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State disinformation: emotions at the service of the cause

Abstract

Disinformation is not only a phenomenon of modern democratic societies, but also a tool at the service of states. In the current communication ecosystem, politics and society interrelate in the face of a phenomenon characterised by multiple information channels and sources in which emotions now play a central role. In international relations, the expression of a state's political will through charisma and populism are the chief aspects detected in the analysis of emotions in political science. This has led to the construction of a narrative based on security threats and the friend-enemy distinction, among other things. On the basis of an exhaustive literature review, this study offers an overview of the political and social factors underlying the use of emotions in disinformation as regards four aspects: politics, economy, diplomacy and security. Likewise, it identifies the main defining traits and behaviours of domestic and international audiences. The analysis and verification of the research question contribute to elaborate an international theory of emotionally driven disinformation which has begun to play a leading role in both academia and politics.

Keywords

Disinformation, emotions, journalism, political communication, social networks, framing, populism.

1. Introduction

In international relations, the study of disinformation has been patchy with contradictory results. There is no unified corpus of the theories or consequences of media campaigns, the use of intelligence or their effects on the population (Lanoszka, 2019). Greater attention has been paid to other aspects, such as charisma (Nye, 2014). Not only knowledge and ability drive foreign policy, but also charisma, in which convictions and alliances are the foundations for success (Aggestam & Johansson, 2017). It is a quality that audiences attribute to politicians when they feel that they form part of a political project. International projection favours the

construction of an account in which audiences make sense of their position in global society. Charismatic leaders take centre stage in that account, above and beyond institutions, and give stability to their societies by answering three questions: Who are we as a nation? Why are we important for the world? And what does the future hold for us? (Wivel & Grøn, 2021).

The narrative construction of reality is based on emotions and allows for: (a) employing history to explain contemporary problems and to learn lessons from the past, even though it is leveraged capriciously, resorting to platitudes, legends and very blinkered visions of reality;

(b) performing causal analyses based on perceptions, values and moral principles, so as to prevent affronts from being objectified; and (c) offering symbolic and performative solutions, instead of sustainable agreements or alliances. Charismatic leadership precedes the narrative of legitimacy that consists in providing “moral and consensual bases for modes of governance” (Price, 2015, p. 8).

In public diplomacy, this connects with the analysis of soft power (Solomon, 2014), whose main definition is “the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment” (Nye, 2021, p. 10). That ability depends on the audience in question, rather than on one’s own merits. For this reason, Bakalov (2019) observes that soft power has three defining traits: it is aimed at foreign audiences, acts in the long term and forges stronger ties with civil society. Soft power persuades and attracts, for which reason it needs to arouse emotions (not only admiration and respect, but also loathing and fear) and to lead to habit (Berger, 2020), which reduces the cost of transactions and automates decision-making processes.

In soft power, emotions are not coercive, although they can contribute to symbolic violence or rhetorical coercion (Krebs & Jackson, 2007). This escalation to argumentative or verbal pressure intersects with constructivism and representational strength (Mattern, 2005). The staging of international events, the choice of spokespeople and the “humanitarian” label underpin Anglo-Saxon hegemony over global affairs. Coercion gives rise to fear and has an impact on the ideas and beliefs of audiences, predisposed to support or reject foreign policy decisions (Graham, 2014).

In sum, public diplomacy does not serve to achieve specific political objectives, but to prepare audiences for a series of decisions grounded in supposedly shared values and beliefs that are more emotional than rational (Mercer, 2010).

2. Theoretical framework

Communication research has approached emotions from perspectives belonging to different disciplines. Neuroscience has demonstrated their essential role in the behaviour of all living beings and that their value lies in the universality of the rules governing them (Damasio, 2006; Layouts & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Basic emotions are automatic physiological and behavioural reactions to stimuli that the brain detects innately or after a minimum exposure to specific ones (Damasio, 2018). Although emotions cannot be disguised, they can be triggered by distorted impulses, as numerous studies analysing the impact of different forms of disinformation on public life have demonstrated, along with the need for a deeper enquiry into this issue (Garret & Weeks, 2017; Tucker *et al.*, 2018).

Appealing to emotions is effective owing to the fact that it automatically triggers physiological reactions based on the social function of transmitting an emotional state for motivational (to move to action) and adaptive purposes (to prepare the body for action). In this respect, falsehood is an efficient psychological mechanism for detecting factions and for showing how ideology and moral principles take precedence over evidence (Malo, 2021). This adaptive function of falsehood develops in three ways: by favouring group coordination, by detecting who is committed to the group and by highlighting dominance. In other words, those politicians who make absurd statements that contradict the beliefs of the group would be offering greater evidence of dominance, while challenging both the norms of society and their adversaries (Hahl, Kim & Zuckerman Sivan, 2018).

Basic emotions include happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise and disgust (Damasio, 2018). The use of fear and anger in diplomatic communication can be explained by the fact that the physiological reactions to which they give rise are protection and self-defence, respectively. It couples with new public diplomacy approaches as part of reputational security (Cull, 2019), whose aim is to intervene in international affairs by means of political proposals, alliances or the defence of values. The priority is security, legitimacy or the defence of

territorial integrity. Similarly, happiness gives rise to the desire to relive the event that has triggered that emotion, whereby the appeal to national victories or heroes in times gone by. Seemingly better past times are remembered with nostalgia, which allows for constructing a future message politically anchored in the reinterpretation of the past. The account structures the space of socialisation of “them versus us” and is a factor driving political behaviour (Sasley, 2011), while allowing for the social construction of passions (Coicaud, 2016).

In journalism, emotions are associated with the study of public expressions. Beckett and Deuze (2016) note that the change in the information consumption model has enabled audiences to live in the media and to link production and consumption, in line with the thesis proposed by Webster (2014), who notes that they consume traditional media content, while simultaneously reproducing it on social media. This phenomenon can be understood in ambivalent terms. On the one hand, journalism and politics play an important role as sources. The new media logic, developed in a context in which technology and social media take centre stage, revolves around concepts like statement-based and citizen journalism. The speed of consumption, the “breaking news” label and ephemeral content have side-lined the detailed analysis and interpretative capacity of the traditional media corresponding to the Five Ws (Manfredi & Ufarte, 2020).

In this connection, the absence of a clear-cut intermediate level (gatekeeping) and means of verification has paved the way, voluntarily or involuntarily, for disinformation in journalism and also in politics, thus shaping a new information diet for the citizenry (Innerarity & Colomina, 2020).

Classical sociology has prioritised the rational version of communication (Bericat, 2000; 2016), as with communication research (Waisbord, 2019) which gives precedence to the analysis of models that institutions (from media outlets to public relations agencies) ought to follow. From this perspective, emotions are associated with the manipulation of propaganda, the influence of advertising and the risks posed by disinformation. Nonetheless, the limits of human rationality and nature do not dissociate the emotions involved in information and communication, an aspect observed by scholars from Lippmann (1925) to Habermas (1990) and confirmed by a plethora of studies performed on the effectiveness of emotions in communication –from commercial advertising to election campaigning.

On the other hand, the aesthetics of emotions can undermine the value of arguments, data and facts. When playing a militant role, journalism prioritises mobilisation by offering extreme information; this is more effective for coordinating a group formed by individuals predisposed to conflict, as well as for misleading and offending adversaries (Petersen, 2020). So, emphasising emotions in the media “redefines the classic idea of journalistic objectivity –indeed, it is reshaping the idea of news itself” (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 2). Accordingly, the journalistic model of objectivity and independence now coexists with others that give priority to some of the many aspects of the relationship between the press, the citizenry and political power (Mellado, 2020). This issue can be observed in the coverage of climate change, scientific advances and public health, in which legitimate sources in this respect coexist with false beliefs (O’Connor & Weatherall, 2019) and political enthusiasm in the shape of media fandom (Sandvoss, 2013), whose influence on the change in mentality of individuals is less effective than normally expected (Mercier, 2017).

The decline of the press, reflecting the many problems plaguing Western democracies (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Crilley & Gillespie, 2019), has also been influenced by the emotional factor, inasmuch as politics has known how to exploit it, whereas the quality press has yet to discover how to do so. The political culture of the Post-truth Era is grounded in these practices (Crilley, 2018), coexisting in this stage with the active role of audiences. Storytelling has proliferated in the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2015), with memes and emoji, hyperboles and the simulation of interactive or *amateur* content (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019). All of which has exacerbated the crisis affecting the rationalist press model forged in the

nineteenth century (McChesney, 2013; Deuze & Witschge, 2018), grounded in the mutating values and models of the intercommunicated societies of the 21st century, which virtuously integrate the emotional component into the news to increase citizen participation in information (Amado, 2019; Beckett & Deuze, 2016).

On social platforms, the fragmentation of audiences challenges strategic narratives. Public diplomacy ceases to be a state-centric activity, because more actors can and want to tell their own stories. Even when this activity is managed by states, institutional tools are employed to simulate social or citizen action. Citizens are consuming, generating and distributing content, without the intermediation of media outlets or government guidelines. For Deibert (2019), disinformation relies on the mass distribution of extreme and emotional content aimed at audiences more interested in receiving a succession of striking news stories than in the ontological construction of truth.

Ultimately, the incorporation of the emotional factor is interesting for political science, insofar as it helps to understand the phenomenon of populism on the strength of its complexity. Populism has helped to delve into the study of emotions (Arias-Maldonado, 2016). The charisma of leaders, contempt for the world of ideas and the press, the nostalgic identification with a past or a nation (Canovan, 1999) and the exploitation of polarisation have given rise to a communication environment based on emotional registers for an anti-pluralistic purpose.

Emotions construct the friends and enemies of an undefined collective (a nation, people, front or vanguard) which enable it to single out adversaries (Gerbaudo, 2018). Presidents become representatives of collectives and allow for building narratives around their political programmes and agendas (Ambrosio, 2010). The tone of a narrative is more relevant than its structuring with arguments or economic data (Guriev & Treisman, 2020). “Information autocrats” employ censorship and disinformation for manipulating and reducing traditional political violence. The comments and sallies of presidents fuel a statement-based and institutional journalism which hinders the practice of the independent kind, personal research and coverage outside official channels. In the digital field, the media and social networks facilitate disintermediation, an issue that has undermined the institutional foundations of public diplomacy. Populist leaders create performative narratives that combine emotions with aesthetics so as to engage foreign governments and audiences (Wajner, 2021).

3. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to analyse the disinformation employed by states as a communication practice for favouring their own interests, while subverting those of others. It is an interesting issue in that it analyses the use of emotions for meeting objectives and facilitating the active role of audiences. As to methodology, its main contributions include a review of the literature on emotions in the field of international relations and a new approach to news sharing, disinformation and diplomacy studies. In view of the wide range of disinformation practices at the interface between political communication, diplomacy, technology and emotions, the following research question is posed: Why is there a tendency to employ emotions in disinformation campaigns?

This question forms the basis of the main working hypothesis, with a supplementary assessment, which holds that emotions are the preferred mechanism for expressing immaterial demands relating to international affairs. It is not a question of pursuing a specific diplomatic objective, but internal cohesion and external rhetorical coercion. As an additional contribution, it is understood here that emotions are exploited to spread disinformation. State disinformation employs visual tools inherent to digital culture to shape public opinion and to foster polarisation. As images trigger real emotions and connect with the collective imaginary, audiences feel engaged and entitled to share them.

4. Results: Disinformation and emotions

Disinformation consists in designing and implementing communication strategies with the intention of producing and distributing imprecise, wrong or false information and content, so as to confuse public opinion deliberately and to cast doubt constantly on developments, institutions, the press and experts, instead of telling the truth. It deploys emotional arguments (us, the nation, the community, etc.), while dispensing with rational or argument-based content. Emotions thus allow for constructing a genealogy of truth grounded in feelings, morality and interpretations (Arias-Maldonado, 2020).

The pretence of veracity is important for generating and distributing that content, since it aspires to carve a niche for itself in the public communication space and to discredit media outlets and governmental institutions. Disinformation does not involve the dissemination of fake news or falsehoods, but seeks to call into question the credibility of actors and institutions. The conceptual novelty lies in the necessary collaboration of audiences in dissemination, rather than in the classification of content (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). That collaboration can be active, because readers redistribute low-quality content, or passive, because they realise that the digital space is rife with interactivity, including bots, trolls and automated tools.

Information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) has intensified the culture of suspicion, because in order to be successful it does not have to construct an alternative reality, but perhaps only to alter its fabric. All that is needed is “the intentional choice of data that is biased, incomplete, altered and so forth,” which “does not necessarily have to be false,” but which puts forward a “range of hybrid proposals, between true and false, so as to give rise to doubt, fear or controversy for the purpose of skewing the perception and behaviour of different social groups” (Del Fresno, 2019, p. 2).

There is a struggle to impose a strategic narrative that responds to the media crisis, the fragmentation of audiences, the “platformisation” of networks and dwindling privacy. The media crisis is behind the problems of news consumption in the West, while opening a window of opportunity for disinformation:

the global debate on disinformation is developing in a context in which people do not believe in the news or news outlets, are sceptical about the information that they receive on platforms and regard poor journalism, political propaganda and dishonest forms of advertising and clickbait as elements that are contributing to exacerbate the problem (Del-Fresno, 2019, p. 16).

Disinformation is a phenomenon that has breathed new life into international communication, public diplomacy and propaganda studies (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). There is an increasingly greater number of studies, reports and analyses of the communication activities carried out by international actors with an eye to influencing global public opinion.

In this connection, special mention should go to Russia's meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections and in the Brexit “Vote Leave” campaign (Faris *et al.*, 2017), an issue that was even brought up in the Parliament of the United Kingdom (Russia Report, 2020). As to Europe, this problem had led to protection initiatives and reactions against the messages distributed through official Russian channels. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the action and scope of disinformation campaigns, whose content has abandoned the tenets of traditional propaganda to incorporate elements of the political and press battle (Seib, 2021).

Traditional propaganda has specific political indicators and proposals aimed at bringing about a change in how the electorate behave or cast their votes. The substantial change lies in the fact that disinformation poses other threats and has other objectives at a cognitive level (the dissemination of ideas, institutional deterioration, the discussion on pluralistic values, etc.) and in attitudinal judgements (practices contrary to open societies, contempt for minorities, the tendency towards standardisation, etc.). In both cases, there is a need for the positive action of audiences to connect with pre-existing social problems. Social polarisation

precedes disinformation, since this exploits prior social or political controversies (racism, inequality, anti-vaccine movements and climate change, among others).

4.1. Elements of emotional disinformation

The ultimate purpose of disinformation is to weaken political structures and social cohesion. It differs from propaganda in that it does not pursue a specific political objective, but aims to influence the frame of mind of audiences and to shape public opinion. The four dimensions or activities described below are understood in this vein:

4.1.1. Disinformation is a political activity

Emotions are exploited to challenge knowledge, specialisation and analytic depth. The emotional perspective is essential for disdaining verifiable facts, as it contributes to introduce biases. McIntyre (2018, p. 15, original emphasis) explains that, in the absence of a factual reality, “politicians can challenge the facts *and pay no political price whatsoever.*”

As already noted, emotion is expressed as a basic physiological reaction that cannot be concealed, so that rationalisation associates its certainty with the authenticity of that which provoked it, and links that sensation to a feeling, a mental experience associated with the vital state that generated it (Damasio, 2018). Sensation becomes an emotional event (Weeks, 2015), an emotional epistemology (Del-Fresno & Manfredi, 2018; Adler & Drieschova, 2021) or the rumour-mongering of self-consumption (Rojecki & Meraz, 2016). The right to feel different, ignored, aggrieved or appreciated can lead to a demand for political rights grounded in difference. That gives rise to nationalist or populist discourses which aspire to define what deserves to be classified as truth and, consequently, the scope that demands have in the legal or political sphere. The political threat does not lie in distorting reality, but in appealing to emotions and desires and placing them above facts. For example, Lakoff (2016, n.p., original emphasis) explains how the logic of the strict father goes beyond family values:

The basic idea is that authority is justified by morality (the strict father version), and that, in a well-ordered world, there should be (and traditionally has been) a moral hierarchy in which those who have traditionally dominated *should* dominate. The hierarchy is: God above Man, Man above Nature [...].

When, now as president, Jair Bolsonaro repeats his campaign slogan, “Brazil above all, God above all,” he is only appealing to beliefs forming part of the Christian tradition.

The Russian government’s manipulation of emotions has been widely studied, as regards both the decline of independent journalism and the generation of content ordered in specific operations. Pomerantsev (2019) contends that propaganda, the lack of impartiality, self-censorship and poor legislation (the protection of journalists, the criminal liability of news outlets, institutional advertising, etc.) have disrupted the ability to perceive reality.

4.1.2. Disinformation as an economic activity

Emotional disinformation has created its own economic logic (Bakir & McStay, 2018). The industry is relevant. Social networks and algorithms have favoured an economic model that has decoupled production and distribution from the ultimate responsibility for the distributed product or good. Disinformation is produced in technological factories that turn a profit from the global syndication of content, which poses a threat to the news industry governed by professional and ethical standards (Carlson, 2017).

The lack of editorial responsibility is fostered by US legislation, which draws a distinction between digital channels, on the one hand, and publishing houses and news outlets, on the other. The former have no responsibility for what is published and are not obliged to restrict, prioritise or censure content. Social networks are not media companies.

In the European Union, the shortcomings in this respect are, broadly speaking, due to the battle against censorship, the defence of freedom of expression and corporate responsibility.

The response to disinformation is reactive and all but restricted to highlighting meddling and inconsistencies. Under the current legal framework, it is impossible to aspire to much more.

In both markets, tech companies allow the dissemination and sale of the disinformation of private actors (non-governmental organisations, individuals and companies), while hardly becoming exposed to criminal liability. It is a breeding ground for the major producers of disinformation, who are often amateurs championing a cause and motivated by the profits that can be reaped from disinformation, programmatic advertising and the invention of hoaxes. Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018, p. 9) have classified these actors as “‘Fake News’ Entrepreneurs/Political Clickbait Fabricators.” This amateur activity falls into the category of stories and campaigns, isolated examples conceived to be instantaneously profitable. Tech companies are powerless to control that activity, while governments have been incapable of passing adequate legislation.

The emotional factor is understood as the individualised consumption system of networks and platforms. Versus the conventional news industry, the business model of networks exploits freedom of choice as an asset and, as before, customises consumption by capitalising on data, channelling demands and exploiting topical issues in real time. On-demand disinformation mixes the agenda of verifiable events (election calls, social movements, corporate behaviour, sports results, etc.) with the mood of readers, the recommendations of their inner circles and the most popular content, even though it does not match their profile (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015).

In predefined categories of weaknesses, disinformation employs echo chambers and filter bubbles, among other phenomena of digital political communication. There is evidence that “when people are inundated with information, pro-attitudinal information that is judged as higher quality and is more likely to be selected” (Stroud, Thorson & Young, 2017, p. 46). This same reasoning points to the efficiency of the economy of mistrust: “Algorithms increase mistrust of public institutions and leaders. They make it harder to connect with alternative points of view and to open up to new ways of thinking” (Mele, 2019). It is the vicious circle of the private agenda, beyond news channels and institutional communication, with controlled key ideas and opinions.

4.1.3. Disinformation is a diplomatic activity

The third dimension has to do with diplomacy, because it affects the management of international affairs. Disinformation serves foreign policy purposes, promotes ideas, identifies relevant voices in conflicts, sets the negotiating agenda and validates mechanisms of relations on the margin of violence and war. As to diplomacy, disinformation tenses old power structures. The hybrid character of political and media systems is revealed in the generation and distribution of content (Chadwick, 2017). Diplomats, journalists and audiences produce, consume and distribute information (news, infotainment, etc.) in a constant cycle of feedback.

State disinformation seeks to destabilise neighbouring countries, to meddle in elections, with the aim of promoting candidates and polarising debates, and to put forward alternative multilateral cooperation proposals to those led by the European Union and the United States, among other initiatives. In this regard, Gerrits’ (2018, p. 11) thesis is revealing: “Putin has successfully brand-named Russia as a conservative bastion against the excessive political, economic and cultural liberalism of the West.” Russian disinformation engages reactionary sectors in Western politics. It is possible that the proponents of the Russian political programme are not pursuing a stable relationship with the country’s institutions (trade agreements, for example), but they can indeed leverage Russian appeal to set an agenda differing from the dominant one.

Something similar is occurring with Latin American populisms which have the support of a journalism manipulated to suit their purposes (Waisbord, 2013). Disinformation connects

with the deliberate attitude of audiences who want to break with the status quo, be it as regards institutional or press information, by redistributing that which does not come from official channels, regardless of whether or not it is false or imprecise, so as to give it greater visibility (Singer, 2014).

4.1.4. Disinformation is a security activity

The fourth dimension has to do with the fact that the decline of digital freedom has coincided with the rise of disinformation, under the logic of security, law and order, territorial sovereignty and the protection of traditions (Freedom House, 2017). Legislative action allows for controlling content and restricting public freedoms on the strength of different political and legal arguments. In this vein, China and Russia have passed laws contrary to digital freedom with the framing of security (Finnemore & Hollis, 2016; Flonk, 2021). Both countries are influenced by conventional realist thought for which security is a performative act. The mere classification of a development as a “national security” threat anticipates an agenda of political action and behaviour (Buzan, Waever & de Wilde, 1997). The behavioural and performative factors underlying communication make it obligatory to identify the authorities responsible for issuing threats, pointing the finger at enemies, implementing restrictive measures against the conventional order, extending politics of exception, granting themselves emergency powers (state of alarm, siege, war or emergency) and restricting individual freedom itself. In brief, it is a transformational act.

Blazacq, Léonard and Ruzicka (2016) employ the term “securitisation” to define a type of politics based on threats and how to cope with them. As to foreign policy, securitisation singles out an enemy, specifically employing the friend-enemy distinction. While as regards domestic policy, the phenomenon allows for identifying a common public good of an abstract nature (security, nation, culture and identity, among others) from which the principles and behaviours that should be followed emerge. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it possible to determine how public health issues are presented as threats to security, with the subsequent adoption of extraordinary measures with less political control (Kirk & McDonald, 2021).

4.2. How emotional disinformation operates

La Cour (2020) distinguishes between stories, campaigns and operations. Isolated stories contribute to the dissemination of hoaxes and to discredit official sources. Denying rumours and falsehoods is very costly and, above all, exhausting for the institutions of open societies. Ünver (2017, p. 7) underscores the psychological dimension of the struggle against disinformation: “Balance of power in computational propaganda –like cyber war– favors the offensive side as costs of defending against such attacks require greater resources and better coordination. Even when the defender is successful (i.e., corrects disinformation quickly), psychological processes of digital information consumption still linger on.”

Research in the field of the social sciences has examined different types of polarisation among audiences, including the ideological and political kind, plus that which has to do with news and its respective audiences (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019). For their part, political campaigns exploit polarising issues to construct alternative narratives and operate in the hybrid system with a competitive edge, in line with the “liar’s dividend” (Chesney & Citron, 2019). They are oriented towards the dissemination of political ideas that chime with already known preferences.

Audiences share and distribute disinformation when they sympathise with its producers, either because the rumours benefit them or because they reinforce their worldview. Epistemic communities of disinformation do not aspire to broaden the range of arguments or to encounter contradictory ones, but pursue ideas and facts that serve a particular way of believing and behaving. The cognitive process is ordered by a criterion, an attitude towards the observed facts. Framing is essential in the construction of disinformation because it ranks

facts and associates them with moral values. Disinformation anticipates the validation or legitimization of political decisions, so that emotions (which are true) serve to manufacture collective truths. The effectiveness of disinformation has nothing to do with its ability to manipulate or change beliefs, but with its ability to appeal to previous ones, to which end ideological frames are very useful, for when they are challenged by facts, voters take no notice of them so as to preserve their beliefs (Lakoff, 2004).

A systematic effort is put into operations, with on-off actions, real voices and bots, false information and serious journalistic work. The growing weakness of the news industry is exploited to occupy the professional space, to identify experts with a dubious track record, to promote false profiles, to publish unverified polls or figures and to take complex information out of context. Operations elaborate specially tailored messages for each audience, without the need to maintain a certain degree of discursive coherence. Given this lack of consistency, in order to counter disinformation it is necessary to customise each and every response, without resorting to generic or structural censorship.

Confusion increases the noise in the public space in which narratives vying with each other to arouse the interest of audiences operate. This plays an active role in the construction of operations, either because these are designed to make information go viral (striking headlines, content that fosters polarisation with attacks against the other) or because they are communities to which the global media industry pays no heed. News sharing results in the production of information for self-consumption, so that international content ends up reinforcing the domestic discourse. By nature, operations are structured in an open and trackable space, a phenomenon summarised by Cormac and Aldrich (2018, p. 478) as follows: “many covert actions are an open secret: implausibly deniable.”

The analysis of Russian activity in this respect provides a model for the connection between disinformation and foreign policy in the wake of the invasion of Crimea (2014) at three levels. The budget of major state companies, like RT and Sputnik, was increased to produce daily stories under the guise of news products (news, non-daily information, interviews, expert opinions, etc.). Framing can be observed in Russian campaigns. Anti-Western framing includes content painting a picture of chaos and disorder in the United States, the Union European and NATO (Elswah & Howard, 2020). The immaterial dividing line is reflected by a narrative of order versus one of disorder, which includes resentment, traditionalist rhetoric and cultural cohesion. It is not a question of promoting Russia, but of destroying the reputation of the West in the aforementioned countries and regions. There has been a substantial increase in harassment campaigns and in restrictions on the activities of Western non-governmental organisations and companies. They are ultimately operations because they link the political agenda of Putinism to the widespread implementation of disinformation strategies. The interests of the government are concealed under the label of Russian public diplomacy, while initiatives simulating the region's multilateralism are implemented (van Herpen, 2016). The Valdai Discussion Club is an example of an international forum that pretends to be an open platform of debate on the future of the post-Soviet states.

Investment in infrastructures serves to underpin operations. When access is controlled, there is no need for censorship or content generation. Blocking access to foreign websites and partially controlling the distribution of content are two tools employed at election time (Lutscher *et al.*, 2020). The physical infrastructure includes cabling, satellites, platforms, the cloud and digital goods and services that are used in the construction of distribution channels. The construction of infrastructures depending on third parties enable those with vested interests to disconnect them at their whim. The Silk Road is prolonged towards the technologies of those industries affected by the deployment of physical infrastructures:

As things stand, after having heavily invested in transport infrastructures, such as railways, ports, airports and navigation satellites, China is now doing so in the

telecommunications and energy infrastructures of smaller countries and/or those in need of them and funding (Blecua & Feijóo, 2020, p. 5).

Chinese investment and funding of access guarantees its future control over information flows (Shen, 2018). This logic allows for capitalising on data and using them to produce customised messages, for locating people (dissidents, social leaders, etc.) on the Internet and in the physical space and for censorship. The tech companies ZTE and Huawei, as well as the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (BDS) and the Alibaba sales website, comprise a network of investment and content. And it is the Communist Party of China (CPC) that manages the capitalisation of data (Hoffman, 2019).

4.3. *The purpose of state disinformation*

In light of the foregoing, it is possible to claim that in authoritarian regimes disinformation is aimed above all at domestic audiences (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Internal coherence is pursued either by producing messages of ethnic or linguistic unity or by identifying an external enemy. Stroud, Thorson and Young (2017, p. 46) stress the importance of internal coherence when noting that “leveraging social identity may be more effective at the point of distribution rather than at the point of reception.” In other words, showing our identity on social networks and, in particular, our disagreement with news outlets and official sources extends the lifecycle of disinformation. Emotional orientation facilitates the construction of a shared identity revolving around a particular discourse.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation is a good example of the *modus operandi* of internal coherence (Wawrzonek, 2014), for it defends the legacy that the Orthodox community has bequeathed foreign affairs and the validity of Russian civilisation in the region. Language and memory identify a geographical and political space based on values and traditions. Internal coherence also involves demographic communities in the Baltic States whose mother tongue is Russian.

In Hungary, the rhetoric against George Soros allows for highlighting the essence of the nation versus foreign capital and meddling. The dissemination of paranoid conspiracy theories on Soros’ financial clout and his influence on international institutions serves to rally the population around the idea of a sole way of being Hungarian, even if this means challenging the Community *acquis*. The campaigns in Turkey against social movements and the political opposition are of an emotional nature, identifying the country’s enemies with its neighbours. In Mexico, the apologies offered by President López Obrador for the fall of the Aztec Empire at the hands of the Spanish Empire in the sixteenth century follow the same logic, for this discourse reinforces the idea of an original indigenous Mexican culture devastated by colonisation. In France, for its part, the discourse of Éric Zemmour before the upcoming presidential elections in May 2022 incorporates ethnic and anti-pluralistic elements.

International disinformation campaigns are aimed at audiences whose main vulnerability is the shortage of their own independent infrastructures. The current weakness of the media and news ecosystem is allowing for the mass influx of foreign content aimed at defending an international position and belittling dissident voices. Russia provides Georgia, Belarus and other post-Soviet countries with news content that is conspicuous by its absence in Western news circuits. Sociolinguistic appeal facilitates cohesion (Mattern, 2005). Without their own news ecosystem, the Russian discourse flows unabated through their local infrastructures. It is a particular disinformation phenomenon, based on non-electoral meddling in home affairs (Heerdt, 2020). Through this deployment, the possibility of debating on or disseminating democratic ideas diminishes considerably (Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2016).

At a multilateral level, disinformation affects bilateral, regional and global relations, as well as the practice of public diplomacy (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019). Geographical framing

justifies intervening in and contesting the sovereignty of states, as evidenced by current political disputes in this respect (Crimea, Donbas, Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, etc.). The information and media system bolsters the position of one of the actors for framing problems and their possible resolution.

Disinformation is not an isolated action, but a state policy, for it serves the following purposes: (a) to give journalists professional credentials, even though they do not comply with the ethical standards of the profession and serve other purposes; (b) to represent leaders and authorised people; (c) to gather, produce and disseminate news, ideas, audio-visual or entertainment content by licit means for its cultural and news offerings, regardless of work quality or compliance with ethical standards; and (d) to identify actors supporting the theses of disinformation, either out of self-interest (commercial or economic incentives) or for immaterial interests (a linguistic community). Disinformation follows state logic when it defends a political proposal, a form of social coexistence, a position in international relations or the recognition of authority, which includes political leadership and territorial sovereignty.

5. Discussion

The findings of this piece of research paint a full picture of the political and social factors underlying the use of emotions in disinformation. The main aspects and behaviour of audiences, be they domestic or foreign, have also been identified. An analysis of the research hypothesis put forward above has allowed for fleshing out an international theory of emotionally driven disinformation. Furthermore, the main working idea has been confirmed, while establishing that disinformation capitalises on immaterial demands through messages aimed at both domestic audiences (identifying the enemy, fostering nostalgia, implementing memory policies, etc.) and their foreign counterparts (the rhetoric of coercion, doubts about the legitimacy of borders, the construction of an ethnic nation, etc.). As an additional aspect, the spread of disinformation has been considered as being emotionally driven. The deployment of emotional disinformation requires the social participation of audiences, as well as their desire to share public demands and claims. Capitalising on emotions by contagion obliges producers to multiply and diversify stories and campaigns so as to enable customised consumption.

All considered, three avenues of research can be proposed. The first has to do with the offensive character of disinformation, namely, the deliberate desire to implement communication strategies to obtain results in the field of foreign policy. As this requires a combination of financial clout, technology and content, the phenomenon goes beyond the traditional vision of propaganda as the systematic sending of messages to become a construed space of public communication that defines truth, falsehood, sources of law and the legitimacy of claims. Against this backdrop, the leveraging of emotions is more profitable in open societies, whose internal controversies are employed to exacerbate polarisation. A functionalist vision of propaganda as a vehicle for disseminating falsehoods is inappropriate, since it should be seen as a way of diminishing the capabilities of the press, belittling dissident voices and undermining Western proposals of liberal democracy.

The second line is related to audience motivation. According to the working hypothesis, immaterial demands and emotional discourses connect with the beliefs and biases of audiences. The success of disinformation does not lie in distributing news that –almost– appears to be professionally produced, but in elaborating stories that reflect aspirations, desires, fears or feelings of anger. It would be interesting to enquire into what prompts audiences to share such stories on their own networks and social media profiles, insofar as their inclination to inform their fellow citizens is a rather moot point.

It seems more adequate to hold that participating audiences aspire to contest the established order and to challenge the logic of a political and diplomatic model in which preference is given to the interests of the United States and the European Union. Their

motivation may contribute to determine what type of content they distribute and why, as well as the public (i.e., social networking sites) or private platforms (i.e., electronic messaging systems) that are used depending on the type of story or campaign. The very incoherence of the messages of state disinformation enables audiences to choose to receive those that best adapt to their preferences, irrespective of their origin.

Lastly, careful thought should be given to the results of disinformation operations. Versus propaganda and election campaigns, whose indicators are predefined, disinformation operates in the market of ideas (facts) and beliefs (emotions). The quality of disinformation cannot be measured by operational results, but only by the ability to exploit internal weaknesses, to introduce noise in conversations and the public sphere, to promote an alternative multilateral agenda and to undermine the leadership of liberal democracies.

6. Conclusions

The study of emotions allows for analysing the narratives of disinformation circulating in the fields of international politics and diplomacy from a multidisciplinary perspective. A strictly symbolic analysis of messages does not explain why those that are undisguisedly false or inappropriate circulate and are consumed. Unlike propaganda, disinformation narratives contain proposals and ideas for the future underpinned by non-factual epistemological premises. These narratives are not explanatory or argumentative, but offer a vision of the future, in line with framing and public diplomacy studies. The emotional factor makes it possible to include the moral variable in the resolution of international problems, for which reason Russia and China offer alternative solutions far removed from the standards of the liberal order.

On another note, the risk posed by the securitisation of disinformation could lead to less individual freedom, accountability and control over the digital space. Threats serve to elaborate a successful discourse that places security over individual rights and freedom, even as regards cybersecurity and data protection. An analysis of the measures currently in place suggests that this approach is gaining ground, without suitable institutional or media counterweights.

For international journalism, this study offers a number of lessons. Disinformation is rife in countries with weak political and media systems. Freedom of information precedes political and institutional crises characterised by clientelist policies, censorship, corruption and direct threats to the safety of journalists. The battle against disinformation waged in international and European institutions will have no impact on local audiences, if they do not have access to healthy, stable and leading media. In practice, there is a need not only for ethical codes and community initiatives, but also for journalists, sources, social recognition and applied ethics (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Schudson, 2018).

In conclusion, state disinformation based on emotions is now firmly on the research agenda, as well as having consolidated its position in political practice. It is essential to continue to reflect on the effect of this phenomenon on the practice of international relations, as well as on its incorporation in information processes in which the role of the media should be more important than ever. And they can achieve this by not only playing the role of intermediaries and producers, but also possibly by acting as gatekeepers for verifying information that may be harmful for society. In rational logic in which emotions are associated with a failure or deviation, the role of journalism, often presented as a counterpoint of composure and reason, in opposition to populism that exploits emotions for the purpose of engaging individuals who stray from rationality in the quest for shared values, remains to be seen.

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