Topical Digest

Truth, the media and the public sphere

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The pressure on the European Union's information ecosystem, including on public trust in free media, is increasing. There is growing concern over the potential impact of a 'post-truth' era and the proliferation of 'fake news' on the EU's democratic values. In the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine includes an 'information war' which has forced not only the EU, but also NATO to respond. At the same time, the EU and its allies are facing destabilising campaigns from ISIL/Da'esh. How do key actors address disinformation? How has their strategic communication evolved? And what can we learn from past and present approaches?

'Fake news' and the EU's response
At a glance by Naja Bentzen, March 2017
'Fake news' – deliberately fabricated stories posing as journalism with the aim of manipulating readers – became an increasingly visible global phenomenon during last year's presidential election campaign in the United States, not least due to the growing use of social media as a source for news. The increasing concern in the EU over the challenges that 'fake news' and disinformation pose has sparked calls for more action.

How to spot when news is fake
At a glance by Naja Bentzen and Christian Dietrich, April 2017
Viral 'fake news' received more engagement from Facebook users than real news in the final three months of the US presidential election campaign last year. A growing number of EU citizens (46 % on average in 2016) follow news on social media. Six out of ten news items shared on social media have not been read by the user who shares them. What can you do to spot and counter fake news and disinformation?

Understanding disinformation and fake news
At a glance by Naja Bentzen, April 2017
Recent political and security-related developments have increased the focus on, and concern over, the use of biased and deceptive information – including disinformation and 'fake news' – as a tool to exert strategic influence. The growing emphasis on countering the manipulation of information calls for an equally attentive approach to the usage and definition of the terms involved.

Western Balkans: Media freedom trends 2017
At a glance by Velina Lilyanova, May 2017
Media freedom in the Western Balkans continues to be undermined by systematic shortcomings, and remains a priority reform area on these countries' EU accession agendas. In recent years, the region has experienced a trend of erosion of the media and has not made progress in addressing its long-standing challenges.

US strategic communication to counter foreign propaganda
Briefing by Naja Bentzen, October 2016
The 9/11 attacks reignited the need to respond to the propaganda of third parties such as Al-Qaida and, more recently, ISIL/Da'esh. Meanwhile, the growing role of state-led media campaigns targeting foreign audiences has boosted calls for the USA to upgrade its efforts. At the same time, government action is challenged by the difficulties of inter-agency coordination as well as by legal limitations.

StratCom tools: US international broadcasting
At a glance by Naja Bentzen, February 2017
US international broadcasting has been a key instrument in the country's strategic communications toolbox since World War II. Whereas growing propaganda efforts from foreign state and non-state actors have boosted calls for reforms, there is uncertainty over the future US direction and international role in this field.

Communicating Europe in third countries
Briefing by Patryk Pawlak, March 2017

Intensified propaganda and disinformation campaigns seeking to discredit the EU and eventually undermine its position have highlighted the need for a strategic EU approach to communication. At the same time, effective EU communication in third countries plays a key role in countering jihadist propaganda in the EU's neighbourhood and stopping it spilling over into EU territory.

Russia's information war: Propaganda or counter-propaganda?
Briefing by Martin Russell, October 2016

In the West, Russia is more often seen as an instigator than a target of disinformation. However, the Kremlin claims that Russia must take defensive measures, as the USA and its allies are waging an information war against it. ISIL/Da'esh, which produces an increasing amount of Russian-language material, is another major adversary. At home, the Kremlin has clamped down on media and civil society to exclude external influences. Internationally, it has launched media tools, such as news channel RT, to compete with Western media.

Canada's strategic communication to counter foreign propaganda
Briefing by Naja Bentzen, October 2016

Over the decades, Canada has taken evolving measures to counter foreign propaganda from non-state and state actors. With both hard and soft tactics and strategies, through legislation, community outreach and military operations, Canada aims to provide alternative narratives that rival hostile propaganda and emphasise the country's diversity; to connect with local communities and engage them in countering radicalisation; and to promote Canadian values such as freedom, respect for cultural differences, and law and order.

North Korea's propaganda strategy
Briefing by Enrico D'Ambrogio, October 2016

Kim Jong Un has helped modernise the image of the North Korean leadership. The regime's nationalistic narrative increasingly targets young people and elites. The USA, South Korea, and occasionally Japan, are the targets of bellicose rhetoric that has often had a destabilising effect on the region. Anti-US propaganda has been a primary theme in Pyongyang's efforts to boost patriotic feeling, while the duel with Seoul resembles old-fashioned psychological warfare.

NATO strategic communications - An evolving battle of narratives
Briefing by Naja Bentzen, July 2016

Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine and its illegal annexation of Crimea has forced NATO to respond to a new reality. Meanwhile, the NATO-accredited Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, established in 2014, contributes to the alliance's communication efforts. In the face of increasingly aggressive information campaigns from the east and the south, cooperation between NATO and the EU is set to increase.

Ukraine joins the information war with Russia
At a glance by Naja Bentzen, May 2015

Ukraine's policies on the information front are characterised by Russia's hybrid war against it, including massive disinformation campaigns. Kyiv has responded to with a top-down information policy approach. However, grassroots media initiatives have gained popularity among the population in Ukraine.

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