Disinformation and the Role of Influencers in Times of Conflict

Berlin Study Trip

Conference Report

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Aspen Institute | Germany

Introduction

Social media has become a growing arena of geopolitical contention and a place where crises play out in real-time. Online platforms are omnipresent in 21st century geopolitics, but their potential to be "digital public squares" has often been overshadowed by their misuse as vehicles to disseminate disinformation or propaganda. Recognizing the danger that disinformation on social media poses to public discourse, democracy and social trust, the Aspen Institute Germany has initiated the project "Disinformation and the Role of Social Media Influencers in Times of Crises, Conflicts, and Wars," aimed at strengthening media literacy among multiplicators of information on social media platforms and cross-border cooperation. The project brings together a selected group of seventeen purpose-driven, politically interested social media influencers and content creators from Germany, Ukraine, Romania, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, and Latvia with other actors to discuss their role in democratic societies in times of conflict. Through digital workshops and face-to-face meetings, the project aims to foster the development of a sustainable network of European social media influencers and content creators, while ensuring that the participants are independent in forming their individual opinions and perceptions.

The Berlin Study Trip from June 6 to 8, 2023, was the first face-to-face meeting of the project, where the influencers and cre-
ators traveled to Berlin for a three-day visit that included six workshop sessions, an exchange with the German Federal Press Office, and a formal reception with external guests from the Federal Foreign Office, the German non-profit sector, as well as the social media industry. In the workshop sessions, the participants exchanged experiences about the threat of disinformation, discussed the unique perspective that influencers and creators bring to this issue, and collaboratively developed ideas for countering disinformation that can be expanded upon in the upcoming meetings.

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Propaganda

Before delving into in-depth discussions, the participants engaged in a brief exchange to establish a common language for the workshop sessions. Specifically, they agreed on a key distinction between misinformation, which is false information that is spread unknowingly, and disinformation, which describes false information that is deliberately disseminated with the intention of causing harm. Disinformation is often spread through a systematic, targeted effort and may be carried on as misinformation by people who have fallen victim to it. A query of the participants revealed a strong perception that disinformation had increased in recent years. Disinformation campaigns can be a form of propaganda, which is the systematic promotion of particular information, ideas, and/or images with the intention of influencing peo-

Disinformation

False and misleading information covertly and deliberately produced and shared to manipulate and wield political, financial or other form of influence.

Misinformation

Verifiably false information that is spread unknowingly without the intention to harm.

Malinformation

Genuine information that is deliberately disseminated for personal or corporate interests with the intention of causing harm on a person, organization, or country.

Propaganda

Systematic promotion of particular information, ideas, and/or images with the intention of influencing people's opinions in pursuit of a political objective.

ple's opinions in pursuit of a political objective. The participating influencers and creators recognized that although challenges to information integrity are not new, the ubiquity of social media has exacerbated these challenges in our present time.

The instantaneous exchange of information has made it increasingly difficult to detect

Advances in AI further enhance the threat posed by disinformation.

and contain disinformation before it can influence people's perceptions and cause harm, for example by potentially undermining cohesion of democratic societies and their institutions. A participant in one of the workshop sessions hypothesized that there has been a shift in the social media age from analyzing first to believing first, leading to stronger confirmation bias and more echo chambers. Participants also discussed the results of a 2018 study from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) which found that falsehoods spread six times faster than true information on Twitter. The workshop participants noted these concerning trends and added that advances in generative artificial intelligence (AI) further enhance the threat posed by disinformation, since they enable a faster and cheaper production of fake, misleading content that is nearly indistinguishable from true-to-life content. Due to its pervasiveness, disinformation on social media has become a widely employed weapon in political conflicts, turning social media platforms into non-kinetic battlefields of hybrid warfare.

It was clear from the discussions that social media influencers and content creators cannot ignore information warfare, since it takes place in the same information space that their livelihoods depend on. Disinformation has negative consequences that affect creators' professional lives. For example, it may create a general sense of distrust about social media that undermines their reputation. Attempts to reign in disinformation can also spark technological adjustments on social media platforms that have side effects on how regular content is viewed on social media. Hence, although many content creators did not set out with the intention of becoming experts on disinformation, they expressed both a social responsibility and a pragmatic need to become more active in helping create a safe, trustworthy work environment for themselves.

Information Warfare in Central- and Eastern Europe

Central- and Eastern Europe has been especially targeted with disinformation and propaganda campaigns. In addition, unfavorable trends such as low citizen trust in traditional media and the political system, partly influenced by the region's Soviet past, and reliance on social media for news gathering have made the region more vulnerable to disinformation. Over the past decades, the countries in Eastern Europe have moved deci-

sively toward liberal democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration, eliciting backlash from anti-European forces who view the region as a geopolitical battleground. Russia in particular has organized disinformation campaigns aimed at lowering social trust as well as reversing democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time, many countries in the region have only limited government resources to respond to disinformation and sometimes even lack the incentive to oppose it. Whereas some regional news media and politicians are even adopting foreign narratives or promoting their own, other countries are still in the process of deepening their

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democracy, strengthening media literacy, and modernizing traditional media outlets in a way that they can provide a counterweight to Russian disinformation. There is a mutual imperative for Germany and its neighboring countries in the eastern region to engage in reciprocal learning. Germany, like many other European Union (EU) members, has faced considerable challenges due to disinformation campaigns and the emergence of authoritarian inclinations. As such, fostering collaborative efforts and knowledge exchange between these countries becomes essential to address these common issues effectively.

Russia's full-fledged military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has been accompanied by severe information warfare. In a workshop session specifically dedicated to the war in Ukraine, one participant described how Russia had prepared the information space for its military aggression by promoting a distorted world view and trying to discredit Ukrainians across Central- and Eastern Europe (and beyond). The repeated false portrayal of Ukrainians as Neo-Nazis was named as just one example where Russian propaganda utilizes disinformation. Several participants discussed their personal experiences with the invasion as well as the accompanying information warfare, describing Russia's attempts to convince people that their propaganda was merely a different version of the truth and that no accounts about the war on social media could be trusted. The group largely agreed that there was a need for stronger rebukes of Russian disinformation and that governments have provided insufficient protection against disinformation in the region. One participant from a Baltic country said her government had taken appropriate measures to ensure the country's physical protection after Russia's invasion of Ukraine but had showed little initiative in protecting the population from information warfare.

In collaboration with experts on strategic communication, the workshop participants identified several specific strategies that Russia uses in its disinformation campaigns in Central- and Eastern Europe, such as:

- *Exploiting existing societal cleavages* and specifically targeting ethnolinguistic and religious minorities (particularly Russian-speaking minorities);
- *Sowing confusion* by misrepresenting facts, oversimplifying complex truths, or unleashing a "firehose of falsehoods" on social media;

Social Media Influencer

Individuals who, due to their strong presence, reputation, and reach on social platforms, have a great influence on their followers by "generating opinion". Influencers publish content on their own accord at a high and regular frequency, thus evoking social interactions. In some cases, they may use their reach to promote products or lifestyles via social media channels.

Content Creator

Individuals who voluntarily produce and share digital content on one or several social platforms, often focusing on specific topics or niches. This content can encompass a wide range of formats, including but not limited to articles, videos, podcasts, graphics, and social media posts.

- *Mixing facts and opinion* in a way that blurs the distinction between the two;
- *Elevating and weaponizing "culture war" issues* like immigration or LGBTQIA+ rights and portraying the West as experiencing moral decay;
- *Delegitimizing specific people* on social media through personal attacks because they hold different views or opinions.

These strategies have proven challenging to stop for governments and they threaten to disrupt human rights, democracy, and social cohesion in Central- and Eastern Europe. The influencers and creators from the region agreed that while some disinformation campaigns push a particular narrative, many simply try to sow chaos and uncertainty in people's minds in hopes of undermining public trust in information. The influencers and creators reported noticing distrust among their audiences. They described how ordinary social media users sometimes question the legitimacy and truthfulness of their personal stories, because they increasingly think nearly everything on social media is staged or fake content. This trend has also been recognized by academic research. In this context, many participants expressed gratitude for being able to share their experiences with their peers through this project.

They mentioned feeling left alone with the responsibilities posed by having a growing social media following on platforms that are also used to circulate disinformation. The meeting in Berlin gave them a first chance to exchange views and find commonalities they experience in their work.

Berlin Study Trip Summary
Influencers' Perspectives on Disinformation

As professional users of social media, influencers and creators are deeply affected by disinformation and propaganda. In the workshop sessions of the Berlin Study Trip, the participants highlighted several issues that arise for them as a result of information warfare in times of conflict. First, they discussed relying on accurate information for creating high-quality content and sharing insights with their viewers. They highlighted that the prevalence of disinformation raises their own uncertainty about the integrity of other content and requires increasingly rigorous fact-checking. For content creators, the risk of inadvertently spreading falsehoods grows in a climate of disinformation, putting their reputation at risk and straining their research capacities.

The participants also emphasized how much their status relies on the credibility and trust they have built with their followers. It was noted that due to the uncertainty that arises in an environment with widespread disinformation, this credibility and trust is often at-

tached to themselves as a person rather than an institution or a platform. In the same vein, multiple participants observed a growing inability on social media to separate an opinion from an individual. Too often, people's multidimensionality seems to get lost, and they are viewed as mere vessels for a particular opinion or ideology.

This dehumanization has led to increasingly vicious personal attacks aimed at undermining influencers' legitimacy with their followers, which often hinges on their personal reputation and likability. Several participants said they had experienced slander or even hate speech on social media, requiring them to defend their reputation while also dealing with the adverse mental health effects of suffering this verbal abuse. Some drew a connection between the "personalization" of trust on social media and these attempts at delegitimization.

As one content creator described, when people's trust becomes closely attached to a person rather than an institution or a larger societal group, efforts to undermine trust in societies also increasingly target these influential individuals on a personal level. This problem was said to be especially severe for women and minorities, who have suffered from particularly vicious and distasteful attacks. Nonetheless, many put up with these attacks and continue making content for a certain cause or to have their voice heard – a voice that may be drowned out on other media platforms. One Ukrainian influencer, for example, expressed her discontent about the ample airtime given to Western-educated and usually male "Russia experts" on television compared to a paucity of coverage devoted to the lives of everyday Ukrainians, especially women. Her motivation is grounded in amplifying the voice of everyday Ukrainian women like herself, and this drive allows her to endure the unpleasant sides of social media.

Influencers and content creators can play a crucial role in preventing and reacting to disinformation and online hate speech.

Although social media influencers and content creators are adversely affected by disinformation and online hate speech, their unique perspectives also allow them to play a crucial role in preventing and reacting to this misuse of social media. Influencers and creators have a large following and have cultivated trust among their followers, acting as thought leaders for a different audience than traditional media outlets. Specifically, the participants emphasized their potential to reach young people as well as politically disengaged individuals, who may not consume much traditional media and could be especially vulnerable to disinformation. Furthermore, influencers and creators are experts in understanding how content spreads on online platforms, having mastered this art in gaining a sizable following. They noted that they had learned how to adjust their content depending on platforms' users and algorithms in order to achieve success as content creators, for example through certain music, filters, or imagery. It was stressed that this kind of practitioner knowledge could be valuable for limiting the spread of disinformation.

Understanding and Countering Disinformation

To effectively utilize and channel their unique perspectives on disinformation, the participants also received a training with a Ukrainian expert in strategic communication. She discussed the key elements of propaganda and disinformation, and especially highlighted the important role that emotional appeals play in these campaigns. She explained that propaganda messages are designed to appeal to people's basic needs, which can be exploited for political purposes, such as feeling a sense of belonging, striving for recognition, or seeking stability. The training also provided insights about the communication tools that are used to spread propaganda. Specifically, the participants discussed how to recognize and counter the following techniques:

- *The framing effect*, which describes manipulation through a one-sided presentation of information, distorting facts rather than outright inventing falsehoods;
- *The effect of the illusion of truth*, which describes a psychological tendency to believe outright false information if one is repeatedly exposed to it;
- *The confabulation effect*, which describes manipulation that aims to have people misremember certain events and

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inadvertently carry forward disinformation as misinformation.

The participants added their own insights to this discussion, confirming the use and effectiveness of repetition in the spread of propaganda, and providing examples of these effects during a group activity. They also identified crucial protective measures against disinformation, such as developing critical thinking skills and only engaging directly with constructive comments. Several participants also highlighted that the training sharpened their sense of responsibility as people in the public eye to foster critical thinking and media literacy in the general public, helping their followers recognize the manipulative techniques employed in disinformation campaigns.

Working with the communication expert, the participants encouraged each other not to shy away from using emotions to counter propaganda and disinformation. They acknowledged that facts are unlikely to outweigh falsehoods if they are presented in a plain, dispassionate manner. Humor was considered an effective way to counter certain disinformation – one participant said funny content had been successful in response to antivaxxers – but a tool that needs to be used cautiously in times of crises, wars, and conflicts. The group was receptive to learning more about effective storytelling and offered examples of how they have sought to combine facts and emotions in their content. Some participants also voiced the need to "go on offense" in combating disinformation, rather than defensively responding to attacks on liberal-democratic values and free

public discourse. Yet some also cautioned that, in being more proactive, it was important to keep these values in mind and avoid resorting to manipulative techniques or hateful rhetoric themselves.

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A key point in another discussion round, where selected participants presented their own informative social media projects, was the question how to develop a sense of trust and community among social media followers. The merits of different strategies and approaches were debated, such as whether or not to frequently reply to comments, including negative ones, and whether or not to use a second platform for communicating with followers. One participant also emphasized the importance of acknowledging subjectivity toward the audience and owning up to factual errors if they happen accidentally. The participants agreed that online community-building was an important aspect of their work and allowed them to share their content and counter disinformation more effectively. The group also discussed to what extent it is necessary to delineate a specific target audience on social media. Although having a target group may allow for more effective messaging, at least one influencer suggested that she did not want to tailor her content so specifically and rather prioritize speaking to as many people as possible. In general, most participants agreed that they would like to focus more consciously on strategic communication and better understand the psychological factors at play on social media.

Influencers and Governments

Another shared sentiment among most of the participants was that there should be more collaboration and exchange between their community and governments. They expressed some discontent about the low priority that many governments seem to assign to effective social media communication. The concern was voiced that many public officials presently do not understand the scale of social media and subsequently the reach of online influencers.

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As part of the Berlin Study Trip, the group had a chance to discuss the role of influencers in government communication during an exchange with the German Federal Press Office. The government representatives first reported on their work and the structure of government communication in Germany. They then shared examples of their social media activities and of past cooperation with German influencers. One important avenue of collaboration that was highlighted were public information campaigns, particularly in crises, when it is key to reach all segments of society. For example, influencers played an important role in de-bunking vaccine disinformation during COVID-19. The government representatives also stressed the potential for content creators to help build media literacy in the population. Many participants expressed a willingness to work more on public information campaigns. Furthermore, they expressed the hope for more support and proactive outreach by governments in entering partnerships with them.

The visit at the Federal Press Office also featured a discussion on collaboration between influencers and governments regarding public diplomacy. Some of the participants said they see themselves as citizen ambassadors engaging in online diplomacy for their country. Particularly in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one influencer shared how she aims to act as a bridge between Ukrainians and other Europeans as well as between Ukrainians at home and abroad. Others also emphasized the potential to support brand-building efforts by their government, while acknowledging that influencers must be carefully selected and fit the broader communication strategy. The representatives from the Federal Press Office also described their vetting process for collaborators and noted the potential for mutually beneficial joint public diplomacy and brand-building endeavors.

Finally, some participants suggested they could collaborate with governments on the policy-making process for social media regulation and oversight. Highlighting their knowledge as professional social media users, several participants expressed an interest in getting involved in policy, at least in an advisory capacity. The workshop highlighted that there remain significant gaps in the regulation of the internet and that the rapidly changing social media environment poses numerous ethical pitfalls. While remaining

open to increased collaboration, many participants also voiced the need for more support from their governments in order to help mitigate the threat posed by disinformation. Especially important, they said, was fair compensation for their efforts and increased action against slander or hate speech online, particularly when it occurred in the context of collaborative projects with the government.

Summary and Outlook

The Berlin Study Trip provided an important foundation for continued collaboration between the influencers and creators who joined this year-long project. With many participants personally affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the accompanying physical and information warfare, the group showed eagerness to take a stand for human rights and to step up efforts to push back against the destructive impact of online disinformation. Having worked together in identifying what allows disinformation to flourish, many participants described feeling a responsibility to further educate themselves about the psychology behind social media behavior and to develop more sociopolitical content, including informational content that directly takes on the threat posed by disinformation. The fruitful discussions about how to strengthen critical thinking, strategic communication, and community-building skills mark promising paths toward taking stronger action in this direction that leverage content creators' unique influence on social media discourse. The meeting with the German

Federal Press Office in particular offered key suggestions on how to strengthen ties between influencers and governments for jointly taking on disinformation. The upcoming meetings, including online meetings on generative AI, hate speech, and developing recommendations, as well as a Study Trip to Prague planned for December 2023, will build on insights from the Berlin Study Trip and develop them into concrete policy recommendations. In the closing session of the workshop, many participants emphasized that the feeling of community in the group

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had given them confidence to continue their work with renewed vigor. There was also a sense of urgency to step up the fight against disinformation amid the rapid advances made on AI, the frequent changes to social media algorithms, and the ongoing challenges to peace and democracy in Europe. Disinformation is a moving target that requires a determined response. A European network of social media influencers and content creators can help provide such a response and can mobilize people to jointly defy attempts to manipulate them. Aspen Germany is committed to contributing the development of such a network by continuing its engagement with influencers and creators and other key stakeholders in the information space.

ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE GERMANY

The Aspen Institute Germany is an independent, non-partisan organization that promotes values-based leadership, constructive dialogue between conflicting parties, and transatlantic cooperation to strengthen a free and open society. Founded in 1974 in Berlin, the Institute has been bringing together decision-makers and experts from politics, business, academia, media, culture, and civil society for 49 years to address the challenges of our time.

The summary represents a collection of the points raised by the participants. It does not necessarily reflect the position of the author or the Aspen Institute Germany.

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