
The Analysis of Narratives and Disinformation in the Global Information Environment Amid Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

We are currently witnessing widespread disinformation, propaganda, and manipulation in the information space, potentially harmful consequences on national security. The COVID-19 pandemic has become an opportunity to increase activity in conducting offensive information activities and building narratives affecting the global information environment. This article aimed to analyze the narrative and disinformation in the global information space amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was on examining various forms and methods of spreading disinformation and the possible effects of undertaken actions and entities conducting disinformation campaigns.

This article is primarily based on a review of press and government information, analyzed using the open-source method. The paper is also based on theoretical research methods such as analysis, synthesis, and deduction and examining the content of source materials, which include scientific studies of analytical centers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the spread of aggressive information campaigns aimed at managing perception. Some of these activities are linked to intentional and coordinated activities carried out by the state or state sponsored actors. The main objective of the activities undertaken is to strengthen the international position of certain entities.

Keywords: Disinformation, narrative, China, Russia, USA.

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1. Introduction

Disinformation is psychological by nature, and its mechanisms of action and their consequences affect people's cognitive sphere, affecting their emotions and changing the perception of reality. The coronavirus pandemic has created extremely favorable conditions for offensive psychological operations. The unprecedented public health crisis has made societies scared and confused in the face of the new deadly virus, making them even more vulnerable to operations of influence. It should be noted that misinformation, as opposed to misinformation, is not simply inaccurate but is designed in a specific way to mislead and create a specific perception of reality on the part of the recipient. Foreign actors often use already existing misinformation (misinformation) in each society, and instead of creating history from scratch, they use existing messages to convert them into specific misinformation.

Analyzing disinformation and narration in a global information environment is not an easy task. Namely, these studies' subject is difficult to detect, the techniques and means used may be quite different, and most importantly, the source of disinformation is difficult to identify. The assessment of disinformation campaigns and created narratives is largely based on examining the content of government positions and media messages in the global information flow and their sources of origin. To complete the picture, additional sources come from government and non-government analysis centers.

The article's main aim is to examine the current narrative and disinformation in the global information environment in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives have become: to present concrete examples of conducting disinformation campaigns, to define the created narratives, and to identify the actors influencing the global information environment. In this paper, a solution to the research problem in the question was: What entities, how, and with what methods and tools are trying to influence the creation of the societies' perception of reality by influencing the global information environment?

Due to the objective reasons for the possibility of conducting information operations on a global scale, the author limited his analysis to three main actors conducting psychological operations of influence - China, Russia, and the USA. The search for answers to the research problem presented in the question form has become the basis for this paper's organization. The first part of the work contains preliminary considerations on the conditions of the global information environment in the context of conducting disinformation campaigns and creating a narrative in the COVID-19 pandemic face. Then there are examples of disinformation distributed and narrations created by China, Russia, and the USA. In the last part of the study, conclusions are presented to address a research problem constructed as a question.

2. Conditionality of the Global Information Environment in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The political chaos that has arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic is both a threat and an opportunity to carry out offensive information operations more effectively. These operations' effectiveness is increased if certain criteria are met in the places where they are carried out.

The first of these is a connected internet community of coherent interests, which provides a network effect of spreading disinformation. This means that disinformation can be spread very quickly and reach a wide audience. An important role in this criterion is played by so-called "super-spreaders," i.e., persons who have significant influence through their position in the network or political or cultural significance. People who are considered authorities in society can significantly speed up spreading disinformation while giving credibility. The second criterion is the level of public confidence in power - especially in politicians and mainstream media. The public's mistrust of the political elite and power in the state makes disinformation campaigns more effective. The third criterion is the occurrence of a crisis or a situation of high unrest in the country. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this situation must be considered to remain extremely high for a much longer period of time than in other crises such as a large-scale disaster or terrorist attack. This condition also encourages disinformation campaigns. The last criterion is the level of emotional attachment to the content distributed. Disinformation is more likely to reach a wide audience if the subject gives it emotional expression.

These factors are well known by foreign actors conducting disinformation campaigns. It should be stressed that they are primarily the result of the State's local conditions and are usually not created by foreign entities but are used by them. They may also be a result of the activities of less coordinated networks of various smaller entities. Disinformation campaigns highlight society's vulnerability to issues and may reveal the motivations of those who run them. The political chaos that has arisen due to the COVID-19 pandemic is both a threat and an opportunity to carry out offensive information operations more effectively. These operations' effectiveness is increased if certain criteria are met in the places where they are carried out.

3. The Case of China

China has a unique political war model, which has been called the "three wars" concept, in which the psychological field is one of the foundations of its operation. The concept is based on the coordinated use of psychological warfare, media warfare with public opinion, and legal warfare to gain "discursive power" over the adversary. This power is based on controlling the perception and shaping of specific narratives that will attack the opponent's interests while supporting the Chinese. The Chinese military defined this multidimensional strategy in the 2003 Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army and reflected Beijing's continued efforts to manage perception and suppress the response capacity of its opponents both nationally and internationally. China's disinformation campaigns and actions to

shape the global narrative in the face of the coronavirus pandemic are an example of a war based on public scrutiny (Kania, 2020).

The Chinese narrative focuses primarily on the spread of speculation that the coronavirus originated outside China. Initially, the victims of such false accusations were South Korea and Italy when, in early 2020, the Chinese state media claimed the virus was from these countries (Ha, 2020). In March, the Chinese narrative changed, transferring the responsibility for the pandemic to the USA. Zhao Lijian, Deputy Director of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, is an example of conducting this narrative and avoiding responsibility. He accused a member of the American army of bringing the virus to China, stating that it came from a US military laboratory. The alleged credibility of this message has been reinforced by official accounts of Chinese consulates and ambassadors on Twitter. Nowadays, watching the activities of Chinese officials and the media it must be acknowledged that the leading narrative line of CCP is that the virus originated in the USA Westcott and Jiang, 2020)

In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, China has also significantly increased its global information impact, as evidenced by the more than 300 percent increase in Twitter accounts associated with Chinese government officials and Chinese embassies and ambassadors since April 2019. With the state media's help, these accounts were spreading false information accusing the United States of a pandemic (Watts, 2020).

China uses various channels for its content, acting on many levels. Namely, the China Global Television Network published a video on YouTube in March addressed to viewers from the Middle East. An Arab-speaking presenter presented a thesis that American military athletes could have brought the virus in October in Wuhan. The film had nearly 400,000 screenings at the end of July 2020 (CGTN Arabic, 2020). Using the CCP's propaganda outlets, the Chinese government is also avoiding responsibility for the rapid escalation of the pandemic by accusing the United States and other Western countries of improperly managing the crisis (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020).

The Chinese government also influences foreign governments, as exemplified by the German Ministry of the Interior's information, which reported that Chinese diplomats urged Berlin to present the Chinese measures taken to combat the coronavirus in a positive light (Lau, 2020). Another evidence of this is the Chinese ambassador's action to Australia, who threatened to take retaliatory economic action against Australia if an independent investigation into Beijing's response to the coronavirus pandemic was carried out, which could reveal irregularities in the action taken.

China also has an effective impact on the European environment. Namely, China has forced the EU to tone down its criticism in a report dated on the 24th of April

(EUvsDISINFO, 2020) on Chinese disinformation operations. In the original version of the report, China was presented as a country conducting a "global disinformation campaign" to avoid blame for the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic using open and covert actions. However, following the intervention of Beijing, this section was removed (Lau, 2020). This situation shows China's ability to influence foreign governments and international narrative in the face of a pandemic. It is only part of a broad information war strategy.

Despite the EU's submissiveness in the context of this report, in June, it decided to publish a strategy document that openly accused China and Russia of conducting targeted disinformation campaigns on coronavirus. Foreign propaganda was found to be sponsored by various governments. The European Commission also called on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google to take stronger action on their platforms to counteract disinformation. It was also pointed out that "Given the novelty of the virus, gaps in knowledge have proven to be an ideal breeding ground for false or misleading narratives to spread" (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2020). However, to immediately mitigate the conclusions presented in the document, EU Foreign Minister Josep Borrell assured the Chinese Foreign Minister on the same day that the EU "is not going to embark on any kind of Cold War with China" (EU says China, 2020).

China is also trying to shape the narrative in the global information environment through the World Health Organization, as exemplified by the statement by WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who strongly praised the "effective" response of CCPs to the crisis while completely ignoring the WHO recommendations on how to stop the spread of the virus, which Beijing did not follow. Moreover, he kept silent that China stopped spreading signals about the danger of COVID-19 while criticizing other countries for their reaction. This demonstrates China's asymmetric influence on the WHO, which has helped shape a specific narrative in favor of CCP interests. Interestingly, Ghebreyesus himself warned about the fake news, claiming that it spreads faster and easier than the virus (Collins, 2020; The United Nations Department of Global Communications, 2020).

The Taiwanese government reported in March 2020 that China, running a disinformation campaign, was using bots and fictitious accounts to spread fake information in social media around the world. In Taiwan's case, it was found that the Chinese disinformation was primarily aimed at causing panic among the public (Lien, 2020). To maintain control over its narrative, the Chinese government expelled American journalists in March 2020 from three U.S. news organizations, including The Times (Tracy, Wong, and Jakes, 2020).

During the coronavirus pandemic, China offered its assistance to more than 130 countries and international organizations by sending them masks, protective suits, tests, and Chinese medical teams. Such action in the context of this work can be seen

as a further part of shaping the global narrative of China's indispensable leadership in the fight against COVID-19 and presenting Beijing as a responsible global leader in health that has dealt with the virus. They want to create an image that each successive wave in other countries is solely the result of other governments (news ctgn, 2020).

In China's narrative formulation, there is a correlation between the statements of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their representatives being consistently reproduced by foreign Chinese media such as the Global Times and People's Daily. These messages are also further disseminated by Chinese ambassadors and government officials in social media and various interviews and statements to foreign media. The content published by Chinese representatives on Twitter is shared by thousands of other fake accounts, giving the impression of popularity and credibility of certain narratives (Legucka and Przychodniak, 2020).

Government entities primarily run the Chinese disinformation campaign. Chinese actions aim to reduce the American influence limiting China's actions on the international scene and undermining the effectiveness of global democratic institutions. The most important role in China's global information apparatus is the state media and Chinese diplomats pushing the same selected superior false narratives.

The global Chinese narrative can be summarized in three main points:

- 1.The virus most likely does not come from China and was developed outside Beijing - in the USA.
- 2.China has successfully managed the virus by proving its effectiveness in dealing with crises.
- 3.China's authoritarian system has proved itself to be perfect in the fight against the pandemic, as opposed to countries with democratic systems, which have proved ineffective in fighting the crisis (Niquet, 2020).

4. The Case of Russia

When considering the Russian approach to psychological operations, the assumptions of the so-called "Gerasimov doctrine" should be cited. Chief of General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Army General Valery Gerasimov, published an article on 26 February 2013 in which he outlined the concept of a new generation of war (Gerasimov, 2020). He combined the Soviets' tactics with strategic thinking about total war and developed a new generation of war theory, in which one of the key elements is the means of information war. Gerasimov primarily claims that the border between war and peace is now blurred. The goal of a new generation of war is not to physically destroy the enemy's forces and infrastructure but to break the resistance and morale of the population and the ability of the state to resist. In achieving this goal, non-military means play a greater role than traditional warfare,

and therefore Gerasimov described the ratio of military to non-military means as 1:4 (Jórárt, Rácz, 2017). In the article, he wrote that "remote, non-contact influence on the enemy becomes the main way to achieve the objectives of tation" (Gerasimov, 2020). The war is being waged on all fronts with various actors and tools such as hackers, media, businesspeople, disinformation, propaganda, and influence agents. Thanks to the Internet and social media, it is possible to conduct psychological operations on a huge scale. The article is considered by many to be the most useful articulation of Russia's modern strategy for conducting a total information war (McKew, 2020).

Russia has its own center for psychological impact operations, located in St. Petersburg, called the Internet Research Agency - also known as the Kremlin troll factory (Calamur, 2020). The owner of the organization is a Russian businessman closely related to Vladimir Putin - Yevgeny Prigozhin. It should be stressed that it is subject to the USA's personal sanctions for attempts to overthrow the American democratic processes (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2020). Instead of creating new narratives and inventing false messages, the Internet Research Agency relies on real events and real conversations. They correct in a specific way giving them an emotional dimension by creating specially tailored messages for specific social groups. They give a specific narrative to existing information and ongoing discussions.

The Washington Post, in its research, proves that the activity of this organization is based on broadening the existing divisions among American society during the crisis, rather than creating new ones. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, it uses discussions about the virus, on the one hand, criticizing the reactions of the liberals and adding to the narrative that a coronavirus is only a tool for taking away freedom. On the other hand, they suggest that Donald Trump's administration's actions are inadequate, blaming the US pandemic on the president. Real Americans make such arguments, and the Russian organization's activities only publicize the most harmful of them, making them even more popular (Linvill and Warren, 2020).

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Russian narratives are based primarily on evoking and fueling anxiety and panic among people. It uses the uncertainty and chaos in society caused by the coronavirus pandemic to perpetuate disinformation. According to these assumptions, Russia is trying to shape people's perception by stoking fear of, among other things:

1. The imposition of martial law in the USA (Army national guard, 2020).
2. The possibility of class wars in western countries (Clark, 2020).
3. Loss of civil liberties and government seizures (Buyniski, 2020).
4. Using the coronavirus pandemic for political struggle (Bridge, 2020).

Russia is also trying to present conspiracy theories about coronavirus. Namely, in March, the media company ZVEZDA, controlled by the Russian armed forces,

published an article entitled "Bill Gates, a secret laboratory and a conspiracy of pharmaceutical companies: who can benefit from coronavirus." The authors of the article claim that Bill Gates knew of the virus's existence and the Russian government suspects that he was probably informed of its spread. Interestingly, the article quotes Chinese, Iranian and Russian materials, which prove that the virus comes from the United States (Ivlev, 2020).

During her briefing, Lea Gabrielle, the coordinator of the Global Engagement Center at the State Department, referred to Russian disinformation activities, indicating that disinformation was growing and replicated in its own "ecosystem". It consists of official government-controlled media, news portals, and authorities pushing certain narratives in social media. The functioning of such an ecosystem is because Russia is further promoting the narratives that have been disseminated by China. Also, it promotes those first developed by Russia, then duplicated by the Chinese media, and finally redistributed by Russia as if they came directly from China. We can call this phenomenon "recycling of disinformation" (state gov, 2020).

Although Russia has separate goals from China in its foreign policy, it has joined in the conduct of anti-American information operations, developing Chinese narratives because of one convergent goal - they are jointly striving to limit the U.S.'s influence the world. This is not a contractual element of the alliance, but rather an illiterate and under-spoken cooperation. One example of a convergent narrative is that the US hegemony is coming to an end - such positions are being pushed forward by the Chinese Global Times and the Russian Russia Today (Wen, 2020). The coherence of the narrative is also manifested in American technology companies' defamation and the expression of support for Chinese technology companies such as Huawei - the Chinese Global Times and Russian Sputnik News (Cong, 2020).

Russian disinformation during the coronavirus pandemic, as opposed to Chinese, also focuses on breaking the unity of states in the European Union and undermining American security guarantees for Europe. The following false information supports these two statements. First of all, in March, the Chairman of the Committee on Information Policy of the Council of the Russian Federation gave false information through the social media that "Poland did not let the Russian aircraft carrying aid to Italy pass through its airspace. This is mean, at the public policy level. Especially in the light of the fact that the aid was sent to an ally of, especially NATO and EU. From now on, Russia shall not be meeting Poland half-way. In any domain!". This message accusing Poland of obstructing assistance has been replicated by the media (including Sputnik and Russia Today) and many social media people. Through the Minister of National Defence, Poland reacted by completely denying this information "The Russian side has not been submitting any request to enter the Polish airspace. The flight route was planned via Russia, Turkey, Greece, Albania, and Italy." This is an obvious attempt to contradict the EU countries and break its unity (Sabak, 2020). Secondly, Russia targeted disinformation activities aimed at the DEFENDER-Europe 20 exercise, presenting them as an epidemiological threat

resulting from NATO troops' presence in Europe. The official Twitter account of the Russian delegation to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has criticized the exercise by posting a comment: "How many more pandemics will we face before realize the importance of joint efforts in establishing common euro security architecture?" (Russiarealizingon OSCE, 2020). The Russian state media also replicated the anti-American narrative on military exercises. Also, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko officially called on European countries to abandon the DEFENDER-Europe 20 exercise's active phase in March (sputniknews.com, 2020).

Russia is also responding to attempts by the United States to combat disinformation. Namely, it dissociates itself from accusations of spreading disinformation by denying the U.S. Department of Defense information that the Russian state media Sputnik and Russia Today are conducting a disinformation campaign (Embassy of Russia in the USA, 2020).

Russian entities conducting a global disinformation campaign are primarily state media, such as Russia Today and Sputnik, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian secret service and trolls, bots, and fake social media accounts (Legucka and Przychodniak, 2020).

5. The Case of USA

In the current doctrine of "Joint Publication 3-13 Information Operations," the U.S. Secretary of Defense describes information operations as "the integrated use, during military operations, of informational capabilities in conjunction with other operational lines to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making process of opponents and potential opponents while protecting our own." (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2020) Doctrine defines information potential as 'a tool, technique or action applied within an information environment dimension that can be used to create effects and desired operational conditions' (Ibid, n.a.). According to the current definition, the basic element of information operations is MISO (Military Information Support Operations - formerly PSYOP), which focuses on the cognitive element of the information environment and influencing the behaviour of the recipients, where its target recipients are not only potential and actual opponents, but also friendly and neutral populations (Ibid, n.a.).

In the United States, their activity to shape the narrative in a global information environment is primarily to fight foreign disinformation, fact-news, and disclosure of the truth. One of the first cases of disinformation during the pandemic that they had to deal with were false text messages and social media entries, which, as it later turned out, Chinese agents helped to disseminate. It was information that said the administration of President Donald Trump was to shut down the whole country. This information quickly caused panic in the public that the White House National Security Council, within 48 hours of its appearance, declared it false. American

officials estimated that Chinese techniques for spreading disinformation had been like Russian ones. False social media accounts and encrypted text messaging applications were used in this case, while Americans unwittingly helped spread the message by forwarding it (Wong, Rosenberg and Barnes, 2020).

The earlier mentioned Lea Gabrielle, referring to disinformation and propaganda related to COVID-19, stated in one of her briefs that "What we've seen is the CCP mobilizing its global messaging apparatus, which includes state media as well as Chinese diplomats, to push out selected and localized versions of the same overarching false narratives" (state gov, 2020).

U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said in an interview in April that China was misleading governments worldwide about the threat from the very beginning of the virus. A spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian, called on the US to stop political manipulation, stating that China has been acting openly and transparently since the beginning of the pandemic by engaging in international cooperation to combat COVID-19 (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, 2020).

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during a press conference, fighting the Chinese narrative, indicated that China had been "the first country to know about the risk to the world from this virus, and they repeatedly delayed sharing that information with the globe." He also referred to the actions of Chinese government officials such as Zhao Lijian, who claimed that the virus is an American biological weapon, claiming that making such accusations is madness (Secretary Michael R. Pompeo, 2020). The United States may use speculation about the origin of the virus as if it came from a Chinese laboratory to shape a favorable narrative (Forgey *et al.*, 2020). To this end, they can provide intelligence selectively to shape a specific image, as best exemplified by President George W. Bush in the run-up to the Iraq war.

An example of the virus's position came from a laboratory in Wuhan is Republican senator Tom Cotton. Namely, it calls on China, inter alia, to provide evidence to challenge the Wuhan laboratory as the source of COVID-19, claiming that there is no evidence that the virus originates from the seafood market in that city (Musto, 2020). An example of the fact that Chinese and Russian disinformation campaigns are producing certain effects on a large scale can be Iran, which rejected American aid in the fight against the pandemic, and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the virus is an American biological weapon (Haghdoust and Motevalli, 2020).

The United States, when conducting outreach operations to combat disinformation on Chinese territory, has a challenging task because of China's authoritative political system and the fact that about 10 years ago, Chinese counterintelligence got rid of the network of CIA informants, which weakened its ability to conduct operations there (Mazzetti *et al.*, 2020). Studies conducted by the National Institutes of Health

indicate that "In the U.S., eight in 10 Internet users search for health information online, and 74% of these people use social media". This situation makes it difficult to reach the real ones, compounding the American public's divergence about the pandemic (Ventola, 2020).

6. Conclusions

Eliminating in full the disinformation from the global information flow is practically impossible because of how social media works, which encourages people to share information immediately. People, in turn, acting under impulse, rarely verify a given message before it is available. Such action often prevents experts from overturning erroneous theories before they spread on a large scale. International disinformation campaign actors are trying to create an alternative version of the story blaming the US pandemic. They are consistent and disciplined in their actions, forming a coherent narrative in the global information environment.

The authoritarian Chinese regime focuses on silencing foreign governments and experts who shape a different image of the world than that presented by Beijing, treating all other narratives as elements of anti-Chinese politics. The control of transmission in a global information environment is a priority for CCPs. China and Russia are using similar information war tools, such as fake social media accounts and spreading disinformation through state media. China is also trying hard to create a narrative through its diplomatic missions and government officials.

The United States, in the absence of a comprehensive and coordinated strategy against disinformation, is currently risking a loss of credibility in the eyes of governments around the world. It should be stressed that the US must counteract Beijing and Moscow's disinformation and influence both at home and abroad to combat the effects of current disinformation campaigns on such a large scale. Both the US, China, and Russia are trying to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, but not only in the health context, by stopping it from spreading. The battle is also fought to win the narrative in the information war by presenting your country as a responsible international actor.

Research conducted by the Pew Research Center shows the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns against the USA. In an April survey, 29% of adult Americans said that the coronavirus was created in a laboratory (Schaeffer, 2020).

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