

Understanding propaganda and disinformation

Recent security-related developments have increased the focus on, and concern over, the use of biased and deceptive information as a strategic communication tool. The growing emphasis on countering manipulation of information calls for an equally attentive approach to the usage and definitions of the terms involved.

Manipulation of information: old tools, new tricks

Propaganda and disinformation are interconnected terms and are sometimes used interchangeably. Although both terms in their current meaning imply a degree of purposeful and systematic manipulation of information – defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as 'knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event; that of which one is apprised or told; intelligence, news' – the broader term 'propaganda' dates back to the 17th century, whereas 'disinformation' was coined during the Cold War.

Propaganda: purposeful dissemination of information and ideas

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

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

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

Disinformation: systematic and intentional deception

The OED defines disinformation as the 'dissemination of deliberately false information, esp. when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it; false information so supplied'. The OED lists the first English-language reference as *The Times*, 3 June 1955, and suggests that the term 'perhaps' derives from Russian, *дезинформация* (transliterated as 'dezinformacija'), first recorded in 1949 (whereas the French equivalent *désinformation* was not recorded until 1954). In its 2011 Draft Convention on International Information Security, Russia lists 'disinformation' as one of the main threats to international peace and security in the information space, defining it as 'manipulation of the flow of information in the information space of other governments, disinformation or the concealment of information with the goal of adversely affecting the psychological or spiritual state of society, or eroding traditional cultural, moral, ethical, and aesthetic values'.

Misinformation: unintentionally incorrect information

The EU's interinstitutional terminology database [IATE](#) (Inter-Active Terminology for Europe) specifically notes that disinformation should not be confused with misinformation, defined in IATE as 'information which is wrong or misleading but **not** deliberately so'. The OED dates the use of misinformation back to 1605, [defining](#) the term as 'Wrong or misleading information'. The guide '[Evaluating information](#)' by Johns Hopkins University Library (JHUL) goes a step further and clearly distinguishes between disinformation and misinformation. Defining misinformation as 'erroneous or incorrect information', the JHUL goes on to explain that misinformation – as opposed to disinformation – is 'intention neutral', thus not deliberate, 'just wrong or mistaken'. As an example of misinformation, JHUL lists urban legends; fabricated or untrue stories disseminated by people who sincerely believe them. Although most sources seem to agree on the distinction between disinformation as intentionally deceptive and misinformation as unintentionally incorrect, Oxford University Press' [Oxforddictionaries.com](#) lists misinformation as a synonym for disinformation, [defining](#) it as 'False or incorrect information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive'.

Related terms and concepts

Information warfare: In its 2011 Draft Convention on International Information Security, Russia defines 'information warfare' not only as 'a conflict between two or more States in the information space with the goal of inflicting damage to information systems' (e.g. cyber-attacks) as well as 'carrying out mass psychological campaigns against the population of a State in order to destabilize society and the government; as well as forcing a State to make decisions in the interests of their opponents'. The Kremlin's '[chief propagandist](#)', Dmitry Kiselev, asserts that information wars have become '[the main type of warfare](#)'.

International information security: While both NATO and the EU recognise and respond to Russia's disinformation campaigns in and beyond Ukraine (see below), the concept of 'international information security' remains controversial. Whereas the West recognises the cyber threat from hostile code, others view content itself as a threat. In the 2009 agreement between the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation member states (until July 2015, these were China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), content is viewed as a potential security threat that should be [restricted](#). The 'Western' consensus [considers](#) this level of content regulation to be a threat to fundamental human rights.

Official EU and NATO usage of the terms 'disinformation' and/or 'propaganda'

The European Council and the EEAS use the term 'disinformation' to describe Russia's information operations

While 'disinformation' has become widely used in connection with Russia's actions in Ukraine, the term was previously used to describe some Syrian media outlets in the 2012 Council Decision concerning restrictive measures against Syria ([2012/739/CFSP](#)). In the context of Ukraine, official EU documents – for example, the March 2015 European Council [conclusions](#) – use the term 'disinformation' with regard to Russia's operations in Ukraine. According to the June 2015 [Action Plan](#) on Strategic Communication, the EU should be prepared to 'anticipate and respond to disinformation relating to the EU'. In November 2015, the East StratCom Task Force (a new communication unit under the European External Action Service) launched the weekly '[Disinformation Review](#)', in which they publish and thwart Russian 'disinformation attacks'.

NATO seems to use 'propaganda' and 'disinformation' interchangeably

In NATO, the picture is less clear. In March 2015, NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg on [various occasions](#) used the term 'propaganda' to [describe](#) Russia's activities in and beyond Ukraine. Since May 2015, he has been using both '[disinformation](#)' and '[propaganda](#)' in this same context. On 6 November 2015, NATO Deputy Secretary General, Alexander Vershbow [referred](#) to Russia's 'propaganda campaign' in Ukraine.

The European Parliament on propaganda and disinformation

The EP has repeatedly used the terms 'propaganda' in its resolutions in the context of Russia's information activities in and beyond Ukraine. In its June 2015 resolution on the state of EU-Russia relations ([2015/2001\(INI\)](#)), the EP expresses concern over Russia's '**political propaganda**' and calls on the EU to support projects aimed at 'deconstructing propaganda within the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries'. In its July 2015 resolution on the review of the European Neighbourhood Policy ([2015/2002\(INI\)](#)), the EP reiterates its calls for the EU to 'strengthen its capacity to counter **misinformation and propaganda** campaigns'.

In its 2013 recommendations on EU Policy towards Belarus ([2013/2036\(INI\)](#)), the EP stated the need to 'oppose **disinformation and misleading information** by the Belarusian authorities on EU policies'.