

POLAND – A TESTING GROUND FOR INFORMATION WARFARE?

The influence of intentionally fabricated information on democratic principles, security and public order, opinions and social moods have become a crucial challenge for authorities of the state and has become an indispensable part of current political debates. In Poland this problem is particularly visible, but the main problem is that many are talking about fighting with disinformation, but no one is acting to do it.

Difficult Past

It was a huge logistical challenge to produce good fake news decades ago before the dawn of Internet era. Nowadays, when it is possible to use many advanced professional tools, it is difficult to believe how much work needed to be done to prepare and distribute fake news in the past. Despite the lack of Internet and social media, the results of information operations in the past were successful, similarly to current operations, which used the most innovative and advanced tools. The best example of the effective information operation from the past was the “Operation Infektion” prepared and distributed worldwide by the KGB in 80’s. It claimed that HIV virus was invented in American military laboratory to reduce African population. The Soviets achieved a great success, even though their spreading messages tools were limited to traditional press and participation in the international research conferences. Moreover, the operation was so successful that the president of Namibia said in 2001 that the HIV virus was an American product.

Polish Internet User an aware Internet User?

Nowadays, the widespread public access to the Internet and social media has become a fertile soil for information operations. Fake news and trolling are visible in Poland and they are omnipresence on social media. They are particularly visible during the sophisticated organized information operations, which lead to confusion and flaring tensions by exploiting issues such as anti-vaccination theories or attempting to undermine elections campaigns.

How do Poles deal with information verification, which they find on the Internet? In IAB POLAND 2018 report: „Dezinformacja w sieci. Analiza wiarygodności kanałów informacyjnych” (Disinformation on the Internet. News channel credibility analysis) the authors conclude that 58% Internet users in Poland point out social media as the place where they find false information most common, the news portals (39%) occupied the second place and on the last there were video services like YouTube. These numbers can make a wrong impression that the Polish users are aware of the disinformation threats. However, can we be sure that these numbers show the true image of Polish society self-awareness. We do not know if information recognized as fake news was a real false information or it was information which people do not agree and consider them as a lie.

In 2018 the European Commission alarmed that disinformation could undermine trust in public institutions, media, hinder citizens in making conscious decisions and ultimately may deepen social tensions. In response to this growing challenge the European Union kicked off the Rapid Alert System to provide alerts on disinformation campaigns. Nonetheless, the system was not effective enough and there was speculation about closing it. However, even such an initiative was a good signal and beneficial action to raise the importance of this problem. It was also a proof that EU administration have been becoming more and more aware and decisive to undertake the necessary actions in this area. Disinformation is not the anonymous threat and we know the main sources of it, but the European Union and its members states need to build up an organizational mechanism of fast detection of mis and disinformation and combating this threat.

Tilting at windmills, fighting with disinformation in Poland

There are only a few media in Poland, which try to fight fake news seriously. They are pretty good at detecting and debunking fake news but they are not responsible for creating mechanisms to disarm hostile malign information operations. Currently, the topic of disinformation has become more and more popular and what is not surprising it is misused by politicians in domestic political clash to libel political opponents. Despite the fact that it is not difficult to predict how destructive specially crafted false information can be, we are sure that the politician does not appreciate this danger before the huge crisis would start caused by external power intervention.

In Poland it is difficult to find any traces of work in education, politics and legislation to prepare society and state to fight disinformation. Archaic education in Poland does not prepare the particularly vulnerable youth to resist the information operations, which come from both domestic and abroad. The media literacy and critical thinking programs should be implemented from an early age. In area of education there is still a lot of work to do. It is necessary to teach children in schools about safe behavior on the Internet and what is even more important schools should develop critical thinking analysis programs for children to reach them out with knowledge before they get their first own smartphones . Children should learn how to collect, use and send information – and there is one main reason to do it – time, because children spend more and more time on the Internet. It is the main reason why it is necessary to teach the right behavior since the earliest possible stage of education, which will help to create a responsible citizen that can make sovereign political decisions and understand its role in social and political life.

Building awareness and knowledge about the way of using information to fight is indispensable in teaching people critical thinking. A lie told thousand times becomes the truth, especially if it is transfered and authorized by our friend, family or an influential person we respect. It makes a conformism and social proof rule very popular on the Internet, especially if information is shared by a person with similar values and beliefs. If a few of my colleagues on the Internet share the same information, can it be a lie? Do I need to waste time to verify this information?

We should also remember of educating government members and politicians. Not only to create infosphere, which allows to conduct political campaigns in a clear and fair way but also to build awareness that the usage of fake news for an unfair political fight will finish with public ridicule or even force a politician to withdraw from the policy

Interfering in the elections or personal political beliefs violate the basics of the democratic rules. Nonetheless, these are the serious threats for the country but far graver threat comes with the influence on the citizens' knowledge, which in longer perspective leads to intellectual pauperization. It is easier to manipulate a herd of rams and the constant and long term misleading people could be beneficial for political parties, who can easily manipulate groups of unaware voters and the external actors, who tend to influence the situation in the country and advance own interests. In such a

situation it is also hard to talk about confidence building to public institutions, experts, or scientific research. Feeding society or groups with specially prepared information may finish with creating information bubbles and lack of interaction between people. It is difficult to communicate with people, who are driven by fear and an anti-system approach. But, it is far easier to manipulate and control them by maintaining this approach through delivery of new information, which is perfectly tailored to their need.

it's time for a change?

The most popular social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn from time to time inform about closing accounts, which were engaged in disinformation publishing fakes news. This kind of work is necessary, but it is hard to call them effective and sufficient. One removed account is replaced with dozens new and we witness never-ending race between authors of disinformation and social media platforms. The social media platforms are also pressed by the European Union and its members to take responsibility for the published content and removing fake news and distorted information. Fight with the disinformation on the social media platforms looks like fight a losing battle.

Disinformation is a complex issue, which can be countered only by the long-term plan including educational and institutional actions, which allow administration and citizens to prepare effectively for detecting and combating the malicious activity on the Internet. The base of this work is to increase the citizens, representatives of public administration and politician's awareness.

To sum up, it is important to stress that fight with the disinformation could not only focus on eliminating fake and distorted news from social media platform. Much more important is building the resilience of the people. The handful of cases of interfering in the democratic elections and referendums questioned the effectiveness of democracy mechanisms. They are particularly worried in the cases of voting on crucial decisions. Disinformation could distort the final outcome. The manipulation of the citizens played an important role in Brexit referendum, US presidential election or referendum in Catalonia. All of these cases guide us to hypothetical question whether the referendum of election could be dismissed in a case of detection of hostile interference?