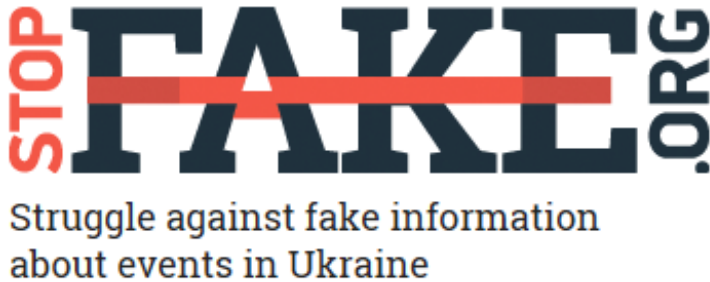


An anti-fake counter-attack in the propaganda war

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2014/11/03/the-journalistic-dilemma-speed-over-accuracy/

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Polis Interns and LSE MSc students Bani Bains and Pressiana Naydenova report on the first Polis Lunchtime Talk featuring Yevhen Fedchenko, cofounder of the StopFake news website.



In many ways Yevhen Fedchenko's talk on Russian government-sponsored propaganda about Ukraine felt like an exposé. It was essentially a critique of both the readiness with which some Western media accepted pre-packaged information on critical situations, and their internal infiltration by Russian propagandists.

Fake news and counter platforms

In March 2014, Fedchenko, the Director of Mohyla School of Journalism in Kiev, decided that it was high time to counteract the disinformation campaign that Russian media had launched on Ukraine. This is why, after he discussed the issue with students and colleagues, the idea for the fact-checking website StopFake.org was born. A voluntary collaboration between academics, students and activists, the project aimed to fact-check and debunk fake news in Russian media outlets, especially in relation to the recent events in his country.

Fedchenko pointed out that while the official Russian position maintains that there is no anti-Ukrainian agenda in its discourse, there are four main channels through which Russia shapes perceptions of the Ukrainian issue in international media. These are Russia's English Language Broadcasters, Intellectual Influencers like academia, celebrities, PR firms and Cultural Diplomacy Campaigns.

Have the Russian Propaganda Tanks Rolled into the UK?

Fedchenko began by identifying RT (Russia Today) as "the voice of Russia" in the West, a voice, that many uncritically accept as a second opinion or alternative to an Anglo-Saxon dominated media. This becomes ever more relevant with the launch of RT's new English Channel in London as recently as 30th October, 2014. He also emphasized the role of *Ruptly* in providing disinformation. *Ruptly* is a media organization that claims to have no ideological bias, but even a quick look at its website's headlines shows their pro Russian stance. The Comment sections on their website, for instance, show examples of hate speech which Mr. Fedchenko believes are produced by trolls hired by Russia.

The Death of Journalism?

Another example of deception is the use of old pictures from various conflicts like those in Syria, Iraq and Russia, which are easily passed off on the internet as authentic images from eastern Ukraine. Mr. Fedchenko called this the 'death of journalism', the creation of a stage where readers and viewers are easily convinced by digital effects. This paints a scenario in which a deficiency of truth could have long-term implications for the reputation and future of journalism. If there is so much deliberate falsehood why believe anything?

Furthermore, Fedchenko compiled a list of famous academics and journalists, who in his opinion are purveyors of Russian propaganda. The list was diverse including academics such as Professor Stephen Cohen, an American scholar of Russian studies teaching at New York University and Princeton but also including Mike Tyson, the infamous former boxing heavyweight champion of the world who recently joined the Writer's Union of Russia.

However, these examples raise the question: is everyone interested in Russian culture deserving of being labelled Russian propagandist?

An uncertain future

The volume of propaganda now spread in the networked media spaces today leaves much to reflect on, and the existence of StopFake.org shows the complexity of the situation. After the website published its first blog post, it had more than 800 enquiries per second, which reflects the importance of the issue for consumers who want to see through propaganda.

This fact-checking website provides a grass-root mechanism with which citizens can seek accountability from mass media. This is inspiring in terms of wider democratic participation in the information gathering and dissemination processes. Yet it also presents a challenge to mainstream media's status as the primary watchdog of the governmental activity. It remains to be seen to what extent projects like WikiLeaks and StopFake will multiply across national borders in future and what implications their presence will have for the legitimacy of both, mass media and governments.

This article is by Pressiana Naydenova and Bani Bains.

Polis Lunchtime Talks are every Wednesday at 1pm and are free and open to the public – [details here](#)

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