

Forum: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Issue: Combating Misinformation on NATO's Borders

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Introduction

In our modern society, the rate at which news enters the viewer's eyes is increasing at an alarming rate. It is all too easy for us living in the modern world to gain information from a variety of different sources. However, information can be "truthful, un-truthful or an opinion of the writer." A truthful fact carries the burden of proof and can be quite hard to be established as the truth. Untruthful or false information comparatively, is much easier to create and often comes with the intent of evoking a certain emotion. The fast paced society and new technology such as social media have allowed for the blend between the two. Causing it to be increasingly difficult to differentiate between fact and fiction. Facts are now being disguised and masked under partial truths; opinions are now disguised as facts and spread with an instant click of a finger. The globalization and interconnectedness of information online have radically changed the news industry and how information is spread throughout the world (Riddle).

During this global age, the use of information as a part of warfare has become more and more important as information can be spread at speeds unlike anything before. Tactical information spreading such as propaganda and intentional portrayal of individuals can be used to reshape the general public's opinion on a topic. Furthermore, the creation of fear and misunderstanding in the general public can cause irrational decisions to be taken by the general public against the government and undermine the legitimacy of the government. Moreover, laws and regulations aimed at targeting misinformation are often easier said than done. Many tools that can help spread misinformation are widely available to the public and such spreading of misinformation can be accomplished anywhere on the globe, making tracking down offenders an extremely extraneous process (Sulaiman).

Definition of Key Terms

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Established after World War II, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was originally an economic aid program to support war-torn nations' revitalization. As the values of the Soviet Union

(USSR) and the United States of America (USA) began drifting apart, the economic pact between Western European countries and the USA grew not only to be a security pact to prevent a resurgence of Germany but also serves as a blockade to prevent the spread of communism into Western Europe. One of the most important parts of the treaty that the founding 12 countries agreed upon is the idea that an attack against one is an attack against all. This arrangement of collective defense not only put Western Europe under the protection of the “Nuclear Umbrella” of the USA, but it also prevented further Soviet influence on the continent (North).

Cyberwarfare

Cyberwar is a war conducted on the internet, targeting information on the World Wide Web and the computers that are connected to it. It is waged to “disrupt, destroy or deny” a country’s ability to be able to communicate through intergovernmental networks. Three main things can be targeted in cyberwar, the hardware such as the computer, the software that operates the hardware, and the semantic interaction between the network and human interpretation and logic. Related military tactics involve the direct destruction of computers; the use of malware such as computer viruses or spyware to corrupt or monitor activity; and the use of psychological tactics such as phishing and misleading links on the internet. The act of cyber defensive strategies such as implementing firewalls or encrypting data has also actively prevented foreign into a country’s top secret information within the information networks (Cyberwar).

Information Warfare

Information warfare is still a very broadly inclusive term with no clear definition; however, it is generally agreed upon that information warfare includes manipulation of “information” transferred between agencies in the government. The definition of what constitutes information differs from organization to organization and even between government agencies. Moreover, the view of whether information warfare is conventional warfare between countries or unconventional warfare between countries and organizations is still highly debated (Bingle).

Misinformation

According to Dictionary.com, misinformation is defined as “false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead.” It is important to note that both contain wrong or false information; however, misinformation is different from disinformation as disinformation only contains false information that is spread with the intent to mislead (National).

Russo-Ukrainian War

The Russo-Ukrainian War started with the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Peace agreements are quickly negotiated to prevent further escalation of warfare in Eastern Europe.

However, on February 24, 2022, President Putin authorized a special military on Ukraine which he claims is an attempt to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine and end the genocide that is happening to Russian citizens in Ukrainian territories. Although there were attempts at peaceful resolutions, the war has been raging continuously throughout the past two years. Mass destruction has been made to Ukrainian infrastructure all around the country (Center).

Borders of NATO

At NATO's current state, it includes 31 countries in the North Atlantic region across Europe and North America. The borders of the combined countries make up the geographical boundaries of NATO. NATO started as an alliance formed by mostly Western European countries; however, after major events such as the fall of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, NATO has gradually admitted former Soviet nations such as Poland, Croatia and Romania ([North]).

Article 5

One of the most important articles of the North Atlantic Treaty is Article 5. This article states that "an armed attack against one or more of [the allied countries] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all." In the 20th century, this clause of collective defense was regarded as the main reason for the prevention of open military conflict in Europe between NATO and the USSR. This article has been invoked only once in history, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks to back up the United States of America (Amersi).

Background Information

COVID-19 and its Impact on Information Spreading

COVID-19 has undeniably had a great impact on our modern lifestyles and especially left a great legacy on how information is spread. During COVID-19 lockdowns, various online media, especially social media, have allowed governments to spread information in a timely manner to the majority of its citizens without physical contact. However, it has also allowed for the easier spread of misinformation because of the ever faster speed of spreading information, and the inability of humans to counter such information in a timely fashion. The result of such circulation of misinformation has led to speculation and distrust, non-compliance with policies, and intensification of political conflict (Social).

Russo-Ukrainian war

In 2022, Russia started a campaign to invade Ukraine, 8 years after its occupation and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Russia opened up combat in the Donetsk Oblast, Luhansk Oblast and an operation for Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. Until 2024, the conflict is still ongoing and still plays a significant role in international politics and global news (Why). However, the conflict has generally

reached a point of stalemate and both sides have lost a significant amount of soldiers. With an estimation of casualties rising up to around half a million, nearly 2,200 civilian casualties, 5.1 million people displaced internally, and 6.2 million that had fled Ukraine (Center).

Why did Russia invade Ukraine?

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, each of its member nations gained independence; however, Ukraine, as an independent country, was still thought of as an important part of “Mother Russia” and believed that with the invasion, it would restore “Historic Russia.” Furthermore, the reestablishment of the Russian sphere of influence and imperial empire is something that President Vladimir Putin of Russia wants to see happen to avoid the overexpansion of Western democratic values and especially the expansion of NATO (Why).

Moreover, Russia justifies their invasion of Ukraine as a threat to national security as they believe Ukraine is turning into a neo-nazi, fascist nation that is armed and supported by the West. President Putin charges Ukraine with genocide against Russians living in the Donbas region, justifying their invasion as absolutely necessary to protect the interest of Russian citizens. In addition to the alleged genocide, President Putin views this invasion as an attempt to “de-nazify” Ukraine, comparing President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine to Hitler, and equating Western support of Ukraine as supporting Nazi Germany (Sherlock).

Last but not least, a major ground for the Russian invasion rests on the expansion of NATO into more of Eastern Europe. Ever since Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, former USSR member states, have joined the alliance, Russia has been reluctant to see a further eastern expansion of the alliance. It sees the further expansion as a containment of Russia and believes that it also deserves a sphere of influence in its neighboring countries. Especially when a direct membership in NATO puts the country under the protection of Article 5, which in essence prevents Russia from influencing it (Moskowitz).

Misinformation during the Russo-Ukrainian War

The use of dis- and misinformation has reduced the public understanding of the situation of the war. Oftentimes, conflicting information simultaneously reaches civilians and causes confusion (Heintz). Russia has continuously spread disinformation and propaganda in an attempt to fuel public support for its goals. The deliberate use of lies about the situation has required other national governments to come out to refute and clarify false claims against their country (Countering).

Not only does Russia use information to cloud enemy understanding, Ukraine has also deliberately spread information about the war in an attempt to mislead the Russians in the war.

However, the extent to which the Russians misinform the public is on a different level. For example, when a photographer for the Associated Press took a photo of an injured pregnant woman on a stretcher in the ruins of Mariupol after the bombing of the city, Russian diplomats, including their UN ambassador, claimed that they were an actor and cited a patient whom they claimed to be the same person. However, the same patient who was interviewed later claimed that they had not given permission to be cited. Such conflicting information made it difficult for the outside world to really understand what was happening and allowed misinformation to spread easily (Heintz).

Public Support for the War

Not only can misinformation be used to cloud enemy understanding, but President Putin of Russia has also used it to gather public support for the war through deceptive language. For example, he claims that Russia is not at war with Ukraine, but a larger Western enemy, and that “true sovereignty” in Ukraine can only be reached under Russian rule. The Russian government has been strategically dissenting information that can reveal the true intentions of the Russian government. According to most surveys, this strategy has worked and allowed strong support of the Russian government backed by the general public. However, the freedom within Russia to go against the government in public has been reduced, with news stations and radio stations spreading “fake news” facing up to 15 years in jail. It has been theorized that the mass support for the invasion was not primarily due to the people actually supporting the government and their cause, but rather through fear of facing consequences and the lack of other options of opinions and narratives other than those of the Russian government (Myers).

Misinformation during Induction of Finland

In the process of inducting Finland, supporters of Moscow have repetitively spread misinformation regarding Finland. Associating Finland with fascism and framing NATO's induction of Finland as support for Neo-Nazism and white supremacy. They argue that since the Finnish air force has long been using the swastika in its badge until 2020, this is a symbol of support for Nazism. Furthermore, they misrepresent Finland's complicated history of alliances during World War II, focusing solely on the time period Continuation war where Finland sided with Nazi Germany and ignoring events later in history. Such logical fallacies completely ignore the change in the global political landscape in the past decades and quickly assume the false dichotomy of supporting Russia and supporting Nazism. It plays on the reader's pre-existing biases based on the little information or facts given (Institute).

Why is Misinformation Hard to Prevent

Misinformation has been a challenge to many countries of the world, and without proper intervention, incorrect information will most likely dominate our online social networks for the foreseeable

future. When we look at the spread of misinformation, it will be easier to imagine it as the spread of a viral pathogen. There will be one initial “virus”, then others might “catch the virus” and share and spread it through their contacts. Such growth will continue until most of the members in a given network have all been shared the false information.

Moreover, many people are extremely susceptible to misinformation as our psychological effect is geared towards believing repeating information and claims. The repetitiveness of information presented on social media has increased the chance of the public believing in it. Furthermore, according to research, false news is 70% more likely to be spread than true news on Twitter, with the spreading of misinformation often growing at exponential rates (Van der Linden).

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

NATO

Ever since the alliance’s creation, misinformation has always been a prominent issue. It has seen a rise of information targeted at defaming, deepening divisions between allied nations and ultimately weakening the alliance ever since the Russian annexation of Crimea. NATO’s actions against misinformation are simple. First, it listens to what misinformation is being shared. Then, they react accordingly, providing factual information to the audience through a wide variety of methods such as exposing large cases of disinformation, connecting with the general public through social media and official websites, and most importantly, communicating and coordinating with national governments on topics specific to each country. NATO firmly believes that its strength lies in its ability to unite allied nations to commit to the goal of collective defense, and any attempt to undermine and degrade such an alliance shall be viewed as a hostile force against the interests of the alliance as a whole and therefore, needs to be confronted with (“NATO”).

United States of America (USA)

Russia has repeatedly used misinformation as a weapon against the interests of the USA. It has fostered an ecosystem of disinformation and propaganda against the USA. As a result, the USA shall utilize truth as the ultimate counter offensive weapon. The USA believes that it’s only because the truth is not in favor of Russia that the Russians are using information tactics. It is a smokescreen to overwhelm or blur the general public from noticing their real actions in Ukraine, Georgia and other countries in Europe. It is a fairly cheap and easy to execute method of creating discord and degrading the trust between societies. These activities have continued to break international standards and threaten global peace (Global).

Russia

Even though the Russian government does not admit that it is spreading false information, multiple countries were able to trace sources of misinformation back to the Russian government, identifying it as intentionally spreading false information to mislead millions of people. (“Examples”, “GEC”). Governments such as that of the USA have created websites in order to counter Russian disinformation either by sharing factual information or releasing special reports on the use of information warfare as a response to Russian offenses (Global).

Ukraine

Even since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has been a major target of misinformation from Russian information warfare. Many Ukrainian allied members such as the USA, Canada and Germany have created dedicated websites directly for the cause of refuting and clarifying false information and providing accurate information to the nations’ citizens (“Examples”, “GEC”, Global). However, since the battle is still ongoing, there have been many myths and claims that both sides make towards the war and war efforts. This “fog of war” creates unclarity and uncertainty about the future of the war, and may conceal the facts about the war from the general public (Heintz).

Finland

Finland, and its recent admittance to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, has also been a target of misinformation, connecting present day Finland to its counterpart decades back during WWII. However, it has successfully been able to disprove a large majority of Russian misinformation and is on a campaign to educate its new generation about misinformation (Institute). Other than natural advantages such as how Finnish is only spoken by a relatively small group of people compared to other languages like English, its successful and trustworthy public school system also allowed media literacy lessons to be deeply rooted in Finnish education. With media literacy being required starting as early as Preschool all the way up until when they are adolescents (Gross).

Sweden

As Sweden applies for NATO membership, it can not be neglected as one of the most targeted countries towards misinformation. Russia has deliberately used some of the images from protests in Stockholm against immigration and placed them out of context, leaving only images of protestors burning the Quran. This has already led to the delay of Sweden’s admittance into NATO as Turkiye, a majority Muslim country, objects to its admittance. As a result, Sweden has created a Psychological Defense Agency under its Ministry of Defense, with one of its primary focuses being the first line of defense for Sweden against information warfare from foreign sources. However, some speculation has arisen regarding this agency, questioning its possible infringement on the freedom of speech, one of the most important stepping stones to a thriving democracy (Myers).

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
April 4th, 1949	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is created in Washington D.C. with 12 founding countries.
February 20th, 2014	The Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea is invaded by the Russian military.
March 26, 2014	The Russian military has successfully captured the entirety of Crimea.
February 24th, 2022	The Russian military begins a “special military operation” on Ukraine, attacking Kyiv and the Donbas region.
May 18th, 2022	Finland and Sweden together applied for NATO membership.
April 4th, 2023	Finland is admitted into NATO.

Relevant UN and NATO Resolutions and Treaties

- Countering Disinformation And Promotion And Protection Of Human Rights And Fundamental Freedoms, 24 December 2021 (**A/RES/76/227**)
- Resolution 483- Protecting Allied Democracies and Partners from Disinformation, 09 October 2023
- Report- Bolstering The Democratic Resilience Of The Alliance Against Disinformation And Propaganda, 28 October 2021
- Resolution 436- Weaponisation Of Information, 09 October 2017

Possible Solutions

One solution that many countries already implement is to create a myth busting or fact checking website that regularly updates information to provide facts and disprove misinformation. However, studies have found that fact checkers have been less successful in changing groups with deep rooted beliefs and are especially limiting in extremely polarized discussions such as that of political campaigns or controversial policies. Studies have also shown that even though people might have the correct information, the beliefs that stem from the misinformation might still stay and impact their decision making. They have found that people might gain the right information, but without

adequate thinking processes behind the information, it still proves to carry minimal influence towards decision making (Tompkins).

Another solution that countries implement is to increase media literacy among the public through educational lessons on misinformation and how to spot it. It has been shown that it increases critical thinking skills and those with higher levels of media literacy generally were more likely to differentiate evidence based posts from posts containing misinformation. Still, large groups of people believe false information as real stories, and many aren't able to distinguish between commercial search results and non-commercial ones. It should be noted that due to the nature of media literacy, there are limited metrics on which media literacy can be assessed and oftentimes social-cultural differences in online behavior are not considered when assessing particular educational strategies of media literacy (Bulger).

Misinformation can also be solved in communities that lack access to multiple sources of information by increasing communication and reaching out to the under informed communities. In many cases, misinformation comes into effect when the reader doesn't have any other source of information and the wrong information is the only source of information that they have access to. A coordinated approach between multiple government agencies to reach out will allow this group of people to be correctly informed and be less likely to create deunification based on misinformation (Wardle).

Questions for Further Research

While doing your research, please consider the following questions regarding your country and NATO as a whole:

- To what extent can the public be more educated about ongoing national security issues correctly?
- How can NATO as a whole combat information warfare?
- How can unintentional false information spreading be prevented?
- To what extent can the government censor false information without violating the freedom of speech in democratic countries?
- To what extent are citizens trusting governmental sources?
- To what extent are citizens relying on social media and unregulated information sources as their main source of information?
- To what extent are NATO's borders clearly defined and how can the public be more informed?
- How can the use of social media be beneficial to governments when it comes to spreading factual information?

- How can foreign entities use the nature of NATO to weaken the alliance?

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