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## **FAKE NEWS AND THEIR IMPACT ON MILITARY OPERATIONS**

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### **Abstract:**

*Fake news* is a new phenomenon that, along with the speed of mass communication nowadays, has an enormous potential to do harm. Be it propagated consciously or not, this reality is yet to be addressed at a sufficient scale to be minimized and then eventually, ignored. Its range is non-discriminatory as it affects a wide array of domains, from politics and military operations, to high-life and common people's lives. It can influence elections up to the point that can decide the free choice of a countries' leadership or significantly reduce the huge volume of resources invested in a military operation.

However, people became more and more aware of the truthfulness of the news they're consuming and tools and mechanisms to check the facts versus opinions are emerging but the society needs to have these instruments clearly defined, regulated and supported up to the point the fake news phenomenon becomes marginal and limited.

*Key words:* Fake news, alternate facts, facts versus opinion, military, strategic communication, Twitter, Facebook, Social media, Traditional media, clickbait, information war

### **1. Introduction**

*Fake news* is not news anymore. It is a phenomenon that entered and influenced our day to day lives unnoticed, unobserved, and unbothered by any existing rules of ethics or deontological norms. Yes but, as one might notice, we do have journalism ethics, right? Well, the answer to this is yes and no. The ethics in this field stopped being so clearly defined and applied once the virtual life became the refugee for all news organisations that wanted to keep up with the high tempo given by the evolution of the virtual worlds. And while some respectable news organisations maintained this code of ethics, the rest of the news portals, blogs, forums were not morally or legally bounded to any restrictions. And this is how everything started.

Among the negative effects *fake news* might have on the forming of a realistic public opinion, one particular case is its impact on the military operations.

**Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to raise the awareness of the negative impact on military operations while focusing on a set of *countermeasures* against it.**

### **2. General considerations and definitions**

*Fake news* has yet to find its way to the dictionaries as it is a compound noun that takes the meaning of each of its words. Therefore, *Merriam-Webster* defines it, quite simply, as news (“material reported in a newspaper or news periodical or on a newscast”) that is fake (“false, counterfeit”) [1]. In the practice, more definitions emerged as scholars tried to approach this phenomenon through articles and studies. In conclusion, *fake news*

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<sup>1</sup> *Merriam-Webster* Dictionary - <https://goo.gl/XPjQk8>

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encompasses a series of facts presented in a similar way like the news but whose content is partially or totally false, incorrect or groundless.

The first target of *fake news* amongst the military fields is the *Strategic Communication* (StratCom) as this discipline encompasses the entire communication efforts defined and solely guided by telling the truth to its audience so it gains and channels the support of the publics for the military activities. NATO Strategic Communications Policy defines *NATO StratCom* as the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations (Info Ops) and Psychological Operations (Psy Ops) – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims. [PO (2009) 0141, 29 Sep 09][<sup>2</sup>]. In other words, *StratCom* is in the frontline against *fake news* as it controls the communication tools not only to better communicate key ideas and messages to the public but also to counter fake, false, or alternate facts and preventing these to propagate among the population.

### **2.1.Fake news impact on StratCom**

While the main task of *StratCom* is to ensure there's a match between words (the official messaging and communications of the organisations) and deeds (the actions on the ground of the same organisation), *fake news* is *attacking* precisely this link by altering the action on the ground thus sending to the publics a different and highly unfavourable set of messages.

Therefore, *fake news* can have a significant impact on the overall *StratCom* effort of an operation, mission or event led by the military by diminishing the impact of the *narrative* and the *core messages*. Moreover, these lines of message could be reversed in such ways that can do a lot of harm to the organisation that initiated them. As a result of this, instead of being very active in promoting the actions undertaken on the ground, the organisation will have to invest all of its resources to block and counter the effect these kind of news have on the objectives of a mission. The scale of this impact depends on how the probability of encountering the *fake news* phenomenon was assessed prior to launching an operation.

*Fake news* may have multiple facets, depending on the very purpose they're created for. Some are less harmful as they want to garner more clicks and, therefore, more money, using the so-called *clickbait*, described by *Oxford Living Dictionaries* as “content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page”[<sup>3</sup>]. This particular type of *fake news* basically takes a fraction of the facts and exaggerate or rewrite it so it conveys a feeling such as joy, fear, hope, or outrage that would almost automatically make the audience “click for more details”.

Some other, however, have *higher aims* as they want to change a public opinion or to shape it in a specific angle and serve a clearly defined purpose. And these are the most important, especially in a military context as they can significantly weaken the public support for missions or exercises organised in an allied environment, thus significantly reducing the consistent effort and resources invested in planning of the respective activities.

The main situations that favour the occurrence of *fake news* could be:

- **Rail, sea, air or road accidents** that involve service members and military equipment;
- **Slowing down civilian traffic** caused by military convoys;

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<sup>2</sup> NATO International Staff, *NATO Strategic Communications Policy*, 2009

<sup>3</sup> The Oxford Dictionaries, - <https://goo.gl/cd1bLO>

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- **Incidents involving troop contributing nations (TCN) service members** while being off duty within the local communities;
  - **Accidents during training or missions** involving service members or military equipment;
- Official statements regarding military operations** or other facts associated with the purpose of the military presence in a particular area or region.

### **2.2. Trolling**

A particular case of *fake news* propagation is given by the *trolling* phenomenon which can be defined as the actions undertaken by identified or unidentified people that post intentionally provocative or offensive messages to a social interaction platform with the intent to cause harm or change an opinion. In most of the cases, *trolling* or the *trolls* (those who troll) use *fake news* to support their purposes but they may also use real facts as a basis for their posts, facts that they distort to fit an idea or a claim, thus creating and favouring the *fake news* phenomenon.

The trolling phenomenon was captured in a comprehensive study ran by the NATO's StratCom Centre of Excellence based in Riga called "Internet trolling as a tool of hybrid warfare: The case of Latvia" (<https://goo.gl/FDibI8>) [4]. The study identified two types of trolls, the *classical trolls* (who act under no apparent purpose) and the *hybrid trolls* (who communicate a particular ideology and operate under a certain command) [5].

When analysing the potential of spreading *fake news* with *troll support*, one may have to consider a counter-strategy so that the phenomenon is kept under control and the impact it may have on *Social Media* platforms or *Traditional media* outlets is reduced.

The actions of the military that may trigger the trolling phenomenon are mostly pictures with service members in uniform captured on camera in unfavourable postures that could be found on *Social media* platforms. These pictures are quickly picked up by the trolls, added a highly unfavourable or provocative caption, and then reposted under injurious headlines. Given the potential impact of these pictures on online audiences and considering the wide-spread of *clickbait*, these posts have an exponential traction both on *Social and in Traditional media* outlets. As a result, the support for the military actions of the public in a particular context will be consistently diminished and additional efforts are required from the military personnel assigned to deal with these cases. In most of the cases, the first measures need to consist in:

- **Having a quick reaction to address the situation**, although maybe not all the information is available on the spot (whether the photo or the facts claimed in the post are true or false);
- **Avoiding entering in a discussion with trolls** as this would magnify their interests to continue with the spread of the *fake news*, now that they have official answers to their claims;

**Ensuring a consistent reaction as soon as more details are available**, regardless of the outcome of the internal investigation (for the situation when the facts were false, communicating the result and restating the main purpose of the mission whereas in the less probable case the facts were deemed true, launch a thorough investigation and condemn the incident – these might be the right verbiage to be used).

### **2.3. Overall impact on military operations**

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<sup>4</sup> Latvian Institute of International Affairs & Riga Stradins University, *Internet trolling as a tool of hybrid warfare: The case of Latvia*, page 10 (<https://goo.gl/FDibI8>), NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence

<sup>5</sup> Idem [4]

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The combination of *fake news* and *trolling* can result in a reshaping of the public opinion which in turn will diminish support for military operations up to level where the population will not agree with a certain type of military action or, in a worst case scenario, sabotage and act against it.

It is common knowledge that the population usually turns to military in times of crisis or conflict. But if the enemy's ability to win the *information war* is raised, it will result in winning "the hearts and minds" of local populations that have a stake in the conflict, of troop contributing nations, and of international community. Thus, the military operations will be more and more difficult to continue, not to say the least about winning over the enemy.

According to the famous "Gerasimov's Doctrine" (a Russian general who addressed the *information warfare* in an article published in 2013), the *information war* consists in the coordination of electronic, cyber and psychological warfare under the same line of effort [6]. Part of this type of war is to convey to the population a wide range of messages carefully crafted so they trigger various sentiments beginning with confusion and uncertainty and ending with disloyalty to NATO values, lack of support for NATO actions and, eventually, re-orienting the population against the North-Atlantic Alliance.

Analysed from the *information war* perspective, *fake news* are somewhere between the hostile strategy of diminishing the support for the opposing forces and the end-state defined by the achievement of this goal. In another words, this concept represents the means through which the military actions are targeted without firing a single shot. This new technique exploits the weaknesses of the nations, in general, and of the armed forces in particular, making the fight against this phenomenon imperative.

### **3. How to spot fake news**

Although the effort invested in fabricating fake news is not scanty and proves to be an elaborated process designed to either gain money easily or promote personal ideas in a non-transparent manner, there are still ways to identify *fake news* websites, *Social media* accounts, or even the news itself. The minimum required steps when dealing with *fake news* on *traditional media* should be [7]:

- **Check the website address line:** it may sometimes contain errors such as ".co" (not as in "co.uk") instead of ".com" or it reads as a combination of words separated by the .dot;
- **Research the name of the website:** it sometimes sounds unrealistic or it is very similar to a renown one by only a letter or a symbol;
- **Look for visual inadvertences,** like wrong or badly designed logos - like those used for counterfeit products as these sites may try to borrow the fame of a well-established media organization for the sake of a single click;
- **Perform additional checks on the website itself,** such as the "About" section [look for names provided as points of contacts, emails (based on own mail servers), phone numbers (country code should match location), physical address (run it through a map locator)]; you may also run the website through specialised websites that provide information on when the queried website was established and where it is based; check the website photos through Google images so you can see whether they were not borrowed from other well-established media organizations;

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Milo, Katarína Klingová, *Countering Information War - Lessons Learned from NATO and Partner Countries*, GLOBSEC Policy Institute, Bratislava, Slovakia, 2016

<sup>7</sup> Poynter (<http://factcheckingday.com/>) here: <https://goo.gl/RR5AqO> and here: <https://goo.gl/XIgTny>

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- **Look for what usually makes an article attributable**, such a “by line” with the name of the author clearly stated upfront, a headline that should match the content, a date stamp so you avoid reading old news presented as new;
- **Pay attention to highly emotional or sensationalist claims**, as, with some exceptions that can be found in tabloids, this is not the usual writing style for news outlets;
- **Check the facts on the news through a search engine** so you can see whether other news outlets reported on it. This should provide a broader image on whether the facts alleged in the fake news were also covered by other media and have a real ground base.

*Fake news* are not designed to be thoroughly analysed and referenced at as this might reveal their hidden scope. Instead, they’re crafted to be quickly read, convince the audience to perform some additional clicks and move on. Therefore, they found a fertile ground on *Social media* which is mostly about quick news read even quicker. So, when skimming through some *Social media* accounts or pages, it is important to look for [8]:

- **A verifying icon**, that should appear right under the profile picture;
- **The use of all words in capitals** or an exaggerated use of exclamation or question marks in the posts or statuses;
- **Misguiding use of letters in different fonts** within the same word (e.g.: “L” with “l”);
- **The use of blurry, low-res photos** instead of clear and high-res photos as profile pictures;
- **Recent posts or statuses** as a credible source of information should be constantly updated and actively engaging with its followers;

**A good balance** between the followers and followings, as this might give an idea on how the respective news outlet manages its activity on *Social media*.

### **4. Case Studies**

#### **4.1.A political example**

In the wake of the US Presidential Elections in 2016, a tremendous volume of information that couldn’t be independently verified made its way to the *Social media* leaving to the public the complicated activity for some or the easy task for others with the dilemma whether to believe it or not. Things, however, get more complicated once the fake news are picked up through official channels and redistributed since one may consider a piece of news true only because it was initiated from a trusted source. A very well documented example was provided by *The New York Times* in the article *How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study* signed by Sapna Maheshwari published on 20 November 2016[9].

Essentially, the article tells the story of Eric, a 35-year old who spotted an impressive number of buses outside of Austin, right in the vicinity and right at the time when an important anti-Trump meeting was held. He then chose a couple of pictures and tweeted them to his 40-followers account saying “Anti-Trump protestors today are not as organic as they seem. Here are the buses they came in” [10]. The tweet went to his followers but a series of game changers appeared on the way: some of his followers were members of various republican forums and discussion groups so very quickly the tweet was picked up by these generating in turn an exponential number of posts, tweets or

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<sup>8</sup> Idem[ 7]

<sup>9</sup> Sapna Maheshwari , *How Fake News Goes Viral: A Case Study*, The New York Times – November 20, 2016, courtesy of Defense Information School, March 2017

<sup>10</sup> Idem [9]

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comments in the blogosphere, including claims that the busses were sponsored by George Soros, a liberal billionaire philanthropist frequently targeted by these groups. Soon after this, Mr. Trump's campaign managers picked up the story and retweeted it from the Republican candidate's official account.

The problem with this tweet was that it incorporated facts that were completely untrue. As some respected news organisations tried to find out, Eric told them that he *assumed* the busses were linked to the protestors, he did perform a Google search that hasn't revealed anything regarding a nearby large conference, and he hasn't seen any loading or unloading of people from the busses. So when the journalists confronted them with the fact that the busses were, nonetheless, linked to an IT conference that gathered 13.000 people, Eric said it was not up to him, as a private person, to precisely verify this information and added that he felt embolden by Mr Trump's tweet to keep his tweet undeleted. After realizing the magnitude of the phenomenon, Eric eventually marked his tweet in red as "false" in a move that has not received by any means the same traction in the blogosphere or traditional media as the original one (58 retweets and 68 likes compared to 5000+ retweets and likes of the original tweet).

### **4.2. A military related example**

A study published by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs [<sup>11</sup>] found that Sweden was the target of multiple actions such as *fake news*, *false documents* and *disinformation* from Russian-based organisations in order to diminish public support for NATO and increase a pro-Russia attitude.

The study found that various *fake news* made their way to the Swedish media and were then redistributed and posted by Russian news wire and then right into the international media.

Concretely, the study found around 26 forgeries or *alternate facts* that were allegedly coming from Swedish decision makers, leaked to the "media" and then published in obscure Russian-language news outlets. Such an example, as described in a feature story published by *The Guardian* was a "leaked" discussion between the Swedish defence minister with the Head of the BAE Systems Company discussing a possible arms sale to Ukraine [<sup>12</sup>].

The way these news found their way to the media was done with the support of a Swedish-language version of the Russian-owned News Agency Sputnik, a version that was only active from 2015 to 2016. During this period of time, the narratives identified in their stories were highly negative towards NATO and the US while portraying a favourable Russia in the context, thus provoking ample Parliamentary debates and making the Swedish prime-minister declaring that it is very likely that Russia will be involved in influencing countries' next elections in 2018.

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations**

The issue with the *fake news* is a new reality the society needs to face in the upcoming years as the authorities will continue the struggle into finding ways to stop or at least reduce this phenomenon.

After a period of lull during which nothing much happened and it seemed that the society was caught by surprise by the *fake news* phenomenon, things started to become

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Kragh, Sebastian Åsberg *Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case* Swedish Institute for International Affairs - <https://goo.gl/ZQtizx>

<sup>12</sup> Jon Henley, *Russia waging information war against Sweden, study finds*, *The Guardian*, 11 Jan 2017 - <https://goo.gl/8w2zv5>

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clearer for media organisations that commenced to organise themselves to face the problem. In the first place, *Google, Facebook* and *Twitter* teamed up in order to crackdown the *fake news* phenomenon by creating apps and add-ons that would spot these news and remove them from their platforms.

While it is not clear yet whether these steps had an impact on the *fake news* propagation, it remains clear that the public space still includes these types of news. With this in mind, it is worth mentioning here the move of the German Government to draft a law against *Social media* outlets fining them with up to EUR 50 million if they fail to remove *fake news* from their networks.

Having said that, the Alliance and the governments need to address this issue at all level so it prevents the waste of resources involved in a mission or exercise on a territory not properly assessed or prepared from the *information warfare* perspective. Therefore, at strategic level, nations could employ a set of measures such as:

- **Acknowledge the phenomenon** and create properly resourced structures to address it through research, monitoring, and drafting specific procedures;
- **Ensure transparency across all national ministries and agencies**, particularly those related to the national defence security system;
- **Draft national strategies** against this phenomenon and seek support for them across the entire political spectrum.

In order to reduce the impact of these news before or during the launch of a military operation or exercise, those in charge with tackling *the fake news* at operational and tactical level could take a series of measures such as:

- **Assigning communication specialists to the contingents** deployed to missions;
- **Drafting contingency plans for crises** associated to *fake news* propagation;
- **Ensuring a close contact between host nation and troop contributing nations** so the facts are quickly verified and the media relations management is clarified;
- **Monitoring adversary *Social and Traditional media outlets*** to identify *fake news* in their initial stages;
- **Drafting key messages and lines to take in advance** to be used in relation with the media and the publics in case such crises emerge;
- **Making key people available for the media** in a timely manner so the propagation of *fake news* be reduced by taking a stand against it and presented the real facts;
- **Restating the strategic narrative and core messages** so audience is informed regarding the true purpose of the presence in the respective country;
- **Announcing the local communities in due time of the passing through or stationing** of the Allied troops so the alternate facts regarding their presence are rejected from initial stages;
- **Unveiling trolls and fake news** based on thorough analyses of the information environment performed by specialists [<sup>13</sup>];
- **Avoid arguing and use humour instead** when dealing with *trolls* in a virtual environment whose allegations are obviously exaggerated [<sup>14</sup>];
- **Organising various Civil Military activities in the local communities** so the people would better understand, interact, and connect with the service members thus providing a better mutual understanding.

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<sup>13</sup> Idem [4]

<sup>14</sup> Idem [4]

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