

Understanding disinformation and fake news

Recent political and security-related developments have increased the focus on, and concern over, the use of biased and deceptive information 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.

Manipulation of information: old tools, new tricks

Propaganda, disinformation and 'fake news' are interconnected terms and are sometimes used interchangeably. Although all three terms, as they are currently understood, imply a degree of purposeful, systematic manipulation of [information](#) – defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as 'knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event; that of which one is apprised or told; intelligence, news' – the broader term 'propaganda' dates back to the 17th century, whereas 'disinformation' was coined during the Cold War. Fake news may be as old as propaganda itself, but the term is currently trending.

Propaganda: the purposeful dissemination of information and ideas

Propaganda originally meant disseminating or promoting ideas, deriving from the Latin *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, a board of control established by the Vatican in 1622 to propagate the Roman Catholic faith. In the context of the Counter-Reformation, the word soon lost its neutrality and over time became derogatory. The OED defines [propaganda](#) as the 'systematic dissemination of information', especially in a 'biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view'.

While the French philosopher Jacques Driencourt [asserted](#) that 'everything is propaganda', the term is most often associated with [political persuasion](#) and psychological warfare. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines [psychological warfare](#) as 'the use of propaganda against an enemy ... with the intent to break his will to fight or resist, and sometimes to render him favourably disposed to one's position'. Propaganda can be used by state actors to further national goals. It can also be used to strengthen or recruit non-state actors such as resistance fighters or terrorists (as has been seen in the case of the 'Islamic State' (ISIL/Da'esh), which uses propaganda to [recruit](#) young people all over the world).

Just as propaganda can be used by different actors, in various contexts and for differing purposes, channels of communication are constantly evolving, and have included banknotes, photocopying machines, posters, stamps and [porcelain](#). Whereas Genghis Khan (1162-1227) and his Mongols planted rumours about their cruelty and number of horsemen long before the printing press made the mass production of information possible, Garth S Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell in *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Sage, 2015) note that Twitter – founded only in 2006 – essentially combines the oral tradition with new electronic means of dissemination.

Disinformation: systematic and intentional deception

The OED defines [disinformation](#) as the 'dissemination of deliberately false information, especially when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it'. The OED lists the first English-language reference as *The Times*, 3 June 1955, and suggests that the term 'perhaps' derives from the Russian *дезинформация* (transliterated as 'dezinformacija'), first recorded in 1949. In its 2011 [Draft Convention on International Information Security](#), Russia lists 'disinformation' as a key threat to international peace and security in the information space. The same text defines 'information warfare' as a conflict 'in the information space with the goal of inflicting damage to information systems' (e.g. cyber attacks) as well as involving 'mass psychological campaigns against the population of a State in order to destabilise society and the government'. Russia's '[chief propagandist](#)' and head of the news agency, Rossiya, Dmitry Kiselyov, asserts that information wars have become '[the main type of warfare](#)'. Pro-Kremlin information [campaigns](#) boost Moscow's [narrative](#) of a 'weak and morally decayed EU



that is about to collapse', according to which the EU has banned the [baptism](#) of children, and the March 2017 terror attack in London was plotted by [Brussels](#) to deter Theresa May from triggering Brexit.

Misinformation: unintentionally incorrect information

The guide '[Evaluating information](#)' by Johns Hopkins University Library (JHUL) clearly distinguishes between disinformation and misinformation. Defining misinformation as 'erroneous or incorrect information', the JHUL goes on to explain that misinformation – as opposed to disinformation – is 'intention neutral', thus not deliberate, 'just wrong or mistaken'. As examples of misinformation, JHUL lists urban legends; fabricated or untrue stories disseminated by people who believe them. Although most sources seem to agree on the distinction between disinformation as intentionally deceptive and misinformation as unintentionally incorrect, some sources do suggest that the two are synonymous.

Fake news: herding people in a specific direction

The phenomenon of 'fake news' is at least as [old](#) as the printing press. However, social media and their personalisation [tools](#) have accelerated the spread of fake news and the [use of the term](#). The trend gained momentum and visibility during the final months of the 2016 United States (US) presidential election, when viral fake news prompted more [engagement](#) on Facebook than real news. The Australian Macquarie Dictionary (AMD), which chose 'fake news' as its [word of the year for 2016](#), defines it as 'disinformation and hoaxes published on websites for political purposes or to drive web traffic, the incorrect information being passed along by social media'. A growing number of EU citizens (46 % on average in 2016) follow [news on social media](#); six out of ten news items shared are passed on [without](#) being read first; and US [research](#) has shown that most young, digital-savvy school and college students have difficulties in identifying fake news. Fake news headlines seem tailored to trick users into sharing the stories, making them spread fast and far among like-minded users. Sometimes the aim is simply to generate traffic ('[clickbait](#)'). However, when designed to deceive users for political purposes, it falls under 'disinformation'; aided by users who genuinely believe and [react](#) to the stories.

International media watchdogs warn against 'misleading the public'

The increasing use of fake news as a slur for unwelcome media (reports) – for example, by US President [Donald Trump](#) – has sparked warnings from international media freedom watchdogs. For example, the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, the OSCE representative on freedom of the media, and other international monitors of freedom of expression issued a [joint declaration](#) in March 2017 on fake news, disinformation and propaganda. They expressed alarm at 'instances in which public authorities denigrate, intimidate and threaten the media, including by stating that the media is 'the opposition' or is 'lying', thus undermining public trust in journalism as a public watchdog, with the risk of misleading the public by 'blurring the lines between disinformation and media products containing independently verifiable facts'.

Official EU usage of the terms 'disinformation', 'propaganda' and 'fake news'

Before '**disinformation**' became widely used in connection with Russia's actions in Ukraine, the Council in its 2012 decision concerning restrictive measures against Syria ([2012/739/CFSP](#)) used the term to describe certain Syrian media outlets. The [European Council](#) in March 2015 asked the European Union High Representative, Federica Mogherini, in cooperation with EU institutions and Member States, to submit an action plan on strategic communication to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. As a result, the EEAS's [East StratCom task force](#) was set up in September 2015. Since then, the team – consisting of some ten people – has been analysing disinformation trends, explaining disinformation narratives and myth-busting in its weekly [newsletters](#), as part of its broader efforts.

In its June 2015 [resolution](#) on EU-Russia relations, the EP expressed concern over Russia's '**political propaganda**' and called on the EU to support projects aimed at 'deconstructing propaganda within the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries'. In its July 2015 [resolution](#) on the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EP reiterated its calls for the EU to boost its capacity to 'counter propaganda campaigns'. The EP, in its [November 2016 resolution](#) on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda, warned against Russian anti-EU propaganda, and called for 'proper staffing and adequate budgetary resources' to reinforce the East StratCom task force.

In December 2016, the European Parliament's then-president, Martin Schulz, called for a European [solution](#) to the problem of **fake news**. Andrus Ansip, European Commission vice-president in charge of the digital single market as well as digital economy and society, said in January 2017 he was 'worried' about fake news, 'especially after the elections in the United States'. He urged Facebook and other tech giants to boost their [efforts](#) to counter the problem.