Only free societies can combat disinformation

TECHNOLOGY

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I f the purpose of creating a governmental disinformation unit is to increase trust in the information flow of a free society then the launch of the US Disinformation Governance Board did not go well.

A terse announcement last week, first flagged in a Politico newsletter, that the Department of Homeland Security was setting up a specialist board to address disinformation was followed by faltering attempts to explain exactly what it would do and how it would be run. In essence, it appears a modest effort, led by respected digital expert Nina Jankowicz, to co-ordinate different departments to focus on the issue. But a cackle of conspiracy theories soon erupted among Fox TV commentators and Republican senators. The board was soon equated with George Orwell's Ministry of Truth.

However cack-handed the launch, the board is addressing a pressing problem: how can democracies protect themselves against hostile authoritarian nation states intent on turning the openness of free societies against them? The issue has acquired all the more resonance since Russia's propaganda-heavy assault on Ukraine and Elon Musk's proposed takeover of Twitter. Free speech absolutists such as Musk want to curtail almost all moderation of online content. That amounts to unilateral disarmament on disinformation, say critics.

The obvious problem with disinformation is how to categorise it. The conjugation tends to go: I believe trusted information, you are misled by misinformation, and they propagate disinformation. But even one-eyed sophists would find it difficult to explain away the Kremlin's blatant manipulation of western opinion. The activities of Russia's troll factories, such as the Internet Research Agency in St Petersburg, have been repeatedly exposed. Other regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, have unleashed Twitter trolls and even plotted to recruit a mole inside the company, according to the New York Times.

The Poynter Institute for Media Studies has identified 52 countries where governments have taken steps to counter misinformation. One of the most interesting initiatives is in the EU. After Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, it created the East StratCom Task Force. With a staff of more than 40, working in

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15 languages, the task force monitors and exposes Russian disinformation. To date, it has compiled a public database of nearly 14,000 samples, ranging from alleged British involvement in the recent Bucha massacres in Ukraine to claims that Covid-19 vaccines have killed more people than the virus.

The task force's mission is to raise public awareness of disinformation, to debunk false information and promote media literacy. "Russia has been deliberately, constantly and systematically targeting the EU," says Peter Stano, the EU's lead foreign policy representative. "After 2014, member states woke up."

Although democratic governments can help educate citizens to be more sceptical of suspect stories — "pre-bunking" disinformation — and can debunk conspiracy theories too, there are clear limits as to how far they should go. Surreptitious attempts to shape a partisan narrative will backfire. Some civil society organisations can, and do, take a far more proactive role. Open-source intelligence organisations, such as Bellingcat, have publicly challenged the Kremlin's line on the poisoning of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2020 and war crimes in Ukraine.

One other intriguing example is Moonshot, a for-profit start-up founded in 2015, that aims to disrupt disinformation networks and challenge online extremism. Employing the same techniques that consumer companies use to reach online customers, Moonshot identifies internet users who read extremist websites and engages with them. It uses personalised advertisements, encouraging these users to read alternative materials and even speak to counsellors. "We need to counteract harmful speech with more speech. These people are not necessarily extremists, they are family and neighbours," says Vidhya Ramalingam, Moonshot's co-founder.

The war against disinformation will never be won, but that does not mean giving up the fight. For too long, democratic governments have been naive, allowing hostile regimes to exploit the openness of technological platforms and free societies to peddle corrosive lies. It is the collective responsibility of governments, tech companies, civil society, the media and millions of individual users to maximise the advantages of free speech. As they say in the software business: "Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow."

The writer is founder of Sifted, an FT-backed media company covering European start-ups