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Countering misinformation in the EU: origins, evolution, and prospects

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Summary and Authorship Statement

Summary (English)

This dissertation explores the European Union's response to the growing problem of misinformation. It uses this case to critically analyse how societies interpret and govern information challenges such as "fake news" and propaganda. It shows why such issues are understood as security threats, discusses the consequences of that framing, and considers alternative approaches better suited to the global and complex nature of information systems.

The thesis builds on 50 interviews with key stakeholders and over 400 documents to fully retrace the development of EU misinformation policies since 2015. It focuses on three key moments: (1) Russia's annexation of Crimea and the resulting creation of the East StratCom Task Force, (2) the COVID-19 pandemic and the strengthening of EU crisis response mechanisms, and (3) Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which prompted the EU to ban Russian state-backed media RT and Sputnik. These milestones are unpacked to explain how responses were shaped, who influenced them, and what difficulties arose during their implementation.

Finally, drawing on the lessons from the EU case, the dissertation shares best practices and new theoretical perspectives on "information disorders" and the governance of our information space. It suggests using complexity science as a guiding framework to formulate responses that tackle dangerous and malicious acts while respecting the freedoms of liberal democracies.

Samenvatting (Nederlands)

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de reactie van de Europese Unie op het groeiende probleem van desinformatie. Het gebruikt deze casus om kritisch te analyseren hoe samenlevingen informatie-uitdagingen zoals "nepnieuws" en propaganda interpreteren en beheersen. Het laat zien waarom dergelijke kwesties als veiligheidsrisico's worden gezien, bespreekt de gevolgen van dit kader en overweegt alternatieve benaderingen die beter aansluiten bij de mondiale en complexe aard van informatiesystemen.

Het proefschrift bouwt voort op 50 interviews met belangrijke belanghebbenden en meer dan 400 documenten om de ontwikkeling van het EU-beleid inzake desinformatie sinds 2015 volledig te reconstrueren. Het richt zich op drie belangrijke momenten: (1) de annexatie van de Krim door Rusland en de daaruit voortvloeiende oprichting van de East StratCom Task Force, (2) de COVID-19-pandemie en de versterking van de crisisresponsmechanismen van de EU, en (3) de Russische invasie van Oekraïne, die de EU ertoe aanzette de door de staat gesteunde Russische media RT en Sputnik te verbieden. Deze mijlpalen worden uitgelicht om te verklaren hoe de reacties vorm kregen, wie er invloed op uitoefende en welke moeilijkheden zich tijdens de uitvoering ervan voordeden.

Tot slot deelt het proefschrift, voortbouwend op de lessen uit de EU-casus, best practices en nieuwe theoretische perspectieven op 'informatiestoornissen' en de governance van onze informatieruimte. Het stelt voor om complexiteitswetenschap te gebruiken als leidraad om reacties te formuleren die gevaarlijke en kwaadaardige handelingen aanpakken, met respect voor de vrijheden van liberale democratieën.

Authorship Statement

In this statement, I outline my contributions to each article that forms part of this thesis, detailing the role I played in conceptualizing, designing, and writing them, as well as their publication status. Chapter 1 was commissioned for the *Palgrave Macmillan Handbook on Cyberdiplomacy*, edited by George Christou. I have conceptualised and written this manuscript on my own. After two rounds of revisions, the chapter has now been accepted for publication, which is foreseen for 2025. Chapter 2 was published in the *Journal of Common Market Studies*. I have conceptualised and written this manuscript on my own. After two rounds of blind peer review and revisions, the chapter was published in 2024 and was cited once at the time of writing. Chapter 3 was published in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*. I have conceptualised and edited the manuscript, written in collaboration with Joachim A. Koops and Corneliu Bjola. My co-authors wrote the third and fourth sections of the article and provided inputs for the conclusion. After one round of revisions, the chapter was published in 2020 and was cited 71 times at the time of writing. Chapter 4 was submitted to *International Affairs*. I have conceptualised and written this manuscript on my own. After a first round of blind peer review, the manuscript received a Revise & Resubmit decision. Chapter 5 was submitted to *International Organization*. I have conceptualised and written this manuscript on my own. This manuscript is awaiting a decision from the editors.

Title	Author(s)	Publication	Status
Chapter 1 “Undesirable Information in Cyberspace: Unpacking the Complexity of Propaganda, Misinformation, and Disinformation”	Sophie L. Vériter	<i>Palgrave Macmillan Handbook on Cyberdiplomacy</i>	Accepted
Chapter 2 “Small State Influence in EU Security Governance: Unveiling Latvian Lobbying Against Disinformation”	Sophie L. Vériter	<i>Journal of Common Market Studies</i>	Published
Chapter 3 “Tackling COVID-19 Disinformation: Internal and External Challenges for the European Union”	Sophie L. Vériter, Corneliu Bjola, and Joachim A. Koops	<i>The Hague Journal of Diplomacy</i>	Published
Chapter 4 “The Collective Securitisation of Disinformation and the EU’s Ban of RT and Sputnik”	Sophie L. Vériter	<i>International Affairs</i>	Revise and resubmit
Chapter 5 “Beyond Order and Disorder: A Grand Theory of Information Complex Systems”	Sophie L. Vériter	<i>International Organization</i>	Submitted

Throughout this research project, valuable feedback was received from peers, either in bilateral communications or at the outcome of presentations. Earlier versions of the chapters in this thesis have been presented at Leiden University’s EU Governance Seminar, at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs’ Research Seminar, at Maastricht University’s “Countering Hybrid Threats While Protecting Digital Rights” workshop, and at the International Studies Association Annual Conference in San Francisco as part of the “Emerging Scholars in Public Diplomacy” panel.