CHAPTER 4

Disinformation: Anatomy and Trends

As established in the previous chapters, disinformation is a specific and developed type of message based on falsehood that is intended to paralyze the recipient or shape them in a way that works in a manner expected by the manipulator. As Vladimir Volkoff points out, disinformation has been a constant phenomenon in interpersonal communication since ancient times (Volkoff, 1999c, p. 5). When conveying information, a person can, intentionally or unknowingly, deceive the recipient by adding their own interpretation, assessment, comment, joke, or subjective opinion that is not based on an in-depth knowledge of the subject matter or any qualifications to speak on a given situation. Based on the intent of the source, researchers have distinguished three collective categories of information lies:

1. Misinformation, which does not correspond to reality; it can be spread both intentionally and unconsciously, without the intention of harming the recipient.
2. Disinformation is deliberately created or multiplied false and manipulated information; the sender's intention is to mislead the recipient for specific political, economic or military purposes.
3. Harmful information, or *malinformation,* is the misuse of real information or a stereotype in order to stigmatize specific social groups. Its includes hate speech (Lanoszka, 2019, pp. 3–4).

Misinformation could primarily be described as unintentional disinformation. It concerns a wide range of official, social, and private situations, such as the use of social media and spontaneous reactions to the content that is shared there. In such situations, the information transferred may be false, partly untrue, or unverified in terms of its truthfulness. A lack of ill intent does not, however, change the fact that even unknowingly duplicated messages can be a valuable component of a disinformation operation and be used by the operator.

Disinformation involves a form of trickery aimed at influencing the recipients of the information and effectively changing their perception of a specific issue in the direction planned by the entity carrying out the operation. In this approach, disinformation should be perceived as an element of information warfare, which is defined as "activities aimed at protecting, using, damaging, destroying information or information resources, or contradicting information in order to achieve significant benefits, a goal, or victory over the opponent" (Aleksandrowicz, 2016, p. 105). The era of digital technologies makes it

particularly important to emphasize this aspect of disinformation, which uses modern methods of transmitting information to increase its range. In addition, it involves the use of fake social media accounts, false identities active on digital information platforms, or content generated automatically by bots. The scale of such influences largely defines the operational mechanisms of disinformation that function in Western societies today.

Malinformation involves the spread of false information regarding events or social groups that reinforces stereotypes, prejudices, established narratives or permanent memory patterns. This often occurs in situations related to historical facts, minority groups, or the public image of an "alien". It provides a fertile ground for politically motivated disinformation campaigns, using these established attitudes to deepen existing differences of opinion and create conditions conducive to conflict.

1 Categories of Disinformation

Despite the differing concepts and contexts surrounding the three aforementioned phenomena, each can become a component of disinformation operations conducted by states or non-state actors against third parties. Disinformation can take on a wide range of forms and can be conveyed through various channels of contemporary social communication. These channels include spoken words, conversations, jokes, rumors that are repeated and changed freely during circulation, political speeches, interviews with celebrities on television, debates featuring "pseudo-experts", manipulated films, manipulated images (including photos and graphics), sounds (e.g., music that affects the subconscious mind or song lyrics that resonate with a particular audience), written words in press articles, and text duplicated on social media.

It is important to note the informational influences within the entertainment sphere, such as satire, parody, and humorous stories, as particularly well-disguised instruments of disinformation. These influences can act on the recipient irrespective of their intellect and knowledge, using their abstract thinking abilities or sense of humor. It is often said that authoritarian regimes do not have a sense of humor but are happy to use it offensively in information operations. They try to mock, caricaturize, or otherwise depreciate and delegitimize certain figures, groups, or institutions in the eyes of the recipients, unable to attack them directly. It can also be particularly easy to cast or use unaware artists, tabloid journalists, performers, and internet or TV entertainment influencers in this role. Lowering the recipient's sensitivity to this type of manipulation and misleading is favored by the general decline in the

quality of this type of production, which has naturally increased its influence during electoral campaigns, referenda, and other important public decisions. This does not mean that open societies should be afraid of their own sense of humor and entertainment. However, it is essential for their media education to teach them to be sensitive to this channel used for disseminating disinformation.

The list below summarizes the 12 possible forms of communication that may contain disinformation. The items mentioned most often appear in professional analyses of this phenomenon presented in relevant literature. This list is not comprehensive, and it is worth remembering that each of its components may appear differently depending on the specific medium it uses.

1. **Satire and parody** are acts that serve to discredit the object of disinformation, either intentionally to cause harm or unintentionally with the potential to stun the recipient (Rashkin et al., 2017, p. 3).
2. **Rumors** involve a change of the initial truth elements found in information during its circulation.
3. **Deceptive content** is the specific use of information to present a fact or person in a specific light or to authenticate a fabricated situation or belief based on unfounded messages.
4. **False content** is content that pretends to be original.
5. **Forged content** is intentionally and fully falsified information used with the purpose of deceiving the recipient.
6. **False connections** occur when a text, its title, or an image is used but does not reflect its actual content or meaning.
7. **False context** involves the use of true content conveyed within a false context.
8. **Manipulated content** is when original content is distorted to deceive the recipient (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 17).
9. **Myth** a repeated message containing unverified and intricate information. In foreign policy, states can create myths using multiple narratives, manipulated in terms of the accuracy of facts and the way they are presented. These myths may evolve over time and be altered or updated based on the requirements of the creator as well as the changing circumstances (Kupiecki, 2019, pp. 77–105).
10. **Propaganda** is content aimed at influencing people's minds for a specific intended effect.
11. **Sponsored information** features a hidden form of persuasion conveyed as objective information.
12. **Information error**.

European Union analysts (*Modus trollerandi,* 2021) have revealed the empirical mechanism of interaction between various types and techniques of disinformation in the pursuit of offensive political goals. Although the perpetrators may appear to accept the standard of open debate, their actions are aggressive and aimed at narrowing the communication space. They seek to eliminate not only rational voices but also all fact-based positions that differ from their own. Disinformation can therefore be, to some extent, considered a model of modern information warfare that is based on the use of seven combined tactics:

1. Attacking views never expressed by the target of the interactions.
2. Spreading *whataboutism* and deflecting the discussion away from the original topic.
3. Using offensive or inflammatory language to discourage opponents.
4. Mocking and using sarcasm to minimize the voice of opponents.
5. Provoking and asking who benefits from it.
6. Bringing opponents to exhaustion by drowning them in detail and technicalities.
7. Strongly denying any evidence of disinformation (*Modus trollerandi,* 2021).

The mechanism described above refers to the correlation of three rhetorical techniques known in linguistic studies. Ethos defines a goal (as a person or a group), pathos affects emotions, and logos operates in the area of weaknesses of logical processes (Sample et al., 2020, p. 8). The same team that developed *Modus trollerandi* quotes a different seven-step scale from the *New York Times* that denotes the actions used by disinformers, which coincides in some places with the above-mentioned analysis. It goes as follows: look for divisions; create a lie; wrap the lie in the appearance of facts; hide your share; find a useful idiot; deny everything; and play the game long enough (*Seven commandments*, 2018).

2 The Building Blocks of Disinformation

Disinformation agents target their opponents' weaknesses and aim to change their point of view rather than engage in respectful communication and exchange of views. They perpetrate acts of informational violence, attacking the opponent's cognitive mechanisms and exhausting them with a variety of continuous interactions, ranging from jokes to offensive attacks, all under the guise of pseudo-rationality. The form of disinformation can be deceptively innocent as it is often intertwined with its carrier. Moreover, any form of manipulated information can take on a life of its own and create a story whose origins and destiny can only be understood by exploring the larger narrative of which it is a part (Bal, 2009; Ricks, 2015).

Experts point to relationships between three formally separate building blocks:

– A given story or narrative. This is about showing specific events in a specific context.
– A specific message. This can present in the form of an image, text, sound, or a combination.
– A plot or meta-narrative. This plot plays a superior role compared to the messages related to it and organizes the variable messages, giving them an axiologically unambiguous character on the axis of good versus evil or in a clear hierarchical order.

The message, plot, and narratives can create an infinite number of versions of the presented reality, known as plot modifications. These modifications arise depending on the specificity of the recipients, the expected effects they are intended to cause, and the effectiveness of the chosen form of communication. The story itself is therefore a function of the mission it fulfills in the information operation. Its content, emotional charge, and the percentage of truth contained in it constitute only an operationally useful, time and place-specific mutation of a strategic meta-story that transcends time and exists beyond its tactical carriers and records (Kołodziej, 2017, p. 26). Such a message serves as an auxiliary to the key goals of politics and has only as much value for it as the result it is capable of producing. It lives only as long as it remains effective and can be freely changed to ensure continued correlation with the overarching assumption it serves.

In the practice of Russian disinformation, there are many such duplicated plots using fabricated meta-stories. Examples include:

– The "betrayal of the West", cited as the cause of Russia's aggressive actions in the world and presented as a justification for enforcing the right to self-defense. This narrative is employed in operations directed against Western countries as an offensive argument introduced into the local political discourse, as well as in operations directed towards its own citizens for the purposes of social mobilization and consolidation around state leadership.
– The narrative that frames Russia's actions as a defense against the imposition of Western values and way of life, which are presented as degenerate and alien to the "Russian soul". In political terms, this is manifested by the West's support for pro-democratic forces and movements in the countries of the former Soviet Union, commonly referred to as color revolutions.
– Narratives around Western efforts to colonize Russia, use its natural resources, and employ Russians as cheap labor.

Narratives based on such plots are disseminated to Russians and the international community through various channels, often relying on what is known as

the "big lie". These narratives not only violate historical facts and truth but also common sense (Houston et al. 2015). To better understand how such stories are built and disseminated, the study of lies in journalistic texts can be particularly useful. The findings from these can be applied to lies presented in both traditional and new media information messages. A Russian media expert from the University of Kazan has listed nine types of these forms:

1. A paranoid lie. This involves presenting completely unverifiable facts, with an argumentation system that is highly ideologized and does not reflect rational understanding. Such messaging strongly affects the recipient's emotions and often uses the image of an enemy who is blamed for all the evils or conspiracies surrounding the subject, who presents themselves as the victim.
2. A politically convenient lie. The factual basis of this message is often limited, and facts are chosen selectively, mixing truth and falsehood. This can disturb the recipient's understanding as they may assume that the described events are probably factual.
3. A discrediting lie. This message is masked by ambiguous concepts or complicated images.
4. An embarrassing or demagogic lie. The aim of this message is to discourage the recipient from engaging with the described matter or person permanently by using general and oversimplified statements, creating scapegoats and mental shortcuts, and portraying negative characters or features.
5. An interpretative lie. In this type of message, facts are sparsely used but deliberately thrown around in a way that leads the recipient to create a specific story. The narrative may include cleverly expressed opinions that influence the recipient's perception and interpretation of the facts.
6. A persistent lie. This is a message in which each utterance contains or refers to previously known narratives.
7. A conceptual lie. This type of falsehood is linked to the prevailing ideology, and altering it can result in the authentication of narratives about the past.
8. A hypostasized lie. This message imparts the actual definition of an abstract concept, property, or idea, and has a subliminal effect that emotionally inspires the recipient toward a particular action. The liar in question eagerly employs libertarian references and the subjective nature of the opinions.
9. An axiological lie. Arising from the assessment of values that favor our own (i.e., "our values are superior to those of others"), such evaluations supplant logical reasoning, gaining a persuasive character and the strength of arguments (Ostaszewski, 2018, pp. 36–39).

Once again, the above categorization of media lies demonstrates that they need not be entirely false to serve as instruments of influence. It suffices to selectively choose and "adjust" facts and to skillfully interpret and package them linguistically or visually, placing the recipient in a situation where they face an "apparent" choice of a position dictated by the "heart" or one that purportedly stems from proper cognitive processes, all orchestrated by the disinformation source.

3 Trends in Disinformation

In the third decade of the 21st century, disinformation is thriving and its prospects are impressive. This is due to the anticipated demand for social influence tools in the realm of politics, including elections, party rivalries, personal campaigns by politicians, relations with society, legitimacy protection, and governance systems. Similar trends exist in marketing and market competition, where disinformation is akin to doping in sports. The data cited in the previous section demonstrates that one-third of countries, or the political and economic entities within them, employ varying degrees of disinformation tools. While the context and purpose of this practice as well as its relationship to foreign policy are diverse, its potential for expansion is significant. These needs will continue to grow in the international arena as actors seek to enhance their power at the expense of others, using disinformation as a tool. This trend is also linked to the evolution of peacetime conflicts, where finding effective methods of influencing the decisions and cognitive processes of opponents has become important, beyond the traditional measures of military potential and other "hard" policy instruments. The widespread use of disinformation and its social standing on par with truth poses a global threat to individuals, societies, and states and their military bases, economies, and political systems. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), three aspects should be considered in the developmental trends of disinformation:

1. The learning processes of disinformers and the lessons they draw from the past to improve their tools and activities.
2. The development of technology, which has expanded the boundaries of imagination regarding effective information interactions and their social consequences. If there is any reason to be optimistic about the impact of the disruptive digital technologies, it is connected to their "dual use" nature (Kupiecki, 2020a, pp. 472–497). While these technologies allow for even more effective and pervasive disinformation, they also provide an opportunity for these same technical capabilities to be used for education, detecting, and combating information threats, and strengthening

the resilience and cognitive security of modern societies. In this context, *cognitive security* is a relatively new area of research related to security. It pertains to activities aimed at defending societies against the harmful effects of disinformation and information manipulation supported by modern technologies.

3. A relatively new but fast-learning actor in the field of disinformation: China (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Scientific analyses of disinformation, regardless of the research discipline in which they are conducted, tend to overlook important aspect of this problem, namely the *post-factum processing* of experiences by information operations strategists. This analytical phase involves estimating the costs and benefits of a given operation, evaluating the effectiveness of the techniques used, and assessing the evolution of the operating environment. It is an integral part of planning similar activities in the future and serves as a process of continuous learning to improve information interaction methods and develop the repertoire of analysts' applications in various situational contexts. A good example of disinformation operations as a learning process is the Russian influence on the electoral processes in the U.S. in 2016 and 2020.

According to an expert from the Helsinki Center of Excellence who deals with hybrid threats, the initial stages of similar campaigns involved the placement of harmful content in the enemy's information space directly by the Russian entities conducting the operation, located outside the US. In subsequent years, the Russian *modus operandi* in this area changed. They reduced the risk of detection and the connection with Moscow by acquiring American news portals that spread the desired narratives for their own activities. These narratives focused on issues that polarized American public opinion (e.g., the myth that the 2020 U.S. election was stolen from Donald Trump by the Democratic Party). The websites were run by genuine American activists operating on platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. The content they disseminated was difficult to unequivocally classify as false but it was prepared in such a way that its messages would strengthen attitudes of dissatisfaction and protest, delegitimizing the new U.S. president. At the same time, these activities emphasized the need to reduce the amount of machine-disseminated information in favor of people who could be identified without suspicion as aspiring opinion leaders or "concerned citizens", including influencers with millions of followers.

At the same time, many different types of media are used to disseminate information so that no administrative action (e.g., the removal of false content) can disrupt the entire operation and weaken the influence of a given message. During the 2020 American elections, the disinformation employed was

primarily emotional rather than based on knowledge. Emotionally charged content from social media was disseminated on television news programs and popular talk shows through many message sources. This made it difficult to detect and effectively counteract false information in the face of the dynamic nature of the messages and the confusion between truth and falsehood within the emotional content.

The means and methods of disinformation are constantly evolving and adapting to changing conditions, including the circumvention of defense mechanisms. Perpetrators can better conceal their identities behind fake social media accounts or pay local internet users to spread disinformation. Detecting disinformation in podcasts (Wirtschafter, 2021) or even audio disinformation (Urbani, 2021) has also become more time-consuming and challenging, especially as this type of message becomes more popular and difficult to verify through online moderation. Trolls working for Russia on social networking sites often leave comments under articles on mainstream Western media portals, which are then used in pro-Kremlin propaganda as "favorable voices" from the West. This new approach has been further complicated as major social media platforms increase their efforts to counter disinformation (Corera, 2021).

Disinformation as a global problem has manifested itself in various ways, such as attacks on Australia from the Balkans and Israel, or the organization of anti-vaccine protests from Germany in the Antipodes' (Galloway, 2021). Ghana's cheap English-speaking disinformation operators, for instance, have been hired to interfere with the U.S. election process. During the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, troll groups were created in Ghana to pose as African Americans. Low-cost account operators from the Balkans, such as North Macedonia and Kosovo, were also hired to pose as "voters" struggling online, potentially reaching 140 million Americans a month. In Kenya, a disinformation operator for hire is valued at only $15 per day (Elliott, 2021a). Fake social media accounts created on behalf of Russian services and their agents covered Facebook pages of American Christians, African Americans, and Native Americans. Additionally, 70% of online racist attacks on dark-skinned English footballers come from abroad (Stokel-Walker, 2021a).

Conclusions from disinformation campaigns to date can be formulated in three ways.

First, they can be seen through the paradox of massive dissemination of false content that is perpetrated by genuine users. This has guaranteed the speediness of information distribution, making it impossible to control by portal administrators and fact-checking organizations.

Second, there is an increase in the number of partially falsified messages compared to completely fabricated ones. This technique is a reaction to

the actions of internet portals filtering election content and hate speech. Manipulated or distorted information is more difficult to detect using control algorithms.

Third, there is a cascade of network interactions not related to one medium or digital platform but simultaneously using many different places and tools of communication, including encrypted messaging (Garcia-Camargo & Bradshaw, 2021).

4 Technological Challenges

Modern technological advancements in various fields have affected both the development of disinformation and the ability to combat it. Digitization has become prevalent in all areas of life, including work, services, entertainment, and communication. Yet the most significant revolution is happening in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) research and its applications. Many believe that AI, with its enormous data sets, is already demonstrating its capabilities and will pose a greater threat to information security, privacy, database integrity, and systems for processing and sharing knowledge in the future.

The problem is not only the faster spread of false information in greater quantities but also the increasing use of human identity as a tool for disinformation. Techniques like *deepfakes*, which can manipulate images, voices, locations, intentions, outputs, and reputations, pose a criminal risk when used to infringe on personal rights. Much more serious problems may arise in the political sphere, however, when the victim of such actions becomes a state leader, for example uttering content that delegitimizes their own leadership or poses a threat to peace. The capabilities of AI in this area go beyond entertainment applications and will have far-reaching implications for human cognitive processes, education, everyday life, and international relations, with increasing application in both the civil and military arenas.

Even today, there is a real technological "arms race" taking place among world powers that recognize the potential of new technical solutions and the expansion of their applications. Countries that gain an advantage over others in this respect or dominate development processes will strengthen their international position, defined today by traditional determinants of power such as army, territory, and capital. The essence of this matter has been laconically and precisely expressed by Vladimir Putin, who has asserted that the first country to master artificial intelligence will dominate international relations (Vincent, 2017). The ambitions of the Russian president and China's leader in this regard are prompting Western leadership to seriously reflect on their own strategies.

The West is already experiencing aggressive information operations that utilize the developing functionalities of artificial intelligence, which includes supporting social communication processes as an "accelerator" of the transmission, individualization, and multiplication of information. AI's role as an autonomous content creator heralds new though still unavailable opportunities for disinformation on a massive scale as a tool for states, corporations, and criminal organizations. The modern world's dependence on information and its internet transmitters, combined with the possibilities of machine learning, creates a real explosive mixture. The actual aftermath of this mixture will only be revealed in the future, however. Just like dynamite or firearms, which have become tools of both destruction and development, artificial intelligence may become the greatest threat to or source of protection for the information security of democratic societies (*The phenomenon of disinformation*, 2019).

The task of serving the truth is not simple, however. It is determined not only by the scale of technological challenges but also by the legal, organizational, political, and cultural conditions that make up the social environment of artificial intelligence applications. Paradoxically, challenges for defenders of the truth outweigh those of the producers of disinformation, who do not care about truth, universal values, or social order. In democratic countries, determining what can be considered truth and what should be fought as disinformation begins with questions about the subject and its legal basis. Justice institutions and state authorities, civil society organizations, and people's habituation to freedom of choice, guard the appropriate justification of the answer. Arbitrary administrative actions by governments and media owners, for instance, would face charges of censorship and restriction of freedom of speech.

Another problem is the complex regulatory context of information governance. This includes methods of controlling the use of modern technologies or algorithms in their specific applications to prevent discrimination against specific groups. Another issue is ensuring fair cooperation between governments, the European Union, and producers and users of information. Governments act as regulators interested in maintaining order, while media owners are interested in profit and avoiding regulation. Creative employees and the audience of their works are usually reluctant to limit their freedom and are prone to protest if the actions of regulators arouse their suspicions.

There is a growing awareness among all these groups about the scale and dangers of online disinformation. Artificial intelligence could be a possible solution to limit these dangers as it operates systematically and faster than human verifiers of information. Social media owners, under pressure from governments and conscious users, have long been investing in

algorithms detecting *fake news* and removing false content created by bots from circulation. They have also been collaborating more and more with non-governmental organizations to combat disinformation using the capabilities of AI. Although the elimination of bots through the analysis of network traffic and patterns of undesirable behavior supports the fight against disinformation, it does not solve the core of the problem that bots present. Bots operate based on how they have been programmed by humans and therefore possess no remorse for the damage caused by the misinformation they spread over the internet.

Analyses and experiments conducted by specialists show that bots duplicate both truth and falsehood equally; it is humans who are predominantly responsible for the deliberate or accidental spread of disinformation. Effective media education, critical thinking, and forming habits of fact-checking are therefore of great importance. Combatting disinformation must rely on both the power of computers and human presence of mind to pay attention to distortions or inconsistencies in images and content. There are many widely available and rapidly growing *fact-checking organizations* in the world based on cooperation between humans and machines. For example, companies verify text, image data, and information flows on social media using AI algorithms through their applications. More and more often they can also filter toxic content such as hate speech or obscene comments.

Given the current state of artificial intelligence, it may not be realistic to expect fully effective tools in the near future to combat internet disinformation. However, it is worth considering AI as a solution that can support people who act ethically and in accordance with safety requirements. The future of AI in relation to disinformation should therefore be viewed as a tool with dual purposes rather than an inevitable threat to be feared. Depending on human decisions, it can be wielded as a sword by opponents of freedom or used as a shield to protect societies and individuals from the effects of disinformation. This comparison, often used in history by military strategists, applies to a complex modern battlefield where much still depends on human actions. The choice is clear.

5 China: the New Actor of Disinformation

China's emergence as a major player in the realm of international disinformation is a recent development that can be attributed to its foreign policy reorientation in the 21st century. The Chinese government's overt expressions of superpower aspirations, regional leadership, and efforts to create favorable

conditions for its own interests worldwide have led to an open, multidimensional rivalry with the United States and the Western world as a whole. This rivalry spans across various spheres, such as politics, the military, and the economy, with key focal points including the technological arms race and the expansion of China's "soft power" components. Against this background, information and information operations, which are deeply ingrained in Chinese strategic thinking, are viewed as a tool to improve global conditions and help implement state interests. As a component of military operations, they also have specific uses, which were discussed in Chapter Two.

In the opinion of a U.S. Atlantic Council expert:

> In recent years, China has increased the activity of its own state propaganda and manipulative actions in social media to promote its own vision of the world towards the people of Hong Kong and Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora in the U.S. and other countries. Aggressive promotion of one's own vision of the world coincides with the growing one economic, political, and military power of this country. (Roberts, 2020, pp. 6–10)

China has a long history of propaganda, which after the victory of the Communist Revolution in 1949 became a tool of both social communication and government oppression by the regime in Beijing. For decades it focused on its own society and its neighbor in Taiwan. Although both these targets remain high on the list of contemporary Chinese information operations, in the dimension of international disinformation China is emerging as a new actor with growing influence. It is drawing on Russian models while developing its own methods of influence using traditional media and direct messages phrased by state functionaries. It is also setting new directions for disinformation using social media, bots and artificial intelligence.

China spreads disinformation using both state media and global social media platforms. Their messaging centers on issues of sovereignty and noninterference in the internal affairs of the "Chinese world". They also strongly exploit the image of a state that was humiliated in the past by Western powers, which they claim gives China the right to defend its ownership status and decide on its directions of development.

The complex crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented collaboration between Russia and China in their international communication strategies, which has resulted in the strengthening of propaganda and media cooperation on both sides (Legucka & Przychodniak, 2020). In this partnership, Russia gained an ally in its opportunistic disinformation campaign, and China found a defender against accusations of being

responsible for the global viral crisis (*China on*, 2020). This tactical alliance demonstrates that the foreign policy objectives of both states, which seek to revise the liberal international order, are similar. They both feel discriminated against, have limited respect for its rules, and are willing to change or expand the freedom of interpretation of these rules (i.e., the rules of international law). However, they differ in the means they use to achieve these objectives.

Russia primarily uses political corruption and military pressure against foreign countries. China, while consistently expanding its military potential in Asia and its power projection capabilities, emphasizes economic pressure measures. In the field of information, China is in fact a country closed to external influences. It strictly control its own information space and censor the internet and the largest web search engines. The state's information monopoly is protected by the ownership structure of the media and by laws, which penalize the dissemination of content that goes against the messages of local authorities. It can therefore be said that, in a way, Beijing has created an endemic version of social resistance to hostile influence. At its essence, however, is not the freedom of choice and education but control over the population and limitations of individual freedoms and information rights. Despite this strict control, the state and its institutions fully enjoy the benefits of globalization and an open economy. China's ambition to re-write the history of the 2020 pandemic that ignores its origins in Wuhan has a much longer-term significance. It is aimed not only at rebuilding Beijing's tarnished international image but also its "soft power", which it uses as an instrument for fulfilling its political and economic interests.

While there are similarities in Russia's and China's goals and methods of disinformation, it is important for observers, analysts, and communication practitioners to recognize significant differences in their current and long-term goals, as well as their methods of achieving them. Russia has been responsible for most disinformation and media influence operations worldwide, while China has recently begun replicating similar patterns of aggressive disinformation. The sophistication of China's disinformation techniques is also growing rapidly, aided by advances in technology, including artificial intelligence, which will play an increasingly important role in enhancing the precision and responsiveness of Chinese information operations.

Additionally, China's economic relations with foreign partners, particularly in accessing the Chinese market and cooperating in "soft" areas such as film production, will increasingly link access to concessions and loans with the neutrality of foreign partners or their active promotion of the Chinese vision of the world and its image as a stable and peaceful superpower. Chinese

disinformation seeks to promote its own efficiency and agency against the backdrop of a supposedly ineffective rotten West, both domestically and internationally. Beijing will support this narrative through information interactions and broader influence operations that are continually refined.

Both experienced disinformation operators utilizing older schemes and methods and novices find their place and application in the new reality. One example of this is seen through the Chinese conspiracy theory claiming that the U.S. military garrison of Fort Detrick is responsible for the origin of COVID-19 (*Wuhan*, 2021). This theory follows similar patterns as the old Soviet propaganda that accused the U.S. of creating HIV, as well as recent Russian myths about American laboratories experimenting with biological weapons in Georgia or Ukraine. So far, the russification of Chinese disinformation efforts has progressed less effectively and without finesse.

This also seems to be the case with French-language Chinese state media portals, which have large followings but record disproportionately low engagement, with their political propaganda in cultural content appearing clumsy. Nevertheless, China has been allocating increasingly significant resources to coordinated disinformation campaigns worldwide, with an annual spending of around EUR 1.3 billion on information operations abroad even before the pandemic (*French-Language*, 2020). Moreover, with the continuous improvement of data processing ability, it is now possible to distort reality even faster, more perfidiously, and in a way that is more difficult to detect. For instance, a network of 350 fake accounts spreading pro-China narratives was identified, and their profiles were found to have been created with the help of artificial intelligence. These accounts focused on narratives related to COVID-19 and problems with respecting human rights in the U.S., including the murder of George Floyd during a police arrest. The mesh was detected partly by analyzing hashtag usage (Carmichael, 2021).

The Chinese activity behind disinformation is largely driven by the accelerated effect of COVID-19 and often inept attempts to imitate Putin's trolls. However, it must be acknowledged that China is currently in a transitional stage, in a period of apprenticeship after which it will create its own school of international disinformation, harnessing the results of its research on artificial intelligence in a much more effective way than before. To carry out these activities, China will use the potential of Chinese diasporas around the world, as exemplified by the ongoing problems in Australia, Canada, and the U.S. The scale, tools, and perspectives of multifaceted operations by the People's Republic of China are illustrated by an excellent 650-page study prepared by analysts at the Institut de Recherche Stratégique of the École Militaire in Paris (Charon & Jeangene-Vilmer, 2021).