

How to Distinguish Pro-Kremlin Disinformation



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Nowadays, due to the endless possibilities of spreading unverified information, especially with the help of social networks, which are often used for political gains, hundreds of politicians, journalists and analysts use the term “disinformation”. As political and expert community struggles to use shared typology on this matter, analysts speak about this phenomenon in a similar way, but there are dozens of interpretations of what each term means and how it is perceived. That causes inaction and exhausting need for never-ending explanations of what means what. Therefore, we are summing up already existing definitions and frameworks.

Firstly, we shall start with a review of relevant methodological framework. Ben Nimmo starts¹ with a general definition of disinformation by The Oxford English dictionary: *‘False information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media’*.

He follows up in his review by using an extended definition of disinformation describing it as *„information that is incorrect by intent“*, contrasting it with misinformation, which is *„information that is incorrect by accident“*.² All these definitions agree that there are two key components of disinformation:

1. The falsehood of the information
2. The intention to mislead

Don Fallis³ uses the same basic concept and broadens it to describe the activity of disinformation in itself. He acknowledges the fact that the falsehood of the information one gives does not have to be direct and that the information can be disseminated in many ways, for example by doctored photographs or by eavesdropping. According to him you disinform only if you disseminate information while foreseeing that the recipient is likely to reasonably infer from the content of the information something that you believe to be false and that actually is false. He then continues to define disinformation simply as *“the information (i.e., the stuff with representational content) disseminated by someone who is disinforming”*.

He builds up on that later in his paper⁴, in which he says that *“disinformation is misleading information that has the function of misleading someone”*. The criterion of intent is switched for the criterion of function. Therefore, according to this definition, disinformation can be spread also by people who do not

¹ Nimmo Ben, “Identifying disinformation”: an ABC, Institute for European Studies, February 2016 WWW: <http://www.ies.be/files/PB%202016:01%20Ben%20Nimmo.pdf>

² Lewandowsky, S., Stritzke, W., Freund, A., Oberauer, K., and Krueger, J (2013): ‘Misinformation, disinformation, and violent conflict: From Iraq and the “War on Terror” to future threats to peace,’ American Psychologist, Vol 68(7), Oct 2013, 487-501.

³ Fallis Don, “A Conceptual Analysis of Disinformation”: University of Arizona, February 2009

WWW: http://ischools.org/images/iConferences/fallis_disinfo1.pdf

⁴ Fallis Don, “A Functional Analysis of Disinformation”: University of Arizona, March 2013

WWW: https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/47258/278_ready.pdf?sequence=2

attempt to mislead but who “*systematically benefit from their being misleading*”. This mostly accounts for the authors and disseminators of conspiracy theories.

The activity of disinformation was further processed by the European Parliament's research service⁵, with a special focus on the responsibility of the speaker. According to their briefing, “*those who speak from a position of authority have the duty to ensure:*

- 1) *that any statement of fact which they make has been of verification to ensure its accuracy;*
- 2) *that their reporting ensures an appropriate balance in its use of commentators;*
- 3) *that due care is taken to ensure the credibility of the sources quoted”.*

A reasonable degree of care is required in these areas, otherwise the speaker is committing disinformation. A “reasonable degree” can be flexibly evaluated by measures like accessibility of correct information, issuing a correction, or qualifying the statement by the speaker. This is an important point relating not only to the media that come up with incorrect information, consciously or unconsciously, but also to the state officials and public figures who irresponsibly decide to spread incorrect information. Contrary to their potential feeling, it is also their responsibility to check whether the information is verified enough to be made public and disseminated.

The term “disinformation” is not used by James Mahon⁶ at all, but he creates a clear typology of those who write about the definition of lying instead. The first category created by Mahon, Deceptionists, consider the intention to deceive necessary for lying. The falsehood of the information and the intention to deceive are the only requirements for the so called Simple Deceptionists, while Complex Deceptionists add the necessity to “*use means of a breach of trust or faith*” and Moral Deceptionists also require “*the violation of a moral right of another or the moral wronging of another*”. The intention to deceive is not a necessity for Non-Deceptionists who either consider the falsehood of the information enough (Simple Non-Deceptionists) or add a different condition into the mix in its stead (Complex Non-Deceptionists), for example warranting the truth of what is stated or making of an untruthful assertion. Those categories cover misinformation and disinformation alike but their added value for the present paper is based on them shedding light on their different forms and on how to perceive them. The “moral wronging” or “warranting the truth” conditions are often included in misleading commentaries which do not present themselves as news as such but are based on false facts and often contain unjust and extremist presumptions or views towards specific persons or groups of persons.

⁵ Bentzen Naja and Russel, Martin (2015) “Russia's disinformation on Ukraine and the EU's response”, European Parliament Research Service, Brussels, November 2015

⁶ Mahon, James Edwin, “The Definition of Lying and Deception”: The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

Last but not least, Miroslav Tudjman and Nives Mikelic⁷ deal with the concept of the information's integrity on the websites. According to their research, “*a complete information is the one that precisely receives and perceives the signals, properly interprets data and purposefully applies the knowledge with the aim to solve the problem*”. The integrity of the information can be interrupted at the data integrity level which qualifies as a technical error and results in misinformation, at the meaning integrity level which qualifies as a semantic error and might be the base for disinformation, and finally at the decision-making level, which qualifies as a social error, in other words “*an error in evaluation and use of the information*”. According to the authors, “*attaining the errors in social acting and decision-making is the main task and the main intention of the disinformation*”. This conclusion precisely sums up how the multiplying media and quasi-media with misleading and defective content might affect society unless they get adequate attention from academic, non-governmental and political sectors in order to disrupt their efforts.

Practical recommendation for the definition

While having in mind above-mentioned research, our practical suggestions for a working definition of pro-Kremlin disinformation is following:

1. The falsehood of the information
Practical use: The view doesn't represent reality in a significant fashion. It skips important parts of context, doesn't provide reliable source for such information, or, for example, presents an extreme view as an objective truth.
2. The intention to mislead
Practical use: Nobody can see into heads of disinformation multipliers; therefore, we suggest using the following pattern: If a story is proved not to be true and correct, and the multiplier is reminded of that yet still does not issue a correction and explanation of the mistake, we suggest deeming that the disinformation process was intentional. A lie is not an alternative opinion.
3. The story has direct or indirect objective to support policy of political regime of the Russian Federation
Practical use: The message of this story usually says that mainstream democratic institutions of the Western states are the “bad guys”, while Russian Federation is a good one, or at least equal in morality of its actions. Reflection of the Kremlin view doesn't need to be present. The story usually fits into the current Kremlin narrative. For example: the European institutions and leaders are the intentional cause for migration crisis, and therefore their legitimacy should be questioned.

⁷ Tudjman Miroslav and Mikelic, Nives, “Information Science: Science about Information, Misinformation and Disinformation”: University of Zagreb, June 2003

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