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THE LONG DECADE OF DISINFORMATION

A Review Essay by Vera Michlin-Shapir

Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle against Disinformation and What We Can Do About It. Richard Stengel. London: Grove Press, 2020.

Beyond Post-Communication: Challenging Disinformation, Deception and Manipulation. Jim Macnamara. New York: Peter Lang, 2020.

The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology and Disruptive Communications in the United States. W. Lance Bennet and Steven Livingston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

About the Author

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Introduction

'Disinformation' was well positioned to become the word of the year in 2020, as a key term that describes the notional framework within which this year would be remembered in history. The Coronavirus pandemic and the runoff in the US presidential elections were a perfect set-up for a perfect storm of disinformation. The possibilities for abuse, misuse, and exploitation of information, true or false, were endless. Disinformation, however, while widespread, turned out not to be the entire story of what has taken place in 2020. In a remarkable progression from 2016, experts, journalists, officials, and media executives were more empowered to implement policies that brought commendable achievements in curbing disturbing trends of disinformation.

It is possible that 2020 ended what future historians may call 'the long 2010s'. This 'long' decade began with the 2008 financial crisis, the election of the first African-American US President, and the rise of social networks; and ended with a global pandemic, Trump's losing the presidential elections, and the first, still self-imposed and flawed, mass attempt to crackdown on online disinformation. These events demonstrated how cyber-digital innovations revolutionised, for better or worse, the ways in which people consume and disseminate information, and transformed economy, society, and politics. This makes it an appropriate time to look at what has taken place in the field of information during this seminal year that ended a turbulent and transformative decade.

Disinformation was widespread in 2020. Social media overflowed with misleading or false information about the Coronavirus and the US elections. Enigmatic posts suggested that drinking water or eating garlic reduced the risks of Coronavirus.[1] After recovering from Coronavirus, US President Donald Trump claimed that he had a 'protective glow' and was 'immune' to the disease, contrary to scientific advice, and thus better suited for re-election.[2] These fallacies spread so fast that the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) declared an 'infodemic' and 'disinfodemic'.[3]

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1 Reality Check team, 'Coronavirus: The Fake Health Advice You Should Ignore', *BBC News*, 8 March 2020.
2 *Sky News*, 'Coronavirus: Donald Trump Claims He Has 'Protective Glow' and 'Immunity' From COVID-19', 12 October 2020.
3 Jim Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communication: Challenging Disinformation, Deception and Manipulation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), p. 2.

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This is an endemic state of disinformation in which one has to 'question not only the information that you are getting but also the means through which you get it'.[4]

Yet, on 3 November 2020, Donald Trump, the world's most notorious spreader and amplifier of disinformation, lost to Joe Biden, whom he viciously nicknamed 'Sleepy Joe', mocking him for his dry demeanour and scrupulous attention to detail. Biden's election was not only a symbolic victory in a contest between two personalities that treated scientific and fact-based truth in profoundly different ways. It was an indication that the enormous energy invested by researchers and officials in recent years towards understanding the problems of disinformation and delivering solutions had begun to work. Most policy steps taken during 2020 probably had no direct effect on the outcome of the election. But they signified that today we have both a greater willingness and better tools to tackle the problems of disinformation.

In 2020, media organisations and social media companies took steps to address their previous failures and mistakes, in some cases at a cost to themselves. Famously, Twitter increased its labelling of President Trump's questionable tweets—including his claims about immunity to Coronavirus and election fraud—as 'misleading'.[5] Twitter's decision to curb Trump's ability to use the platform for promoting disinformation signalled that social media giants were responding to pressure to act more like publishers and to take responsibility for the information that was shared by users and advertisers. This was an even greater achievement, considering that it was a self-imposed task by the social media company. It was introduced even though Section 230 in the US Communication Decency Act (CDA)— the revision of which many consider as imperative to fixing online disinformation—is still in force, stating that 'no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information'.[6]

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4 Richard Stengel, *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation and What We Can Do About It* (London: Grove Press, 2020), p. 2.
5 *Sky News*, 'Coronavirus: Donald Trump Claims He Has 'Protective Glow'; See Donald Trump's @realdonaldtrump account on Twitter.
6 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 294.

An even starker example of disinformation that could have had a major impact on the course of the elections was a dubious report about Hunter Biden's allegedly recovered computer. On 14 October, the conservative tabloid *New York Post* published that it was given access to a computer whose owner was allegedly Joe Biden's son, Hunter, and which revealed emails that tied his father to his business dealings in Ukraine. Despite the potentially explosive nature of the materials, mainstream media did not leap to cover the story. The background tale of a broken computer left in a small repair shop in Delaware that had found its way into the hands of Rudy Giuliani and Steve Bannon raised many questions.[7] Journalists from several outlets reported that the *New York Post*'s denial to grant them access to the primary materials retrieved from the computer put them off covering the story.[8] Facebook, on its part, intentionally decelerated its dissemination on the platform.[9]

The steps taken by mainstream journalists and social media executives were not perfect at stopping the dissemination of the story, although they improved on their performance during the 2016 election. Critics pointed out that the original *New York Post* story had received an estimated 54,115,025 views on Facebook,[10] and inconsistent policy across companies and platforms meant that the story had reached large audiences.[11] This criticism echoes a profound critique of mainstream and new media for playing into the hands of disruptive actors by amplifying their messages.[12] But in comparison to the hack and leak operation of Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails, coverage of the *New York Post*'s story shows that some lessons have been learned. Mainstream media's amplification of DNC's emails, despite early signs that they were stolen by Russia's security agencies, according to Stengel and others, caused Clinton's campaign more damage than the hack itself.[13] The same cannot be said about Biden's story, which was covered by mainstream media largely suggesting links to a possible Russian disinformation

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7 Rudy Giuliani is the former Mayor of New York City and currently serves as Donald Trump's personal attorney; Steve Bannon was CEO of Trump's first presidential campaign and served as his chief strategist at the White House for seven months in 2017.
8 Ken Dilanian and Tom Winter, 'Here's What Happened When NBC News Tried to Report on the Alleged Hunter Biden Emails', *NBC News*, 30 October 2020.
9 Alex Hern, 'Facebook leak reveals policies on restricting New York Post's Biden story', *The Guardian*, 30 October 2020.
10 David Gilbert, 'Facebook Failed Miserably in its Attempt to Stop the Hunter Biden Story', *Vice*, 23 October 2020.
11 Siva Vaidhyanathan, 'The Hunter Biden Story Was a Test for Tech Platforms. They Barely Passed', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2020.
12 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 11; Todd C. Helmus et al., *Russian Social Media Influence*, RAND Corporation (2018).
13 Stengel, p. 11.

attempt due to Giuliani's contacts with a known Russian agent in Ukraine.[14] Media responses to the two incidents showed that direct and blatant disinformation is better addressed today than four years ago.

This does not mean that the problem of disinformation is closer to being resolved. Far from it. Mainstream and social media are still guided by ideational and business imperatives that allow for mass manipulation of information. Moreover, the latest flare-up in conspiracy theories regarding alleged US election fraud shows the enormous power of alternative media outlets, which can deliver false information to millions, bypassing traditional media outlets.[15] There are also profound problems arising from audiences' points of view. The social, economic, and psychological conditions that allowed disinformation to escalate significantly in the 2010s are all still there. Authors agree that the ability of malicious actors to prey on target audiences was due to fundamental weakness in our societies—decline in social interaction, loss of trust in institutions, economic inequalities, and social marginalisation.[16] Or as Stengel puts it, these actors 'weaponised […] grievance', which is still very much present in our lives.[17]

Three engaging books published this year by leading media practitioners and scholars, which are discussed in this essay, put the events of 2020 in historical, theoretical, and practical perspectives, and allow us to discern key trends and to identify conceptual gaps and blind spots in our understanding of the problem of disinformation. Richard Stengel, who served as the US Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and was formerly the editor of *Time* magazine, tells his story from a practitioner's point of view. By sharing his experience at the State Department during crucial years in the rise of disinformation between 2013 and 2016 he offers a peek into one of the world's prime institutions charged with addressing this problem in the international arena.

Lance W. Bennet and Stephen Livingston offer an academic socio-historical analysis by focusing on the rise of neoliberal economics in the US as a key factor contributing to the rise of disinformation. Their edited volume underlines that

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14 Shane Harris, 'White House Was Warned Giuliani Was Target of Russian Intelligence Operation to Feed Misinformation to Trump', *The Washington Post*, 15 October 2020.
15 Vera Tolz, 'Short Cuts: Troll Factories', *The London Review of Books* Volume 4 № 23, 2020
16 W. Lance Bennet and Steven Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) p. 8; Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communication*, p. 2.
17 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 2.

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organisations that advocated neoliberal economic reforms had a leading role in the decline in public trust in authoritative institutions in liberal democracies. Jim Macnamara offers a multifaceted and comprehensive analysis that considers the psychological-sociological factors that contributed to this problem. He focuses on the role of Public Relations (PR) companies and on the tools they developed in manipulating audiences into consuming disinformation.

These three books illustrate the high levels of interest and calibre of expertise that disinformation attracted in 2020. And the conceptual gaps that still exist. These books suggest important lessons and fixes, some of which have been partially or wholly implemented in 2020, and some of which are still to be fulfilled. Yet, certain important points are missing from these accounts, which may indicate gaps in Western understanding of disinformation that need further research. In the current review, I shall identify five observations offered in these books and other recently published materials on the topic, and I shall highlight what these writings failed to observe. These points may serve as paths for researchers and practitioners to prepare for the complex future challenges that certainly lie ahead.

Language Matters

Disinformation, or any other kind of manipulation of communications, is hardly a new phenomenon. In 1944 George Orwell wrote, 'Hitler can say that the Jews started the war, and if he survives that will become official history'.[18] Orwell described the frightful rise of disinformation in the 1930s and 40s that was propagated by telegraph, printed media, and the radio. His fears of the 'decay of democracy' and the rise of a world where 'two and two could become five if the Führer wished it' reminds us of the long history of disinformation.[19] The first lesson that Orwell suggested to counter incidents where truth, facts, and language begin to drift was to use clear, definitive, and truthful words as a well-proven antidote to disinformation.[20]

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18 George Orwell in a letter from 1944, reprinted in *On Truth* (London: Penguin Books, 2017).
19 Ibid.
20 Orwell, *Politics of the English Language* (originally appeared in 1946; reprinted London; Penguin Books, 2013).

The current sense that publics are unable to recognise a 'common set of facts' that constitute a mutually agreed reality[21] comes after decades of spinning and perception management by political elites and PR companies.[22] From commercial advertising to the US government's handling of the Vietnam and Iraq wars, manipulative practices of using information for monetary or political advantage have come at the price of undermining the public's trust in what is being said by traditional authoritative voices and institutions. As the British film maker Adam Curtis noted in his documentary *Hypernormalisation* (2016), 'the version of reality that politics [in the West] presented to the people was no longer believable'. This growing gap between what is said and what takes place in real life became a ripe arena for organised attempts to manipulate information. For instance, Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), currently one of the best-funded disinformation projects in the world, regularly echoes what Bennet and Livingston call the 'culture of spin' by saying 'there is no objectivity—only approximations of the truth by as many different voices as possible'.[23] When confronted with intelligence reports about Russian election interfering in 2016, she reminded viewers of the Iraqi WMD report, as an indication that US intelligence cannot be trusted and as a reminder of the ongoing erosion of the social process of communications in the West.[24]

Macnamara observes that communications are not a mere exchange of information between two or more entities, but as American theoretician James Carey suggested, 'a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed'.[25] If one uses Carey's definition of communication, it becomes evident that communications are under real threat in Western societies; and indeed that destructive processes in the West pursued by various disruptive players began well before Simonyan started her work at *RT*.

Such terminological reconsideration calls into question the widespread use of the term 'information war' (which is also the title of Stengel's book) to

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21 *BBC News*, '[Barack Obama: One Election Won't Stop US "Truth Decay"](#)', 15 November 2020.
22 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*; Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communications*.
23 *Der Spiegel*, '[The West Never Got Over the Cold War Stereotype](#)', 13 August 2013.
24 Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) report refers to the Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on the US Intelligence Community's Pre-war Intelligence Assessments on Iraq, which have found serious problems with US intelligence work in the lead up to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. These shortcomings were acknowledged by the CIA. For Simonyan's interview see, Lesley Stahl, '[RT's Editor-in-Chief on Election Meddling, Being Labelled Russian Propaganda](#)', *CBS 60 Minutes*, 7 January 2018.
25 Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communications*, p. 8.

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describe contemporary disinformation. 'Information warfare' is an important concept in Russian strategic thinking. It describes the metamorphosis between information, international relations, and conflicts, where 'the main battlefield […] is perception', and domains of information warfare (*informatsionnaya voyna/ protivoborstvo*) and psychological warfare are maximised.[26] This term broadly corresponds with what Western political and military thinking refers to as strategic communications.[27] However, in the West 'information warfare' has been used normatively to describe Russia's or other foreign actors' hostile uses of information.[28] This lack of original theorisation of the term means that Western discourse needs a more precise theoretical framework to describe planned and methodical actions that use information to impact people and politics.

A term suggested in recent writing by researcher of Russian intelligence Thomas Rid could offer a basis for such a framework. Rid provides a good definition of Russian influence operations, which with some adaptations can help define influence in the current age. In his book on Soviet and Russian 'active measures', he characterises such operations as methodical work by 'large bureaucracies run by intelligence agencies against an adversary' that includes some elements of disinformation or forgery, and are aimed at specific goals vis-à-vis an adversary.[29] While, as in the case of 'information warfare', Rid's definition of 'influence operations' is modelled on the Russian case (pointing to the pervasive involvement of security agencies), this definition is instructive in that it calls attention to the fact that influence operations are not 'spontaneous lies'.[30] While lies are undesirable in public discourse, they are unlikely to exert political influence on large audiences. Hence, as Rid underlines, the danger that such operations pose to communications is their methodical nature, their backing by bureaucratic work, and execution in a coordinated or semi-coordinated manner.

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26 Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*, Proliferation Papers 52 (Paris: Security Studies Center, November 2015), p. 26; Keir Giles, *The Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*, (NATO Defense College, 2016) p. 16.
27 Ofer Fridman, ' "Information War" as the Russian Conceptualisation of Strategic Communications', *RUSI Journal* Volume 165 № 1, 18 March 2020.
28 Joanna Szostek, 'What Happens to Public Diplomacy During Information War? Critical Reflections on the Conceptual Framing of International Communication', *International Journal of Communication* Volume 14 (2020).
29 Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2020), p. 8.
30 Ibid.

The distinction between spontaneous lies, unintentional errors, and premeditated disruptions to communications is imperative. As a veteran of Western journalism, Stengel calls for a distinction to be drawn between disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda. Disinformation, according to Stengel, is the deliberate dissemination of information that is wholly or partially false in order to mislead or manipulate people.[31] Misinformation is different in that it does not have a deliberate purpose and is a result of unintentional action.[32] And propaganda can consist of either true or false information, but in both cases the information provided to the audiences serves a political purpose.[33] Such terminological clarifications can help facilitate better discourse and begin repairing communications.

It's the Economy, Stupid!

The wave of populism that took place in the 2010s has been described by many as a result of the shortcomings of neoliberal economics and the stalled economic recovery after 2008 of middle and lower class taxpayers.[34] The main thrust of literature has focused on the causal link between the economic downturn, the breakdown of democratic institutions, and the rise of populist and nationally infused politics, while leaving the informational dimension of the crisis aside. Bennet and Livingston rightly point to the central place of the methodical manipulation of information that is at the heart of the political and economic crisis. They portray the gordian knot between economics, politics, technology, and disruptive communications, which together set the stage for 'The Disinformation Age'.

The poor state in which we find our communications space, according to Bennet and Livingston, is a result of several decades of neoliberal economic politics, which eroded the public's trust in democratic institutions. As they put it, 'a mix of money, multi-levelled political organizations, and strategic communications helped elect a growing number of politicians who [...] sold

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31 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 289.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Arlie Russell Hochschild, S*trangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, (New York: The New Press, 2016); Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (Tim Duggan Books, 2018); Christophe Guilluy, Malcolm Debevoise (trans.), *Twilight of the Elites: Prosperity, the Periphery, and the Future of France* (Yale University Press, 2019).

the free market political agenda […] and […] utopian vision of "free markets make free people"'.[35] They show that even before the 2008 economic crisis, as the promises of freedom and prosperity did not materialise for most people, neoliberal organisations, charities, and think-tanks turned to aggressive and disruptive influence campaigns, the aim of which was to 'engineer democracy against unhappy masses'.[36] These domestic influence campaigns aimed at 'systemic devaluing of institutions of truth telling', which followed a profound erosion in the public's trust in state institutions and the media.[37]

The decade's long decline in public trust is a well recorded and disturbing phenomenon that is widely thought to contribute to the recent wave of disinformation. Macnamara notes a Harvard University study from 2015, which found abysmally low levels of trust among Americans towards their state institutions. For instance, among young adults (age 18–29) only 14% expressed trust in Congress and only 20% trusted the federal government.[38] International barometers point to similar trends outside the US, with only 47% of respondents placing trust in their governments.[39] These findings make Macnamara's book and Bennet and Livingston's volume eye-opening accounts into how the dynamics of disinformation developed in the West, in many cases because of deliberate actions by PR companies and the propagators of neoliberal economics.

The link between neoliberal economics and disinformation is a gripping account that requires much attention. But it is not the entire story. It is highly likely that without thorough economic reforms, alleviation of decades of injustices, and reduction in social disparities, disinformation and political influence campaigns will continue to be an attractive option for disruptive actors who pursue a variety of political and economic goals. These accounts circumvent the connection between neoliberal economics, disinformation, and identity-focused politics. They see the latter as a symptom rather than a root cause of the current crisis. Such an omission presents a lacuna in understanding the mutually reinforcing processes of breakdown in trust, disruptive economics, disruptive communications, and disrupted identities.

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35 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, p. 24.
36 Ibid., p. 27.
37 Ibid., p. 262.
38 Macnamara, *Beyond Post-Communications*, p. 3.
39 Ibid.

Identity, Security, and Trust

It is hard to imagine the current wave of disinformation without the alluring power of identity mobilisation. When the shadowy Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) purchased advertisements on Facebook in the run up to the 2016 US presidential election, they placed content that aimed to stir emotions on both sides of the political spectrum. One advertisement featured a border sign saying 'No Invaders Allowed!'; another endorsed the Black Panthers as fighters against the Ku Klux Klan; and a third displayed a photo of Muslim women wearing *burqas*, calling the *burqa* a 'security risk' that should be banned in the US.[40] While Russian messages may seem varied, they had one thing in common—they made emotional appeals to national, religious, and racial identity as their most favoured rallying point.

Recently, former US National Security official Fiona Hill wrote that 'Russian operatives did not invent our crude tribal politics; they invented internet personas to whip them up'.[41] Indeed, the Russian IRA did not invent the US alt-right's national discourse or left-wing identity politics, but neither did it target them by coincidence. Russian influence campaigns targeted identity because it is a sore spot in US politics. As Vladimir Putin himself suggested when Donald Trump was elected as president in 2016:

> A significant part of the American people has the same ideas [as us…]. People who sympathize with us about traditional values […] The newly elected president subtly felt the mood of the society…[42]

These identity-related fault lines in American and other Western societies go deeper than Bennet and Livingston's analysis of the neoliberal economic roots of disinformation and the erosion of trust in institutions.

40 Scott Shane, 'These Are the Ads Russia Bought on Facebook in 2016', *The New York Times*, 1 November 2017.
41 Fiona Hill, 'The Biggest Risk to This Election Is Not Russia. It's Us', *The New York Times*, 7 October 2020.
42 Vladimir Putin, 'Administratsiya SSHA Vinit vo Vsekh Neudachakh na Vneshniye Faktory' [Putin: 'The US Administration Blames All Failures on External Factors'], interview on *TASS TV*, 23 December 2016, accessible on YouTube.

Globalisation and neoliberalism, where economic logic and the need for flexibility and adaptability overpowered all other aspects of social life, undermined the day-to-day routines and long-term relationships that formed individuals' continuity of identity and what the sociologist Anthony Giddens referred to as 'ontological security'.[43] The precarious psychological conditions that emerge once these routines, relationships, and identities are undermined are detrimental to peoples' sense of security and trust.[44] These conditions are known, on the individual level, to induce anxiety. And on the political level, they are found to stimulate populist calls for strengthening national identity,[45] and are 'intimately linked to the emotional significance of identity mobilization'.[46] In other words, individuals who were 'freed' by the neoliberal project were also put under the constant ideational pressure to stay flexible, competitive, and adjustable. For many this became a daunting experience and an anxious existence. And they increasingly reverted to political mobilisation along identity lines as a way to manage their fears and the breakdown in trust.

Hence, identity cannot be decoupled or left aside from any discussion on the erosion in public trust and the rise of disinformation. The current economic and political order that purposely undermines routines, relationships, and the continuity of identities is a glaring hole within the neoliberal global project. It produces vulnerabilities in audiences that cannot be overlooked or underestimated. Unfortunately, this aspect of disinformation has not received enough attention in scholarly debates and needs further developing.

Audiences Matter

The relative neglect of the interplay between identity and disinformation is mirrored in the overall insufficient attention paid to audiences. Stengel's book, for instance, reveals the high volumes of energy and thought that were devoted to developing messaging and counter-messaging to the information campaigns of Russia and the Islamic State (IS). Yet the audiences that these messaging campaigns were aimed at were rarely considered. This disparity reveals a general

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43 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford University Press, 1991).
44 Ibid., p. 46.
45 Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).
46 Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security', *Political Psychology* Volume 25 № 5 (2004): 741–67.

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tendency to focus on the perpetrators of influence campaigns and their strategies and techniques, rather than on the audiences they are targeting. The focus on the perpetrators is one of the problems of viewing disinformation as a new type of 'war'. While studying the aggressors might be appropriate for traditional military and security issues, information and influence campaigns—especially online and on social media—are reliant on a sender-receiver mechanism in which the receptiveness of the audience is crucial.

Although authors acknowledge the importance of audiences' receptiveness to disinformation, they offer little insight. Bennet and Livingston note that 'unhappy masses' become easy prey for influence efforts,[47] while Stengel acknowledges that grievances become fertile ground for promoting disinformation.[48] These assertions might be generally true, but they offer little perspective on the mechanisms that make certain people more susceptible to disinformation.

Not all individuals who live in conditions of neoliberal economics are upset or vulnerable to disinformation as understood in Bennet and Livingston's analysis. Indeed Browning and Joenniemi caution against such a simplistic approach when it comes to the interaction between neoliberal economic disruptions to the continuity of identity and the rise of populism and disinformation.[49] They warn that such an approach could result in a simplistic securitisation of identity, which assumes that any hardship, reform, or economic overhaul, results in anxiety and support to populist politics. But this is not what is happening. Anxiety and revanchism appear in audiences who are unable to resolve reflexively disturbances to identity over time. It is in these situations that audiences demand help and support to overcome enduring, structural conditions that make them vulnerable to manipulation and disinformation.

The media literacy of audiences that support disruptive international actors, such as IS or Russia, is also habitually underestimated. Stengel mentions that in one of his briefings with US intelligence officers, he was encouraged to see IS's limited appeal to Sunni audiences.[50] Sunnis in Northern Iraq, he was told by US

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47 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, p. 27.
48 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 9.
49 Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological Security, Self-articulation and the Securitization of Identity', *Cooperation and Conflict* Volume 52 № 1 (2017): 31–47.
50 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 146

intelligence officers, were not convinced by IS messages and propaganda; they just hated the Iraqi government more and feared Shia Iranian militias. 'They see ISIS as brutal; they don't see them as corrupt. They see the Iraqi government as corrupt *and* brutal', he was told.[51] These Iraqi Sunnis were neither manipulated by disinformation, nor were they ardent supporters of radical Islam. They were ordinary people caught between bad choices.

Something similar can be said about East European Russian-speaking audiences. Szostek points out how labelling them as one undistinguishable mass of 'vulnerable audiences' that are susceptible to Russian influence campaigns was misleading and resulted in inappropriate policy choices. She shows how many Russian speakers in Ukraine who consumed media content from Russian state channels approached the news critically and were in fact seeking to diversify the channels through which they receive their information.[52] She shows that many of these individuals held pro-Russian views despite a good level of media literacy. Their problem was not one of communications. They substantially disapproved of Ukrainian policies and favoured the Russian side.

As this wild and long decade of disinformation draws to a close, paying more attention to audiences is one of its most valuable lessons. Researchers and officials should not underestimate people's ability to spot and counteract disinformation independently and should not assume that they are passive and gullible. Not all problems are communications problems. By paying more attention to audiences, one is more likely to discover which is which.

This is NOT Cold War 2.0

The current disinformation wave is popularly referred as the return of the Cold War.[53] Such a simplification of what is taking place these days overestimates Russia's role in the current crisis and demonstrates there is still a lack of a developed theoretical framework to explain the current wave of disinformation.

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51 Ibid., p. 147
52 Szostek, 'What Happens to Public Diplomacy'.
53 Robert Legvold *Return to Cold War* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016); J. L. Black and Michael Johns (eds), *The Return of the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

The disproportionate attention that Russian disinformation activities receive in popular discourse skews the analysis of current day disinformation, although Russia does have some advantages in this field. Russia is not the architect of global disinformation; it is not even a leader in this field.[54] Bennet and Livingston rightly note that in some ways 'Russia was late to the party' of disinformation, which was in full swing when it first started making noticeable strides to influence politics in the West in the mid-2010s.[55] However, the Russian state has tactical and strategic relative advantages in the field of disinformation. From a tactical point of view, Russia has a large reserve of highly trained computer engineers and social media manipulators (trolls), who are working on the cyber black market and can provide ad hoc or more consistent support to state-backed operations. Strategically, Russia has a community of researchers, officials, and academics, which is more willing to deliberate, conceptualise, and theorise for itself the meaning and place of political influence in contemporary social life.

Vladimir Putin's former aide and Kremlin ideologue, Vladislav Surkov, who writes short stories and novels under the pen name of Natan Dubovitsky, published in 2014 a short story on a new type of 'non-linear war'.[56] In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, this story attracted much attention in Western writing, where in many cases it was taken too seriously and out of context. Surkov's dystopia described wars that were no longer waged between states, but between localities, classes, and even generations. He wrote:

> Now four coalitions clashed […] all against all.
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> And what a coalition they were! Not the same as before. Rarely states joined sides in their entirety. It happened that several provinces were on one side, several on the other, and some city or generation, or gender, or professional community of the same state—on the third. Then they could change positions. Go to any camp they liked. Sometimes right in the middle of a battle.[57]

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54 Tolz, 'Short Cuts'.
55 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, p. 280.
56 Natan Dubovitsky [pseud. of Vladislav Surkov], *Bez Neba* [*Without Sky*], *Russkiy Pioneer*, 12 March 2014.
57 Ibid.

Surkov's story should not be read as a policy doctrine or a strategic plan. It shows the ability to think abstractly about the revolutionary transformations that are taking place in our world. It demonstrates how some Russian thinkers and state agencies were quicker to realise and internalise that the digital-cyber revolution had changed the world in profound and irreversible ways, where a standoff between two camps, as in the Cold War, was impossible.

Contemporary disinformation, whether we brand it as war or not, is borderless, transnational, and interconnected. Globalisation, neoliberal economics, and information technologies made the transfer of money, people, and ideas faster than previously seen in world history. This means that disinformation can not only move faster, but that labelling it as 'domestic' or 'foreign' becomes less relevant. This is not to say that there are no liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, or pro-democratic forces and forces that want to erode democratic values and institutions. But in today's world it would be much harder to chart two distinguishable camps that can be rallied against each other. More likely, what the world is experiencing is an internal dialectic within different global forces that pull towards different directions of future development.

The West's aversion to theorising and conceptualising political influence puts it at a disadvantage. In the West, most influence efforts were carried out by commercial and partisan actors, and state-led efforts focused mainly on countering radical Islam.[58] Western thinkers are cautious about articulating conclusively what they consider to be unwanted political influence. Stengel, for example, notes that disinformation is problematic because it attacks 'the marketplace of ideas', which is essential for democracy to flourish.[59] But such a vague conceptualisation can be easily rebuffed by astute propagandists such as *RT*'s Simonyan; she argues that *RT*, whose motto is 'Question More', serves the marketplace of ideas by conveying Russia's point of view.

Szostek notes that while Russian goals in influence campaigns can be projected and articulated, 'Western states are hesitant to specify their own end goals in relation to audiences'.[60] The West's unwillingness to commit to a straightforward definition of what is the present danger, together with its vague set of goals,

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58 Stengel, *Information Wars*, p. 191.
59 Ibid., p. 12–13.
60 Szostek, 'What Happens to Public Diplomacy'.

dooms it to feel continuously that other players have the upper hand. There is no evidence that the West is 'losing', nor are there any benchmarks to test this sense of calamity, and hence there can be no tools to repair the situation.

Conclusion: Towards the Next Wave of Disinformation

The 2010s wave of disinformation was crude and unsophisticated. It was mounted by multiple state, partisan, and commercial actors. These actors took advantage of the deregulated media space that was still coming to terms with the consequences of the digital-cyber revolution, and the West's slowdown in economic performance after the 2008 financial crisis.[61] These disruptive actors flooded the media space with lies, half-truths, forgeries, distortions, and manipulations, which gave rise to toxic discourses and populist politics. While this was a dangerous trend, it was not particularly complex. And thus, the adjustments that were needed were more apparent to experts. Some of them have already been made.

However, the structural problems that facilitated the rise of disinformation in the 2010s are worsening. The ongoing pandemic and its economic fallout are deepening the underlying conditions that allowed for disinformation to reach such highs in the past decade. They suggest that ahead of us are even more complicated tasks in reigning in the ever-increasing flows of information. Inequalities and grievances have become more apparent by the disproportionate number of victims the pandemic claimed from poorer classes and ethnic minorities. In many countries the pandemic revealed the weakness of political leadership and further decreased trust in institutions, especially among the young.[62] Meanwhile, ever more spheres of life are moving online, and it is projected that post-pandemic, economic recovery will be driven by the tech industry.[63]

While our sense of ontological security continues to deteriorate, disruptors are likely to increase their dissemination of more sophisticated disinformation at higher volumes. It is now time to think of deeper economic, political, social, and philosophical remedies that our societies need in order to protect a world where two plus two will always remain four.

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61 Bennet and Livingston, *The Disinformation Age*, p. 279.
62 Federica Cocco, '[The Kids Aren't Alright](#)', *The Financial Times*, 17 November 2020.
63 Rana Foroohar, '[Covid Recovery Will Stem From Digital Business](#)', *The Financial Times*, 4 October 2020.