

Disinformation: Traditions, Lies, Strategy, and Relationship to Politics

Disinformation is a mature, conscious practice that is centered on creating and spreading deliberately produced lies. For millennia, it has been perfected as a communication technique – a tool used to shape interpersonal relations and politics. Within this framework, it is nowadays perceived as a growing threat to the security of individuals, society, states, and international order. Lies, which are the foundation of disinformation, should, however, be considered among the oldest and most natural phenomena that exist in the human environment. They feed human temptation to effectively influence others free from any ethical assessments, and their roots go deep into the past (Philips, 2019). However, the effects of public lies have evolved together with the development of civilization, technological revolutions, and humanity's growing dependence on access to information. So, while it can be said that the phenomena of lies are as old as humankind, modern disinformation has its novelties. Most notable among them is the scale at which the deliberate transformation of information into a tool of social control has occurred, along with the resulting weaponization of information as a strategic resource of the state.

In its most general definition, a *lie* is an intentional communication action in which the liar, be it an individual, state, or media entity, knowingly spreads a falsehood that they themselves do not believe (Kucharski, 2014, pp. 93–117). A lie therefore represents a conscious action intended to deceive the recipient. More often than not, the liar has an advantage over the person deceived, who may not have the ability or resources to verify information or has consciously decided not to verify the information. American psychologist Paul Ekman's experiment, conducted on a sample of 12,000 people, showed that half of them were not able to recognize a lie (Ekman, 2014). Only in a fairy-tale was the puppet Pinocchio transparent about his lies – his nose grew whenever he told one. The example of this wooden character is as infantile as it is didactic, but literature is full of cultural patterns of deception. They are not missing in the Bible and play a central role in stories about the beginnings of human kind, and can be found in William Shakespeare's dramas, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels, and countless other works.

The general definition of a lie, however, says nothing about the specific intentions and reasons behind these distortions of information in the communication process. Motives on the liar's side can be innocent, like in the case of a joke made by a diplomat for social amusement, or an undeserved compliment. They can also be noble, intent on sparing a person's feelings. However, history shows that there is no such thing as an innocent lie in international politics. Many years ago, the then Russian ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin sent his Western counterparts a "funny" Christmas card that featured a photo of an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) with multiple nuclear warheads. The political message was both clear and contradictory to the occasion and to the expected tone of Christmas and New Year's greetings. Its form also did not arouse any enthusiasm or laughter from the recipients. Similarly, on October 18, 1984, U.S. President Ronald Reagan caused a scandal when he announced in a speech on television that he had decided to destroy the Soviet Union and would launch rockets aimed at the USSR in five minutes. This "joke" resulted in a declaration of the highest degree of readiness by the Soviet air defense.

Lies have therefore functioned in human consciousness from the earliest times, coexisting with the truth, though not necessarily as its absolute and indisputable opposite. From the point of view of (dis)information operations, the analysis of their nature requires understanding the phenomenon and the scale of the threat they pose.

1 The Philosophers of Truth

Since ancient times, the concept of lying has also been subject to reflection by philosophers who have considered the coexistence of truth and falsehood through various ontological and epistemological lenses (Kirkham, 1992; Kuenne, 2003). The achievements of these thinkers cannot be summarized with simple conclusions that evaluate the very existence of a lie on the axis of good-evil. For if everything is a *being*, and this originates in thought, then all thought as *being* is equal; hence there is no need to inquire about its truthfulness and the reasons for which it was created. This reflection, though philosophically sophisticated, is only a reflection of reality. For in this, the truth objectively coexists (for some, it struggles) with its deformed representation, which constitutes independent social beings and objects of inquiry. Ancient seekers of truth and perfection went even further. They questioned the very existence of a lie in the face of their inability to undeniably prove what is true

and in view of the understanding that a lie does not always mean evil itself. This is the Faustian dilemma of power desiring only eternal evil but doing eternal good. It was demonstrated masterfully by Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita*.

It can be argued that the ancient sources of the history of thought (including Plato's works) do not provide an unequivocal explanation of the nature of a lie or a clear condemnation of its active use. They do, however, recognize the universal nature of the phenomenon and various reasons why people and nations mislead each other. It is therefore unsurprising that these types of early philosophical writings spurred later praise of utilitarian attitudes proclaiming consent to falsehood as: an act of reconciliation with human nature; the art of effective governance (like in the case of war when used to raise the morale of a nation or deceive an enemy); or the byproduct of ethical motivations to do good, such as in the case of saving a life or protecting mental well-being.

This direction of reflection owes much to Aristotle, who made one of the first categorizations of disinformation based on lies, which he defined as the act of deliberately misleading someone. Considering it evil, he differentiated motives behind lying, understandingly belittling the guilt of reckless people and seekers of fame and sharply condemning those who did so out of a desire to get rich. Plato's disciple can also be considered an important source of the modern classification of disinformation tools. He noticed a phenomenon recognized as the category of people who cast themselves (sometimes unconsciously) in the roles of "useful idiots", spreading falsehoods due to naivety, a lack of knowledge, or insufficient reflections about the surrounding world (Aristotle, 2002). Such useful idiots are an integral part of any disinformation operation.

This mental impotence was overcome thanks to the biblical tradition and the achievements of Christian writers and philosophers. Much of the "analysis" of this phenomenon was performed by Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Thomas Aquinas. While the latter rigorously rejected lying even as an excuse for acts based on noble motives, including saving a life, the bishop of Hippo authored a kind of early study of the morphology of this problem. As someone unequivocally on the side of the truth, he distinguished between disseminating false messages (*lying in speech*) and lying (*lying in deed*) (Goliński, 1936). In his classifications, he designated exceptions for situations in which certain statements, like jokes, even if overtly untrue, did not indicate fraudulent intention. There was much to the understanding of human weakness, although the aforementioned Augustinian reflection runs against the tide of contemporary analysis, incorporating jokes, mockery, and related forms of communication

into the (intentional or otherwise) domain of disinformation. This is discussed in further detail later in the book.

Saint Augustine's rejection of lies based on a moralistic interpretation of the Bible was an important point of reference for the later teachings of Christian authors and the Catholic Church. The bishop of Hippo also had his critics, however, for example his contemporary John Cassian, who promoted the idea of the "useful lie" and justified it through historical assessments of events described in the Bible. Saint Augustine's theorizations can also be considered an unconscious precursor to modern definitions of disinformation. He saw two distinct and integrally connected features in a lie: (1) material falsity of the content of the statement, of which the liar is aware; and (2) an intention to mislead the other party (Chudy, 2003, pp. 152–154). This formulation led him to create the first hierarchical typology of this phenomenon, contained in the treatise *de Mendacio* (On Lying), written around the year 395 and further developed in the quarter-century later work *Contra mendacium* (Against Lying). In both volumes, he describes a wide range of circumstances in which a lie may appear but designates the different levels of severity and evil it may carry.

According to Saint Augustine, the most severe type of lie is characterized by a falsification of God's truth. In descending severity, lies are also designated based on the following factors: they harm other people, they are perpetrated for the pleasure of oneself or others; or they do not harm others and are perpetrated to save someone else's property or life or protect them from rape. This view sets a moral foundation for condemning lying as an intentional act but also provides for dual assessments of the gravity of this problem in specific and ambiguous life situations.

The writings of the Church Fathers and their epigones and polemicists moving in the opposing space of good and evil, relativism, and cognitive rigorism undoubtedly shaped the Western worldview of lies and their effects on human life. However, teachings based on biblical records and the eighth commandment (*Thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor*), understood as a condemnation of lying in all its forms, "have suffered a complete didactic failure" (Kucharski, 2014, p. 13).

2 Grotius, Machiavelli, Diplomacy, and the Right to Truth

Modern reflections on lies and disinformation owe a great deal to the Dutch philosopher and lawyer Hugo Grotius. He approached the topic in an Augustinian spirit, classifying truth as a good violated by those who intentionally

mislead others; however, he did so in a more secular, earthly order. In his understanding, lying is a form of violence that imposes on others an understanding that differs from their own. In his trilogy of books entitled *On the Law of War and Peace*, he acknowledges the ambiguity of contexts in which a lie can function, but he also considers them an attack on the human right to truth. Admittedly, the right to truth is not, in his opinion, an unconditional right, as it does not apply in:

- Everyday situations towards sick people incapable of the truth.
- The case of joking and accepting untruths in social situations.
- The context of sovereignty – authorities have the right to their own truth, to shape their sovereign communication space and to dictate the rules that govern it, including in the realm of relations with other countries.
- Situations where the protection of good justifies a counterfeit equal to it, otherwise known as a *useful lie*.

The importance of Grotius' teachings is not diminished by the changes in standards of contemporary democratic societies regarding the last two situations described by him. The idea of truth as a human right has been developed in contemporary international relations studies and acts of "soft law" concerning the impact of disinformation on various spheres of rights and freedoms. It includes human rights; individual freedoms; the right to truth and freedom of expression; privacy; and cultural, economic, and political rights, including participation in public life. These issues are reflected in numerous reports and resolutions by the Council of Europe, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the European Commission, among others.

The reflections of Grotius also influenced the development of political thought and the practices of states operating under the post-Westphalian order that sought to develop legal protection for their interest in mutual relations. Diplomacy became an important instrument for this purpose, undergoing dynamic institutional and organizational development in recent decades, including an improvement in the skills of diplomats. This expansion of skills was based on effective communication, for which the point of reference was the dichotomy of "truth expected" by partners and the "possible truth", meaning various forms of its deliberate distortion used to pursue one's own interests (i.e., propaganda and disinformation).

Niccolò Machiavelli, who lived a century earlier, took the use of truth and its nuances to advise rulers and diplomats in their own interest even further than Grotius. In the interest of politics and achieving its goals, such as the survival of the state and its center of power, he deemed lies beyond moral judgment. In book XVIII of his treatise on governance, he provides a solid foundation for

treating lies as a tool that can be used depending on needs and circumstances. He even goes as far as to say they are necessary in environments where political power is rife with falsehoods (Machiavelli, 2014). For Machiavelli, the key to success was not the power of truth or Christian ethical evaluations of an argument but rather the skill and efficiency in using messages elevated to the rank of a strategy (strategic art).

Efforts by Machiavelli, Grotius, and Saint Augustine in assessing the social contexts of lies was further developed by Ambroise Guillois, a Catholic priest and 19th-century commentator on theological texts. Guillois broadly commented on the role of deception in diplomatic communication, building on the foundations laid by Augustine's condemnation of lies. He writes:

There are circumstances, however, in which ambiguous expressions may be used; for example, someone out of curiosity asks you a question that you cannot answer clearly and firmly without risking indecency or annoyance; on the other hand, your silence would be sufficient to reveal your thoughts: then you can answer with an ambiguous answer to the obsessiveness of the one who asks you ... they are accepted by custom, and their meaning is known. The servant says that you are not at home, although it is real: is he lying? No, because it doesn't cheat whoever it talks to. So, it is not known that these words mean: that you do not want to see anyone, that you do not receive guests? The significance of such an answer is known; no one will be mistaken in it; then you have no lie here. You ask a friend to borrow money; because he knows that you like your expenses too much, and he replies to you: I don't, and yet he has money. Are they lying? No, because the words he says cannot deceive you and only mean, according to the customary practice: I don't have any money that I would like or could lend you. (*Disfavoured truths*, 2018)

It would be a significant oversimplification, however, to regard the views of Machiavelli or the peculiar explanations of Guillois as the sole key to comprehending contemporary diplomatic communication. On the one hand, the history of diplomatic communication is replete with instrumentalized falsehoods and a flexible attitude towards truth, deception, and disinformation. Sir Henry Wotton, the English ambassador to Venice at the turn of the 17th century, characterized the heads of diplomatic missions as "good people, sent abroad, lying in the interests of the country" (Freeman, 2009, p. 9).

Notwithstanding popular opinions and *bon mots* suggesting otherwise, lying is not the foundation of a diplomat's work in representing their

country. Communication based on truth is the bedrock of international relations, even in the presence of ubiquitous falsehoods. Occasionally, in times of conflict or permanent interstate hostility, the use of lies or systemic disinformation may seem necessary, but it comes with measurable costs and does not bode well for long-term success. The price of lies in diplomacy includes the erosion of a state's credibility and the credibility of those acting on its behalf, perpetuating conflicts and distrust, and the inability to solve problems that require a minimum amount of honesty. Even if honesty, openness, and truthfulness may not always be a diplomat's primary virtues, lying outright is neither their preferred tool nor a valued aspect of their role.

The fact remains, however, that distrust is one of the most important principles in international relations. While this feature has been exposed by researchers in their attempts to develop a realistic paradigm for the study of international relations, it only reveals the stakes for which the international game is being played: survival, security, and the power of the state. Considering this scenario the norm, it becomes notable when the diplomacy of states becomes systematically dependent on the use of lies and everyday disinformation to hide their intentions or justify their decisions. Such is the case for Russia, for instance, which used these types of tactics to justify its aggression in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 on "defensive grounds". Furthermore, a significant part of Russia's foreign policy employs mythical stories that combine truth and falsehood, framing itself as a country betrayed by its Western partners that must defend itself against a repeat of such treatment (Kupiecki & Menkiszak, 2020; Legucka & Kupiecki, 2022). The mythology of "national humiliation" also appears in the justifications of Chinese foreign policy, which presents China as an ancient civilization mistreated by foreigners for centuries. This narrative asserts that, as a modern-day superpower, China has the right to protect itself against the return of such a situation and should take its rightful place in the world.

Yet this is a typical situation for revisionist powers with aspirations for which disinformation becomes their own version of the truth in communications with foreign states – an operational tool into which the entire state apparatus is harnessed. It is a political strategy capable of effectively influencing the behavior of others while being less costly than war and not bearing the direct risk of confrontation. Such an instrumentalization of disinformation is reminiscent of the old Talleyrand maxim that "in politics, what is believed is more important than what is truth". However, it requires a well-organized state apparatus, a high level of social control, legal regulations, and suitable material resources. Such means are often not available to smaller (and democratic)

countries. If disinformation occurs in their activities, it is an exception rather than the rule.

3 Sun-Tzu, Clausewitz, and the Strategic Nature of Disinformation

In the service of state interests, lies and disinformation are not only the concern of ancient philosophers – they are also deeply ingrained in the literature of strategic studies. Unlike philosophers who seek good, truth, and life harmony, military strategists and historians view the manipulation of truth as a legitimate means for governments to pursue their interests. Manipulating the truth is freed from moral considerations and evaluated solely in terms of its potential effectiveness, benefits, and costs, as well as the circumstances that make it possible or difficult to apply. This is not surprising given that the point of reference for these strategists' deliberations is war, which is decisive for the existence of nations. As the popular and apt maxim attributed to the Athenian tragedian Aeschylus proclaims, "in war, the first victim is truth".

Sun Tzu, a Chinese general and a master teacher of strategic thought, emphasized the importance of misleading the opponent in his seminal work on the art of war (Sun Tzu, 2005). Other classics of strategic thought, from the Carthaginians, Macedonians, Greeks, and Romans to Nicolò Machiavelli, nuclear-era strategists, and contemporary theorists of "strategic disinformation", have also drawn attention to this way of using information. The art of effectively disinforming the enemy; blurring their situational awareness; and influencing their decisions, morale, and planning ability are highly valued in the arsenal of strategy. It is also a tactical key to achieving victory at the lowest possible cost in terms of effort and resources, or even without a fight. Such indirect influence on the opponent can cause uncertainty, force them to act defensively, or take away their fighting spirit, all of which weaken them. However, it also hides a deeper strategic reflection, making indirect action a desirable policy tool. It can also win over allies or help manage alliances in conditions of disagreement about the war plan. Indirect actions are a form of combat, which in an optimal situation does not require classic warfare.

Even earlier than the teachings of the Chinese general Sun Tzu, the most well-known example of a mythical message about the application of such an approach is the Trojan Horse. The defenders bringing the horse into the city was preceded by a disinformation operation about the withdrawal of the Greeks, who were besieging Troy. This prompted the inhabitants to abandon their vigilance, which until then had guaranteed their success. The Trojan Horse is arguably the most popular example of an effective hybrid tactic – a

disinformation-backed war deception that uses diversion and asymmetric measures. It has also become a cultural synonym for dishonest gifts, and it is no coincidence that it is the name of a malicious digital tool used to steal data. A similar though less known method of conquering the besieged Yaffa was used even earlier, around 1500 BC, by the Egyptian pharaoh Tuthmosis III. He misled the defenders with false information about the withdrawal of troops and sent war contributions in huge wicker baskets where Egyptian saboteurs were hidden in the place of gold. Like the Greeks in Troy, the Egyptians successfully attacked the city at night from within.

A contemporary adaptation of Sun Tzu's strategic thought is the Chinese concept of unlimited war, which relies on disinformation and follows Mao Zedong's theory of revolutionary war (Commin & Filliol, 2015). According to the authors of the monograph that describes its framework, China should use, without any legal or moral restraints, all methods of weakening, exhausting, and defeating stronger opponents. This assumption is primarily related to the power of the United States and the international order as it was shaped after the end of World War II. The arsenal of unlimited war measures includes classic combined military and paramilitary operations; psychological deception; informational and cybernetic operations; and financial, economic, criminal, and terrorist instruments (Liang & Xiangsui, 2002). The aforementioned monograph, which first appeared in its Chinese edition in the late 1990s, may have been a harbinger of an idea in the form of guidelines for the Chinese armed forces known as the "concept of three wars", or three types of warfare. This concept assumes a combination of informational (shaping public opinion at home and abroad), psychological (influencing decision-making processes), and legal (building legal arguments supporting the implementation of the state's interests) means of strengthening China's international position (Mattis, 2018; Spalding, 2022).

For Carl von Clausewitz, a classic of modern strategic thought, disinformation represents more than just Sun Tzu's ideation of a tool of war – according to von Clausewitz, it is also a tool of policy. For him, in a conflict, information and disinformation coexist on an equal footing. In his understanding, warfare is always carried out "as if in darkness, [...] which, like a fog or moonlight, gives things an exaggerated size and a bizarre appearance" (von Clausewitz, 1984). This "fog of war" is an objective reality that increases uncertainty for commanders and politicians alike. While opponents can magnify this uncertainty, disinformation as a combat tool must be planned precisely, with a clear understanding of its benefits and costs. The key to success lies in identifying the opponent's "center of gravity", which, when hit, will lead to their defeat. Clausewitz's concept of "center of gravity" is the essence of effective action,

both in times of war and peace, and requires a constant and careful analysis of changing circumstances.

While modern Chinese strategy heavily draws on the thoughts of Sun Tzu, Russian strategic thinkers and their followers in the 21st century are students of both the ancient Chinese general and von Clausewitz. From both, they draw an understanding of the integrity of space and domains of conflict, which does not distinguish between military and non-military domains; traditional operational domains such as land, air, and maritime versus extended technological, cyber, and information battlefields; or the separation of times of peace and war (Darczewska & Żochowski, 2017). They also see new asymmetric possibilities of effective informational influence on Westerners to weaken the cohesion of democratic states and limit their resilience. Without social support or in conditions of divided public opinion, it can be difficult to govern effectively; in such cases, making difficult and bold decisions may turn out to be impossible or even deadly for democratically elected authorities. Russia's reference point for such actions is the concept of *political warfare*, which was defined by George Kennan as the:

logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in peacetime [...] application of all means at the disposal of the state below the threshold of war to achieve national goals [...] in an open and secret manner, from such explicit measures as alliances, economic and "white" measures propaganda, to covert operations to support "friends" abroad, "black" psychological actions, and even incitement to resistance in hostile countries. (Kennan, 1948)

Disinformation is important and facilitates linking various measures into complex scenarios of interaction, but it is only one dimension of contemporary activities referred to as political warfare, or the *fourth generation of warfare* in Anglo-Saxon strategic studies (Robinson et al., 2018, pp. 2–6). It features a particular mutation of peacetime in the form of *hybrid warfare* or a *gray zone conflict*. This concept includes: (1) coordinated and synchronized actions, using political, economic, military, civil, and information measures against the weaknesses of democratic states and their institutions; (2) difficulty in detecting or attributing the actions to specific actors due to their operation in a space between peace and war (i.e., the gray zone); and (3) the perpetrator's aim to influence various decision-making processes in pursuit of their own interests (*The Landscape*, 2021).

These concepts often lack precise and universal definitions, regardless of whether they are viewed through Kennan's categories of mobilizing all

components of the national potential to act below the threshold of war or in Clausewitzian terms, which see war as a political tool. The author of the term “hybrid war” admitted to taking the idea of the waning boundaries of conflict and the loss of the state’s monopoly on violence from the concept of fourth-generation warfare. Furthermore, the concept of multi-domain warfare was borrowed from Chinese proponents of unrestricted warfare, net-centric warfare was taken from American strategists, and the synergy benefits of combining conventional and unconventional capabilities at a lower and more integrated level comes from the proponents of *compound warfare*. The complex and dispersed nature of the operational environment and the opportunistic nature of future adversaries were derived from Australian experts (Hoffman, 2007, p. 30).

The lack of precise definitions is because the focus remains not so much on the classical understanding of military operations but instead on treating these actions as interconnected and non-kinetic activities that construct various scenarios of conflict escalation below the threshold of open war. These scenarios aim to achieve goals through information manipulation and multi-level non-military activities while avoiding open clashes of troops. The end phase of such scenarios may lead to a full-blown conflict, but the key is to achieve objectives through non-military means. In non-military activities, it is difficult to identify the perpetrator or assign responsibility in accordance with international law, which would imply, for example, the right to retaliate (Treverton et al., 2018, p. 10).

In times of peace, controlling information – whether it is true, partially distorted, or false – can help create an image of power that is not worth challenging. This can help convince opponents that aggression is not a profitable course of action. The impact of this image depends mainly on the strength of persuasion, and, to a lesser extent, on the limited possibilities of confronting it with reality. This is particularly true when it comes to communicating data, such as the possession of military capabilities and their potential use in specific situations. The effectiveness of a deterrence policy, for instance, relies on this kind of behavior (Lorenz, 2021, pp. 15–92). Extensive mechanisms of strategic communication supported by intelligence organizations and public diplomacy are employed to achieve this, drawing on knowledge from social sciences, humanities, and modern mass communication technologies.

4 The Colors of Propaganda

Diplomacy, strategy, and the art of war are linked by a distinctive, active way of using information with the intent of communicating one’s intentions,

hiding them, or influencing the perception of partners and opponents. This is hidden under the concept of propaganda. In a linguistically neutral context, propaganda means communicating and promoting specific messages. The concept itself indicates only the operational mechanism of action, saying little about the content being promoted or the specific intentions related to it (Cunningham, 2002).

In this sense, propaganda can be a tool for promoting negative agendas, such as encouraging genocide, creating a cult of personality of leaders in totalitarian states (Kupiecki, 1993), or justifying aggression and territorial conquests. It can also contribute to positive causes, however, such as vaccinating children, promoting occupational health and safety, and advancing cancer prevention. In international politics, propaganda can be used to share good practices in governing and organizing elections.

However, the political practices of states, international organizations, and businesses have given the concept of propaganda a negative connotation. It is most often associated with information manipulation, *spin*, dishonesty, brainwashing, and psychological operations. The classical definition of propaganda defines it as “the art of influencing, manipulating, controlling, promoting, changing, encouraging, or supporting opinions, attitudes, actions, or behavior” (Martin, 1958, p. 10). According to the authors of the most widely read and repeatedly re-published textbook on propaganda analysis, propaganda assumes the purposefulness of an action which aims to maintain or change the balance of power in relation to the recipient of the propaganda. Jowett and O’Donnell (2015) define propaganda as “a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perception, manipulate cognitive processes, and direct behavior to implement the propagandist’s intention” (pp. 4–9). Simultaneously, they distinguish between propaganda as an act of manipulating the recipient of a message and persuasion based on a relationship and mutual perception of benefits for the sender and recipient.

In this realm of meaning, relationships, and communication, Jowett and O’Donnell (2015) distinguish between two types of propaganda: agitation and integration. Modern states employ both forms of informational interaction, using propaganda and disinformation to achieve their goals. Agitation involves using words and images to move the recipient and persuade them to act in a specific way, changing their behavior or support for certain actions. This type of influence is apparent in the activities of anti-vaccination movements, for instance, as well as in Russian information operations that use the justification of necessary defense to rationalize their foreign policy (Kupiecki, 2019). Integration content, on the other hand, creates messages with the aim of strengthening social acceptance and affirming the cause around which the propaganda

effort is built. Examples of integration propaganda include China's attempts to shift responsibility for concealing information about the spread of COVID-19 (Dubow et al., 2021), Donald Trump's domestic propaganda built on the slogan of "making America great again", and Russian efforts to consolidate public support for the annexation of Crimea.

Jowett and O'Donnell (2015) also recall older classifications of propaganda (Becker, 1949, pp. 221–235; *Foreign Service*, 1951, pp. 955–956) into "white", "gray", and "black" based on the credibility of the source, the nature of the information used, and the persuasive intent of the propagandist (pp. 20–28). Within this framework, *white propaganda* is defined as an act of communication that benefits the sender and shapes their positive image while respecting the recipient's needs. *Gray propaganda* loses this clarity, involving half-truths, falsifications, frequent source concealment, and messages that may harm the recipient's knowledge and attitudes. *Black propaganda* is equivalent to disinformation, in which the truthfulness of the information is irrelevant if it induces the desired effects in the consciousness, attitudes, and decisions of large social groups. The intent to harm the recipient and disregard their needs lies at the heart of black propaganda. In this case, the operator is hidden, and it can be difficult to prove their connections with a sponsoring state.

Among the numerous concepts that have a similar meaning to propaganda and relate to the deliberate and targeted handling of information, it is worth defining the following terms:

- Press and information activity of public affairs. This refers to specialized institutions such as press offices, spokespersons, situational centers, or press attachés. They can be either civilian or military in nature, with the former being related to timely, precise, advanced, or reactive information through the media about the policies and undertakings of a given entity. The latter is associated with external information about the entity's sphere of military activity. The aim of these institutions is to create a favorable information environment that increases public support for the entity's activities. Additionally, these institutions ensure consistency in external communication across all centers of the entity.
- Strategic communication (StratCom). This refers to a field of activity that involves coordinating and applying specific methods of informational influence to the intended recipients at the appropriate time and with the appropriate specificity, to achieve the objectives of a given activity.
- Information operations (InfoOps). This refers to various information activities utilized to attain a desired effect on a recipients' motivation to act, their perception of issues, and their capabilities.

– Psychological operations (PsyOps). This refers to the deliberate and systematic use of information to influence the cognitive processes and behaviors of social groups, with the goal of achieving political and military objectives. The above definitions primarily reflect the Western perspective on the elements of information warfare. However, their interpretation and practical application differ in countries outside this cultural sphere, which have developed their own approaches to the field.

Information and psychological operations are a specific type of activity that involve a series of undertakings such as support, counteraction, and information defense. They are carried out according to a uniform concept and planned with the aim of gaining and maintaining an information advantage over the enemy during military operations. The purpose of conducting information and psychological operations is to disorganize the function of the enemy's information infrastructure and, consequently, cause its state structures to collapse. The success of the operation depends on constant pressure exerted on the opponent and the maintenance of the psychological initiative.

Scientific analysis of propaganda has led to the classification of approximately 100 techniques of information manipulation that operationalize knowledge about the psychological and cognitive processes of people and the dynamics of group behavior. Conserva (2003) has divided them into the following categories (Cole, 1998; Shabo, 2008; Da San Martino et al., 2019):

1. Applying fallacious logic. This involves drawing false inferences from data that does not back them up.
2. Using eristic ploys and diversion. These include, for instance, *ad hominem* rhetoric, use of content *ad nauseam*, references to emotions, and selective use of quotes or authorities.
3. Appealing to emotions through a “love offensive.” This involves an ostentatious showing of interest and care, as well as the use of fear, flattery, hate speech, patriotism, and higher emotions.
4. Using falsehoods and deceptions. This involves the operationalization of lies, half-truths, generalizations, and inverted meanings.
5. Playing a game with human behavioral inclinations and limited inference abilities. This is done by dehumanizing the opponent, demonizing problems, creating group pressure, and causing cognitive dissonance.
6. Using a propagandistic style of speaking or writing. This style includes the use of false accusations, labeling, exaggeration, positive words, minimization, and slogans.
7. Arguing based on the “common sense” argument.

All these propaganda measures are present in contemporary disinformation campaigns carried out in the international arena. They have been proven

effective with identified target groups and are able to exploit the perceptive weaknesses of individuals and social groups, which are intensified by an overload of information and its channels. This hinders not only verification but also critical reflection (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). Some of these measures seem like innocent coloring or “creative” processing of the truth, and in some cases they have even been used as “proof” of the intellectual and social sophistication of their users. A perfect example of this is the media “talking heads” from the world of politics and commentary who efficiently use eristics, once described by philosopher Schopenhauer (1893) and processed by spin theorists. In general, however, these measures lead to distortions of reality, constituting acts of direct disinformation or, by proxy, efforts aimed at lowering public sensitivity to information manipulation.

Contemporary state use of gray and black propaganda includes, for example:

- Traditional state-controlled media.
- Social media, which can be used as an enabler of activities perpetrated by paid, organized disinformation groups (e.g., troll farms) (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2021).
- Trolls, i.e., individuals paid to produce content that is biased in favor of their clients’ goals – they comment on reality in a biased way, building criticism or support for specific individuals or issues.
- Bots, which are automated information production and duplication processes responsible for the increasing number of false messages intentionally disseminated online. Particularly active on Twitter, bot accounts are often characterized by a lack of identifying or false photo of the owner, a small number of followers and many accounts they follow.
- Specially created organizations that imitate legitimate civil society institutions.
- Secretly sponsored radical and populist parties, opposition movements, and peace campaigners, for example Soviet support for Western anti-war, environmental, and anti-nuclear movements during the Cold War.

As part of disinformation operations, these actors often operate in a coordinated and planned manner, becoming in effect a broadly understood “influence agency.” The tools of influence should be considered more broadly, however, extending beyond the strict nomenclature of intelligence services. It is also important to not forget the “useful idiots”, an immortal phenomenon of people supporting social and international pathologies for various reasons. Without naming them as such, the “useful idiot” phenomenon was first characterized by Aristotle. The modern understanding of this human tool of manipulation is ascribed to the leader of the Bolshevik revolution, Vladimir

Lenin, who so described the uncritical Western eulogists of the freedom and successes of Soviet communism. Given the lack of evidence as to who coined the term itself, it must be considered a historical construct of scientific debate (Charen, 2003, p. 10).

The perfidy of propaganda and disinformation lies in the accurate recognition of the needs, values, and emotions of the message's recipients. Techniques that reinforce existing beliefs within a specific social group are particularly effective. Over time, repeated interactions based on these techniques lead to an instinctive acceptance of information that confirms preexisting beliefs while rejecting anything that contradicts them, regardless of the source's authority. Furthermore, persuasive propaganda clichés contribute to a shift in cognitive habits towards mental laziness, reducing the tendency to verify information sources or fact-check data.

Such an approach alleviates participants' feelings of isolation, discomfort, and potential shame arising from their ignorance. It also provides a sense of security, identity, strength, and satisfaction, along with a distinct social legitimacy resulting from the existence of a separate communication space with its own truth and significant influence. Such a worldview may lead to political representation for that perspective or its adherents, which can be leveraged by groups seeking to expand their electorate. Maintaining this relationship's consistency may generate impulses to develop disinformation that supports the constitutive elements of an information bubble. This same mechanism can be replicated by foreign states who sponsor such relationships for their own benefit, aiming to enhance divisions within foreign societies and hinder or manipulate their decision-making processes. "Alternative facts," simplistic truths, and black-and-white explanatory constructions that strongly appeal to emotions have significant potential power, particularly in situations where economic or political realities are too complex to comprehend or sudden events occur (Wolters et al., 2021).

Disinformation, driven by lies, plays out in people's minds and is facilitated by modern technology and social engineering techniques. However, the consequences of individual behavior are amplified in large social groups, resulting in visible impacts on states and nations. Within the history of strategic thought, the recognition of information as a weapon in political and military conflicts (i.e., the weaponization of information) does not surprise or provoke objections. The essence of the deliberate use of information in times of peace, crisis, and war is to influence the perception of reality and the resulting actions of an unwitting target against whom operations are carried out. Information used as a weapon for disinformation purposes therefore works against its intended target and benefits the disinformant.

The contemporary connotations of this concept, which are cognizant of disinformation interactions occurring in an environment saturated with digital technologies and internet-enabled services, are sometimes described as “hacking cognitive processes” (Mann, 2008). However, disinformation primarily exploits human weaknesses in terms of how people learn about the world, their deficiencies in critical thinking, and their individual and collective attitudes toward problems and values, which can be culturally, psychologically, or socially conditioned (Erbschloe, 2019). In this context, technological measures only act as intermediaries between the sender and the recipient, serving the purpose of transmitting information and shaping or distorting the information space.

While the phenomenon of weaponizing information is as old as humanity itself, the term itself is relatively new. It belongs to the same generation of concepts used to describe the tools of contemporary international conflicts, such as *lawfare* or *hybrid warfare*. While it’s challenging to pinpoint the author of this concept, all evidence suggests that it emerged from Western analyses of Russian information operations during the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2012–2014 and its subsequent actions against Ukraine (Pomeranstsev & Weiss, 2014). In this context, the comment attributed to Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu, who said that “words also shoot”, are particularly relevant. Today, however, the use of information as a weapon is associated with the activities of other undemocratic regimes, including China and Iran, as well as non-state actors. This classification of information is determined by its intended use and the way it is used to the detriment of the recipient.