



Weaponized Storytelling: Disinformation and Narrative Building

^{*1}Ajay Patel

^{*1}Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Delhi and ICSSR Doctoral Fellow, New Delhi, India.

Abstract

Narrative makes, disinformation believable—making both narrative and disinformation as two symbiotically linked phenomena. Narrated disinformation is a much more dangerous phenomenon than the military-nuclear technologies. It has the power to mould the world if under the hand of individuals like Hitler and Putin—who all relied upon on this phenomenon to build a grand-narrative. In this way narrated disinformation casts or creates a world where people's thinking and opinions moves along with the disinformation induced perspective and its culmination builds the aforementioned grand-narrative. It doesn't matter what is the truth, only that it matters is that it is believable. So in this sense, 'narrative makes, disinformation believable'. Only disinformation in isolation amounts to nothingness. It only becomes lethal when it is transformed into a narrative. In this essay we will see how disinformation is used as a narrative building tool and the process of the said 'building' narrative. We will analyze this process of narrative building with the help of three case studies—one, text Weak Strongman (media manipulation in Putin's Russia) by Timothy Frye; second text 'Soul stealers of The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768' (Tales of the China Clipper) by Philip A. Kuhn and third text The Jews Enemy (Nazi Propaganda during Second World War & the Holocaust) by Jeffrey Herf—all in a global perspective.

Keywords: Disinformation, Narrative building, Weak Strongman, Storytelling.

Introduction

Let's begin with understanding how disinformation spreads, and how it is built as a narrative in Putin's Russia. In this regards one needs to throw certain light on Kremlin's media manipulation strategy. "Kremlin has gained a well-deserved reputation for 'weaponizing' information at home and abroad. The conventional wisdom often depicts the Kremlin as a master manipulator of information with Putin leading Russia (and the rest of us) to a post-truth future." [1] This becomes exponentially vital since "at the core of this strategy is the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth. This notion allows the Kremlin to replace facts with disinformation." [2] It is well-known how television has emerged as the most important source of information, however controlled. "Kremlin strategy shifted from the 'infotainment' of the preceding years to what Vera Tolz and Yuri Tepper call 'agitainment', combining the agitation and propaganda of ideological messages with viewer-friendly formats like talk shows and celebrity variety shows." [3] Television, therefore, is used as a tool to spread disinformation where novelist Gary Shteyngart observed how the news anchors have become "a clan of attractive and dead eyed men and women." [4] Same had happened to the newspapers where major newspapers are controlled through a takeover by Kremlin-friendly owners. In social media state gives strict orders about which topics to cover and the modus-operandi of covering the said topics. So, a controlled media spreads a certain type of disinformation

under the guidance of a narrative in-tune with the interests of those who are in control. When one looks closely the whole scenario in day to day life, disinformation daily interacts with people in some way or another (in the form of Television, newspaper, Internet & social media). These disinformation(s) are visible to the public but there are certain narrative in state mind that in which way disinformation spread. These disinformation(s) without narrative would amount nothing since these sets of disinformation(s) are by themselves unable to animate the whole story. People's perception and a believe towards the state only changes when this disinformation becomes a narrative. When state spreads disinformation in accordance to a narrative, the public (or the state beneficiaries like bureaucrats, in some specific cases) is itself able to pick up pieces of disinformation to fill in the details of the narrative. "Informational autocrats recognize that violent repression in modern societies is costly and often counterproductive. Rather than killing or imprisoning thousands to inspire fear, they attempt to convince citizens that they are competent and not violent. Such dictators win the sincere support of many of their compatriots, but this support is based in part on the manipulation and distortion of information." [5] Media manipulation under Kremlin projects a narrative about Russian politics in which, Putin is treated as an indispensable figure. "To Russian viewers, state media depicted the reunification of Crimea as a reassertion of Russian power, a noble effort to defend Russian speakers, and

a victory over a fascist government.” [6]-all under the able leadership of Putin. Disinformation when interwoven into narrative produces a grand narrative that then has its own momentum among the public. So in this way, disinformation is used to build a narrative in which Putin’s image as an omnipotent ruler both at home and abroad-an image that the Kremlin works hard to create and is at the core of Putin’s strategy to stay in power-that then becomes a grand narrative by the public by minimising everything political with Putin alone.

When we look at Chinese Soulstealers Sorcery Scare of 1768, the kind of building of a narrative out of disinformation is quite different. In that time in China there was “a patrilineal society with high infant mortality, the protection of children (particularly males) is one of life’s highest priorities.” [7] In this way a disinformation emerged about sorcerers roaming the land, stealing souls; victims are very likely to be male children who will sicken and die. When we analyse all cases of soul stealing sorcery one can find that there were disinformation’s of soul stealing in the society but also there was a certain invisible direction towards narrative (high infant mortality mortality-the protection of the children; particularly males) according to which disinformation spread or got moulded. So in this way narrative makes disinformation believable-that a soul stealing phenomenon in a society which is interwoven with narrative that causes several unpleasant and bizarre incidents (deaths, torture in prison) which gained its own momentum that even the bureaucrats could not contain since it had already fused itself into a narrative.

Now we move on to the Nazi propaganda during Second World War & the Holocaust. Here disinformation the most extreme form of a narrative which culminated into the Holocaust-thus, the most perfect formulation of narrative making based on dispersed disinformation spread by the state with the help of various tools. Hitler was the decisive factor in the spreading of disinformation in this specific case. There were lots of speeches by Adolf Hitler and essays, government controlled newspapers, anti-Semitic wall newspapers and posters and everyday visual experience that were all first for spreading the disinformation where language of Nazi regime tried to mould the public thinking about the Jews. In other words we can say this ‘public language’ of Nazi regime produced the Disinformation. Orders were given about how to narrate ongoing events. Nazi officials played a central role in this process of narrative build by Nazi propaganda. “Hitler justified every escalation of persecution against the Jews as a response to what he alleged was a prior act of aggression by international Jewry.” [8] Moreover, the visual mode of propaganda by the Nazi regime were a good source of (dis)information for the millions of individuals. Added to that was Hitler publically repeating the genocidal prophecy. He said, “We don’t want to be emotional anti-Semites who seek to create a mood for pogroms. Rather, we are driven by a pitiless and fierce determination to attack the evil at its roots and to exterminate it root and branch. Every means is justified to reach our goal, even if it means we must make a pact with the devil.” [9] Hitler and his associates publically declared that they would exterminate Jews before the Jews could exterminate the Germans. Now we move to the another aspect of “Narrative Building.” When we look at the previous sentence “they exterminate Jews before the Jews could exterminate the Germans”, here Hitler and his associates try to build a Narrative in public that the Jews can exterminate the Germans hence it’s our duty to exterminate them-i.e., a narrative where Germans become the victim rather than the

aggressor. All the (dis)information put together “created a mythic world by transforming the political universe into a conflict of persons and personifications.” [10] And when we see the visual propaganda, a radical anti-Semitic Narrative during world war is visually built. Even though it was the Nazi regime which constructed the public (in a way of thinking and opinions) opinion with the use of Disinformation and its Narrative building practices, once the public began constructing their own narratives in accordance to what Nazi regime wanted, it is easy for Nazi regime to steer all public into the Holocaust. In this way, a perfect narrative has the ability to make disinformation believable. Thus, Nazi regime needs a narrative which provides a direction to the public since only disinformation (aforementioned) in isolation amounts to nothingness. It is the narrative of Nazi Regime which produced The Holocaust.

Conclusion

We have seen Disinformation and it’s Narrative Building from the perspective of Global History (in Russia, china and Germany). As a student of History one will have to be very aware of the narrated disinformation because we have seen in all three cases that the narrated disinformation have the power to mould the society, people’s perception towards the others (in case of china and Germany) and state (in the case of Russia). In Russia the disinformation builds a narrative in which Putin’s image as an omnipotent ruler and this is a core strategy for him to stay in power, on the other hand in the Chinese society tinny disinformation reached to the brutal incident like deaths of many innocent and in Germany disinformation build a narrative which reached to The Holocaust – the last being the most perfect case of disinformation fusing with a narrative that later gains its own momentum.

References

1. Timothy Frye. Weak Strongman-The Limits of Power in Putin’s Russia. USA: Princeton University Press, 2021.
2. Jeffery Herf. The Jewish Enemy-Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the
3. Holocaust. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
4. Philip A Kuhn. Soulstealers-The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990
5. Osterhammel, Jurgen (2014) the Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century, Princeton University Press.
6. Bayly CA. The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914, Malden & Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
7. Christian, David Maps of Time: Introduction to Big History, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
8. Diamond, Jared Guns, Germs and Steel: A short history of Everybody for the last 13,000 years, London: Vintage Books, 1997.
9. Herodotus the Histories (trans. Robin Waterfield) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
10. Lal, Deepak Reviving the Invisible Hand: The case for Classical Liberalism in the twenty-first century, New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2006.
11. Landers David S. The Wealth and Poverty of Nations, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998.
12. Maynes, Mary Jo and Ann Waltner the Family: A World History, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
13. McNeill JR, William H. McNeill the Human Web: A bird’s-eye view of World History, New York: W.W.

- Norton & Company, 2003.
14. McNeill William H. *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963
 15. McNeill, William H. *Plagues and Peoples*, New York: Anchor Books, 1998.
 16. Pipes, Richard *Property and Freedom*, New York: Vintage Books, 2000.
 17. Polybius the *Hisories* (trans. Robin Water field), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
 18. Robinson, Chase F. *Islamic Historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
 19. Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War*, London: Penguin Books, 1972.
 20. Wong R. Bin *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.