

Disinformation and Democracy

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What can democracies do to defend themselves against attacks on their very foundations? That should have been the question in a recent debate on an EU ban of Russian channels RT and Sputnik at a gathering in Amsterdam. The debate got stuck on questions of propaganda, misinformation and freedom of information rather than acknowledging that Russia is systematically aiming to undermine journalism itself, as it is doing with other pillars of democracy.

The Dutch journalists' association, along with the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), has taken the lead in challenging the ban on RT and Sputnik before the European Court of Justice. Not all members present at the debate were happy with that stance. It's a Catch-22 situation: If you want freedom of expression can you ban some expression in order to protect that freedom? And it's typical of what the Russian disinformation effort seeks to achieve: sowing doubt, confusion and discord.

It's an issue that affects all Western democracies and goes back to well before this year's Russian onslaught on Ukraine. In the UK, there's still no clarity over the question of whether Russia successfully influenced the 2016 Brexit referendum, but most agree that this is only because the government at the time didn't bother to look for such interference. And the government since then obviously has had no interest in a closer examination of the question. What did emerge from Parliament's so-called Russia report in 2019, was that the UK was a 'top target' for Russia.

In the US, the intelligence community was much more on the ball about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential elections, which is considered proven, in 2019 even by the at the time Republican-led Senate Intelligence Committee. Such election and referendum interference now seems commonplace, also in the EU, which is still struggling to find a structural common approach to act against it. The ban on RT and Sputnik in March by the EU's council of ministers, after the intensified war on Ukraine, can be seen in the light of this failure to put in place an adequate mechanism to deal with Russian destabilization efforts. It's mostly the improvised nature of the ban that the Dutch Journalists association takes issue with.

That's a valid point, as is the call for very carefully considered checks and balances on any restriction on the freedom of expression. The problem with decree-like powers assumed by the EU or any other national or trans-national body is that it can further undermine trust in the institutions such measures purport to defend. Countering disinformation in general is a wickedly complex issue, not because of the content of the information but because of such devilish dilemmas. Any action to counter it, risks aggravating the original problem.

That's because the purpose of disinformation as practiced by the Kremlin and described by countless experts, including, for example Timothy Snyder in his book *The Road to Unfreedom*, is to undermine in general – a “war against factuality” – much more even than to effect specific outcomes.

It's all very well to be aware of attempts to influence referendums and elections, or of the outright propaganda in conflicts such as the one in Ukraine, but that's missing at least half the picture: Such crude disinformation attempts, whether successful or not, are merely part of a much larger and much more sophisticated longer term strategy that includes destabilising Western democracies by undermining trust in institutions, such as journalism, politics, the judiciary, civil society etc. Another leg of that strategy is sowing doubt, confusion and discord at a fundamental level, to such a degree that agreement on basic facts and ethics becomes contested.

Yet another part of the strategy is to have these efforts be carried out by Western actors where possible, rather than coming too directly or obviously from the Kremlin. This raises the question of what the ban on RT and Sputnik will achieve. The UK has also banned RT from broadcasting but other than the EU has not banished it from social media and Internet channels. Social media companies have taken steps against Russian channels but that raises issues of their credentials to decide what should be allowed and what not. Then there are the infamous 'troll farms' that spread the disinformation, which is then copied and redistributed by Western actors.

The argument in favour of banning channels such as RT and Sputnik despite all this, is that it at least delegitimises them. On the other hand, any ban, whether on cable or social media, reinforces the persecution, victimisation and conspiracy narratives of those spreading disinformation, contributing to the feedback loop that they thrive on. Writing about disinformation efforts in itself, such as in this article, can be used in these efforts, for example to allege bias by journalists, the mainstream media, the establishment etc. i.e. – another Catch-22.

This is also why one of the arguments that the Dutch journalists' association has for not banning the Russian channels – that the public can judge for itself – is probably mostly wishful thinking. It complements the argument that everybody, including journalists, should keep access to these channels in order to see what exactly they're disseminating and to arm ourselves against it. The sad reality is that any bit of disinformation out there will keep serving its purpose and may even be fortified by counter-arguments. We're beyond Catch-22 and well into 1984 territory.

There's a good case to be made that journalists should never endorse limits on freedom of expression, in part because such rules can, and probably eventually will, also be used against them. Also, who's to judge what is disinformation? There are state broadcasters all over the democratic world; whose word should we take for it that they adhere to journalistic values and are not spouting disinformation?

The International Federation of Journalists in 2019 drew up a handy set of criteria, presented as a global charter of ethics for journalists, expanding on an earlier set of principles called the Bordeaux declaration. This can serve to separate earnest journalism from disinformation. One of the points in the charter refers to solidarity with fellow journalists. Does that mean that it's our duty to challenge bans on channels, whether Russian or otherwise? Not so, according to some, because these channels themselves cannot be considered to be journalistic under the global charter. The problem with criteria is that interpreting them is tricky and those swayed by disinformation will find reasons to mistrust any judgement.

Journalism is the arena par excellence for disinformation efforts. It's the journalist's job to critically assess narratives and especially speak truth to power. That should of course include the journalistic establishment itself. Not only is failing to do so unethical, it's also grist to the mill of cover-up conspiracy oriented disinformation. Yet, the uncovering of wrongdoing, malfeasance, abuses etc. is then often used by architects of disinformation to confirm their message that the system is rotten and that no one pillar of democracy can be trusted. But not writing such stories is not an option, so the purveyors of doubt and chaos will always have an advantage.

Can we arm the public against these disinformation efforts? Are ideas for education and creating a more sophisticated news consuming audience realistic? That is highly doubtful and, of course, extremely patronising. In the end, the only way to deal with disinformation and destabilisation efforts is to strengthen the institutions that they seek to undermine, not by placing the solution in journalism, communications or the way information is consumed and regarded by the public.

Confident and strong democracies should be able to fend off manipulation of their electoral processes and be resilient enough to deal with disinformation.

Part of the disinformation efforts is to promote the impression that democracies no longer possess these qualities; confidence, strength, resilience. Every challenge is presented as a death rattle. That's obvious nonsense; a lively debate and a critical press are signs of strength and not weakness. That doesn't mean that democracies don't need the tools to defend their systems as well, when clearly under attack. What this means for banning Russian channels? Possibly that the action is justified but that it was not done the way it should be; as part of a well-considered and balanced mechanism to strengthen our institutions. Working towards such a mechanism might be a better idea than challenging the ban.