmental organisations, academics and officials aimed at identifying and analysing disinformation; the European Parliament's research service has published a briefing note on Russian disinformation (Bentzen & Russell, 2015); the Latvian government has set up a NATO-accredited Centre of Excellence to analyse disinformation and broader questions of strategic communications. These and similar initiatives all bear witness to the seriousness with which the problem is viewed, and the difficulty of developing a working definition of disinformation.

Disinformation is not the preserve of any one form of government. Democracies and autocracies alike can, and do, make use of the full range of weapons available to the state, including communications. However, democracies are subject to a range of checks and balances which are lacking in autocracies, and which make the spreading of disinformation more difficult. In democracies, independent and pluralist media, the scrutiny of political opponents, free and independent judiciaries and the activities of civil society all tend to set limits to the ability to deceive. Autocracies, which by their nature strive for control of their opponents, the media, the judiciary and civil society, can commit disinformation far more easily, and are much harder to challenge through the normal processes of the democratic state.

Regardless of the identity of the person or organisation seeking to deceive, however, the key question is how to establish the intent to disinform, once false information has been identified. This paper argues that such deliberation can be inferred by examining the accuracy of the information given, the balance of commentators interviewed and the credibility of the sources chosen: the ABC of disinformation.

### **Accuracy and the duty of care**

The first duty of those who speak to the public from positions of authority, such as politicians, journalists and academics, is to make sure that they are getting their facts right. This is a duty of care, and it can be stated in the following terms:

"Those who speak from a position of authority have the duty to ensure:

- 1) that any statement of fact which they make has been

subjected to a reasonable degree of verification to ensure its accuracy;

2) that their reporting ensures an appropriate balance in its use of commentators;

3) that due care is taken to ensure the credibility of the sources quoted.

Those who fail to exhibit a reasonable degree of care in these areas are committing disinformation. "

A "reasonable degree" is, of necessity, a flexible term. For example, where a speaker is found to have given false information, a number of factors will play a role in determining whether there appears to have been an intent to mislead:

- Could the speaker have found out the correct information easily?
- Was the correct information readily available from multiple sources?
- Did the speaker issue a correction?
- Did the speaker qualify their statement at the time? (E.g. by the addition of qualifiers such as 'apparently' or 'allegedly')

Consider, for example, the statement made by New Jersey governor and Republican presidential hopeful Chris Christie on 16 December 2015, in an attack on U.S. President Barack Obama's foreign-policy credentials, as reported by New Jersey website NJ.com:

"This president's not trusted ... but I'll tell you this: When I stand across from King Hussein of Jordan, and I say to him, 'You have a friend again, sir, who will stand with you to fight this fight,' he'll change his mind."

This statement is factually inaccurate: King Hussein died in 1999. It is an error which is readily identifiable, with multiple online sources identifying the current monarch. However, Christie subsequently admitted in public that he 'misspoke', correcting his own error. As such, it is reasonable to suppose that his initial inaccuracy was not an act of deliberate falsehood, but a factual slip.

Compare with this the statement made by the Secretary of the National Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nikolai Patrushev, to Elena Chernenko, security correspondent for the newspaper Kommersant, in an interview published on 22 June 2015:

"We all remember the phrase used by the Americans to describe Russia's closest neighbours. They called them 'front-line states', unambiguously showing that the 'front line' goes along our state border. Against that background, it has been announced that the NATO command is planning to deploy a contingent of up to 30,000 people here."

The number 30,000 is diagnostic. By quoting it, Patrushev was referring to a decision taken by NATO defence ministers in February 2015 - that is, some four months earlier - to increase the size of the NATO Response Force (NRF), a rapid-reaction corps created in 2002. The decision was announced by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, who said in a press conference at the time, "Altogether, the enhanced NATO Response Force will count up to around 30,000 troops."

However, Patrushev's comment contained a significant factual error: the NATO decision was not to "deploy a contingent of up to 30,000 people here", to the Russian border. It was to increase

the number of forces allocated to the NRF, while leaving the troops involved based in their own countries.

This is a point of fundamental importance. NATO does not have its own soldiers: individual member states provide (or sometimes fail to provide) the troops requested by NATO's commanders. In the case of the NRF, members take it in turns to put rapid-reaction units on standby, in case NATO needs them. Those units stay based in their home country, unless they are called out on exercise or to answer a crisis.

The NRF has operated in that way since it was created in 2002. Stoltenberg effectively confirmed that it would continue to do so at the same press conference, when he said that "The lead element of this land brigade will be ready to move within as little as 48 hours (...) Six Allies declared today that they are ready to act as framework nations for the new Spearhead Force. France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom have offered to take up this role, in rotation, in the coming years."

In other words, Patrushev's claim to Kommersant (subsequently amplified by other Russian-language outlets, including the state news agency, RIA Novosti) was false. NATO was not planning to move its troops to the Russian border: it was planning to put more troops on standby in their home countries.

The question therefore arises whether this was an accident or a deliberate error. First of all, it is worth noting that Stoltenberg's statement was not explicit on the issue of where the enhanced NRF would be based; it appears to have taken for granted that listeners would understand. Moreover, at the same press conference he spoke of setting up "multinational command and control units" on the territory of eastern allies. An uninformed and inattentive commentator could, therefore, have concluded

that the NRF as a whole would be based in Eastern Europe.

However, open-source material on the NRF is readily available, not least NATO's own fact sheets and official statements. Furthermore, reporting from the February meeting, including by outlets such as Stars and Stripes (Lekic, 2015) and the Associated Press (Dahlburg, 2015), made clear that the enhanced NRF units would be based in their home countries - with Reuters even underlining that the decision "falls short of the hopes of some eastern European countries for NATO to set up large bases in the region" (Croft, 2015).

In addition, Patrushev is not an uninformed commentator: he is the head of the Russian National Security Council, a post he has held since 2008, and prior to that he was the director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), the country's premier intelligence-gathering organisation. Indeed, it could be argued that he is one of the best-informed officials on matters of national security in the Russian apparatus. Equally importantly, he was not speaking in the heat of the moment, but more than four months after Stoltenberg made his statement, and therefore had ample time to verify the state of the situation.

It is legitimate to assume that, by nature of Patrushev's background, his current role, the long existence of the NRF, and the importance of NATO in Russia's national security, he both could and should have been aware of the true nature of the NRF enhancement by June 2015. Yet he misstated the facts. He did so explicitly and definitely, without seeking to nuance the statement ("planning to deploy a contingent of up to 30,000 people here"), and he never corrected his misstatement. His intentions in so doing cannot be proven, but it is clear that he failed in the basic duty of care.

By the criteria outlined above, Patrushev committed an act of disinformation when he made his claim.

## Balance

A further duty of care falls upon the media to ensure balance in their reporting. This is because a false impression of events can be conveyed, even without the dissemination of false information, if the reporting only reflects one side of a dispute.

An example of this concerns a report published by the China People's Daily on 1 February 2016. The report analysed the presence of a U.S. warship close to the South China Sea islands known in Chinese as the Xisha, and in English as the Paracels, with reference to four commentators - two experts and two officials. All four commentators accused the U.S. of violating Chinese territorial waters and stoking tensions in the region. The unnamed journalist opened their story with the statement that, "according to observers," the U.S. move was an attempt to return tension to the region.

In terms of pure fact, there is no indication that this report falsified any of the information presented. The story states prominently that it is reporting the opinions of observers, rather than the journalist's own opinion; the observers are named and their positions identified; all four have expertise relevant to the story.

However, two of the four "observers" are researchers at facilities subordinate to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) - respectively, the PLA Naval Military Studies Research Institute and the PLA National Defence University. The other two are officials from the Chinese foreign and defence ministries. All four are thus employees of the Chinese state and representatives of the state's point of view. Since the American point of view

was barely mentioned in the report, it clearly fails to ensure balance.

The question then arises whether the reporter could have provided balancing quotes by making a reasonable effort. In this case, a Pentagon spokesman issued a statement on the incident, giving the U.S. justification. The U.S. stance on the South China Sea has been made publicly available in a variety of policy documents posted online. It would have taken no more than a swift Google search to provide a number of balancing quotes.

Thus, the journalist and editorial team could, very easily, have found alternative sources to provide balance to their story. There is no indication that they made the effort to do so. As such, their report can be considered a piece of deliberate disinformation.

## Credibility

A report can also be considered as spreading disinformation if it relies for part or whole of its effect on a commentator, or group of commentators, who cannot be considered as credible experts on the issue in question, when other, more credible experts could have been found easily.

A striking example of this comes from Russian state-run TV station RT (formerly Russia Today). In a news report on the forthcoming Dutch referendum on the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine published on 9 January 2016, the channel quoted as its sole external analyst, "legal expert and international affairs editor for Russia Insider, Alexander Mercouris." Mercouris was commenting on the political significance of the referendum:

"My guess is that people in the Netherlands are opposed more to the EU expansion, which leads to more immigration into western

Europe from eastern Europe. And they don't want thousands upon thousands of people coming from Ukraine... One of the reasons why people in Ukraine have wanted it [the agreement], is precisely because that's exactly what they want to do."

Mercouris is regularly cited in RT stories, usually providing comments on foreign affairs. The justification for invoking him is usually that he is "international affairs editor for Russia Insider". However, on one occasion more in-depth identification was given: when the story concerned the UK legal report on the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, Mercouris was cited as "a practicing lawyer for 12 years at the Royal Courts of Justice" (Bridge, 2016).

The biography is true as far as it goes: Mercouris is known to have worked in the Royal Courts of Justice for twelve years, before becoming a barrister in 2006. However, he was reported as struck off from his post in 2012 after a case in which he reportedly confessed to having defrauded a client, faked one High Court judge's signature and falsely accused another of a plot to kidnap and intimidate him (Wardrop, 2012).

The first question is therefore whether Mercouris can be viewed as a credible authority on either legal or foreign affairs.

It is, of course, a logical editorial decision to ask a lawyer for their opinion on an issue of law. For example, when the BBC reported on the launch of the inquiry in 2014, it quoted the UK's former director of public prosecutions, Lord Ken Macdonald QC, as part of its coverage.

However, Macdonald stepped down from his post as director of public prosecutions to return to work as a barrister, and subsequently held a string of high-profile appointments, including heading a government review of counter-terrorism

policy in 2011. By contrast, Mercouris was expelled from the legal profession in disgrace and is not known to have worked in it since. While he can be assumed to have expertise in the inner workings of the UK legal system, he can hardly be viewed as a disinterested and impartial commentator on the institution which expelled him.

RT's regular reference to Mercouris on other issues of foreign policy is more curious. According to his published biography, Mercouris spent some 18 years at the Royal Courts of Justice in a variety of roles. There is no indication that he worked part-time; it therefore appears unlikely that he could have developed in-depth expertise in foreign policy during the same period.

Since he was struck off, he could, indeed, have begun a new career as a foreign-affairs analyst. However, his official biography on the Russia Insider website makes no mention of any foreign-affairs qualification, research or experience, other than his legal background: "Alexander is a writer on international affairs with a special interest in Russia and law. He has written extensively on the legal aspects of NSA spying and events in Ukraine in terms of human rights, constitutionality and international law. He worked for 12 years in the Royal Courts of Justice in London as a lawyer, specializing in human rights and constitutional law."

According to this biography, his areas of expertise are Russia and the law. As such, there is nothing to indicate that he has in-depth expert knowledge of issues such as Dutch voting preferences, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's diplomatic standing or the practices of European mainstream media. There is, therefore, no reason to consider him a credible expert in these fields - yet these are issues on which he has commented for RT and Russia Insider.

The question then becomes whether RT could have chosen a more credible commentator by making a reasonable effort. Mercouris is, according to his profile on Russia Insider, resident in London. London is home to literally thousands of legal practices. It hosts the University of London, numerous foreign-policy think tanks and most of the world's major broadcasters, and is a short train ride from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Therefore, it is legitimate to assume that an editor in London, or seeking a quote from London, could, if they chose to make the effort, find a practicing or honourably retired lawyer to comment on a legal matter, and a serving foreign-policy analyst from an active academic institution or think tank to comment on a foreign-policy issue.

By turning to Mercouris as its commentator, RT made the choice not to refer to a more credible source. As such, it can be considered to have committed disinformation by publishing a polemic statement from a commentator whose impartiality and expertise are open to question.

## Conclusion

Disinformation is easy to define, but difficult to prove conclusively. Yet there is a pressing need to improve the way by which the Western public and institutions can identify it in a timely manner.

The ABC paradigm answers this need by identifying indicators which can be used to infer the probable presence, or absence, of the intent to disinform. Where such cases are identified, it is sufficient to ask whether the speaker could have avoided the violation by taking reasonable care in checking their facts, finding balancing quotes or seeking out a credible commentator.

Care and judgement must be exercised in the use of this ABC paradigm: mistakes do happen, editors make errors of judgement and politicians fumble their lines. However, these errors can be corrected, and indeed should be corrected. If a speaker or a news outlet violates the ABC principles repeatedly, and does not correct their errors, they should be considered as committing disinformation.

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