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## Fake news – and what (*not*) to do about it

Fake news comes thick and fast, on national issues and in international politics. The public reaction to it varies from great concern and offence to a sense of being entertained. One of the main problems with fake news is that fabricated stories look real – that is their key distinguishing feature. They are believed, shared and circulated by people, thus making fake news what it is, “legit” for consumers-cum-multipliers of news. The role of technology in our societies has changed the nature, scale, speed and direction of disinformation. Digital technologies have turned fake news into a new form of 21<sup>st</sup> century propaganda. Apart from the challenge of making sense of what fake news is, one can observe a worrying tendency to counter it before understanding it.

Some people involved in fake news are rather cynically motivated by economic self-interest to generate anything-goes stories in disputes fought out on the internet, or to mobilize like-minded ‘netizens’ helping their cause. Fake news means different things to different people. It can have a destabilizing effect on societies that being are undermined from within, and with mind-blowing velocity and intensity of news circulation. Most challenging, fake news has the potential to pose a threat to international stability.

### Disinformation and dialogues of disrespect

Fake news reverberates above all within so-called ‘echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’, in which algorithms tailor information to unwitting news consumers. Such algorithms constitute the back-end politics of fake news. Echo chambers come in many shapes and

sizes. Both online and offline the Western world arguably functions more or less like a filter bubble. Another sizeable echo chamber, the global community of Catholics, was taken by surprise during the 2016 US election campaign: “Pope Francis Shakes World: Endorses Donald Trump”, which generated 96,000 engagements on Facebook. Fake news has the capacity to *confuse* campaign-style national political debates.

In international politics it can cause interference in a poisonous mix with calculated insults by leaders that impact public opinion and the ongoing conversation between states. Here are two of many examples: “Hillary Clinton Sold Weapons to ISIS” was of course a fake Facebook post. Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė has never been a KGB agent and incest is not a norm in modern Europe, both suggested by fake news originating in Russia. And as to insults: it hardly greased the wheels of US-Philippines relations when

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President Rodrigo Duterte referred to the US Ambassador in Manila as a “gay son of a whore”. And it did not inject trust in Mexican-US relations when US President Trump, speaking alongside his counterpart Enrique Peña Nieto, confirmed to reporters that Mexico was going to “pay for the Wall”. Nor did it help the US relationship with Australia when Trump hung up on Malcolm Turnbull, during his first conversation with the Prime Minister of a country that has fought side by side with the US in every armed conflict since World War I.

Fake news is the bedfellow of what could be called the dialogue of disrespect, and this combination constitutes a fertile breeding ground for political myths. The “post-knowledge society” in which expertise is under fire has not come like a bolt from the blue. In 1958, Cold War hysteria led to the widespread belief that the Soviet Union was technologically superior to the West, and – fast-forward more than half a century – in 2018 climate change is rhetorically equated to weather or winter.

## Social confusion

The World Economic Forum (WEF) warned as early as 2013, in the eighth edition of its *Global Risks* report, that “digital wildfires can wreak havoc in the real world”. Technological developments are blending with geopolitical risk and systematic disinformation potentially undermines global governance and the legitimacy of international institutions. In the time-span of less than five years we can see how perceptions of digital media are in flux. In the wake of the so-called “Arab Spring” they were said to empower people and harbour the promise of social mobilization and political transformation.

Today, with some 15 per cent of tweets generated by bots, people on the internet feel increasingly unsure as to whether they are actually talking to a human. The creation of the Internet was underpinned by trust, but millennials do not necessarily see things that way anymore, let alone their digitally native younger siblings. Fake news plausibly demonstrates “a breakdown

of social morality and a confusion in the value system”. These are fitting words from novelist Yu Hua in his book *China in Ten Words*, reflecting on the rapid rise in popularity of the words “copycat” and “bamboozle” in China. They might equally apply to the proliferation of fake news in the West.

The difference between false news and fake news lies in its stylization. Printed fake news looks real and new technologies make it much harder to determine that pictures have been purposely doctored to mislead audiences for political purposes. “Weaponized” communication is affecting governmental public diplomacy. After the initial euphoria about social media empowering ‘the people’, it was only a matter of time before the power of algorithms drew the attention of a growing number of governments.

At the second International Conference on Digital Diplomacy hosted by the Israeli Ministry of Affairs in Jerusalem (#DDConf2017) in December last year, questions about diplomatic communication powered by algorithms took centre stage. The same is the case at The Hague Digital Diplomacy Camp (#DiploCamp) at the Netherlands Foreign Ministry, 1-2 February 2018, which coincides with the publication of this Clingendael Alert.

In international relationships algorithms give governments the tools to penetrate digital people-to-people networks in both friendly and hostile foreign environments. It is hardly surprising that astute governments perceiving the digital sphere as an arena in which geopolitical rivalries are played out were among the first to embrace the use of algorithms in diplomacy. Outside the West, this includes usual suspect authoritarians like Russia, but also Iran, and Sudan. In China, which aims to become the world’s artificial intelligence superpower, junior diplomats have data science on their training curriculum. On the edge of Europe, Turkey is unfolding as a self-confident powerhouse using digital tools and fake news to both mobilize its diaspora and persecute political opponents in Europe and North America.

## Clampdown on news

For many people in the non-democratic world institutionalized fake news is old news: systematic disinformation is part of political culture, a fact of life. In many countries the population knows that the makers of fake news are the same people as those who control fake news: the government. Spreading undesirable news digitally in the domestic environment is being outlawed in various countries and offenders risk being locked up. The Turkish authorities are reported to have arrested 311 people over social media posts about the recent military operation in northern Syria. Across borders, authoritarian powers both large and small are becoming increasingly skilled in following digital trails and hunting down political opponents across the globe.

In some countries “no news” is still preferred to fake news. The absence of any meaningful domestic news in Myanmar about the Rohingya crisis is a terrifying example. Other authoritarians try to shut down digital platforms that criticize the abuse of power. Rappler, a social news network in the Philippines with 3.5 million Facebook followers, currently faces the withdrawal of its licence by the government. President Duterte is accusing the platform of being run by foreigners, which is illegal under Philippines law. And in the “free” West we see the President of the United States using his discretion to label media like The New York Times and CNN as fake news.

The political contestation of undesirable facts is on the rise and the jury is still out as to whether this trend has reached the high-water mark. But for some Western countries traditional propaganda rather than fake news appears to be the principal headache. Australia is more concerned about China’s influence in mainstream media, purchasing ads and favourable articles, and about Australian Chinese-language media.

In Europe governments have stepped in, with Germany and France introducing legislation to help ban fake news. Chancellor Merkel and President Macron opened 2018 with an offensive against the lacklustre deletion of illegal posts and hate speech by tech giants

Facebook and Twitter. It is unclear where things are going in a world of simultaneous polarization and convergence of traditional media and social media.

On the positive side, it is safe to predict that future media will look different, and we can already discern the outlines of new models. One example: “OhMyNews” is a South Korean citizens’ news organization with 65,000 contributors that is operated by professionals following standard journalistic procedures like editing and fact-checking. In the current siege-like media landscape, with the open question of who is surrounding whom in the global info-sphere, this Korean example is a hopeful sign pointing to possible new media models.

## Meta-literacy

What to do about systematic disinformation in the digital sphere? New forms of news writing are emerging and we therefore need to take a fresh look at how to read. Citizens in a media landscape in which news can no longer be separated from the algorithms that drive it, and devices enhancing the “spreadability” of news, need new, different forms of literacy. Meta-literacy requires greater critical awareness of the context in which information is produced as well as the habit of reading news that does not affirm one’s beliefs. It equally stands to reason that in a digital world in which “everybody is a journalist”, people who write news for potentially large audiences would benefit from the toolkit of the professional journalist.

The fight against digital disinformation has become multifaceted. Where such anti-fake news initiatives (ranging from legal solutions and governments taking on the tech giants to myriad fact-checking initiatives) focus on news as an artefact, they should not overlook the important receiving end of fake news. Fake news exposure, which can be seen as the fast-food variant of investigative journalism, is not enough and may have undesirable side effects.

*The Field Guide to Fake News*, showing the results of a digital cookbook project ([fakenews.publicdatalab.org](http://fakenews.publicdatalab.org)), proposes an

alternative approach: we need to understand “not just the strategies and formats of fakeness, but the politics and composition of the media and information environments of the digital age”. Instead of giving the makers of fake news the attention they crave, the authors argue, we need to look above all at the consumers of news. As stated at the beginning of this argument, fake news is ultimately turned into news by readers and viewers who are mesmerized by negative and provocative headlines. Media consumers-cum-producers turn fiction on the town square of the global village into news – simply by believing, liking, sharing, reposting, forwarding and retweeting it.

### No quick fix

In international politics fake news has real consequences, and so has countering fake news in 20<sup>th</sup> century tit-for-tat style. Probably with an eye to the 2019 EU Parliamentary elections, the European diplomatic service’s EastStratcom Task Force has recently committed an additional €1 million to expose Russian propaganda online. Giving this European online “mythbusting” initiative the benefit of the doubt, one might suggest that the Twitter handle @EUvsDisinfo contributes to greater awareness of Russian practices among EU citizens. But isn’t the whole exercise about something European citizens on all sides of the political spectrum already know? Does the EEAS realize that people *outside* of one’s own filter bubble could see such pronouncements as counter-propaganda?

At best this initiative looks like a quick fix that fails to address underlying problems. At worst it is a classic case of preaching to the converted. Fighting Russian fake news with Cold War-style tools does not make things any better. Did it cross the minds of the mandarins of EU diplomacy that official initiatives like this one are perhaps not in sync with the zeitgeist? There are no quick fixes for what is fundamentally a problem of human behaviour. It is understandable that the EU is in a hurry, but fake news can only be understood by looking into the ways in which it is circulated and believed online.




In the digital age everything starts with the ordinary individual – neither empowered hero nor hate speech villain – and that applies equally to finding solutions for the problem of fake news. In the variegated patchwork that is required to counter fake news, there is a greater need for practices like fact-checking than in the pre-digital age, and it is important to expose destabilizing narratives based on deliberately hurtful disinformation. Powerful actors like tech giants have a job to do, but there is rightly also a call for the taming of excessive corporate power and arrogance. International organizations have a role to play, but should be conscious of their contested legitimacy in the societies of their member states. Governments need to be aware that ‘the law’ is not enough to fix a social illness, and in our collective memory it is hard to dissociate propaganda and lack of freedom of speech from state power.

Civil society involvement in fighting fake news deserves more emphasis, and greater resilience of persons – as the smallest units of our society – starts with the systematic introduction of meta-literacy in education. This probably remains the best antidote to fake news.

### **About the Clingendael Institute**

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