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**War on Propaganda or Propaganda War?
A case study of fact-checking and (counter)propaganda in the
EEAS project EUvsDisinfo**

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MA Programme Euroculture Declaration

I, Laura Giorio, hereby declare that this thesis, entitled "War on Propaganda or Propaganda War? A case study of fact-checking and (counter)propaganda in the EEAS project EUvsDisinfo," submitted as partial requirement for the MA Programme Euroculture, is my own original work and expressed in my own words. Any use made within this text of works of other authors in any form (e.g. ideas, figures, texts, tables, etc.) are properly acknowledged in the text as well as in the bibliography.

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I hereby also acknowledge that I was informed about the regulations pertaining to the assessment of the MA thesis Euroculture and about the general completion rules for the Master of Arts Programme Euroculture.

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Abstract

Following the events that saw Russia operating in the Ukrainian information space as well as on the ground, concern for hybrid threats and targeted propaganda campaigns has grown in the world and especially in Europe. Allegations of foreign involvement in electoral campaigns within liberal democracies have drawn even more attention to the matter and have hastened plans of action to fight hybrid threats in the European Union and the Eastern Partnership. In the region, one of the priorities at all levels of governance is to counteract foreign-sourced propaganda campaigns that make use of disinformation. These disinformation-fighting strategies include the strategical use of fact-checking practices. Fact-checking as a branch of journalism, though, has great potential for being weaponised and used as a vehicle for institutional propaganda, especially when absorbed within the domain of strategic communication. This research offers a case study of EUvsDisinfo, the fact-checking project started by the European External Action Service, to explore its weaknesses as a fact-checking organisation and deconstruct its activity in terms of propaganda analysis. The research employs mixed qualitative methods to show how the project falls short of its ideal role and its function as a fact-checker. Without any value judgement, EUvsDisinfo is exposed as a potential platform for the dissemination of hegemonic narratives or (counter)propaganda in the West and in particular in the European Union. The case study is meant to be a way of developing research on the possible existence of institutional (counter)propaganda in liberal democracies, which is heavily underresearched in present times.

Keywords: EEAS, propaganda, fact-checking, strategic communication, disinformation, EUvsDisinfo

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Introduction

In 2014, after the Euromaidan protests and the change of government in Ukraine, Russian involvement in the Ukrainian crisis quickly escalated. The swift annexation of the Crimean region and the ways in which it was carried out triggered, in Western political discourse, consideration on the “new Russian way of war.”¹ In the wake of these events that saw, and still see, Russia involved in Ukraine on various levels, concern has grown in the European Union for the threats that this way of war poses. These threats, known as hybrid threats or hybrid warfare, refer to operations, often covert, in the information space by the Kremlin or affiliates of any type, targeting the Eastern Partnership countries and, in more recent times, the EU.

The EU’s concern with the issue of hybrid warfare took physical form in the European Council’s conclusions of the 19th and 20th March 2015. The conclusions called for a plan to counteract effectively and consistently the disinformation attacks with concrete actions from the European External Action Service.² The situation became more and more a recurring topic in current affairs. Over time, allegations of Russian interference in national democratic processes all over Europe and beyond not only increased, but were also demonstrated to be founded.³ Russian current disinformation campaign has since been paired with the so-called active measures of Soviet times and the war on Russian propaganda has become a priority at all levels of governance. Centres of Excellence for researching and monitoring propaganda and cyber threats have been established in several countries on the Eastern border of the EU and in the Eastern Partnership the conflict in the information space has reached peaks of counterpropaganda at the civil society levels.

Problem statement and research questions

¹ Keir Giles, “Russia’s ‘New’ Tools for Confronting the West. Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power,” Russia and Eurasia Programme (Chatham House, March 2016), 10.

² European Council, “European Council Meeting (19th and 20th March 2015) - Conclusions EUCO 11/15,” 20 March 2015, III-13, 5, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/european-council-conclusions-19-20-march-2015-en.pdf>.

³ See for example: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections” (Intelligence Community Assessment, 6 January 2017).

In this environment, propaganda studies have regained popularity in academia. Nevertheless, even in a context of fervent activity in the information domain and committed efforts to counteract it, little space has been devoted to an analysis of propaganda in liberal democracies. The reasons for this lack of interest in the field stems from the increased problematisation of the term propaganda in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁴ The reluctance to associate it with liberal democracies,⁵ though, also resulted in a reluctance to study liberal democracies within the framework of propaganda studies. The result was that the academic interest concentrated mostly on illiberal democracies, where there would be no risk in associating the regimes with the negative terminology. And yet, many scholars, starting from Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in 1948,⁶ to Brett Silverstein at the end of the 1980s,⁷ have argued in favour of a concrete need for an analysis of ways propaganda can emerge in liberal democracies. Journalism scholar Florian Zollmann, for example, understands the news media environment as the main environment for possible production and distribution of propaganda. As such, it also is the area propaganda studies that want to focus on liberal democracies need to investigate.

As a contribution to the development of a consistent body of literature on this aspect of propaganda studies, this research wants to investigate the possibility of propaganda promulgated in a specific sub-category of journalism represented by the fact-checking organisations. Fact-checking includes those practices, often by independent online organisations, sometimes by established printed press, that take already existing ‘facts’ from the news media environment and check whether they are truthful or false (and in some cases to what degree). This practice is deemed extremely important in the current news environment, if not necessary. In fact, it is considered one of the main tools, if not the only one available, to fight the diffusion of fake news and targeted disinformation in environments that value freedom of speech and journalist expression.⁸ Whether the

⁴ Florian Zollmann, “Bringing Propaganda Back into News Media Studies,” *Critical Sociology*, 23 September 2017, 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920517731134>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Paul F Lazarsfeld and Robert K Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action,” in *The Communication of Ideas*, Bryson, L. (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d.), 95–118.

⁷ Brett Silverstein, “Toward a Science of Propaganda,” *Political Psychology* 8, no. 1 (1987): 49–59, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3790986>.

⁸ See for example: Craig Silverman, *Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content* (Tow Centre for Digital Journalism, 2015), accessed 14 June 2018, http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/LiesDamnLies_Silverman_TowCenter.pdf.

practice can actually be effective is still debated in academia and touches upon mechanisms of human psychology that are beyond the scope of this research.

Given the question of its effectiveness, it is nonetheless interesting how popular these fact-checking organisations have become in society and the role that this popularity has given them. The recent but vast scholarship on the phenomenon of fact-checking has often raised questions on the power that a fact-checking organisation can have over the information flow. Lucas Graves, to cite one of the most important scholars, in his book *Deciding What's True* analyses the mechanisms that work behind the scenes of a fact-checking organisation. In his research, he sketches out how the organisation itself becomes an elite that has power over deciding what, amongst the massive flow of constant information, is true, but most importantly what is not.⁹ This puts fact-checkers in an even more delicate position than that of regular journalists: fact-checkers are at the same time arbiters over their peers' journalist practice and over the truth itself.

This similarity with press criticism¹⁰ while retaining the authority of reporting creates various interesting opportunities for fact-checking to be used as a channel for propaganda. The wider objective of this research is, in fact, that of investigating the possible connections between fact-checking in liberal democracies and propaganda, whether it is propaganda itself or counterpropaganda. In this sense, this research will investigate the possibilities of a link between fact-checking and propaganda practices by taking in consideration one case study.

The fact-checking project that will be taken into analysis is one started by an *ad hoc* strategic communication team (East StratCom Task Force) put together by the European External Action Service (EEAS), the body that manages the European Union's "diplomatic relations with other countries outside the bloc" and that carries out "EU foreign and security policy."¹¹ This project is called EUvsDisinfo(rmation) and was conceived as a platform to counteract pro-Kremlin disinformation in the Eastern

⁹ Lucas Graves, *Deciding What's True: Fact-Checking Journalism and the New Ecology of News* (Columbia University, 2013), 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹ EEAS, "European External Action Service (EEAS) – EUROPA," European Union, 16 June 2016, accessed 14 June 2018, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/institutions-bodies/eeas_en.

Partnership countries and in the European Union by fact-checking and myth-busting fake news and exposing pro-Kremlin narratives on alternative press and social media.¹²

The reasons behind this choice have to do with the peculiar status of the project in the wider landscape of fact-checking organisations. As fully funded by EEAS, it can be assimilated to a (semi-)institutional project, as opposed to the usual status of other fact-checkers as independent or corporation-owned. Its financial status facilitates an analysis that takes into considerations issues related to ownership and financial orientation. Furthermore, despite its very limited success among the general public, it has received very strong criticism on the bureaucratic level. A report of the European Parliament has in fact raised doubts about its unclear journalistic conduct and gone as far as labelling its products as propaganda.

This research tries to investigate EUvsDisinfo's practice and to deconstruct it in terms of propaganda analysis. Additionally, it inscribes this case study in the wider issue of the relationship between Western fact-checking and propaganda in current times. This is done through qualitative methods of analysis of the project as a whole, supplemented with content analysis of one of the most popular products of EUvsDisinfo.

Outline

The research is divided in two parts.

Part one covers the theoretical premises of the case study: the first chapter is dedicated to an overview of propaganda and the second to an overview of the fact-checking movement. The chapter on propaganda defines a working definition, for the purposes of this research, of the term propaganda and gives an overview of the possible occurrences of propaganda. With the description of the possible models for the study of propaganda, it lays the groundwork for the case study's approach to propaganda. The second chapter covers the phenomenon of fact-checking, trying to identify what it is and mapping how it has been studied. It looks at the epistemological issues of fact-checking, the challenges

¹² EEAS, "Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force," EEAS - European External Action Service, 26 November 2015, accessed 14 June 2018, http://collections.internetmemory.org/haeu/content/20160313172652/http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/261115_stratcom-east_qanda_en.htm.

and weaknesses of the practice and what makes the practice susceptible of being analysed through the propaganda lens.

The second part is dedicated to the case study. By applying one of the models for studying propaganda presented in the first section, it tries to give an overview of EUvsDisinfo's practice that is as encompassing as possible. The third chapter covers the context of the creation of EUvsDisinfo: Kremlin's disinformation practices and the narrative around the so-called hybrid warfare. The fourth chapter delves into the actual case, by analysing the overall practice of EUvsDisinfo. With the help of the International Fact-Checkers' Network principles it assesses the project's practice and its peculiarities in the fact-checking environment. Finally, the fifth chapter examines a sample of the Disinformation Review produced by EUvsDisinfo with qualitative content analysis and discusses the findings by inscribing them in the wider evaluation of the case.

Part I - Background

Propaganda

The first element that needs to be taken into consideration in this research is that of propaganda. The aim of this chapter is to define the term for the purposes of this study with the help of recent scholarship on propaganda studies. It gives an overview of the types of propaganda and then focuses on the models for studying propaganda.

Propaganda and persuasion: proposed definition

The word propaganda comes from the name of a department of the Roman Catholic Church that was established in 1622, *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (congregation for propagating the faith), to spread the gospel in the New World and oppose the Reformation. The term propaganda, which by direct Latin translation means “things that are to be spread,” has then acquired a negative connotation of lying and intentional deception, especially among non neo-Latin languages, as Randal Marlin notes.¹³ The concept of propaganda, though, regardless of its actual etymology, is much older and tightly related to that of persuasion and rhetoric. Persuasion techniques, verbal or non-verbal might go as far back as human history. The philosophical theorisation, as well as the conceptualisation of its practice, can be traced back to the ancient Greeks in Western culture. As it has been pointed out by some of the propaganda scholars that will be mentioned in this work, the definition of propaganda is tightly connected with that of persuasion and propaganda as practice stems from persuasive communication. Based on the analysis of the vast scholarship existing on the matter, it then appears necessary to design a working definition of propaganda by weighting it against persuasion.

Persuasion is first treated in depth and analytically by the Greek philosophers and most importantly by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*. There, he describes persuasion as a way of skilfully making sure an audience accepts a concept and categorises it as a demonstrated

¹³ Randal Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion* (Peterborough, Ont. ; Orchard Park, N.Y: Broadview Press, 2002), 16.

fact.¹⁴ Persuasion is not to be confused with reasoned argumentation. Likewise, rhetoric, as it is the means that is used to persuade, is not to be confused with dialectic. They are, respectively, the opposite of each other.

In the course of history many have studied persuasion from many different points of view and in more recent times, when the study of propaganda became popular, the same has been done with propaganda and persuasion together. The very limited literature review proposed is leading up to the working definition of propaganda that is to be adopted throughout this research.

Sociologist Jacques Ellul, for example, sees propaganda as a technique used as “a means of gaining power by the psychological manipulation of groups or masses, or of using this power with the support of the masses.”¹⁵ In his view propaganda is used, as a technique, in a whole variety of situations, the only discrimination between real propaganda and persuasion being the perpetrator’s intention. In his technical definition, he includes only the instances of propaganda where there is intention of the perpetrator to gain power through manipulation. He, nonetheless, affirms that “unintentional non-political organised along spontaneous patterns and rhythms, the activities we have lumped together are not considered propaganda. And yet with deeper and more objective analysis what does one find? These influences are expressed though the same media as propaganda. They are really directed by those who make propaganda.”¹⁶

The question of the difference between propaganda and persuasion is taken into consideration by propaganda analyst Randal Marlin as well in his manual *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*. He, in fact, affirms that propaganda is “the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual’s adequately informed, rational, reflective judgement.”¹⁷ His fairly broad definition seeks to include all types of influence in which the emphasis is on compromising an informed judgement of the individual. This includes what he calls “well-intentioned propaganda”¹⁸ and other forms of propaganda where public opinion is affected by the dissemination of information that

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotle: in twenty-three volumes. 22: The ‘art’ of rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese, Reprint, The Loeb classical library 193 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁵ As quoted in Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, 19.

¹⁶ Jacques Ellul, ‘The Characteristics of Propaganda’, in *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion*, ed. Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell (London: SAGE, 2006), 33.

¹⁷ Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, 22

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

happens to be in the disseminator's favour, as long as the judgement is not the result of well-rounded information.

How this is linked with persuasion is explained in *Propaganda and Persuasion* by Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell. For them, the difference between propaganda and persuasion lays in the declared purpose of said communication. Persuasion attempts at influencing attitude and behaviour of the persuadee,¹⁹ consequently, as evidence alone is never persuasive enough,²⁰ its strategies might often resemble those of propaganda in seeking to prompt a change in the receiver of the message. The difference with propaganda is regarding to the purpose of the message and the intentions. Whereas persuasion promotes a mutual understanding and strives for a voluntary change in the receiver, being thus outspoken about the persuader's intentions, propaganda is misleading in this aspect. In this light, they describe propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."²¹ In their understanding, the concept of intention is very clear and there is an emphasis on the *deliberate* perpetration of the act.

While Jowett and O'Donnell's definition seems to encapsulate as much as possible in terms of purpose of the practice, means used and intentions, it is not entirely satisfying in the identification of an actor. As seen before, both Ellul and Marlin mention unintentionality and this concept is particularly relevant in relation to Florian Zollmann's definition. As a journalism scholar, Zollmann's focus is much more on the application of propaganda on information and news media. He finds the previous definitions of the term valid but only to a certain extent. In the specific case of news media propaganda, it is necessary to operate a distinction between the actor, the propagandist in the meaning of the persona whose intentions are furthered, and the disseminators, in this case the journalists, who, unintentionally disseminate products that further the actors' intentions. He understands propaganda as "the forming of texts and opinions in support of particular interests and through media and non-media mediated means with the intention to produce public support and/or relevant action."²² Zollmann says that other scholars stress too

¹⁹ Victoria O'Donnell and June Kable, *Persuasion: An Interactive-Dependency Approach* (New York: Random House, 1982), 9.

²⁰ Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, 5th ed (Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2012), 45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² Zollmann, "Bringing Propaganda Back," 7.

much that propaganda is intentional dissemination, but, for example, Jowett and O'Donnell's intentionality is in relation to the propagandist, not the apparent source. While it is true that there is a lack of clarity about how mediated the process can be in their description, their understanding is that the propagandist is not necessarily who is producing the material but who is behind it. Zollmann's definition acquires particular value in this research as it is adjusted to take into consideration the setting of this study and of propaganda analysis in democratic news media in general. As such, it seems legitimate to use it as a clarifier to Jowett and O'Donnell's definition, keeping always in mind that the study of contemporary propaganda in any type of society is complex and that controversial matters in communication can be regarded as a matter of perception.

Types of propaganda

Within propaganda studies, the wider concept of propaganda has been divided in different subsections, or forms, of propaganda depending on the way one looks at the phenomenon.

Jowett and O'Donnell identify three types of propaganda based on the identification of the source and on the level of accuracy of information: white, grey and black propaganda. *White* propaganda is the type of propaganda whose source is not only identifiable, but also the correct one, and the one where the information is accurate. White propaganda examples are those in which the information is not deceptive but framed or presented in a way that sheds a particularly positive light on the sender, as a step towards building credibility in the audience in view of more complex times where stronger persuasive actions might be needed. It might be the case of state-funded public broadcasters.²³ *Black* propaganda has a concealed real source and is mostly about spreading "lies, fabrications, and deceptions."²⁴ It often bases its acceptance on credibility of the source (for which white propaganda might build up) or of the message (leveraging on cognitive biases). *Grey* propaganda is, as the term suggest, in between the two previous ones. It occurs when both the source and the accuracy of the information are uncertain.²⁵ It is, for example, the case of governments planting stories in foreign news media, or of private companies doing the same. The grey element comes from the fact that the story is

²³ Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

legitimised by the apparent source, which is not the real one, and planted purposely to give it credibility.

Another interesting division of propaganda practice in types occurs in the works of Jacques Ellul. Ellul divides propaganda in 4 overlapping pairs, which express a sort of spectrum that goes from what would be commonly understood as propaganda on one side and what fits in a wider definition of propaganda.²⁶ The first pair is that of political and sociological propaganda, where *political* propaganda has as a source a definite body with precise methods and goals, while *sociological* is a more diffuse ideology that is expressed in cultural forms within a social group and is involuntarily promoting a worldview, a lifestyle, etc.²⁷ The second pair is that of agitation and integration propaganda. *Agitation* propaganda is the type of propaganda that foments an audience and seeks to agitate it against an enemy. *Integration* propaganda is “a propaganda of conformity”²⁸ that requires a constant use of mass media and is aimed at “maintain[ing] legitimacy of an organisation to ensure the legitimacy of its activities.”²⁹ The third pair sees vertical and horizontal propaganda. *Vertical* propaganda takes place in a top to bottom direction, from an authority to the masses, while *horizontal* propaganda acts in groups where participants influence each other.³⁰ Lastly, he described the pair of *irrational* and *rational* propaganda. *Irrational* propaganda is the one that only appeals to myths, symbols, and emotions to influence the audience. *Rational* propaganda, instead, might appear as genuine scientific truth manipulated so that the fact is mythicised and finally used as the lever for emotional appeal.³¹

These characterisations of propaganda are particularly interesting when thought of in the framework of information and news media analysis. White propaganda (or certain types of grey propaganda) for example is very easily misunderstood for genuine information. This is because it tends to use informative communication in the same way of information and gives the impression that the aim is that of mutual understanding. Instead, regardless of whether the audience feels that its needs have been fulfilled, the purpose is always “in the best interest of the propagandist but not necessarily in the best

²⁶ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-69.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁹ Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, 291.

³⁰ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 79-83.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84-89.

interest of the recipient.”³² Additionally, propaganda that makes use of informative communication for example in news media tends to gravitate towards the second end of Ellul’s pairs.³³

White/grey instances of propaganda that make use of informative communication were studied in recent times by scholar Oliver Boyd-Barrett amongst others. In his research on Western Mainstream Media’s role in the Ukraine crisis, the author analyses how the Western Mainstream Media coverage of the crisis was framed to convey a certain view on the events.³⁴ He deconstructs the Western Mainstream Media narratives surrounding the crisis to illustrate how they became the hegemonic narrations of the events. His work, together with the models that this research employs for the analysis, exemplifies the understanding of propaganda use in media that the case study tries to address.

Models for studying propaganda

Before describing some of the most prominent models of propaganda analysis in the existing literature that will be used for this study, it is worth taking a step back and summarising very loosely what could be considered a first attempt to systematise propaganda analysis. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle, among other things, defines three tools or appeals that rhetoric uses to persuade. Although he is not referring to propaganda as this study is going to treat it, it is worthwhile summarising the three modes he identifies in the use of rhetoric because, interestingly, they are recurring in the analysis of propaganda devices. The first one is *ethos*, an appeal to the authority and credibility that the speaker holds within the audience to be transferred onto the subject. The second is *pathos*, that is the appeal to the audience’s emotions in the argumentation. The third one is *logos*, that is the employment of a logical demonstration, or more often a demonstration with well-hidden logical fallacies.

³² Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, 31.

³³ Zollmann, *Bringing Propaganda Back*.

³⁴ Oliver Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media and the Ukraine Crisis: A Study in Conflict Propaganda* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM) is a very interesting tool for the analysis of propaganda and in particular that of news media propaganda. Their matrix is thought of as a tool to understand the pressures on journalistic performance that result in the dissemination of propaganda information by a broadcaster. It is composed of five filters, a sort of obstacles that a news item has to pass through to make the cut. The first filter deals with the pressures that stem from ownership and the fact that media firms are businesses and as such interested in complying with market laws and "other market-profit-oriented forces."³⁵ The second filter³⁶ has to do with the power that paying advertisers have over the content that is published. As the content influences audience numbers and demographics, advertisers make sure the content is in line with the type of audience that they are aiming to reach. In this system, the firm has an interest in pleasing the advertisers because of the revenue. The third filter deals with the sources used for the news.³⁷ The fourth filter³⁸ is that of unmediated "negative responses to media statements" which can be "both uncomfortable and costly"³⁹ to the media because might lead the public to boycott a product. The fifth filter is that of ideology.⁴⁰ It notes that the hegemonic ideology in the system analysed (the American one) relies a lot on the dichotomy between communism and property ownership which is seen at the basis of the news media system. This dichotomy filters out the type of news reported.

The model by Herman and Chomsky is a very interesting analysis of the news media environment in late Cold War United States. While it is clear that the matrix can easily be applied with minor adjustments to other environments with similar characteristics, the application of this model to the following research would be a great limitation. This is not only because some of the filters do not apply to the project studied, but also because an analysis that focuses only on the influences that affect news choice would only uncover one aspect of the whole phenomenon that is within the scope of this research. Nevertheless, the elements of a fear ideology (as Chomsky himself renamed the anti-

³⁵ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-25.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-35.

communism filter when revising the book in more recent times) as a control mechanism is to be taken into account when looking deeper into the case study in analysis.

Jowett and O'Donnell's ten-step plan

Two other scholars who have designed a model, or a matrix, to effectively analyse propaganda are the abovementioned Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, who in their book *Propaganda and Persuasion* look at past and contemporary propaganda from the point of view of communication studies. Jowett and O'Donnell's contribution is deemed more useful for this research than Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, because it encompasses context elements that are not mentioned in the latter. Their matrix is composed of a ten-step plan that is meant to look into all aspects of a propaganda campaign.

The first step concerns "the ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign."⁴¹ It understands the term ideology as a worldview that "contains concepts about what the society in which it exists is actually like,"⁴² that is, what is interpreted as good, as right, as desirable and their opposites. When looking into this first dimension, the analyst has to look into pre-existing beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that the propagandist is trying to contest or reinforce. It is the conceptual framework in which the propaganda campaign is embedded.

The second dimension is that of the context,⁴³ in which the analyst should look for the social context surrounding a campaign and what understanding is given to the issues that have occurred by the propagandist.

The third dimension is the identification of the propagandist.⁴⁴ This task is in a way harder to complete, as the source of the propaganda, or whoever is behind the source is likely to be hidden. What Jowett and O'Donnell do not take into account in this case, like it has been pointed out before in this chapter, is that the source, understood as the disseminator, of propaganda is not necessarily aware of the fact that they are disseminating propaganda, which tends to be the case with propaganda in news media, when assumed that the journalists are in good faith.⁴⁵ This conundrum can be solved with

⁴¹ Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, 291-92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴⁵ Zollmann, *Bringing Propaganda Back*, 6.

understanding, based on Jowett and O'Donnell's research, news media propaganda through the legitimating source model,⁴⁶ where the real propagandist creates a deflection source to place the message in and then communicated to the audience as coming from this other source, to give it legitimacy.

The fourth dimension is that of the structure of the propaganda organisation.⁴⁷ For Jowett and O'Donnell, propaganda is always systematic and as such it is likely that a successful campaign is originating from a centralised authority capable of producing a consistent message. This is a complex step to analyse, as internal structure can only be truly observed as an insider and, in most cases, it will be inaccessible from the outside.

The fifth dimension analyses the target audience.⁴⁸ Even though propaganda is traditionally linked with mass audience, Jowett and O'Donnell say it is worth investigating this aspect because modern propaganda tends to target the audience on which the effectiveness of the message can be enhanced.

The sixth step is about the media use techniques:⁴⁹ it investigates what media are used to spread the message, but most importantly how they are used. This element is very tightly related to the concept of control of the information flow, that is of control over when, how, and how much information is divulged regarding a certain topic.

The seventh step has to do with the content of the propaganda and in particular with the techniques to maximise the effect of propaganda and is the one that is going to be the one commented on the most in the case study.⁵⁰ The techniques listed by the authors is purposely not comprehensive, in the attempt of avoiding giving the idea that propaganda techniques are limited to those listed. The categories presented by the authors are eleven: the predisposition of the audience; the source credibility; the use of opinion leaders; the face to face contact; leveraging on group norms; the use of systems of reward and punishment; the monopoly of the communication source; the employment of visual symbols of power; the language usage; the use of music; leveraging on emotions.

⁴⁶ Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, 26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 293-95.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 295-96.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 296-99.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 299-305.

The eighth step deals with the analysis of the audience reaction to the various techniques, through flak, adoption of slogans from the propaganda campaign, etc.⁵¹ This is something that can be mostly seen in a completed propaganda campaign.

The ninth step has to do with the reactions, the institutional responses, to the propaganda campaign.⁵² Where there is a pushing for one type of ideology there often is an alternative ideology as well. The interesting thing about counterpropaganda, as Jowett and O'Donnell describe it, is that it is in all ways identical to propaganda, if not for the fact that is designed as a reaction to existing propaganda, and is often just as active.

The tenth and last step of the analysis is that dealing with effects and evaluation, which, though, can only be applied to the study of past propaganda campaigns as there is no way to foresee the future.⁵³ As this last element showcases, the ten-step plan designed by Jowett and O'Donnell is an all-encapsulating one, but it might tend to lose its effectiveness when analysing ongoing propaganda items, as it includes analysing elements that are either impossible or difficult to identify with propaganda in progress.

Zollmann's indicators

A scholar who, in more recent times, has looked into ways of analysing propaganda is journalism scholar Florian Zollmann. His propaganda analysis guide, the article *Bringing Propaganda Back into News Media Studies*, is just a prompt for larger research, but proves very relevant for this research in that it is specific to propaganda in news media. Unlike Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, though, Zollmann is more interested in the analysis of the content of news media and how the content can bring up evidence of propaganda practices. The empirical path that the author proposes has to consider "production and distribution, content, and reception," that is the analysis of the processes that pressure organisations to conform to a specific agenda (a revision of the filters in the propaganda model); the manifestations of propaganda through content; and the effects of media propaganda. For such a research the author identifies three dimensions of analysis: propaganda and ideology, propaganda and truth, and propaganda and outrage.

Within what he calls the first dimension, Zollmann identifies three indicators. The first is "interest linked frames about events, issues or actors,"⁵⁴ that can be seen when news

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁵⁴ Zollmann, *Bringing Propaganda Back*, 9.

highlights a specific perspective to the detriment of alternative ones, thus legitimising said perspective. Then there is the “absence or omission of substantial criticism,” and “the description of events and actions [that] can be ideological if they relate to contested ideological concepts”⁵⁵ or using terms that acquire a symbolical value in an ideological system to describe non-symbolic events.

Within the second dimension the author identifies “procedural or tactical criticism”⁵⁶ that exists as long as it still in line with the presuppositions of the elite ideology. Then he identifies the “coverage that incites political or military action”⁵⁷ by leveraging on indignation, for example, and “the use of facts within a certain framework”⁵⁸ through distortion or omission and of which the frameworks constitute the indicators of the propaganda and ideology dimension. The last indicators are the emphasis or de-emphasis on certain facts and statements, and the selective use of facts regarding an issue.

Lastly, regarding the third dimension, Zollmann identifies indicators for the demonisation of the enemy: name calling and negative associations; and exaggeration of deeds committed by the designated enemy with nefarious labels such as the description of an event without conclusive evidence or without weighting facts, details of atrocities to trigger indignation.

The Institute for Propaganda Analysis’s How to Detect Propaganda

In this focused overview of the methods used to analyse propaganda, it is necessary to mention the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. The organisation existed between the years 1937 and 1942 in the United States and its main interest was that of enhancing critical thinking in the general public because of a concern about the enormous amount of propaganda the public was subject to on an everyday basis. The organisation would issue a Propaganda Analysis bulletin exposing the tricks of a propagandist to persuade its audience. Apart from the fact that this project is oddly reminding of the project in the case study, this organisation was bound to be mentioned because, despite being outdated and oversimplified, it is still very much mentioned in contemporary propaganda studies. The bulletin, in fact, lists seven tools of propaganda that, far from being the only ones involved in the process and definitely not sufficient for an accurate analysis of a campaign, are still

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

mentioned and incorporated in more recent analysis models. The seven tools are: name-calling; glittering generality; transfer; testimonial; plain folks; card stacking; and bandwagon.⁵⁹

Name-calling refers to labelling negatively an idea, an event, or an actor, while glittering generality is its opposite, associating virtue to another and approval without evidence. Transfer relates to using the *ethos* of an action or an idea to support another and testimonial is exactly the same process but with a strong character, a respected figure that certifies for the reliability of an idea. They both work in negative as well. Plain folks relates to presenting a speaker as one of the people, diminishing the distance in the communication and thus fostering acceptance. Card stacking involves a selective use of facts, the use of deception, or the illogical conclusions to logical premises. Lastly, bandwagon refers to the appeal to a sense of community in which the receiver of the message feels the need to conformity not to be left out.⁶⁰

As it appears clear, these tools are everything but updated, if anything they use more user-friendly terms to explain the same concepts that have been touched upon by other propaganda scholars.

This study will loosely apply the ten-step plan by Jowett and O'Donnell in the case study. It will also touch upon the flak filter of Herman and Chomsky when analysing the responses to the project in question. Moreover, it will incorporate Zollmann's indicators to the technique categories of Jowett and O'Donnell's model and will try to use, when possible, the terms of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis.

⁵⁹ Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, 237.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

Fact-Checking

The second pillar concept to consider in this research is that of the fact-checking practice. This section is going to take a deeper look into the phenomenon, the practice and the controversies of fact-checking as a starting point for the analysis of the case study.

What is fact-checking

Checking facts is not a novel practice and has always been linked with science, for example. The type of fact-checking that this chapter is investigating, though, is the fact-checking process linked to the activity of journalism. Even when talking about journalism, a further distinction must be made: journalistic fact-checking as a practice can be divided in two parts. Firstly, *ante hoc* or internal fact-checking, a practice that has ideally always accompanied the profession of journalism. It defines the act of checking the accuracy of information that would later be reported. This specific activity is not just a branch of journalism, it is at the core of professional journalism itself, but, as Lucas Graves notes, it “stops where reported speech begins: internal fact-checking mainly ensures a reporter got the quote right, not that the claim being made is actually true.”⁶¹ Then there is the other practice, the one that this research is taking in analysis and the one that is mostly associated with the term nowadays and that can be identified as the *post hoc* fact-checking, or fact-checking after the fact.⁶² This practice is that of professional journalists or dedicated amateurs that take on the task of assessing whether a statement from a politician, published in a news article or mainstream media in general, depending on the specific type of fact-checking, is truthful. This second meaning of the term has gained more and more popularity in the past few years because of what Cary Spivak called in 2011 the fact-checking explosion.⁶³ The practice itself is not recent⁶⁴ and it started as a form of

⁶¹ Graves, *Deciding What's True*, 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Cary Spivak, “The Fact-Checking Explosion,” *American Journalism Review*, no. December/January 2011, accessed 14 June 2018, <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=4980>.

⁶⁴ For a more detailed history see Craig Silverman and Jeff Jarvis, *Regret the Error: How Media Mistakes Pollute the Press and Imperil Free Speech* (New York: Union Square Press, 2007).

press criticism at the beginning of the 21st century, as an aspect of the development of forms of online journalism.⁶⁵

As it is a recent and relatively understudied practice, fact-checking's exact definition is challenging to achieve, especially now that the discourse about the news environment is saturated with another problematic term, fake news. As Graves notes, "even journalists apply the term to a range of techniques and formats which depart from narrower interpretations of objective reporting."⁶⁶ For this reason, it is important that a fact-checking organisation is contextualised and compared to the others existing, as the comparison can make it easier to locate the organisation in the landscape of fact-checking and understand its practice.

For the purposes of this research, fact-checking, together with its synonyms myth-busting and debunking, is understood as a practice that, over the past decade, has become a separated branch of journalism. It is identified as a movement committed "to publicis[ing] errors and falsehoods"⁶⁷ in political discourse as well as in media in general and "to sorting fact from fiction."⁶⁸

Mapping the movement

Nowadays, the movement comprises a vast number of different types of organisations all over the world, from independent online fact-checkers, to major print outlets and initiatives of academic affiliation. Fact-checking organisations are a relatively recent invention, but they have gathered a lot of attention on themselves during the past decade. Whether accepted or not by the rest of the traditional journalist community, they have earned their place in the everyday-life journalistic landscape. Even so, their life as independent entities has not been long enough to let academia produce enough research on them, resulting in the existing research on the matter being extremely limited.

⁶⁵ Graves, *Deciding What's True*, 29-33.

⁶⁶ Lucas Graves, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, "Understanding Innovations in Journalistic Practice: A Field Experiment Examining Motivations for Fact-Checking," *Journal of Communication* 66, no. 1 (1 February 2016): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12198>.

⁶⁷ Graves, *Deciding What's True*, 3.

⁶⁸ Silverman, *Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content*, 71.

A vast majority of the existing literature is in fact based on ethnographic research and often limited to a single case study of a single organisation. It is the case of the work of Craig Silverman, journalist, media analyst and fake news expert who started a fact-checking project called The Emergent to study fake news and the fact-checking mechanisms. The result was the already cited *Lies, Damn Lies and Viral Content*, a detailed report on the topic published for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism. Despite being thorough empirical work investigating fake news, the research it does on fact-checking is limited to the project that was built specifically for the research, lacking a more generic cut of the movement. A similar limitation of existing literature for the purposes of this research is found in the article *Anatomy of a Fact Check*⁶⁹ and the book *Deciding What's True*⁷⁰ by Lucas Graves, which focus on the activity of PolitiFact based on the author's fieldwork in the organisation. Similar is the case of Michelle Amazeen's research⁷¹ whose analyses are limited to Politifact, the Washington Post's Fact Checker and FactCheck.org. Another case of in-depth analysis of a fact-checking organisation is the research published in the article *Stopping Fake News*⁷² by Maria Haigh et al. that focuses on the activity of StopFake.org, again, with fieldwork. StopFake is a fact-checking organisation founded in 2014 in Ukraine by professors, students and alumni of a Ukrainian journalism school. Their activity started as a response to Russian information warfare in Ukraine during the events of 2014 and continues to this day. It is particularly important because it is one of the few instances where a fact-checking group is recognised to be performing counterpropaganda, but the analysis is limited to the specific case of StopFake and relies massively on fieldwork and personal experience of the authors within the group.

So far, there have not been more comprehensive studies on the matter, resulting in a knowledge gap for a more accurate study of the single cases. Lucas Graves has attempted to start filling this gap by operating a systematic analysis of a large part of the whole fact-checking movement and has identified three main focuses around which the various

⁶⁹ Lucas Graves, "Anatomy of a Fact Check: Objective Practice and the Contested Epistemology of Fact Checking," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 10, no. 3 (1 September 2017): 518–37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12163>.

⁷⁰ Graves, *Deciding What's True*.

⁷¹ Michelle A. Amazeen, "Checking the Fact-Checkers in 2008: Predicting Political Ad Scrutiny and Assessing Consistency," *Journal of Political Marketing* 15, no. 4 (October 2016): 433–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2014.959691>.

⁷² Maria Haigh, Thomas Haigh, and Nadine I. Kozak, "Stopping Fake News: The Work Practices of Peer-to-Peer Counter Propaganda," *Journalism Studies*, 25 April 2017, 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1316681>.

organisations gravitate.⁷³ This mapping of the existing organisations is extremely important as it allows to analyse emerging or underresearched projects like that of the case study in the wider context of the movement by comparing it to the already mapped ones. In his research, Graves notes that fact-checking tends to “bridge the fields of journalism, academia, and politics”⁷⁴ making it hard to define and at the same time locate in a specific field. The mapping that resulted from his research shows where the single organisations are located in a ternary plot, a triangular graph with the three fields at its apices. Graves shows how the organisations gravitate around these three apices and are all more or less influenced by them.

He calls the first apex the journalistic core, as in his understanding, all fact-checking as a field of practice is journalistic. The organisations on this axis are those anchored to professional journalism, specifically linked to newspapers. All over the globe, a consistent number of fact-checking organisations have direct ties to the established news media. It is the case for example of the Washington Post Fact Checker, part of the American newspaper the Washington Post, or of Politifact, whose parent-newspaper is the Tampa Bay Times, in the US, and many others in Europe and the rest of the world as well.⁷⁵

The second apex is the academic axis that comprises all organisations with ties to academia. It is the case for example of the American FactCheck.org, based at the University of Pennsylvania. FactCheck.org claims the application of academic methods to the journalistic activity, but nonetheless uses only professional journalists and reporters to conduct research. Also close to the academic apex are the fact-checking groups that more formally apply academic approaches to their work. It is the case, for example, of India’s FactChecker.in that uses analysts for the research and journalists for the final product. What is interesting in this more radical approach is the concern in the academic field for the methodological flaws of fact-checking practices on which this research focuses and that are addressed further in this chapter.⁷⁶

The third apex is the political-civic one, to which Graves has converged all fact-checking groups that would claim allegiance to movements for strengthening civil society

⁷³ Lucas Graves, “Boundaries Not Drawn,” *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 5 (24 June 2016): 613–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1196602>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 7–9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

and other NGOs. These groups' peculiarity is their rejection for the journalistic world and their distancing from the established media outlets.⁷⁷

The research not only shows how blurred the boundaries are, but also highlights how the movement as a whole, regardless of methodology and practice divergences, rests on shared values. The shared concern is with "promoting democratic discourse and accountable government" and the common mission is that of "adjudicating public truth."⁷⁸ This shows how, despite the field ties specific to each organisation, the concepts behind the practice of fact-checking are ascribable to those of journalism. It is then no surprise that partisanship is left out of a mapping of groups with fundamentally journalistic values of accuracy and fairness. Even so, it is interesting how Graves chose to consider the special case of StopFake, whose counterpropaganda activity is well-documented⁷⁹ and Graves himself acknowledges. StopFake's case is a peculiar one because of its political activity and its choice of fact-checking only Russian propaganda. In Graves's analysis, StopFake makes the cut because its partisanship is justified by the complexity of the Ukrainian situation and by the fact that it is located "outside of democratic media system with an independent press."⁸⁰

Fact-checking as journalism: The International Fact-Checking Network

This research, though, is not the only one that locates fact-checking in the realm of journalism. As noted, fact-checking as a separate practice from traditional journalism started as a form of press criticism from the newly-created alternative to the traditional journalistic environment represented by the blogosphere and internet in general.⁸¹ Nevertheless, internet has changed during the years and so has the fact-checking world. Nowadays, virtually every research revolving around the fact-checking movement has considered it as at least within the wider journalistic field. Exploring this aspect of fact-checking is extremely important in that, as the practice itself is not codified, it gives a framework within which it is possible to analyse organisations.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁹ See Haigh, Haigh and Kozak, "Stopping Fake News."

⁸⁰ Graves, "Boundaries Not Drawn," 8.

⁸¹ Graves, *Deciding What's True*, 29-33.

In its identification with journalism, fact-checking aims at “revitaliz[ing] the ‘truth-seeking’ tradition in the field,”⁸² as several authors note. This aspect presents fact-checking as novel and at the same time as specifically tied to almost philosophical core values of journalism.⁸³ It is then by looking at these core principles that fact-checking can be addressed.

Outside of the academic world, the association that undertakes the task of codifying these principles is the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). The Network was started by Poynter Institute, owner of The Tampa Bay Times (and thus of Politifact as well) and began as a global summit of all fact-checking organisations. It was created as a forum to gather fact-checkers, monitor trends in the fact-checking world and advocate for fact-checking outside the established community.⁸⁴ Most importantly, though, it is committed to promoting common standards for the practice, by horizontally implementing what was called the Fact-Checkers’ Code of Principles.⁸⁵ The code of principle is intended to work as a guideline by its members for its members, while at the same time setting a standard for fact-checking inside and outside the community. The code was launched in September 2016 and the organisations that wish to become signatories have to undergo close scrutiny by external assessors with journalism expertise. The application is reviewed every year and every process of it, including the assessment sheet with comments from the expert, is clearly displayed on the IFCN webpage.⁸⁶

The code of principles is fairly simple and comprises five points that encapsulate the commitment of its signatories to the five elements deemed important in fact-checking. The first point is about non-partisanship and fairness, thus legitimising only independent groups. The second is regarding the transparency of sources, highlighting the necessity for the reader to be able to follow the fact-checker’s steps in verifying a claim. The third is about transparency of funding and organisation. The fourth principle covers the important element of methodology of fact-checking, advocating for full transparency on the fact-checker’s side. Finally, the fifth principle addresses the correction policy, advocating for transparency in correction and honest admission of the error.⁸⁷

⁸² Graves, “Anatomy of a Fact Check,” 519

⁸³ Graves, Nyhan and Reifler, “Understanding Innovation in Journalistic Practice,” 133.

⁸⁴ Poynter, ‘Fact-Checking’, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/channels/fact-checking>.

⁸⁵ Poynter, ‘International Fact-Checking Network Fact-Checkers’ Code of Principles’, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/international-fact-checking-network-fact-checkers-code-principles>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

The attempt of self-regulation of the community is clearly a way of professionalising the practice in the hope of giving it the same level of relevance that is given to established journalistic practices. At the same time, it is a way of dividing what is legitimate fact-checking and what is not, a way of ensuring quality of what is produced by the signatories.⁸⁸ This might be seen as fulfilling a need of defining fact-checking because conscious of the power that a truth-seeking practice holds when it comes to informing an audience.

Epistemological issues and grounds for propaganda application

The concern with fact-checking practices, though, is far from being a worry limited to the community. A consistent part of the research that academia has dedicated to fact-checking in general has, in fact, dealt with the intrinsic weaknesses of the practice, specifically related to epistemology. The most argued critique of fact-checking revolves around its relationship with the political discourse and sees the very practice as "hopelessly flawed" because it "discounts the value-laden nature of political discourse"⁸⁹

Already in 2013, political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Ryden Butler published an article regarding the topic that ignited the academic discussion on fact-checking, its weaknesses and its legitimacy. Their argument is based on the content analysis performed on fact-checks of three major political fact-checkers in the US: The *Washington Post* Fact Checker, PolitiFact and the fact-checking activity from the *New York Times*. The authors question the methodological approach of the three agencies and criticise it as a common problem in the movement. They argue that the "methodologically questionable practices" demonstrate that political discourse is not all about what is "true" and what is "false" and approaching it in this way is damaging to the whole practice of having a political discourse.

Their critique concentrates on five main points, or methodologically dubious approaches that constitute the highlights of the inconsistencies that the authors attribute to fact-checking in general. The first point is related with selection and in a way is linked

⁸⁸ See for example the Washington Post noting in their re-application letter that they deem the presence of the IFCN symbol beneficial for the reception of the factcheck.

⁸⁹ Graves, "Anatomy of a Fact Check," 519.

to media bias. The fact that "fact-checkers must pick and choose,"⁹⁰ they say might help "construct inaccurate images of political actors."⁹¹ The second point is more strictly methodological and concerns confounding multiple facts or picking apart a whole. This problematic practice includes the cases where a claim is fact-checked without considering the context around it, making the fact-check inevitably based on incomplete information. The third point is related to causal claims. They argue that, because causality cannot be verified, it is methodologically fallacious to fact-check a causal statement. A similar logic is applied to the fourth point, related to statements about the future. As with the causal statements, they note that, as it is impossible to predict the future, it is impossible to verify (or fact-check, which is the same thing) a statement about the future, regardless of its probability. Comparing a statement about the future to other projections, they argue, takes away the very goal of fact-checking as showing the reality of things behind claims. Finally, the fifth point covers the lack of transparency in selection criteria and methodological approach in general.

The critique of the authors is only partly about the methodology in itself. The methodological fallacies are argued for within a wider context of a problem in the general understanding of fact-checking practices. Uscinski and Butler argue against fact-checking's claim to be the arbiter of factuality and demonstrate it by showing how fact-checking is methodologically inconsistent even for social sciences standards. They demonstrate how naïve it is on the fact-checkers' side as well as on the audience's to "think that the resulting [fact-checked] list of facts is unbiased by conceptual filters."⁹²

The rejoinders to Uscinski and Butler's article have been various and the attempts to mitigate the gravity of the weaknesses that their research has pointed out can be seen in many instances. The IFCN code of principles, created well after Uscinski and Butler's article, can be seen as a way of the community to minimise the inconsistencies. Another example is Demagog, a Central European fact-checking project, that checks every single statement. With this often tedious work, they avoid the selection bias, but their job, more than journalistic, is merely an exercise in scientific analysis.⁹³

⁹⁰ Joseph E. Uscinski and Ryden W. Butler, 'The Epistemology of Fact Checking', *Critical Review* 25, no. 2 (1 June 2013): 164.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 168.

⁹³ Graves, "Boundaries Not Drawn," 9.

Others, while disagreeing that the faults pointed out by Uscinski and Butler constitute a problem, admit to the weaknesses and leave the problematisation to a worldview. Lucas Graves, for example, admits that “even well-established facts are open to challenge” and that “value-laden claims cannot be tested for their correspondence to reality.”⁹⁴ Simultaneously, though, he claims that “a restrictive, black-and-white sense of truth is necessary for the daily work of sorting out what we should believe from what we should not.”⁹⁵ He holds that the epistemological issues of fact-checking are in the very fabric of professional journalism and that the right approach to the matter would be to “understand truth as a goal—at best elusive—and still embrace it.”⁹⁶

Interestingly, Haigh et al. in their analysis of the Ukrainian StopFake hold a different stand on the epistemological matter. Their take is that the epistemological issues with fact-checking exist because of the very nature of the fake news they fight. For them “all knowledge is socially constructed [and] not all social processes produce the same kinds of truth claims,” but fake news cannot be included in the “normal range of variation caused by journalistic bias and subjectivity.”⁹⁷ For this reason, because fake news is specifically designed to use socially constructed truth to someone’s advantage, fact-checking does not need to concern itself with epistemological issues. Factuality has to be sought, but journalists and scholars “neither can or should aspire to neutrality in the battle of fake news against real journalistic practice.”⁹⁸

This way of looking at fact-checking, though, does nothing other than confirm what Uscinski and Butler claim. Fact-checkers are, in this understanding, truly to be considered as “participants in the political argument” that they are trying to analyse. For these reasons, presenting what they deem as “facts” as standalones, whose content and context is self-evident, is problematic.⁹⁹ In Uscinski and Butler’s words, “the subject matter of politics is often complex, ambiguous, and open to a variety of conflicting interpretations.”¹⁰⁰ This makes it subject to manipulation, consciously or unconsciously for the fact-checker.

⁹⁴ Graves, “Anatomy of a Fact Check,” 520.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 520.

⁹⁶ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, 1. rev. ed (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 45.

⁹⁷ Haigh, Haigh and Kozak, “Stopping Fake News,” 21

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Uscinski and Butler, “The Epistemology of Fact Checking,” 168.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

At the second conference hosted by the Poynter Institute, owner of PolitiFact's newspaper, that started the International Fact-Checking Network association, the catchphrase that was going to be the slogan of the whole conference was "Falsehoods come in many languages...Now so does the truth."¹⁰¹ This sentence, more than many others, encapsulates the reason why it is important to look at the fact-checking movement in terms of a possible purveyor of propaganda. As Uscinski and Butler note, "in many instances, fact-checkers rat[ing] definitions as true or false [is] a fundamental philosophical mistake."¹⁰² This because creating the dualism between truth and falsehood, and thus posing fact-checking as the practice that fights falsehood with truth, implies that all that is fact-checking is to be trusted and all that is not should, accordingly, be questioned and doubted. As seen in the review of propaganda models, one of the constants for an effective propagation of a propaganda message is that the source (when not the propagandist in itself at least the apparent source) has to be trusted. In the situation where a narrative is spread about fact-checking movements being the holders of truth, it seems evident that fact-checking is suitable of being employed in a propaganda campaign.

¹⁰¹ As cited in Graves, "Boundaries Not Drawn," 1.

¹⁰² Uscinski and Butler, "The Epistemology of Fact Checking," 174.

Part II - Case study

This second section of the text is dedicated to the case study and is three-folded. As mentioned in the previous section, the case is studied keeping in mind the 10-step plan of Jowett and O'Donnell. The first section covers the second step of the plan, by looking at the context of the case study. It gives an overview of the so-called Russian hybrid warfare concept and the narrative around it with the help of secondary sources on the matter. The following chapter offers an overall analysis of the EUvsDisinfo project through close reading of the website as a primary source, other official documents that gravitate around its creation, and a quantitative analysis on the cases analysed by the project. This part loosely tries to answer the questions that the steps four, five and six raise in the 10-step plan about the structure of the organisation, the target audience and the media use techniques. This is achieved indirectly through the analysis of EUvsDisinfo as a whole and its practice in general, with a focus on the gap between EUvsDisinfo practice and the stated vision behind its creation. While performing this overall analysis, the IFCN code of principles is kept in mind, so that all the possible weak points of a fact-checking project can be addressed effectively. The fifth chapter analyses EUvsDisinfo's content in the instance of the Disinformation Review, the main editorial product of the project, covering also the criticism and the controversies raised against it. This builds up to the final discussion and assessment of EUvsDisinfo practice and its role in the wider context of Western strategic measures against Russian disinformation.

The Context: Kremlin's hybrid warfare and fake news

In this case study, before the research can go any further in showcasing the activity of the East StratCom Task Force through EUvsDisinfo, it is necessary to start with a premise about the context. The context is vital to understand the reasons behind the creation of the East StratCom Task Force and EUvsDisinfo itself. Moreover, it is a fundamental element to be able to develop a critique of the project that assesses its practice conditionally to what it is reacting to and that locates it within the framework of other existing reactions.

This chapter looks into the concept of hybrid warfare as the frame within which influence activities, information operations, disinformation, and fake news operate as concepts. In particular, it focuses on the meaning given to the term in relation to Russia and its foreign policy strategies that some have identified as a “blurring of boundaries between public diplomacy and active measures.”¹⁰³ The overview of the term's meaning when in relation to Russia is complemented with the Western responses both on the academic and on the governance levels. Together with the criticism that has been addressed at the concept of Russian hybrid warfare, it helps determine the reasons why the East StratCom Task Force was the European Union's reaction. This indirectly sheds light upon the type of audience the Task Force is targeting EUvsDisinfo to and as such it positions it within the wider strategic plan to counteract Russian hybrid warfare.

Hybrid warfare and the Gerasimov Doctrine

The reasons behind the narratives that contributed to the creation of the East StratCom Task Force and consequently EUvsDisinfo are rooted in long-standing geopolitical dynamics that are outside the scope of this research. On the contrary, the debate on the threats from Russia that brought to the specific parliamentary debates and Council resolutions within the European Union is much more recent. Heated discussions about the “new Russian way of war”¹⁰⁴ started in the aftermath of the events that saw Russia swiftly seizing power and annexing Crimea, on one side, and getting involved in the

¹⁰³ Martin Kragh and Sebastian Åsberg, ‘Russia’s Strategy for Influence through Public Diplomacy and Active Measures: The Swedish Case’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 6 (19 September 2017): 774, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1273830>.

¹⁰⁴ Giles, “Russia’s New Tools,” 10.

hostilities in eastern Ukraine, on the other, in 2014. In the second half of that same year, the phrase “Russian hybrid model in Ukraine”¹⁰⁵ started to become popular in NATO jargon to describe a sequence of operations that was not codified in any other way in NATO’s operational concepts. The adjective hybrid and the term hybrid warfare were borrowed from US military thinking of the beginning of the 21st century acquiring a slightly different meaning when talking about Russia. Nowadays, the concept of hybrid warfare as it is used in political discourse finds its origin in the analysis that security studies have performed over the years of what is known as the Gerasimov Doctrine.

The Gerasimov Doctrine is commonly used to indicate the understanding that Western experts have of the Russian perception of the contemporary way of making war. Valery Gerasimov is a Russian General, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces who, in 2013, wrote a piece on the *Voenno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, the *Military-Industrial Courier*, with the title “The value of science in prediction – New challenges demand for a thorough rethinking of the forms and methods of conducting military operations.”¹⁰⁶ The piece analyses the events of the Arab Spring to showcase what is thought to be the future of warfare of the 21st century, highlighting a few key points that for Gerasimov are to be kept in mind for future conflict. The main attributes of his analysis are that the line between war and peace is more blurred than it has ever been, that there is an increasing use of non-military means to achieve political and strategic goals together with military means of a concealed character. Furthermore, Gerasimov points out that an extensive use of the information space opens to asymmetrical possibilities, including exploiting internal opposition, in order to reduce the fighting potential of the enemy.

In the wake of how the operations were carried out in Ukraine, for example with the *little green men* without insignia that were revealed to be Russian soldiers only after the annexation, Western criticism of Russia looked back at this article. Russian security expert and researcher Mark Galeotti published on his blog in mid-2014 a comment to the article by Gerasimov, coming up with the catchy phrase *Gerasimov Doctrine*.¹⁰⁷ Ever since, the term has been used to describe Russian military activity and the article content

¹⁰⁵ Giles, “Russia’s New Tools,” 7.

¹⁰⁶ Valeriy Gerasimov, “Tsennost Nauki v Predvidenii,” [The Value of Science in Prediction] *Voenno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, 26 February 2013, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/14632>. All translation from Russian, when not specified otherwise, is my own.

¹⁰⁷ Mark Galeotti, “The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russian Non-Linear War,” In Moscow’s Shadows, 6 July 2014, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>.

understood as a “set of beliefs as to what kinds of war the country will be fighting in the future and how it will win them,”¹⁰⁸ as a “programmatically blueprint for [Russian] war on the West.”¹⁰⁹ In reality, as many have noted, including Galeotti, not only has Gerasimov described concepts that had been already discussed for years in the Russian military environments,¹¹⁰ but he was, in fact, talking about Western attitude and practices regarding warfare.

Nevertheless, the points of Gerasimov’s article also describe the wider meaning the West has given to Russian hybrid warfare. US Marine officer Frank Hoffman first used *hybrid warfare* to describe the success of weak opponents of the US militaries, e.g. Al Qaeda, defining it as “a blend of the lethality of state conflict with the fanatical and protracted fervour of irregular war.”¹¹¹ Instead, in relation to Russia, Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, researcher for the Danish Institute for International Studies, describes it as a system with a ratio between non-kinetic and kinetic operations of 4:1 where a situation of “controlled chaos” is achieved to “cause and feed instability, to weaken the social fabric [...] and undermine decision making.”¹¹² This is a loose application of the original concept, as the only element that remains of Hoffman’s meaning is the vast use of non-military operations.

Is there a hybrid war?

Lately, *hybrid warfare* has become the term of choice in the description of Russian foreign policy, triggering several protests in parts of Western academia that are sceptical of the term as well as of its usage. Taking political science professor Bettina Renz as one exhaustive example of criticism, the reasons for this scepticism are multiple. First of all, the relative success in Crimea is not an indication of the existence of an actual invincible

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Mark Galeotti, “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed 14 June 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/05/im-sorry-for-creating-the-gerasimov-doctrine/>.

¹¹⁰ See for example, regarding Russian interest in operations in the information space, Ministerstvo Oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii, ‘Kontseptualnye Vzglady na Deyatelnost Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii v Informatsionnom Prostranstve,’ [Conceptual Views Regarding the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Information Space] 2011, accessed 14 June 2018, <http://ens.mil.ru/science/publications/more.htm?id=10845074@cmsArticle>.

¹¹¹ Frank G Hoffman, “Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars,” (Arlington, Virginia: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007), 28.

¹¹² Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, “Russian Hybrid Warfare: A Study of Disinformation,” Centre for Security Studies (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich, 8 September 2017), 3.

strategy never seen before. The factors that led to the development of the situation in Crimea in the way it went are situation-specific.¹¹³ Furthermore, the employment of operations in the information space are nothing new in warfare. They have consistently been used in the past, but usually with less successful results, one more reason not to judge the entire foreign policy and military strategy of a country based on one instance of success.¹¹⁴ Renz, together with the other authors that question the use of the term hybrid warfare, notes how it is often conceptualised as a “new approach to war that both [Russia’s] neighbours and the West are unable to stand up against,”¹¹⁵ taking on a tone that Galeotti has defined close to a panic reaction.¹¹⁶ She maintains that, even though it is no secret that Russia is trying its best to seek international influence through information tools, claiming that it is waging a hybrid war against the West is, if anything, a bold claim if based only on the existing premises. While observing Russian activity in the information space is legitimate if not necessary, the same cannot be said regarding the conjectures on Russia’s foreign policy intentions. As Renz puts it, “the interpretation of almost every Russian action as part of a well-coordinated ‘hybrid warfare’ campaign against the West imbues the Russian political leadership with an unrealistic degree of strategic prowess,”¹¹⁷ with all the drawbacks that establishing this type of narrative in the geopolitical discourse can have.¹¹⁸

Hybrid warfare is, just like Gerasimov Doctrine, another buzzword that populates the discourse about Russia from the journalistic level, to the political, the governance and even in academia, but it is terribly inaccurate and misleading. Both terms will continue to be used in this research because the purpose of the case study is to dive into an element within the Western discourse about Russia and not to analyse the country’s strategic and military approaches. For this reason, it was important for this research to shortly illustrate why the terms are being used and why they are regarded by some as incorrect. This is to indirectly give evidence of the existence of a certain Western narrative concerning Russia,

¹¹³ Bettina Renz, “Russia and ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2 July 2016): 288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201316>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 289. For a more detailed description of the reasons why information operations successes are not reliable for strategic purposes see also Colin F. Jackson, ‘Information Is Not a Weapons System’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 5–6 (18 September 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1139496>.

¹¹⁵ Renz, “Russia and Hybrid Warfare,” 284.

¹¹⁶ As cited in Renz, “Russia and Hybrid Warfare,” 290.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 293.

regardless of the facts surrounding Russian operations in Ukraine and in the information space in general.

Russian information war and cognitive resilience

For the purposes of this research, though, the attention has to be drawn, more specifically on information war. Together with its numerous variations, the term ideally refers to the non-military operations of a hybrid war that are conducted in the information space. Information operations are but a part of the non-kinetic elements in a hybrid war that might include “targeted use of corruption,” financing think tanks and other institutions, attacking cyber infrastructure, or the use of organised crime to funnel money into specific groups, leveraging on social tensions.¹¹⁹

When referring to information attacks, the scholarship mainly refers to various ways of spreading propaganda, both overtly and covertly. The practice has often been likened to Soviet active measures, a term used in traditional Soviet military thinking to indicate a series of operations, mostly entailing media manipulations, “for influencing events and behaviour in, and the actions of, foreign countries.”¹²⁰ In this domain the line between mere public diplomacy and active measures is at best blurred. If we understand public diplomacy as “an international actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public,”¹²¹ the difference between the two is limited to whether the operations are conducted secretly and with the use of tools of deception like disinformation.

International security expert Keir Giles, in a handbook for NATO officials, explores the understanding of NATO, and academic sources close to it, of Russian information warfare. Giles identifies information warfare as a broad concept encompassing everything from strategic communication to psychological operations that could be described as the “strategic application of power in the information domain.”¹²² When describing its forms

¹¹⁹ Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, “Winning the Information War,” (Centre for European Policy Analysis and Legatum Institute, August 2016), 12.

¹²⁰ Katri Pynnöniemi, “The Conceptual and Historical Roots of Deception”, in *Fog of Falsehood: Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine*, Pynnöniemi, K. and Rácz, A. (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2016), 38.

¹²¹ As cited in Kragh and Åsberg, “Russia’s Strategy for Influence” 777.

¹²² Keir Giles, “Handbook of Russian Information Warfare,” Fellowship Monograph (Rome: NATO Defence College, November 2016), 7.

and aims, he puts the emphasis on two elements. Firstly, the fact that Russia wages it with no connection to kinetic operations, i.e. during notional peacetime and not just as a preliminary part of hostilities. Secondly, that for this reason information is both the medium and the subject of the conflict.¹²³ The operations not only take place in the dimension of information, in all its forms, news media and social media alike, but they also are directed at it. Their main target is the information space. Throughout the whole book it is addressed as an extremely serious threat, that “NATO and Western policymakers cannot afford to underestimate.”¹²⁴ Information warfare is understood as a means to destabilise the West through the destabilisation of the information space and Giles makes bold claims about the specific targets within NATO that Russia might have. Interestingly, the multiple Russian sources cited are quoted to describe the approaches and the understanding that Russia has of these innovative strategies, but a closer look to the sources, and by own admission of the author, make it clear that they are taken out of context. Once again, the Russian sources, in fact, when describing hybrid warfare as the “new type of warfare,”¹²⁵ are referring to the developments, on the Western side, after the Cold War that the Soviet Union lost.

This aspect in Giles’ Handbook displays once more how political this term is as well and how, in time, it has become a trope within a larger narrative on both sides, weighed down by the meaning given to it depending on the occasion. Together with a reiteration of the terms popularised during the Cold War, this attitude contributes to creating a narrative against Russia. This practice is opposed by scholars like the abovementioned Bettina Renz for the reasons exposed earlier and is at the same time inadvertently fueling the narratives that Russia employs in the disinformation it spreads.

The narratives employed in information operations are analysed in a report for the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) within the framework of its Information Warfare Project in 2016, written by Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev. In the report, the authors explore the Russian activity on various information spaces in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region and have labelled Russian information operations as increasing in sophistication and intensity in recent years. They identify them as both overt and covert operations. Overt operations include the spread of information through

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹²⁵ Vladimir Kvachkov, *Spetsnaz Rossii*, [The Russian Special Forces] Voennaya Mysl, (Voennaya Literatura, 2004), accessed 14 June 2018, http://militera.lib.ru/science/kvachkov_vv/index.html.

foreign-language state television Russia Today (RT) and through the multi-lingual news agency Sputnik International. Covert operations employ allegedly independent journalists to plant stories in foreign media, fake experts and commentators on tv shows, trolls and bots on the internet. In the authors' analysis of Russian activity on various information spaces throughout the CEE region, the results show how the narratives behind the spread disinformation are country-specific and targeted, but with a common underlying note. As Lucas and Pomerantsev put it, the message consists in depicting the US and the Western world as "engaged in a selfish, ruthless bid for world domination."¹²⁶ This narrative, together with issues of historical revisionism in some of the ex-Soviet bloc countries, reiterates a Cold War-style polarising discourse that feeds also on Western narratives that demonise Russia and liken it to the Soviet Union.

The most interesting part of the report, though, is the part following the various case studies with Lucas and Pomerantsev's recommendations regarding how to deal with the threats and how to address them. This is especially relevant when considering the East StratCom Task Force and EUvsDisinfo as the European Union's responses to this climate of discussion about a hybrid warfare and threats in the information space at all levels. The authors divide between tactical, strategic and long-term recommendations and do mention the East StratCom Task Force activity when talking about creating targeted myth-busting for an audience of media and policy makers.¹²⁷ On a more strategic level, though, they acknowledge the importance of creating counter-products that could counterbalance the Russian products,¹²⁸ which are "cleverly targeted, technically adept and cynically fact-free. [They are] also enjoyable."¹²⁹

This idea has been developed by many in strategic studies on the information war and associated to the concept of cognitive resilience. Danish scholar Hansen for example brings up cognitive resilience in the discussion of the possible means to counteract disinformation. In his view, as disinformation is a systemic challenge, i.e. an attack on the very system of information, it requires a systemic response. Cognitive resilience is described a sort of "cognitive firewall"¹³⁰ that by creating a strong worldview allows the subject to be exposed to different types of narratives without being influenced by them.

¹²⁶ Lucas and Pomerantsev, "Winning the Information War," 5.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³⁰ Hansen, "Russian Hybrid Warfare," 9.

It would work because it would make constructive use of cognitive biases like confirmation bias to create a backfire effect against disinformation. Such approach, perfectly understandable as a strategic device to counteract a nearly military threat, might be problematic in terms of it being a way of shaping perceptions, manipulating cognitions and directing behavior,¹³¹ making the practice dangerously close to the definition of propaganda.

It is exactly in this perspective that Haigh et al., in the study already mentioned in the previous chapter, analyse the activity of the Ukrainian-based fact-checking organisation StopFake. In their work, the analysis of the practice of StopFake and the process with which the editors and the journalists choose the claims to debunk and post them leads up to the conclusion that the organisation is, in its own way, producing counterpropaganda.¹³² The reasoning behind their thesis has to do with the fact that StopFake, by selectively debunking claims and only publishing the ones that are proven to be false, is constructing a narrative against Russia to counteract disinformation with “information resistance”¹³³ more than by just performing the journalistic duty of checking facts.

This interpretation of fact-checking as a strategic tool to fight disinformation by engaging directly with it in the information space is the concept behind the creation of the East StratCom Task Force (and its products). The European Union’s attempt of producing a response is inscribed in a wider archipelago of Western responses from various organisations within the EU and outside. The main example is the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence based in Riga, Latvia, on which the EEAS East StratCom Task Force is modeled. In a report for the Kremlin Watch of the European Values think tank, Jakub Janda writes about the role and the tasks of both the NATO and the EEAS StratCom groups in opposing hostile disinformation operations. He believes that NATO and the EEAS are the only bodies on the supranational level that can create a valid response to hostile operations on the information space.¹³⁴ Janda identifies

¹³¹ See the working definition of propaganda adopted in this research and mentioned in Chapter 1.

¹³² Haigh, Haigh and Kozak, “Stopping Fake News,” 3.

¹³³ For a description of the term see Tatiana Bonch-Osmolovskaya, “Combating the Russian State Propaganda Machine: Strategies of Information Resistance,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1 (2015).

¹³⁴ Jakub Janda, “Full-Scale Democratic Response to Hostile Disinformation Operations,” Kremlin Watch Policy Paper (European Values, 20 June 2016), 6.

disinformation as both a foreign policy and a “homeland security threat”¹³⁵ to be dealt with through targeted policies at the supranational, national, and civil society levels. Importantly for this research, whenever Janda addresses his recommendations to the EEAS East StratCom Task Force he is doing so in terms of Strategic Communication practice. While it is understandable that a project like that of EUvsDisinfo would be a possible strategic communication tool for facing the alleged threats presented, it cannot be forgotten that it is of a dual nature. While the NATO StratCom CoE is in all aspects an “international military organisation,”¹³⁶ the EEAS East StratCom Task Force is not in any way military. Its product, EUvsDisinfo, cannot just be targeted as strategic communication but its practice seems to resemble that of a watchdog over the information space, which Janda himself ascribes to the measures that are to be taken by civil society.¹³⁷

This analysis of the context around the creation of the East StratCom Task Force and its product EUvsDisinfo sheds light on the narrative around information war and pro-Kremlin disinformation operations in Western information spaces in particular. It also puts the activity of EUvsDisinfo in the perspective of it being also a strategic tool, to build up for the analysis, in the next chapter, regarding EUvsDisinfo’s practice and diving into the ambivalence of its work.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ STRATCOMCOE, ‘FAQ’, NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/faq>.

¹³⁷ Janda, “Full-Scale Democratic Response,” 18.

EUvsDisinfo: The Project

This section of the analysis of the case study looks at EUvsDisinfo and the East StratCom Task Force in the attempt of covering other steps in the analysis of a propaganda campaign. Following Jowett and O'Donnell's analysis plan, this part concerns itself with the identification of who is behind the project, a description of the structure of the organisation, and an analysis of media use. Thus, the chapter covers the background of the creation of EUvsDisinfo and describe its activity. It is supported by a quantitative analysis performed of the database of the cases, to help analyse the methodology. Then, it analyses it in more detail in all its parts, keeping in mind the research done on fact-checking in the previous chapters and the weaknesses intrinsic to the practice, weighting EUvsDisinfo against the standards of the IFCN to see how the weaknesses are dealt with in the specific case. Lastly, the chapter includes a section on the particular nature of EUvsDisinfo and its differences and similarities with other projects to highlight the reasons why this specific case was taken into analysis.

The background

EUvsDisinfo was born after a series of institutional back and forth due to the growing concern, on national, European and global levels, about Russian hybrid threats. The context and narrative around this concept have been already discussed, but it is in this environment that the EU's concern with the issue of hybrid threats took for the first time physical form. During the session of March 19th and 20th 2015, the conclusions from the European Council, the body that brings together EU leaders to set the Union's overall political agenda, called for a "need to challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns"¹³⁸ with concrete actions on the European External Action Service part. As a result, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, as the head of the EEAS and the EU-level counterpart of national

¹³⁸ European Council, "European Council Meeting (19 and 20 March 2015) - Conclusions EUCO 11/15," III-13, 5.

foreign ministers, was tasked with establishing a communication team and designing an action plan for strategic communication.

Drawing on the experience of the Riga-based NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence that had just opened at the time and of other Centres of Excellence in the Baltic, the European External Action Service has then developed a StratCom Task Force. Upon its creation in 2015, a strategic communication plan was also drawn up, highlighting the importance of improving EU's strategic communication to counteract disinformation campaigns. The plan called for the creation of products "put at the disposal of the EU's political leadership, press services, EU delegations and EU Member States,"¹³⁹ aimed at "targeting key audiences and [focus] on specific issues of relevance to those audiences, including local issues."¹⁴⁰ When presented in a Q&A webpage on the EEAS website dated November 2015 and now in the archived documents, the specific engagements of the Task Force included designing ad-hoc communication for EU policy issues and striving for the creation of a "positive EU narrative,"¹⁴¹ while also specifically mentioning myth-busting.

The webpage has since been updated and the new version, dated November 2017, does not talk of active myth-busting anymore, but of creating a "compilation of reports received from members of the myth-busting network."¹⁴² It was, though, in relation to this programmatic point that EUvsDisinfo as a project was born, first as a weekly newsletter and later on as a fully structured website. The Task Force, fully in charge of the project, has started the EUvsDisinfo Twitter¹⁴³ and Facebook¹⁴⁴ accounts and subsequently the website.¹⁴⁵ All three platforms were established to ensure accessibility to the public of their Disinformation Review and Disinformation Digest, accessible otherwise by signing up to their newsletter. In these products, the Task Force exposes pieces of news regarded as pro-Kremlin (or Kremlin propaganda-endorsing)

¹³⁹ EEAS, "EU Action Plan on Strategic Communication," Ref. Ares (2015)2608242, 22 June 2015, accessed 14 June 2018, <http://archive.eap-csf.eu/assets/files/Action%20Plan.pdf>, 1.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ EEAS, "Questions and Answers," archived.

¹⁴² EEAS, "Questions and Answers."

¹⁴³ EU Mythbusters, @EUvsDisinfo, Twitter, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://twitter.com/euvsdisinfo>.

¹⁴⁴ EU vs Disinformation, Facebook, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/EUvsDisinfo>.

¹⁴⁵ EUVSDISINFO, "EU vs DISINFORMATION", EU vs DISINFORMATION, accessed 15 June 2018, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu>.

disinformation, fake news or myths, with the help of a network of fact-checking groups and NGOs, like European Values and StopFake, or private journalists.

Quantitative analysis

In this first part of the research, together with a close reading of the website, a generic analysis of the database of cases treated was taken into consideration to obtain data on the general practice of the project. The database is part of the EUvsDisinfo website and the section dedicated to it is called “Disinfo Cases.”¹⁴⁶ The timeframe taken into consideration goes from the first week of November 2015 to the first week of January 2018. The debunked cases available on the database do not date as far back, though. The ones stored and available are only starting from the third week of November 2015. The total cases in the analysed period are 1231 and all include the date the case was reported, the outlet where the disinformation appeared, the person/entity that reported the case to the East StratCom, a summary of the disinformation, and a disproof.

The most interesting data regarding the Disinfo Cases is related to the sources that have reported the case to the Task Force. Out of all the 1231 cases reported in the timeline that the research has taken into consideration, 45 were reported by the Task Force itself and almost the same amount by the EEAS offices. Furthermore, 378 cases were identified as having been reported by the “East StratCom Network,” an ideal network of sources that help the Task Force in their job. This element, which will be discussed later in the chapter, raises questions regarding the divergence between the alleged collection activity and the factual active fact-checking performed by EUvsDisinfo. The fact that a consistent number of cases does not have an explicit source is problematic in relation to how the other cases are treated and for this reason raises doubts on the actual origin of the reporting. In fact, all the other cases specify the source, even though the sources seem to be limited to a very restricted group of big contributors and a larger pool of one-time-sources. The peaks in contribution see the European Values think tank with over 160 reports and the Ukrainian NGO Promote Ukraine with around 100. The Ukrainian fact-checking organisation Stopfake is also present in large numbers, but one of the sources that stand

¹⁴⁶ EUVSDISINFO, “Disinformation Cases,” *EU vs DISINFORMATION*, accessed 15 June 2018, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>.

out the most is Pavel Spirin. Spirin's contributions are not through any entity or organisation, instead they are labelled as having been reported by "Pavel Spirin, former journalist." His contributions amount to over 200, which, except for the contributions by the ambiguous "East StratCom Network," are by far the highest single occurrence in the sample. This element has been discussed in the criticism of the project that this research is going to engage within the next chapter. Nevertheless, even as a standalone number, it contributes greatly to giving evidence of lack of transparency regarding the structure of EUvsDisinfo, its editorial process, its methodology and activity.

IFCN-based evaluation

With the help of the data gathered in this general analysis of the cases in the EUvsDisinfo database, this section will try to give an overview of EUvsDisinfo. This will be done, as mentioned by using the assessing tools of the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN), without entering in the detail of the analysis that the organisation does when assessing the compliance of a fact-checker to the fact-checking principles agreed upon by the community. This is particularly important because it is a necessary step to build up to the content analysis of the Disinformation Review and discuss the project's practice.

Organisation

In the "About" section of its website, EUvsDisinfo identifies itself as a "campaign to better forecast, address and respond to pro-Kremlin disinformation."¹⁴⁷ More detailed information on the project is scattered on the internet and mostly based on a Questions and Answers webpage on the EEAS website. There, EUvsDisinfo campaign is identified as a product of the East StratCom Task Force that fulfils one of the Task Force objectives that is that "report[ing] on and analys[ing] disinformation trends, explain[ing] and correct[ing] disinformation narratives, and rais[ing] awareness of disinformation."¹⁴⁸ This is said to be done with the help of a vast network of NGOs, other organisations, and private citizens that report the disinformation cases to the Team.

¹⁴⁷ EUVSDISINFO, "About," *EU vs DISINFORMATION*, accessed 15 June 2018, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>.

¹⁴⁸ EEAS, "Questions and Answers."

Notably, the disinformation that is mentioned in the mission of the Task Force is not just any disinformation, but, as specified in the EUvsDisinfo website, it is pro-Kremlin disinformation in particular. This is an important detail because it situates the project in a specific area of the landscape of existing fact-checking entities. Unlike traditional fact-checkers, it focuses *a priori* on one specific part of the disinformation spreading in the global news environment, discriminating in terms of topic in a wider definition. In fact, unlike other fact-checking organisations that might be considered selective and which usually focus on one genre of (dis)information, mostly that of utterances of politicians, EUvsDisinfo focuses on pieces of news that are considered to be endorsing or representations of pro-Kremlin propaganda. Thus, it does not discriminate on the genre of content analysed, articles, politician statements, social media posts, which could be an editorial choice to keep the content and the research mechanisms homogenous. It does, instead, discriminate on a more ideological level, by deciding to only check disinformation coming from one specific political area. This is, quite clearly, a programmatic point in the activity of EUvsDisinfo, exemplified even by the simple slogan of the project, “Question even more,”¹⁴⁹ that echoes “Question more,”¹⁵⁰ the slogan of Russia Today, the Russian Federation international news broadcaster.

Regarding the funding for the project, EUvsDisinfo is fully run by the East StratCom Task Force which is a budget-neutral activity in the budget for EU Strategic Communication. As the EEAS website states, the Task Force “draws on existing resources within the EU institutions and the Member States,”¹⁵¹ which means that those involved in first line in EUvsDisinfo are nine full-time officials of the EU institutions or seconded by the Member States appointed from within the EEAS,¹⁵² making it a product of an institutional body. This means the project is independent only to a certain extent. On one hand, it is true that in various occasions it is stated that the project does not represent the official EU views on whatever is reported and published. Moreover, it appears that higher ranks of the External Action Service from outside the Task Force might not be involved in the editorial process of EUvsDisinfo. It is, on the other hand, legitimate to consider it only semi-independent. As it is fully run and controlled by the

¹⁴⁹ See the Facebook page and Twitter profile.

¹⁵⁰ RT, “RT - Question More,” RT International, accessed 15 June 2018, <https://www.rt.com>.

¹⁵¹ EEAS, “Questions and Answers.”

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

strategic communication team of an institutional body, there is ground for a reasonable doubt regarding its non-partisanship.

Activity

In terms of content there are three main parts of the project, all three available on the website: the disinformation cases, the disinformation review and the analysis section. The disinformation cases are all the cases fact-checked during the activity of the project and gathered in a database on the website that offers information regarding the outlet where the story appeared, the date, and which member of the East StratCom Network reported the case; a summary of the disinformation; and a disproof. The Review is said to be pointing out “key messages carried in the media, which have been identified as providing a partial, distorted or false view or interpretation and/or spreading key pro-Kremlin messaging.”¹⁵³ The Digest, appearing on their website as a section called News and Analysis, instead gives a closer look on selected news or social media trends to try and deconstruct their narratives.

The activity of the project is, as stated in many occasion, mostly that of gathering disinformation, making it a peculiar sub-product of what is widely understood as a fact-checking organisation. The project includes analyses on disinformation trends, that could be categorised as opinion pieces and, most importantly for this research as it is the main object of study, the disinformation review is a fully original product. In it, the cases are chosen for relevance, divided in topic groups and briefly presented, making the Review the window on the whole activity.

Although it is in various occasions stated that the project is only meant as a platform to give resonance to externally sourced debunking, the facts, and sometimes the image it gives out of itself, does not correspond to the stated position. The twitter account @EUvsDisinfo has as a name on its profile “EU Mythbusters,”¹⁵⁴ clearly trying to convey some degree of activity on the group’s side, Furthermore, as it was shown above, the team is the source of the debunked disinformation in many cases. In a great deal of other cases the source was either within the EEAS offices or hidden behind the term of East StratCom Network. The data clearly show that the project is not merely the platform it says it is for resonance of disinformation debunked elsewhere on the internet. Furthermore, the fact

¹⁵³ EUVSDISINFO, “Disinformation Review.”

¹⁵⁴ EU Mythbusters, @EUvsDisinfo, Twitter, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://twitter.com/euvdisinfo>.

that the disinformation and the disproof are presented in summaries contribute to demonstrating how EUvsDisinfo is performing fact-checking at least to a certain degree.

Methodology: the sources, the debunking

When looking at a fact-checking organisation it is of utter importance that there is mention of the methodology that is used for the debunks. This because, as it has been covered before in this work, there are potential intrinsic weaknesses and biases linked to the fact-checking activity and it is important for a fact-checker to be upfront about the process through which the journalist or the team working on a case has reached the published verdict.

In the case of EUvsDisinfo there is no mentioning, in any part of the website, of the methodology used. Ideally this would be easily understood with the fact that EUvsDisinfo is simply a database of information sourced elsewhere, but as it has been shown in the previous section this is not always the case. In the many cases where the story was not reported to the Task Force by a fact-checker that states its methodology on its website, there is no way of understanding the methods with which the information has been picked out and debunked, what type of sources are chosen and why. This situation not only covers the cases where the reporting source is the Task Force itself, but also the many other cases where the source is a private citizen or journalist and an NGO whose primary activity is not fact-checking. These sources cumulatively make up for the vast majority of the cases. Furthermore, when looking in greater detail at how the cases were handled in the database, other methodological issues arose. Researchers that have dedicated their time to analysing fact-checking organisations all agree that the claim has to be reported in full to ensure fairness in reporting.¹⁵⁵ In the case of EUvsDisinfo this is not done, the claims are presented in a summary, elaborated with all probability by the editorial team. Additionally, but as an extension of the same issue, there frequently is a lack of sources to back up the debunks, making it mostly impossible for a reader to reproduce the fact-check and adding to the lack of transparency of the process.

¹⁵⁵ See Graves, “Anatomy of a Fact Check;” Silverman, *Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content*; Amazeen, “Checking the Fact-Checkers”; Uscinski and Burton, “The Epistemology of Fact Checking;” IFCN, “Code of Principles.”

Why EUvsDisinfo

The case of EUvsDisinfo is deemed to be particularly interesting for this research as it combines fact-checking, seen as a journalistic branch, and the activity of an institutional body that is part of a major global geopolitical actor like the European Union. The choice goes to EUvsDisinfo for two reasons. Firstly, because of its financial dependence on the EEAS. This is not to say that it is the expression of the EEAS or the EU official view. As stated in multiple places by the EEAS and EUvsDisinfo itself, “the opinions expressed are not considered an official EU position”¹⁵⁶ and it is not in this research’s interest to consider them as such. When researching propaganda in news media, though, it is very important to identify the source. This aspect has an impact on the analysis because, more or less willingly, there is a chance the editorial line of the project is influenced by who pays for it. EUvsDisinfo is a useful example because at least the ownership and financing of the project is very clear. The second reason why EUvsDisinfo is taken as a case study is that its practice has been heavily criticised on the bureaucratic level by a report commissioned by the European Parliament. The hard criticism that has been directed to the project is seen as a starting point to academically investigate to what extent there is a real connection between EUvsDisinfo activity and propaganda.

In addition to these two reasons, it is necessary to mention that the case of EUvsDisinfo is, possibly, unique in the fact-checking landscape. As shown in the previous section, it is not possible to consider it entirely non-partisan. This element makes EUvsDisinfo substantially different from the organisations that Lucas Graves categorises as having a journalistic core or an academic affiliation, placing it more in the political section.¹⁵⁷ Even so, the limited non-partisanship is not *per se* a unique feature. As Mark Stencel, expert on fact-checking and lecturer of Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy, notes, there are a few partisan organisations. This, in his words, happens “especially in conflict zones and in countries where the lines between independent media, activists and opposition parties are often blurry and where those groups are aligned against state-controlled media or other governmental and partisan entities.”¹⁵⁸ It is evident, though, that EUvsDisinfo does not fully identify with this description either. First of all, it is not

¹⁵⁶ EUVSDISINFO, EU vs DISINFORMATION.

¹⁵⁷ See Graves, “Boundaries Not Drawn,” 6.

¹⁵⁸ Mark Stencel, ‘Global Fact-Checking up 50% in Past Year’, Duke Reporters’ Lab, 16 February 2016, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://reporterslab.org/global-fact-checking-up-50-percent/>.

entirely independent nor is it aligned against governmental entities. Secondly, the European Union is arguably considered, at least in this study, as a liberal environment where freedom of the press is enforced and encouraged. This peculiarity and ambivalence of EUvsDisinfo make it a chimera that is hard to encapsulate in pre-made categories and thus problematic to study applying only one point of view. At the same time, its chimeric nature is another reason why the project is deemed of extreme interest and ought to be analysed in more detail,

EUvsDisinfo: The Content

After calling the attention to the critical elements in EUvsDisinfo, this section focuses on the seventh step, the analysis of media techniques use, and the eighth, the analysis of the reactions and criticism.

Methodology

The texts analysed are the articles from EUvsDisinfo called “Disinformation Review,” that is the weekly articles written by the East StratCom Task Force that give an overview of the week’s most popular disinformation cases that have been checked and listed by the project. I chose this specific product of the EUvsDisinfo project because it is the one designed to reach the highest possible audience. It is not only published on the website and linked multiple times a week on the social media pages of the project, but also sent to subscribers as a newsletter. Moreover, it is, together with the analysis articles, the textual product whose source is unequivocally the East StratCom Task Force, making it the most relevant in the analysis of possible propaganda features. Furthermore, unlike the articles from the section “News and Analysis,” which are opinion pieces that follow-up on trending disinformation stories on social media, the Disinformation Review has been a EUvsDisinfo product from the beginning, before the implementation of the website platform, and is available online from the oldest to the most recent issue.

There were 95 separate issues of “Disinformation Review” articles from the beginning of the organisation to the date of the beginning of the data gathering process (November 2015 - January 2018). As the purpose of the research demanded the use of qualitative methods, it was necessary to identify a sample. To be relevant, the sample would have had to be expanded throughout the whole period of activity, to avoid overrepresentation of certain timeframes. For this reason, I chose a stratified sampling approach and the sample identified in a total of eight cases of issues from January, June and December of every year. This was done partly because it would allow to have an overview of the whole year, but also because the timeframe taken into consideration excludes the majority of months for the years at the extreme ends of the timeframe, that is 2015 and 2018. A sample including both December and January made sure that both 2015 and 2018 would

be represented. The eight cases taken into analysis were arbitrarily chosen as the first issue of the month. The sample comprises then the issues 6, 9, 29, 50, 53, 70, 90, and 94. The issues were gathered through the EUvsDisinfo website's archive when possible and retrieved from databases of the sent newsletter in older cases thanks to the permanent links on the tweets from the EUvsDisinfo Twitter account that were used to promote the newsletter.

This choice in methodology is dictated by the peculiar status of the EUvsDisinfo project. Whenever academic research was conducted in qualitative terms on fact-checking groups,¹⁵⁹ it was always about independent organisations that allowed ethnographic methods and other types of qualitative assessment, like participant observation and in-depth interviews with the members of the organisation. This approach was not possible with EUvsDisinfo. The multiple requests of contact in the preliminary phases of this research have been ignored and fieldwork was impossible due to the institutional nature of the project. This approach, while maybe not the ideal one, is still considered highly valuable in that it sheds light on the language usage and the organisation of contents of the project. The Disinformation Review, much more than the single cases debunked, can give indicators of editorial choices, as it picks and chooses the disinformation topics that make the cut in the article.

The method applied is qualitative content analysis,¹⁶⁰ as it is a fundamental element in the process of propaganda analysis. The coding scheme was elaborated with a summative approach and the texts coded with a quantitative analysis software called QDA Miner by Provalis.

Two dimensions of the three dimensions proposed by Florian Zollmann were taken into consideration. One dimension, labelled Truth, would comprise the codes that show the relationship of the author of the text with the truth and the facts that are being analysed. The second dimension, labelled Enemy, would cover the codes that underline the relationship of the author and the designated opponent in the discourse of the single text and the larger project in general.

¹⁵⁹ See Silverman, *Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content*; Graves, "Boundaries Not Drawn," Haigh, Haigh and Kozak, "Stopping Fake News."

¹⁶⁰ See Philipp Mayring, 'Qualitative Content Analysis', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 1, no. 2 (30 June 2000); Chris Newbold, Oliver Boyd-Barrett, and Hilde van den Bulck, eds., *The Media Book* (London : New York: Arnold ; Oxford University Press, 2002).

The codes were identified throughout the analysis and added to the coding scheme so that previous texts could be re-coded with the adjourned scheme. In the code scheme as it emerged after the coding process, the dimensions are divided in two subcategories each. The dimension labelled Truth is divided in Emotion and Logic. The codes identified within the subcategory Emotion relate to the use of emotional language, metaphors, loaded words, *pathos* to describe the facts explained in the Reviews. The subcategory Logic included logical fallacies that use *logos* to get to an erroneous conclusion. The second dimension was then divided in two subcategories, one about the enemy in itself and the other about the characterisation of the victim.

Findings

Because of the nature of the Review, designed as a summary of other articles, not all text in every case was suitable for coding. Reported speech and titles of other articles could not be taken into consideration as they did not constitute material directly produced by EUvsDisinfo. This situation made it irrelevant for this research to evaluate the amount of text coded in relation with the text that was not coded and all data reported refers to values applied only on the coded text.











	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Truth				
 Logic - Card-stacking	19	10,8%	8	100,0%
 Emotion - Emotional or loaded words	33	18,8%	8	100,0%
 Logic - Overgeneralisation and other logical fallacies	15	8,5%	7	87,5%
 Emotion- Condescension	18	10,2%	6	75,0%
 Enemy in itself				
 Namecalling	51	29,0%	7	87,5%
 Victim				
 Victimisation	27	15,3%	8	100,0%
 Glittering generality	13	7,4%	4	50,0%

Figure 1

In Figure 1, it is clear that almost all the codes occurred in the majority of the cases analysed. Interestingly, the amount of coded text increased in more recent cases, as the genre of the review shifted from the original newsletter format to a more article-like style. The shift could be described as happening on three different levels. First of all, it is a shift regarding the target audience. The first cases, up to one year of activity for the East

StratCom Task Force, are clearly directed to journalists and/or whoever operates on the information space. The newsletters start with addresses such as “Dear Colleagues” and often end thanking the pool of fact-checkers sending their reports to the Task Force, making it clear that they are the main, if not the only, audience for the product. The more recent cases have lost those characteristics and are clearly intended for a larger, more general, audience. On another level, the shift can be seen in the degree of elaboration of the articles. The earlier reviews are merely a summary of information and do not go much further than identifying weekly trends in disinformation topics. More recent reviews, on the other hand, showcase a higher and higher degree of elaboration of the content presented, with comments coming directly from the authors and a tone that is less and less detached. The third level on which we can observe a shift is, in fact, that of writing style. The absence of real commentary to the presented cases in the early reviews is also reflected in a neutral style that left little to no space to emotional terms and loaded words. In the earlier reviews in the sample most of non-neutral terms are used only for the connotation of the aggressors and the victims. In the later cases, though, the already present characterisation of aggressor and victim sharpens.

The designated aggressors, the disinformation outlets, are labelled with denigrating terms that become more and more frequent, to the point that they constitute most of all coded text. Notably, the enemy is never only the disinformation piece, but the outlet in general, directly *inventing*,¹⁶¹ *insulting*¹⁶² and performing *aggression*,¹⁶³ with *tasteless*¹⁶⁴ and *scandalous*¹⁶⁵ pieces. To that, it is important to add the specular characterisation of the designated victims of the general narration of the review. The victims are, of course, the countries at the centre of the disinformation pieces, mostly Ukraine and the EU as a whole, associated in most cases with terms like *blamed* and *accused*. The characterisation of the two sides continues with another linguistic trope that, without directly addressing the aggressor or the victim, contributes to the creation of the opposition of the two in the

¹⁶¹ East StratCom Task Force, “Disinformation Review,” Issue 53, EU vs DISINFORMATION, 12 January 2017, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://us11.campaign-archive.com/?u=cd23226ada1699a77000eb60b&id=8a3e5d1155>.

¹⁶² East StratCom Task Force, “Disinformation Review,” Issue 29, EU vs DISINFORMATION, 7 June 2016, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://us11.campaign-archive.com/?u=cd23226ada1699a77000eb60b&id=17e3fdd693>.

¹⁶³ East StratCom Task Force, “Disinformation Review,” Issue 50, EU vs DISINFORMATION, 6 December 2016, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://us11.campaign-archive.com/?u=cd23226ada1699a77000eb60b&id=03440b6615>.

¹⁶⁴ East StratCom Task Force, “Disinformation Review,” Issue 29.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

narration of the events. The trope has been identified in the coding scheme with the term Glittering Generality in connection to the terms used by the Institute of Propaganda Analysis and described in a previous chapter. With the term, in this specific situation, it is understood the use of specific terms that represent virtues for one side of the narration. In the reviews, the dualism is constructed in terms of truth and lies, where, as the disinformation outlets are disseminating lies, the East StratCom Task Force is spreading the truth. This element is in line with what has been discussed in a previous chapter regarding the value attributed to fact-checking as the keeper of truth rather than a watchdog that sets the record straight.

The most interesting attribute of the sample that the content analysis has pointed out, though, is that of the tone with which the articles, especially the most recent ones, are written. For lack of a better term, it has been coded with the name Condescension and it refers to all the terms and strings of text whose tone is slightly patronising. This element is linked with that of characterisation of the two sides and of creation of a narration where there is tension between two opposites. It was considered as a separate code, though, because in a great deal of occasions it was not in relation to the enemy or the victim, but in direct relation with the facts and what was presented as truth. It is the case of the many small comments, in the recent reviews, that include grand statements about truth and fighting disinformation that, in a weekly summary of debunked fake news, gain a lecturing nuance that they would not have, for example, in an opinion piece. For the sake of clarity, an example is represented by the initial few sentences of Issue 94. After a long preamble about the tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” the authors declare that they “feel the need to point out the obvious, again.”¹⁶⁶ This code, although not being the most recurrent one, was, perhaps, the most striking and, alone, would have raised questions regarding the professionalism of the authors of such pieces. Together with the other data gathered, both in the content analysis and in the analysis of the website, it builds the evidence for a meticulously articulated discussion and criticism of EUvsDisinfo’s practice.

¹⁶⁶ East StratCom Task Force, “Disinformation Review,” Issue 94, EU vs DISINFORMATION, 18 January 2018, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/when-the-emperor-has-no-clothes/>.

External Criticism

The findings described above are not the only element that needs to be taken into consideration for the discussion regarding the case study. These findings, in fact, inscribe themselves in a larger pool of criticism that EUvsDisinfo has received, despite its limited popularity among the greater public and actual outreach.

The first important source for criticism of EUvsDisinfo is represented by the *Report on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties*, drafted by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs. The document raises doubts on the journalistic practice of the project. The report covers all of EU strategic communication devices to counteract propaganda from both Eastern neighbours and Da'esh, but in this wider evaluation EUvsDisinfo is mentioned as a welcomed project that nonetheless needs improving. The Committee on Foreign Affairs criticises the efficiency of the products of the East StratCom Task Force and, most importantly "believes that the [...] transparency of the work of the East StratCom Team needs to be further improved."¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, it "invites the East StratCom Task Force to revisit the criteria used for drafting the review,"¹⁶⁸ calling for it to meet the requirements of the IFJ Conduct of Journalists. The criticism against the Disinformation Review goes even further when the Committee explicitly "emphasises that the review must be drafted in an appropriate manner, without using offensive language or value judgments."¹⁶⁹ These comments are shared by the Committee on Culture and Education in their opinion on the matter in the same report.¹⁷⁰

In addition to the general comments of the committees, the possibility of malpractice within EUvsDisinfo is echoed by the minority opinion of the same report which identifies another problematic detail. The minority opinion, in fact, starts by advocating for a mitigation of the extreme polarisation in the discourse against Russia's disinformation. Additionally, it goes as far as denouncing the efforts of the Task Force as "its own

¹⁶⁷ Anna Elżbieta Fotyga, 'Report on EU Strategic Communication to Counteract Propaganda against It by Third Parties' (European Parliament, 14 October 2016), accessed 14 June 2018, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=//EP//NONSGML+REPORT+A8-2016-0290+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN>, 12.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

propaganda,”¹⁷¹ with tones that often might display “a presumed superiority that may be offensive.”¹⁷²

The minority opinion of a parliamentary committee is certainly not to be considered the most objective analysis of the project, but it is still interesting to note it, in addition to the general remarks and to more recent criticism that has been directed to EUvsDisinfo. As a matter of fact, in February 2018 the European Union, the European Commission, the European Council and the European External Action Service have all been invited to appear in Amsterdam District Court upon a lawsuit filed by Dutch news organisations regarding the conduct of EUvsDisinfo.¹⁷³ The lawsuit was filed by the companies owning De Gelderlander, a local newspaper, GeenStijl, a news website known for being anti-EU and populist, TPO.nl, another right-wing Eurosceptic news website, and Mr. Chris Aalberts, a freelance journalist posting his pieces on tpo.nl. The dispute revolved around various articles, published by the different outlets, that EUvsDisinfo had listed as Disinformation cases.

The specific legal action is of course regarding different cases for each outlet, but it is interesting to note the criticism of EUvsDisinfo carried out in the Writ of Summons. The document, made available by the plaintiffs’ lawyer, involves two major parts of EUvsDisinfo’s products: the summary and the disproof. The criticism is first of all directed to the summaries, that is the part in every disinformation case instance where the disinformation is briefly presented to the reader, because they represent the place where the controversy originated. In each of the cases cited, in fact, there was no correspondence between the summary presented on EUvsDisinfo and the original article. As it emerges from the Summons, EUvsDisinfo’s summaries would present a story as representing the position of the outlet, while in fact parts of interviews or press releases were selectively chosen to create a provocative summary of the article.¹⁷⁴ Regarding the disproof, which is intended to be the part of the entry that explains why the disinformation is such, in the cited cases the explanations were not reporting opposing facts, but argued against the tone of the article and its apparent aim.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ GS Media B.V. v. Europese Unie, Writ of Summons, L1801108/INT, 20 February 2018, accessed 14 June 2018, <https://kvdl.com/en/articles/litigation-dutch-media-vs-eu>.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.6, 10.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.14, 19.

The central idea behind the legal proceeding concerns the defamation, the damage to the public image of the outlets caused by being listed as a disinformation outlet by a project run by an office of the European Union. Even though the proceeding is very clearly intended as a provocation for a lack of previous response in the outlets' request of taking down the cases from the website,¹⁷⁶ their criticism is still a valuable element to add to this case study's discussion. Most of the cases cited have been vaguely dismissed by the East StratCom Task Force as translation errors and, in some of the cited cases, the entry was deleted from the database, but not from the Disinformation Review. The Task Force's attitude towards the flak directed towards EUvsDisinfo was not at all welcoming and open rectifications regarding the articles in question were not made at the time of the Summons. Nevertheless, the fact that, even before the legal proceeding, the Task Force had deleted some of the articles does say a lot on the accuracy of part of the claims in the legal action.

Discussion

This case study shows how fact-checking is part of EUvsDisinfo's practice and nature, despite it not being part of its stated activity. The analysis carried out looks at it as a fact-checking project and, as such, also a journalistic product. This has pointed out issues and incongruities in EUvsDisinfo's practice of fact-checking, especially regarding transparency and methodology. The questions raised by the European Parliament's report and by the lawsuit from the Dutch news outlets are an extremely valid addition to the findings of this study and show how the concerns regarding EUvsDisinfo are in some degree shared by parts of the audience.

The discussion regarding the case study, though, cannot stop at EUvsDisinfo's analysis as a fact-checking organisation. EUvsDisinfo is run by the Strategic Communication team of the European External Action Service and, as such, is first of all a strategic communication tool. The hybridity is the focal point of the discussion because, if it is true that the analysis cannot cover one part without the other, it is also true that the two analyses that emerge are somewhat incompatible. The weaknesses that arise from the analysis of EUvsDisinfo as fact-checking stem from the fact that the project was born as

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.20, 16.

a strategic communication tool and not as journalism. The lack of transparency in the editorial processes and in the methodology are linked with the fact that it is not a journalistic or para-journalistic organisation that runs the website. The inadequate language of the pieces published and the appeal of the European Parliament's committee for an appropriate language are linked with the fact that the authors are not journalists, they are EU officials. The gravity behind the defamation accusations by the Dutch news outlets is linked with the fact that the fact-checking is perceived as coming directly from the institution.

The choice of a product like EUvsDisinfo for a strategic communication campaign is dictated by the context around which the East StratCom Task Force was created. External influence, namely Russian, in the European information space has been calling for a firm response that could counteract the negative effect of such operations. At the same time, though, the narration that has been given of these interferences has created a propaganda hysteria in Europe. The West is trying to counteract this Russian information war with a war on (Russian) propaganda, with all the risks for extremism on one side or the other that such an attitude entails. In this environment where some fact-checking organisations believe it is a journalistic duty not to be neutral in order to fight Russian disinformation, it is not difficult to see the weaponisation potential of fact-checking. The line between simple fact-checking, journalistic activism, and (counter)propaganda is at best blurred. EUvsDisinfo's choice of focusing only on a certain type of claims certainly influences the editorial line of the cases published. If on one hand the activism is clear in view of the fact that it is a product of a strategic communication team, on the other there are signals that require caution. Choosing the cases to publish based on what is thought to be compliant with narratives allegedly pushed by the Kremlin has the risk of presenting a heavily framed reality. For these same reasons, to look at it merely as a strategic communication tool is to take away an incredibly important element out of its real practice. Its origin does not take away that the project is, in the form, journalistic and as such it can use to its advantage the authority that journalism has with the audience.

This case study seeks mainly to achieve the ambitious goal of monitoring, in an all-encompassing way, problematic instances of fact-checking. It is also clear, though, that this research has a great deal of limitations, originating from the nature of the topic and of the object of study.

The object of study presented peculiar characteristics that made it difficult to encapsulate perfectly in any theoretical framework. Its hybridity called for an analysis that was as well-rounded as possible, but at the same time it made complex to apply existing conceptual theories in full. The limited amount of time excluded an in-depth evaluation of the debunking methods that included retracing the debunks to check their reliability. Furthermore, the semi-institutional nature of the project made it impossible to approach it with other qualitative methods, such as direct observation and interviews. Requests have been sent to the East StratCom Task Force team, but never answered, which made it impossible to obtain certain types of data.

Another big limitation to this research as a whole is the possibility of a biased approach. Propaganda theories when applied to current case studies can result in a biased analysis, because starting off from the theory might influence the type of discourse with which the results are discussed, if not the results themselves. In this case the propaganda approach was as cautious as possible and justified by the characteristics and epistemological issues linked to the practice of fact-checking in general and the peculiar situation of EUvsDisinfo in particular.

Conclusion

This research has tried to showcase the possibilities existing in a liberal democracy for instances of hegemonic propaganda or counterpropaganda in the information space. After a review of the scholarship on propaganda and, in particular, of propaganda in journalism, it has looked at fact-checking as a new form of journalism that holds the potential for manipulation of the audience. Fact-checking's perceived role of the watchdog of watchdogs and its practice being often at odds with scientific research make it a perfect tool for possibly presenting facts through specific frames and pushing for specific narratives.

The case study, EUvsDisinfo, was chosen because it represented a peculiar case in the fact-checking landscape. Despite what stated in the descriptions of the project, its practice was found to be undeniably and tightly linked to fact-checking. The tension between its strategic communication purpose and its journalistic form leads to several faults in its practice as a fact-checking project. The case study of EUvsDisinfo's practice, both through analysis of its website and of content, has pointed out a lack of transparency in methodology and in many instances a lack of professionalism in the language used.

The findings point out a possibility of malpractice in EUvsDisinfo that, given the background and the ownership of the project, opens up the field for discussion in terms of propaganda. It is understood that the editorial line of EUvsDisinfo is not expression of the official position of the EU regarding the topics presented in the website. Even so, the faults in its journalistic practice, together with the fact that EUvsDisinfo was born primarily as a strategic communication tool, concur in showing how necessary it is to monitor its practice. The use of fact-checking as a strategic tool for information resistance, for cognitive resilience, is, at best, deceiving. It is deceiving because it leverages on the authority that journalism has as a watchdog of institutions, as the fourth estate. As it has been shown in this research, the weaponisation of journalism in liberal democratic environments is underresearched and, maybe, underestimated. In the discussion about propaganda in liberal mass media EUvsDisinfo is an example of the additional ring in the chain that is usually overlooked. The scholars whose research has been used for this case study have always analysed news and information as coming from independent, or corporation-owned, sources. It was the case of researchers of the fact-checking

environment and the case of critics of propaganda in liberal democracies. EUvsDisinfo, in its very limited concrete outreach, aims at a mainstream audience in the form of a journalistic product, but with an institutional origin. While the aim of this case study is definitely not that of accusing EUvsDisinfo of propaganda, it is important to deconstruct its frames, hegemonic frames, as they originate from institutional sources.

Oliver Boyd-Barrett in his works claims that in recent history, big ideological clashes that have used propaganda, like the Cold War, the war on drugs and the war on terror can be seen as “theatrical construction intended to distract public attention from the unspeakable.”¹⁷⁷ He argues that these large-scale propaganda campaigns would catalyse the attention on themselves to camouflage waging of wars or exploitation of other countries. Far from sharing this extreme position, I adopt his concept to claim that the Western war on Russian propaganda has the risk of becoming a two-sided propaganda war. What this research has tried to show with the case study is that there is solid ground to argue for the existence of a propaganda campaign on the side of Western media and that fact-checking might be playing a role in the process. It is of course extremely necessary, especially in this atmosphere of geopolitical tensions between the West and Russia also over the conflict in Syria, to monitor and investigate Russian activity in the information space, both in its neighbouring countries and towards other geopolitical powers. The research surrounding Russian intrusions and operations, though, should not overshadow the activity on the Western mainstream media’s side. As it has been pointed out by many scholars and in multiple occasions in this research, there is a lack of scholarly work regarding propaganda in liberal democracies and overlooking this aspect might create an imbalance in representation and might lead to underestimate the situation, with repercussions on legitimate democratic processes. This work, with its limitations and small scope, aims at paving the way for further academic research on the matter, starting from the critical analysis of fact-checking practices and their weaponisation.

¹⁷⁷ Oliver Boyd-Barrett, *Western Mainstream Media and the Ukraine Crisis*, 8.

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