OWWF

Thoughts on the defense against the propaganda war on German soil
by Christian Nitsche

Dear Mr. Sinner, dear Mr. Freller, dear audience,

news journalists like me have pronounced protective reflexes: Do we spike a headline without justification? Do we keep enough distance from a topic? If the headline reads "Thoughts on warding off propaganda war on German soil," then journalistic question marks first arise. Is Germany at war? And be it a propaganda war? Is such military vocabulary justified? Nevertheless, I deliberately chose this headline. Because we are indeed experiencing the quality of a confrontation that is not only redefining our role in NATO, but attacking the very foundation of our democracy.

What we need to talk about is not just the influence on public opinion in virtual space, it's not just about bots and individual Facebook groups or Telegram chats. Nor are we just talking about the threat of hacker attacks on critical infrastructure. We're talking about the profound influence on our society via a whole bundle of measures. And if you want to classify all of these measures as different weapons, then you can actually talk about information warfare collectively.

And its goal is the failure of democracy. More than that, it's about destabilization at the European level. Let's take the runoff election in France. A whopping 41 percent of the vote went to the right-wing nationalist politician Marine Le Pen, an anti-European and Putin enthusiast who took out loans from a Russian bank in 2017. The electorate in France was volatile, it was said a few days before the election. One felt transported to the novel world of Michel Houellebecq when reading such lines. So a European nuclear power on its way to the Putin camp? Well, the rupture of the Franco-German axis has been averted. But Putin has already made it that far. The fact that Le Pen wants to withdraw from NATO's command structures was not a dominant theme in the election campaign. Le Pen was not elected, but before that, in Hungary, Viktor Orban was elected once again, who has already been called "Putin's spokesman in the EU" by his critics in the EU Parliament.

Europe's values are on shaky ground. And Germany has long been vulnerable to Putin's propaganda. I flipped back to the year of the annexation of Crimea in violation of international law, which was 2014. I was editor-in-chief of Tagesschau and Tagesthemen and wrote in a Tagesschau blog at the end of the year: "To be disparagingly called a Putin-understanding is no longer taken as an insult by many."

RT deutsch was launched in 2014. Pegida celebrated successes. The Ukraine on-off war was increasingly presented as a fact to be accepted. According to an ARD survey at the end of 2014, 51% of people could understand that Russia felt threatened by the West. Mind you, all after the annexation of Crimea in violation of international law. And another change was already apparent in 2014: the FAZ am Sonntag wrote: "Something seems to be tipping. It's worrying that there are more and more people who no longer expect anything from politics and despise politicians." Disenchantment with politics became contempt for politics.

Since then, we have seen two lines: On the one hand, disinformation related to a specific topic: Putin, refugees, Corona. On the other, a general denigration of politicians, constitutional bodies and quality media. Both tendencies carry weight because even the repetition of false claims over many years has an effect. We also see radicalization: politicians are attacked, journalists are attacked. According to preliminary statistics from the BKA, between 2017 and 2021, the number of crimes against public officials and elected officials almost tripled. Rainer Wendt, head of the police union, says: "Attacks on party offices and especially local politicians now occur almost daily in Germany."

Crimes with a political background reached their highest level in 20 years last year. And hatred of the media reached a negative record in 2021, with 83 violent attacks on media professionals. 75% took place around demonstrations by opponents of the Corona measures (source ECPMF).

In this context, it is also interesting to note that 60 % of the participants in such demonstrations could not be clearly assigned to a political camp. So has disinformation long since had an effect across all strata of society? So far, this seems to be even more the case with Corona than with Ukraine. At the end of April, 15 percent of citizens said that the German government's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was going too far. These were mainly AfD supporters. 15 percent, a manageable figure, one might think. But, as I mentioned, we also had a very different mood a few years ago. From this, I can see that the mood can change very quickly on foreign policy issues, because many people lack the ability to make their own assessments.

Propaganda tries to destroy certainties and create instability. During the Corona pandemic, we saw how scientific knowledge was denied. Successfully, the only tools available, vaccines, were reinterpreted as dangerous substances that were supposedly used to implant 5G nano-chips into people. There were warnings of a New World Order, the "Great Reset." Such narratives, with which social networks have been flooded, have unsettled many. Chats of this kind even form a new home for many. Entire worlds of communication are encapsulating themselves, barely reachable by traditional media. These circles always need new fodder: Now the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine is being reinterpreted here. The false reports that were initially shared on Telegram have long since spread widely on other social media. At BR24, we already determined in March that the majority of well-known lateral thinkers and conspiracy theorists have positioned themselves pro-Putin. So we see a further radicalization: it's not just about a viral disease, basically a natural disaster, but now the bellicose actions of a Russian ruler are justified. NATO and the U.S. are the real aggressors in these forums, not Putin. Theories spread by the Kremlin or Russian state television are often taken up one-to-one and further disseminated.

Prof. Michael Butter, an expert on conspiracy ideologies at the University of Tübingen, also comes to this conclusion. Key words such as "world conspiracy" were also used more frequently with the start of the war of aggression. According to Prof. Butter, conspiracy adherents build new events into their delusions on a modular principle. They see this as the "latest strategy of the powerful to enforce dark goals."

OWWF

The head of the EU task force against misinformation Lutz Güllner has also analyzed the tactics of Russian disinformation campaigns. Russia proceeded very systematically: Ukraine should be brought close to a Nazi state. The term Nazi was built up in social networks well before the attack, according to Güllner. Its mentioning increased fivefold from the beginning of January until the start of the war. This phenomenon was also evident in state-owned and state-related media as early as 2021. Güllner's conclusion: "Here, state agencies in Moscow have tried to set a narrative."

The Kremlin has weaponized information, according to the EU Commission. The EU estimates that Russia's foreign propaganda cost it 1.2 billion euros last year. The tools, it says, range from the well-known state broadcasters to false identities on social networks. Since the shutdown of the RT and Sputnik channels in Europe, Russia has focused more on its embassy websites, according to the Office for the Protection of the Constitution. And Russia continues to find supporters: supporters of conspiracy theories are causing follower numbers of Kremlin-related channels to explode. And it appears that the corona denial scene has been purposefully steered in that direction. Russian state media has long been an important source for the scene. RT deutsch was the central source of information for the milieu in the first week of the war. Prof. Butter even sees a long-term ping-pong effect: from the pro-Russia vigils in 2014, he says, a scene emerged that spread conspiracy theories about the pandemic and is now returning to the topic of Ukraine.

Ultimately, we see a meshing of actually quite different issues. Both groups, Corona deniers and Putin supporters, have a similar image of the enemy: the West, its governments, its allegedly bought scientists and media, the democratic system as such with its institutions, which is contributing to a threatening world order. Fears are deliberately stirred up to activate people to act. When emotion overpowers reason, ideologies become self-perpetuating.

If tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, allow themselves to be emotionalized and feel threatened, we have a serious development. I warned months ago that terrorist tendencies could develop from the conspiracy corner. Unfortunately, this concern has been confirmed: You know the reports of the past few days. Participants in the Telegram chat group "United Patriots" have been preparing explosive attacks and other serious acts of violence. Their goal, according to investigators, was to cause civil war-like conditions and eventually overthrow the democratic system in Germany. Federal Interior Minister Nancy Faeser spoke of a "serious terrorist threat." Armed Reich citizens and radicalized Corona deniers are united by a boundless hatred of democracy, the state and people who stand up for the community.

In December, BR also uncovered subversion fantasies on Telegram among the Bavarian AfD. In a closed Telegram group, there is talk of "ruling criminals." The sentence falls: "Without overthrow and revolution, we will no longer achieve a change of course here." Elections would "no longer help anyway."

An AfD member of the state parliament replies: "Think we won't get out of this one without a civil war." The chat group included the majority of AfD deputies and state executives. The messages date from the end of 2017 to mid-2021. Also an interesting finding: the Corona pandemic should be used to win vaccination skeptics for the party. In the AfD, there is indeed repeated talk of "vaccination dictatorship" and "vaccination apartheid." At the same time, AfD deputies adopt content from Russian state propaganda. After all, the AfD achieves 11 percent in polls nationwide, which is considerable given its extreme tendencies. By comparison, the FPD is at 9 percent.

The radicalization of language in political discourse, too, is not without effect. We have seen in America what can happen in a society already divided into two camps. A president conveys for one term, facts do not apply, only his own truth. In 2018, Steve Bannon, who was a strategy advisor to Donald Trump for a time, said, "The Democrats don't matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit." So if you flood the entire media zone with shit, you get there. At the end of this whole development was the storming of the Capitol.

Wolfgang Blau, the former editor-in-chief of Zeit online and co-founder of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network, put it in a nutshell at the Munich Media Days in 2020: Populists like Trump are not only interested in distorting the truth as untrue: "They are interested in much more. And that is to dissolve the meaning, the social value of truth itself."

We see something similar with Putin. British journalist and book author Peter Pomerantsev says Putin's propaganda strategy is aimed at the narrative that truth is unidentifiable anyway. And that's why strong leaders like him are needed to guide through these uncertain times. At 83 percent, Putin's approval ratings in Russia in March were the highest in 4 years, according to Statista. But there are also doubts whether such polls are reliable. But nevertheless it is to be stated: We have not seen a countermovement to Putin of any relevant size for years.

The question is: Where do we stand in Europe when populists try to destroy an entire value system and with it the accountability to answer for what is said? We should work to ensure that there is no communicative camp formation like in America. The forum for debate must not be allowed to break away. However, traditional media are finding it difficult to continue their important role in the discourse. As is well known, they are no longer gatekeepers. Doors are open everywhere, including many trap doors. In addition, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has surveyed that there is a broad phenomenon of news avoidance. This was found, for example, in the context of the pandemic. Between 20 and 25 percent of Britons deliberately avoided the news for long periods.

So much for the problem analysis. So what can be done to counter all the developments mentioned and to ward off the targeted propaganda in our environment?

First, we need more attention for the topic in general. I'm sure we've all recognized that.

Second: There is a need for well-known and accepted quality seals for quality media. Which media should be classified and how?
A framework for orientation is important, especially when you are overwhelmed by a flood of information on the Internet. Knowledge about quality media must also be taught in schools.

"What next?
Consequences of Russia's invasion
on Ukraine
April 28, 2022

OWWF

This brings us to the third point: education is a very central instrument: we need concentrated teaching in schools right now, quite independently of the rigid curriculum, on European history, on the statehood of Ukraine, on the political situation in Russia, on the characteristics of a democracy as opposed to authoritarian and dictatorial systems. We need to explain exactly what general, direct, free, equal and secret elections are. Basic knowledge is often lacking, in all age groups.

Fourth, of course, we also need to do a much better job of explaining what actually constitutes science. There is a lack of knowledge of fundamental processes, for example, that scientific knowledge develops through research. This is important not only against the backdrop of the Corona pandemic, but also because the issue of climate change will of course catch up with us again very quickly. The Ukraine war has had a numbing effect on other issues. But the big clash of information will take place in the next few years on the issue of climate protection.

Fifth, we need targeted fact checking. Too few media have yet implemented this as a separate department. Information is usually checked as part of regular reporting. Without a separate unit whose sole task is to check information and immediately expose disinformation, we will not be able to do justice to the danger. The investments of non-well-meaning states in destabilizing democratic systems are too great. Years ago, I initiated a network of public broadcasters in Europe to verify visual material. And perhaps you have the BR24 app and also know the "faktenfuchs" format. Behind it is a team that scans 440 million sources on the Internet every day and uncovers developments very early on. The team concludes that the "poison of disinformation" has arrived in the middle of society.

Sixth, it's not just about fact checking. Here, too, we come up against limits. This is not the way to reach groups that are already isolated; at most, it prevents even larger groups from drifting away. If we want to communicate with polarized skeptics or journalism refuseniks, we need support from psychology and motivation research. Why?

Let's take a brief look at how propaganda works: it always aims not only to unsettle or convince people, but to completely emotionally capture them. What are the last lines in George Orwell's book "1984": "But now it was well, all was well, the struggle was over. He had overcome himself. He loved Big Brother." Emotion triumphs over reason. That's why you also have to start with the emotions if you want to fight propaganda. What are the lessons for media companies: We certainly don't reach people in isolated fake news worlds by devaluing them. We have to show that we can listen to them, too. First of all, there needs to be a willingness to engage in dialog. It's not about agreeing with abstruse theses, it's about contact. We can't bring everyone back; we won't succeed. But we might be able to bring some of them back. Ultimately, it's crucial to persuade unsettled people to leave chats that are constantly spreading new untruths. At BR, we're currently developing format approaches to ultimately motivate people to leave the building of lies. Let's not give up on anyone. This would be tantamount to surrender.

Seventh, we cannot rely on the media alone to be effective. The flood of misinformation is too great.

And the professionalism of propaganda is increasing. A strong state is needed to revoke permits when communication platforms turn out to be propaganda tools. As we read on Friday, Putin propagandists are coordinating troll attacks on top German and European politicians, as well as journalists, via the Telegram platform. Now we are curious whether Elon Musk wants to leave room for fake news on Twitter in the future. Internet platforms must live up to their responsibility. They must filter out false or aggressive propagandistic news. Clever regulation is needed here. At the weekend, the EU finally agreed on a digital law against hate and incitement. The Digital Services Act (DSA). In the future, Internet companies will have to remove hate speech, disinformation and war propaganda more quickly. The decisive factor, however, will be how this is implemented in practice and monitored by the state.

Eighth: If we have already come so far as to see terrorist activities in Germany, then our authorities must be equipped to detect dangerous individuals even more quickly. Ultimately, it is also crucial that the judiciary takes consistent action against disinformation, slander and incitement.

Let's move on to the ninth point: Can we stand by and watch other governments and, ultimately, societies radicalize themselves through targeted propaganda? I think democratic states and NGOs must actively counter such tendencies abroad. It requires a large package of measures, starting with German schools, including foundations abroad, financial support for civil society and much more. It calls for an active foreign policy. Deutsche Welle also plays an important role with its foreign-language programs abroad and indirectly safeguards our democracy.

Tenth and finally, a flourishing national economy also ensures the stability of a democracy. But the question is in what way we generate income. Is any state, regardless of its intentions, a good trading partner? In light of the Russian invasion, do we need to recognize that "change through trade" is a slogan that can be misleading? Are there trading partners on whom we have become as dependent as on Russia? States that want to replace democracies and change international law?

So when we talk about how to protect Germany from propaganda and instability, we also need to examine what form of foreign trade will help us in the long term. Let's ask ourselves with which currency we pay? With euros? Or with freedom?

So much for a few thoughts on the challenges we face. We are experiencing propaganda, polarization, dissolution of boundaries, trivialization of violence and the use of violence, both on a large and small scale. The term "turning point" is much used these days. In its generality, the term obscures the fact that we could very well have foreseen developments. It is not only the times that have changed, but above all our attention. Of course, the security policy debate must permanently leave the shadow of domestic politics. We see: Every war is preceded by propaganda. We need an early warning system of narratives. Let's be careful about words. Not only with Putin!