

#DisinfoWeek Conference
Atlantic Council
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Thank you Damon, for that kind introduction. And let me add my thanks to the Atlantic Council and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung for hosting this timely and important set of strategic dialogues, which complement the Digital Disinformation Forum NDI co-hosted earlier this week at Stanford University.

I am delighted to be here and to have this opportunity to talk about one of the most important challenges facing democracy today.

I should begin by noting that it is a bit unusual for someone of my generation to speak at a conference whose name doubles as a hashtag.

But to prove my technological bona fides, I can tell you that I have been in a driverless car, I tweet on a frequent basis, and I have made it a regular habit to visit Silicon Valley for meetings with technology leaders – most of whom are my grandchildren's age.

Those visits are not without risk – during a recent trip, I went to the offices of one startup and was run over by a robot.

My grasp of how technology works may be faith-based, but my perception of its impact does come from experience.

I am also a professor, and I devoted much of my academic career to studying a subject directly relevant to our discussion today – the role of information in political change.

My research focused on the Soviet bloc – a subject which has in recent times become all too relevant.

In the 1970s, I wrote my dissertation on the role of the Czechoslovak press in the events of Prague Spring.

In the early 1980s, I traveled to Poland to study the underground press of the Solidarity movement.

I met with dozens of journalists, who told me that while they started out by delivering typed news sheets to workers in factories, they found they could increase their speed of communication and the reach of their message by using what was then considered a cutting-edge technology – the audiocassette.

I remember thinking about those tapes in 2011, as I watched activists in Tunisia and Egypt use social media to organize, communicate, and ultimately topple two entrenched regimes.

It was easy, in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, to believe that these new tools of communication had transformed politics for the better, and that the spread of Twitter and Facebook would inevitably lead to more open and democratic societies.

But as our agenda today attests, those views turned out to be too optimistic – because like so many other things, technology is a double-edged sword.

In recent years, democracy's enemies have become adept at polluting social media platforms with rumors, disinformation, and anti-democratic propaganda.

This has led some of the same people who once heralded the birth of the social media age to wonder whether democracy can survive it.

Wael Ghonim, the blogger who helped ignite the Egyptian Arab Spring, summed up the problem in the following way: "While once social media was seen as a liberating means to speak truth to power, now the issue is how to speak truth to social media."

Of course, disinformation is not an entirely new challenge. People have been propagating false narratives to achieve ideological aims since well before Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1439.

Many of you might be surprised to learn that one of our country's earliest practitioners of propaganda was Benjamin Franklin, who printed a counterfeit edition of a newspaper at the end of the Revolutionary War to influence British public opinion.

Franklin understood that mass-produced newspapers and pamphlets were changing political discourse – and inflaming it.

“It is not only right to strike while the iron is hot,” he wrote. “But it is very practicable to heat it by continual striking.”

Now to be clear, it is one thing when Ben Franklin dabbles in fake news, and quite another when Vladimir Putin embraces it as part of a broader geopolitical agenda.

There is also a big difference between a printed sheet of paper that circulates in a city neighborhood and an online article that goes viral.

The instantaneous speed of the Internet allows information to escape from the scrutiny a traditional marketplace of ideas might afford.

The vast reach of these networks means that content generated by a blogger in Russia or a programmer in Macedonia can easily have a global impact.

Online discourse is becoming central to how people form their political identities, but the way information is transmitted is not often understood, nor is it transparent – and that means it can be manipulated.

For example, when you enter a search term or pull up a news feed, the pages you see and stories you read are determined by complex algorithms which can be distorted by automated programs posing as other users.

These political “bots” can disseminate disinformation, crowd out fact-based stories, and target specific groups of people with messages designed to inflame their political attitudes. These automated programs are, to quote Franklin, striking while the iron is hot and heating it by continually striking.

The term for this activity is computational propaganda, and last week at NDI’s offices the Computational Propaganda Research Project at Oxford University released a fascinating series of case studies showing how it is deeply affecting public opinion in a diverse set of countries.

For example, they deduced that computational propaganda played a decisive role during three recent political events in Brazil – the 2014 presidential elections, the impeachment of former President Rousseff, and the 2016 municipal elections in Rio de Janeiro.

The Oxford researchers also showed how authoritarian governments are using these tools on their own populations as a form of social control, with some 45 percent of twitter activity in Russia coming from automated accounts.

What is interesting to me is comparing this to how information got transmitted under communism.

In the days of the Soviet Union, people largely knew that *official* sources of information could not be trusted, so they built *unofficial* channels that were more reliable, for example talking to friends and family.

In the internet age, it is these *unofficial* channels that are becoming less reliable, but people do not seem to have yet developed a healthy skepticism about what those in their social networks are sharing online.

This may be changing, as I saw during a recent visit to Ukraine with the board of directors of the National Democratic Institute.

Ukraine has been called the most globally advanced case of computational propaganda, and it has been the relentless target of Russian online disinformation efforts since the early 2000s.

I have to say I was stunned by the scope and intensity of Russia's activities. But I was also heartened to learn of grassroots efforts underway by activists and volunteers to combat this scourge, and raise greater awareness about the phenomenon of disinformation.

One example of this is Stopfake.org, which is documenting Russia's efforts and pushing back against the most egregious instances of propaganda.

We met with one of the co-founders of Stopfake, Margo Gontar, in Kyiv, and I am delighted to see that another co-founder, Yevhen Fedchenko, will appear on the next panel.

I think it is vitally important that we hear from Ukrainian experts because their experience is a taste of what is ahead for other democracies.

We need to learn more from countries on the frontlines to understand the problem in all its dimensions, but we also need to move from talk to action. And that's what this conference is ultimately about.

There are no easy answers. But to begin with, we need to put more pressure on the most egregious offender, which is Russia.

I was pleased to see the United States Senate act on new sanctions earlier this month in response to Russia's interference in the U.S. election, and I hope that the House follows suit.

What especially encouraged me about the Senate vote was that it was overwhelmingly bipartisan.

The biggest mistake we could make would be to turn the issue of Russian disinformation into a partisan matter. It is a threat to our democratic institutions, to both of our political parties, and to our allies abroad. We cannot forget that.

Even as we turn up the pressure on Russia, we need to recognize that these tools and techniques have spread beyond the exclusive control of any one regime. We will need a global, long-term response.

For our part at NDI, we have launched a major new project to protect the integrity of information in democratic discourse.

This initiative has several components.

We are conducting new opinion research to help us better understand which populations are most vulnerable to disinformation.

We are working to strengthen international election observation methodologies to include monitoring of disinformation, leveraging a network of more than four million citizen election monitors worldwide.

We are also working with political parties to agree on ground rules regarding online campaign conduct, while developing and sharing techniques to detect and disrupt disinformation efforts.

Perhaps the most important component of our effort is to try to help foster constructive engagement between government, civil society, and technology firms.

These companies may not be creating propaganda, but they have become the leading platform for it. They need to acknowledge the problem and work with us on solutions.

I was encouraged to hear Mark Zuckerberg say this week that Facebook's responsibility is expanding as it crosses the threshold of two billion users – a number greater than the combined populations of China, Russia, and the United States.

I hope that together, we can devise innovative ideas and not fall victim to a disconnect best summed up by a line I plagiarized from Silicon Valley: “citizens are speaking to their governments using 21st century technologies, governments are listening on 20th century technology and providing 19th century solutions.”

The problem of computational propaganda is a 21st century problem. We need 21st century responses.

The good news in this regard is that the same tools that are used to sow disinformation are also available to those who want to spread the truth.

Tech-savvy individuals have already begun using social media to expose Russian propaganda, and some of that work is being done right here at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Lab.

When Russia denied its troops were in eastern Ukraine, researchers here proved otherwise using social media posts by Putin's own soldiers.

When Russia denied their forces were fighting alongside Assad's in Syria, the Atlantic Council started an online, public discussion in which average Syrians posted interactions with Russian troops there.

And earlier this year, the Atlantic Council released a report called *Breaking Aleppo* which used open source and digital forensics to uncover horrific atrocities committed by Russia and Syria alike.

I was honored to be able to preside over the report's release at the Munich Security Conference earlier this year.

I was also pleased to see that the report was accompanied by a social media campaign that reached some of the same people affected by Russian disinformation. Because let's face it, not everyone has the time or inclination to read a think tank report.

Ultimately, our efforts need to reach a much wider audience, and they need to have a more ambitious goal. Because no matter what tools we deploy democracy will always be opposed, and disinformation will always be spread.

We can turn to technology companies for answers, but the real solution lies in shoring up our society by rebuilding trust in democratic institutions and processes, and by inculcating in people a healthy skepticism and a curiosity to search for facts.

We need to remind ourselves constantly that there is a reason we believe in transparency, while the regimes I once studied, and its modern-day successors, do not. We have an interest in objective facts because they are, more often than not, on our side.

We also need to remind ourselves that there is nothing new about the basic challenge of adapting institutions to keep pace with change.

Tomas Masaryk, the first president of my native Czechoslovakia, used to marvel at the transformation in public habits and discourse created by the invention of the Sunday newspaper.

Radio became an unprecedented political tool in the hands of Franklin Roosevelt – and Adolf Hitler.

Television brought graphic images of war, poverty and famine into our living rooms for the first time.

We have now entered the next era of testing, adjusting, and discovery.

We have no choice but to embrace the new era, and to explore together – as we are in this conference – how best to work together for the common good.

In that effort, I hope we will bear in mind that – although we live in a world of change – what matters most must not change, and that is our basic commitment to democratic values, our respect for one another, and our commitment to justice and the dignity of every human being.

Without those principles in front of us, we will lose our way; but with them beside us, we will not go wrong.

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

My thanks once again to all of our hosts and partners today, and to all of you for your kind attention here this afternoon. I look forward to our discussion.

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