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The Propaganda Machine in the Age of Social Media

„(...) FORCE is always on the side of the governed,
the governors have nothing to support them but opinion" .
DAVID HUME, *Of the First Principles of Government*

Abstract: It is an obvious fact about the history of propaganda that the development of every new public communication medium was accompanied by a new propaganda wave. Therefore, the propagandists proved to be the main agents that were capable of understanding and exploiting the potential of every new communication technology. However, the development of social media in the last two decades offered them the opportunity to exercise their ability to an unprecedented scale. The terms that are used in order to refer to this phenomenon are „computational propaganda" and „digital propaganda". Computational propaganda includes the use of bots and automated content delivery, fake social media accounts, trolls, fake and junk news and other instruments of „computational enhancement" with the aim of creating the illusion of a large scale consensus. In this paper I will refer to the way in which some of these instruments were exploited in large scale propaganda campaigns. In order to explain how the digital propaganda machine works and how it can be countered, I will use the theory of Reflexive Control.

Keywords: computational propaganda, social media, political bots, fake accounts, troll farms, Reflexive Control, digital diplomacy.

1. Introduction

Every new development in our political, social or economic life and, as we recently observed, even in the evolution of contemporary healthcare systems (in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic), seems to confirm the idea that we are witnessing the rise of a new and powerful propaganda wave. As I argued in a previous paper, there is an obvious propaganda conflict

which separates the main Western democracies like United States, Great Britain, France, Germany and others from the Eastern powers like China and Russia, dominated by authoritarian regimes. However, this new propaganda wave also generates social, political, religious and ideological tensions in specific and local contexts. And, in this process it reactivates and uses, in very efficient manner, old propaganda themes that were disseminated especially in the former communist countries (Țuțui 2019, 170).

To this line of reasoning I would add that the scope of this phenomenon is significantly larger than I previously assumed and that there is a mutual influence between the central political and ideological conflict among Western and Eastern powers and the smaller and local propaganda conflicts. The latter are frequently used, speculated and even produced to serve as a new step in the bigger propaganda game, but they could also provide opportunities for repositioning and even for shifting the strategy in the main propaganda conflict.

In this paper, I will argue that this versatility which characterizes contemporary propaganda is made possible by the use of the new communication technologies, in an extensive and systematic manner. It is a new and insidious propaganda machine, a form of computational or digital propaganda that uses instruments like bots, fake accounts, troll farms and troll armies, junk news, fake news and so on. In the next two sections, I will provide an explanation for the features of propaganda which justify the expression „propaganda machine" and I will briefly sketch an answer to the question "Why does the propaganda machine work?". In the following sections, I will argue why the expression is more suitable today in the age of computational propaganda, I will offer a brief presentation of the instruments of computational propaganda: bots, fake accounts, troll farms and so on. In the last sections of the article, I will present of the theory of Reflexive Control formulated by Vladimir Lefebvre and developed by Corneliu Bjola in the form of the 4E Funnel Model, used to explain and identify computational propaganda, I will illustrate the model by using it in the analysis of some case studies and I will refer to some suggestions provided by Bjola on how to counter propaganda understood as Reflexive Control.

2. Justification of the expression „Propaganda Machine"

Propaganda is a concept which is notoriously hard to define for at least three main reasons[1]: Firstly, because it was used in political and

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[1] For a more detailed analysis of the difficulties associated with defining propaganda see Țuțui 2017, 110-125.

ideological controversies so extensively that it became a *pejorative word*: a *way of labelling* our opponents in order to delegitimise their doctrine or cause. Secondly, because, by the nature of his activity, *the propagandist has to conceal his intentions and methods* in order to achieve his objectives. Therefore, the visible part of propaganda will always be only the tip of the iceberg. Thirdly, because it is a phenomenon which plays an important role in the process of *defining the social identity* of human communities. That is why, in order to understand propaganda, we have to take into consideration not only the intentions and objectives of the propagandist, but also the rules, the traditions, the problems and the expectations which are specific to his target community (see also Țuțui 2019, 173-175).

Nevertheless, there are some features which are commonly associated with propaganda and could be used to characterise it. First, we should notice that it is a type of *mass communication* with objectives that are mainly *persuasive* not informative. Jacques Ellul adds that: It is *systematic* or methodical and organized, it is *continuous* or repetitive, it is *durable* because it is carried out for years or decades, it is *exclusionary*, in the sense that it excludes all alternative stories, it is *total*, meaning that it uses all the technical means and targets all human faculties (intellectual and emotional), so it tends to be inescapable, it is *institutionalized* because based on institutional/state organisations, it is *necessary*, since there is a need for propaganda, both at the individual and at the social level, and it is *founded on pre-existing conditions* associated with social life (cf. Hentea 2015, 187).

Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell maintained that: It is *deliberate*, intentional, premeditated, not accidental, it is an *attempt to create a certain state* in a certain audience (shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour), it is *interested* because it promotes the interests of the propagandist or of his client, and it *does not presuppose reciprocity* (2012, 7-17). Jason Stanley mentions the fact that it is *associated with flawed ideologies* that support unjust inequalities (2015,168). Sheryl Tuttle Ross adds that it *targets a group of people which are socially* significant, it is *epistemically defective*, false, inappropriate, or connected with beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading, or unwarranted (2002, 20-23). Harold Lasswell spoke about the fact that it is associated with *the manipulation of significant symbols* (cf. Hentea 2015, 186). Finally, according to Jean Marie Domenach it is *a war carried out with other means* (2004, 33).

All the features mentioned above, and especially its organised, systematic an institutionalized nature determined the researchers of propaganda to compare it with a *mechanical system,* speaking about a

"*propaganda machine"*, designed to produce biased persuasive messages in a continuous way, with the aim of manipulating public opinion. This idea was explicitly sustained by Walter Lippmann and Noam Chomsky who stated that propaganda is *a factory of producing consensus* (cf. Hentea 2006, 49). In a similar manner, Edward Bernays argued that the evolution of propaganda is *directly related with the industrial revolution* and the *technological development*: the steam engine, the printing press, the mass-media technologies and so on (Bernays 1928, 19). Analogously, Jacques Ellul underlined the *relation between propaganda and the technological society*: "Again I want to emphasize that the study of propaganda must be conducted within the context of the technological society. Propaganda is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world" (Ellul 1973, XVII).

If we were to analyse the history of propaganda I believe we could notice that the development of every new public communication medium was accompanied by a new propaganda wave. The invention of writing, music and storytelling, the construction of huge statues and buildings for ancient kings, the religious, philosophical, literary and other artistic works, the printing press, the radio and the television were also used for propaganda purposes.

Moreover, I think we could say that the propagandists proved to be the main agents capable of understanding and exploiting the potential of every new communication technology. And, the same is true for the development of Internet and Social Media. Furthermore, the expression is more suitable today when bots, algorithms, fake social accounts, troll farms and other means of computational enhancement are used so extensively.

3. Why does the propaganda machine work?

This is a very difficult question and I do not hope to provide more than a sketch of an answer in this section. Firstly, I will begin by underlining, once again, the fact that our vulnerability to propaganda in general, and especially to the contemporary digital propaganda, has to do with the important role it plays in the process of defining the social identity of human communities. We are not born with a sense of our social and political identity, therefore it has to be *projected from outside* in the form of self-legitimating narratives. Moreover, the most common way of defining the identity of a given community is *by opposition to another*. And the process of creating and disseminating the self-legitimating stories, which is

one of the main tasks carried out by the agents of propaganda, is significantly facilitated by the new communication technologies. Furthermore, the New Media also simplified the process of creating online communities that usually define their identity in the same way: by opposition to another group or community.

Secondly, another reason refers to the fact that we are *epistemically dependent on one another*. No one can have direct information about all the significant facts and expertise from all the relevant domains. We rely on each other for information which is necessary in order to make our essential choices on various areas of our political, social and economic life. Some scholars say that this ability was essential for our survival and our success as a species. For example, Steven Sloman and Philiph Fernbach in a recent book, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, affirmed that human species is the most complex and powerful species in history, not only because of our complex brain, but also because of our group intelligence based on the way in which we cooperate form an epistemic point of view (Sloman and Fernbach 2017, 132). However, our dependence on the expertise of our fellow men and on the available sources of information also makes us epistemically vulnerable. Information can be "filtered" and experts could be constrained or motivated to provide biased information which would have to effect of distorting and manipulating public opinion. To be sure, this danger is far greater in authoritarian regimes than in liberal democracies. Nevertheless, citizens from democratic societies are also vulnerable to the influence of organized and systematic propaganda, which, in the age of social media, could manifest itself in a more deceptive manner.

Thirdly, in my opinion, the propaganda machine works so efficiently because *we are much more predictable than we think*. Our everyday behaviour, both online and offline, is quite repetitive: we read the same newspapers, go to the same places, talk to the same persons, visit the same sites etc. Hence, we are easy to decipher. And with the help of the new communication technologies not only advertisers and public relation agents, but also politicians and propagandists could construct very accurate profiles of their target audience, and could use the features of online platforms or communities and their echo chamber effect to disseminate and enhance their biased message.

Fourthly, the efficiency of the new type of digital propaganda is based on the fact that *the technologies designed to serve us tend to make us even more predictable* in order to serve us better. As Horea Mihai Bădău underlined in a recent paper, the main role of the algorithms used

by the new technologies of communication, and especially by the social networks, is to create a precise profile of the user based on his online behaviour. Its objective is to facilitate his experience of using that platform and to provide him the experience he desires even before he has the opportunity to express it (Bădău 2019, 117). He also talks about the process of online "surveillance" of the user's online activity carried out by artificial intelligence in order to learn and anticipate his reactions and desires. And this process has the tendency to reduce human creativity and the differences between individual users. Moreover, he even suggests that artificial intelligence tends to make humans so similar and easy to anticipate that, in the end, they could all be considered a unique individual: the single partner of artificial intelligence (Bădău 2019, 126).

Finally, we could mention the thesis supported by Alicia Kearns, in her article *The Democratisation of Hybrid Warfare and Practical Approaches to Defeat Violent Extremism in the Digital Age*. According to her, we witness the *democratisation of narrative control* which creates new „arbiters of truth" in the on-going battle for the dominance of one "truth" over the other. In her view, these narratives about what should be considered as being true are weaponised and are constantly reinvented: "The challenge we now face is that the definition and acceptance of narratives of 'truth' no longer rests with established, predictable parties; but rather these competing definitions are churned by a plethora of diverse actors – with the truth under constant reinvention and reinterpretation" (Kearns 2019, 101). However, this new generation of agents of influence are less organised and easier to manipulate, which makes them very vulnerable to the influence of contemporary propaganda.

4. The New Propaganda Machine: Computational Propaganda and its Instruments

The contemporary researchers of propaganda speak about a new type of propaganda called *digital* or *computational propaganda*. It was defined by Woolley and Howard a "the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous agents, algorithms, and big data tasked with the manipulation of public opinion" (2019, 5).

In their opinion the hallmarks of computation propaganda are *automation, scalability* and *anonymity***. Automation allows propaganda messages to be scaled and to reach very numerous audiences by using rapid cycles of sharing, repurposing and further dissemination. Anonymity allows propagandist to remain unknown. They add that it

usually involves one or more of the following ingredients: *bots* that automate content delivery, *fake social media accounts* that require some human curation and *junk news* – that is misinformation about politics and public life (2019, 5).To this list we should add the infamous *troll farms*.

a) Bots

Woolley and Howard defined bots as "software programs or agents that are created to perform simple, repetitive, typically text-based tasks" (2019, 6). They differentiated between *three types* of bots: general, social and political. *General bots* have the purpose to gather information. *Social bots* operate over social media platforms and can interact with real users, share messages, engage in comments. *Political bots* are a type of social bots and they were defined as "algorithms that operate over social media platforms, written to learn from and mimic real people so as to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of social media and device networks" (Woolley and Howard 2016, 4885).

In a study dedicated to computational propaganda in Ukraine, Mariia Zhdanova and Dariya Orlova mentioned *five types* of bots (2019, 53):
- *Impact bots* which are used to create a mass following certain pages or persons and establish a bigger presence online.
- *Amplifiers* that are used for liking, sharing, and promoting certain content on social platforms.
- *Complainers* developed in order to block certain accounts on social media by sending a great number of complains.
- *Trackers* used to detect and drive attention toward certain online behaviours.
- *Service bots* which can help automate the process of bot account registration by automatically generating names, email addresses or reading CAPTCHAs.

In a paper dedicated to computational propaganda in Canada, Elizabeth Dubois and Fenwick McKelvey (2019) spoke about four types:
- *Dampeners*: bots that suppress certain messages, channels or voices in order to exclude information or people. For example: Anonymus used bots in Canada to launch distributed denial of service attacks as a protest against the expanding of surveillance powers
- *Amplifiers*: bots that seek to increase the number of voices or the attention paid to certain voices or messages. For example: @StopHarperToday, @MapleLeaks etc. directed against Canadian officials in 2015.

- *Servant bots* (or butlers): bots that automate simple tasks, help maintain data or simplify data analysis. And they illustrate this category with the bots used used by politicians to manage social media content.

- *Transparency bots:* automated agents that use social media to draw attention to the behaviour of particular political actors. An example for this category is in their opinion the bot @gccaedits from Canada that tweets whenever an Internet address associated with government edits Wikipedia (Dubois and McKelvey 2019, 75-79).

The dates and statistics about the impact of bot activity on social media are impressive, but also quite alarming. Woolley and Howard mentioned a report of a security firm Incapsula which states that almost half of all Web traffic is generated by bots. They added that, according to some estimates, a third of the Twitter users are in fact bots and that within two years 10 percent of all activity on popular social media sites will be generated by bots. Moreover, they claim that many bots maintain a parallel presence on several social media, they are capable to mimic human lifestyle, to adhere to a believable sleep-wake cycle which makes them very hard to identify. In 2014 a chatbot named „Eugene Goostman" (portrayed as a 13 years old Ukrainian boy) passed the Turing test by managing to fool a third of the judges (after a 5 minutes conversation) in believing that it was a human (Wooley and Howard 2019, 7-8).

Fig. 1. A fragment from an interview with the chatbot Eugene Goostman[2]

"**Independent**: Who's going to win the World Cup?
Eugene: I'm not interested in soccer, unfortunately. I think, it's quite annoying show. I believe even cockroach races are more intelligent and amazing show.
Independent: You look a bit like Harry Potter. Are you a fan of the series?
Eugene: I have no idea why kids go crazy about Harry Rotter – sorry – Potter. No magic wand can turn a boring geek into a super-hero.
Independent: Where do you live?
Eugene: I live in a big Ukrainian city called Odessa. It is on the Black Sea shore".

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[2] Source https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/turing-tested-an-interview-with-eugene-goostman-the-first-computer-programme-to-pass-for-human-9535740.html, accessed at 7.11.2019.

b) Fake Social Media Accounts

They are manually maintained accounts created with false identification data which are used in order to boost attention to certain topics or voices on social media and to create the illusion of a large scale consensus. They are used to manually comment in order to promote messages or to hijack the online debates.

Usually they are quite *cheap*: for example, according to Maria Zhdanova and Dariya Orlova in Ukraine the price of a Facebook account varies between 0.9 to 200 US $ and a the price of Twitter account varies between 0.4 to 90 US $. They mention the fact the purchased accounts can be easily blocked by the social media platforms themselves due to suspicious behaviour. This is the reason why, in Ukraine fake accounts are most often used for manual commenting in order to promote certain messages or trivialize or hijack the debate online (Zhdanova and Orlova 2019, 52).

According to Woolley and Howard, in 2012 Facebook announced that 8.7 percent of all accounts are fake which represented 83 milions accounts. Almost half of all Twitter activity in Russia is managed by highly automated accounts (Woolley and Howard 2019, 7-8).

c) Troll farms/ armies

According to Robert Gorwa, the trolls were initially defined as "those who deliberately baited people to elicit an emotional response" (2019, 88). However, in the last decade the term became synonymous with hate speech and harassment. But, the trolling gradually evolved to an increasingly organised and even institutionalised activity.

Gorwa also mentions the fact that Adrian Chen (2015) investigated the large scale Russian operation in St. Petersburg which involved hundred of employees paid to post articles, write blog posts, and attempt to influence political debates on social media. This kind of operation was latter called „troll-farm" or „troll army" and was suspected to have influenced major political events like the Brexit referendum or the 2016 US Presidential election. The similar operation form China was called „the 50 Cent Army" (from the price paid for every post) (Gorwa 2019, 89).

5. How does the propaganda machine work?
The Theory of Reflexive Control

The theory was firstly formulated in the 1960's by Vladimir A. Lefebvre a military researcher from the Soviet Union who emigrated in the United States. He developed the theory in works like *Algebra of Conflict*, *Algebra of Conscience* and *Reflexive Control: The Soviet Concept of Influencing an Adversary's Decision Making Process*. It is a complex mathematical theory of ethical cognition which is meant to be a more comprehensive model of explaining social behaviour than the classical theory of social choice. His view represents the process of cognition in a three level structure. At the lower level we find the person himself and the influence he suffers from the world (from the social norms, from the others and from his own inclinations). At the middle level we encounter that person's perception of himself and the person's perception of his opponent or communication partner, or more precisely the mental representations of the world's influence directed toward the self and the other. Finally, the top level represents the first individual's mental representations of his own and the other's mental representations of the world's influence (Lefebvre 2001, 10; see also Umpleby 2016, 65).
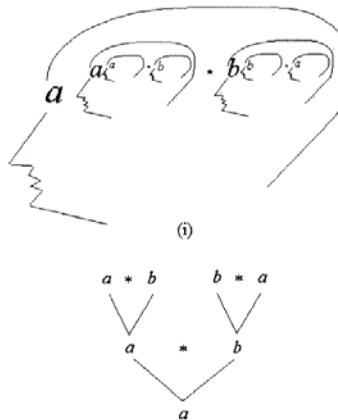

Fig. 2. An individual with images of the self and of the other; each image also contains images of the self and of the other (Lefebvre 2001, 10).

I will not refer to the complex mathematical formulas of his theory, which are beyond the scope of this paper. What is essential for our purposes is that this theory accounts for the differences between the ethical philosophies which are specific to the people living in Western democracies, on one hand, and the people living in the former communist countries (and especially in Russia), on the other hand.

"Let us distinguish two ethical philosophies. One is based on the principle that 'the compromise of good and evil is evil'. The second is based on the principle that 'the compromise of good and evil is good'. (...) I will offer experimental and empirical arguments demonstrating that the first ethical system is realized in Western culture and the second ethical system is realized in the culture of the Soviet Union. Thus, the difference between Western society and Soviet society is much deeper then is usually assumed: this difference touches upon fundamental structures connecting the categories of good and evil" (Lefebvre 2001, 21).

Hence, in his view, the main difference has to do with their attitude towards the relation between the ends and the means of an action: in the first ethical system, the end does not justify the means, while, in the second ethical system, the end does justify the means (Umpleby 2016, 65). In order to describe the dissimilarity between the two ethical systems in a more intuitive manner, Lefebvre uses the following story:

"Imagine a toy castle in which there lives a paper man with his paper friends. Suddenly a dragon with a human face approaches the castle. The paper man opens the gate and valiantly goes to the dragon extending his hand in friendship and trying to awaken human feelings in him. But the dragon breathes fire and the paper man becomes a handful of ashes. Imagine now another toy castle and another paper man living there with his friends. Another dragon with a human face approaches this other castle. This paper man also opens the gate and valiantly goes toward the dragon, holding a tiny sword in his hand to fight the dragon. He also vanishes in flame. Let both dragons lose interest in the castles after the paper men are burned up, so that the inhabitants of these castles survive. Each paper man from the first part of the story is lionized in his own castle, but the people from the other castle disapprove of him" (Lefebvre 2001, 19).

Lefebvre argues that the first paper man, who went out extending his hand in friendship, will be considered a hero in his castle and a weak man in the second castle, because he will be perceived as lacking the courage to take up a sword. However, the same is true for the second paper man: because he tried to fight the dragon he will be considered a hero in his castle and weak man in the second castle, because he will be perceived as lacking the courage to come out without a sword. Moreover, he adds that there is no rational basis for preferring one of these two points of view (Lefebvre 2001, 19). Each one illustrates a set of cultural norms which influences the typology of the individuals belonging to that

culture (specific to Western or Eastern countries) and determines their respective attitude towards conflicts. And it leads to very different ways of dealing with conflicts, which can lead to serious misunderstandings and tensions in the process of managing those conflicts.

Therefore, each one of the two parties could benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the opponent point of view and attitude towards the conflict, in order to influence it and improve the chances to manage the conflict in his favour. This means to be able to attain a more comprehensive perspective regarding the way in which your adversary thinks, the way he makes his decisions and the way he acts, and to be able to influence every phase corresponding to each of these processes.

And this is the essence of what he calls "gaining reflexive control" over the adversary. According to him to gain reflexive control means to understand the thinking process of the opponent and "to influence his perception, goals or his doctrine and, in the same time to be able to conceal the influence" (Lefebvre and Smolyan 1968, 45 cf. Bjola 2019, 15). Reflexive control was defined by Timothy Thomas "as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision intended by the initiator of the action" (2004, 237).
It presupposes either:
- *To map the cognitive filter of the opponent* (knowledge, ideas, experiences) in order to be able to understand it and imitate it, or
- *To locate the weakest link of the opponent* (the intellectual, moral, or personal features on which he bases his decisions). Ex. To exploit his prejudices (Bjola 2019, 17).
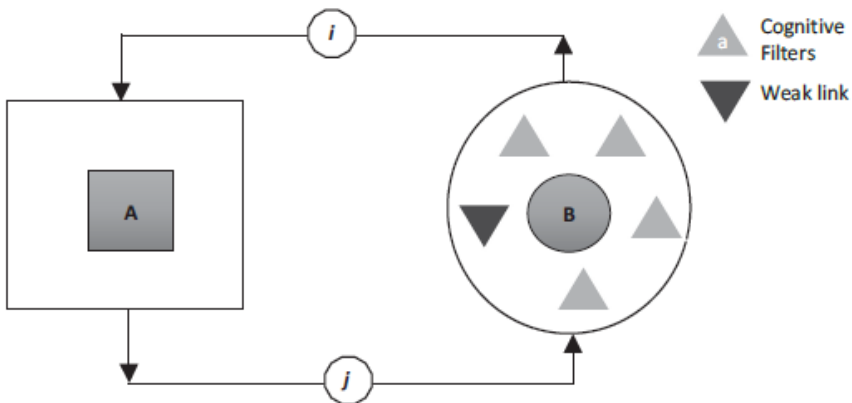

Fig.3. The Tactical Model of Reflexive Control (Bjola 2019, 21)

Bjola states that on social media the task of gaining access to the cognitive filter of the opponent could be based on one of the following four filters (2019, 21):

-*conversation*: It refers to topics of relevance for specific audiences. Ex. A hashtag analysis could be used to observe event-triggering subjects of online conversation, to examine the dissemination of controversial topics or to evaluate the reception spectrum of certain messages.

-*network*: It refers to the way people relate to one another. Ex. Social network analysis could help map the interactions between users, the potential influencers or the evolution of online communities.

-*demographic*: gender, age, education, income level, religion etc. Ex. These indicators are associated with political preferences.

-*psychographic*:   It refers to introversion-extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, neuroticism etc. Ex. These indicators provide deep insights into the personalities of the users.

The filters can help the propagandist to obtain an individual or a group profile, a moderate or a strong profile, a profile characterised by weak, moderate or high data accessibility.

TABLE 1.2 Cognitive Filter Mapping

Filter Type	Profile Scope	Profile Depth	Profile Data Accessibility
Conversation	Group	Moderate	High
Network	Group	Moderate	Moderate
Demographic	Individual	Moderate	High
Psychographic	Individual	Strong	Weak

Fig.4. Cognitive Filter Mapping (Bjola 2019, 21)

Therefore, in Bjola's opinion, Reflexive Control presupposes „to exert influence by hacking or infiltrating the decision making process of the opponent in order to determine him to pursue a course of action that favours the strategic goals of the initiator" (Bjola 2019, 14).

Reflexive Control is explained as having a *dual aspect*: *the process* and *the outcome* of the disinformation strategy. According to Bjola on *the process side* it presupposes the transformation of the opponent's information processing mechanism (*the cognitive dimension*) or through the careful selection of the messages that are presented to him (*the information dimension*). On *the outcome side*, RC can help influence

the opponent to voluntarily make a decision that is desired by the influencer (*the constructive result*) or to destroy, paralyse or neutralise the procedures and algorithms of the opponent's decision-making processes (*the destructive result*) (Bjola 2019, 15).

TABLE 1.1 Processes and Outcomes of Reflexive Control

	Constructive	Destructive
Cognitive	B is induced by A to alter his/her decision-making algorithm to facilitate outcomes beneficial to A	B is induced by A to revise his/her decision-making algorithm to avoid outcomes detrimental to A
Informational	B is induced by A to assess the situation in a manner that facilitates outcomes beneficial to A	B is prevented by A to assess the situation in a manner that may lead to outcomes detrimental to A

Fig. 5. Processes and Outcomes of Reflexive Control (Bjola 2019, 16)

Bjola believes we could understand better how RC works and how to distinguish it from other types of political communication by using a *4E funnel model* (2019, 24):

- Entice: analysing the *context* of the information environment of a country we could observe *a sudden influx of messages* that are tailored to domestic political circumstances. An example could be the unexpected intensification of messages regarding migration in countries from Western Europe in the context of the 2015 migration crisis.

- Engage: the analysis of the *content* could prove that the *message is informative, emotionally charged or misleading*. For example, we could notice that the content of the message was carefully tailored in order to determine a powerful emotional response.

- Elevate: we could observe if the message was *disseminated* in a natural and predictable fashion or it was *deliberately accelerated* by the use of bots, trolls, fake accounts or other means.

 - Exploit: paying attention to the *outcome* could prove that the public is encouraged, sometimes even by state officials*, to engage in offline political* actions for or against some political ideologies: protests, riots and so on.
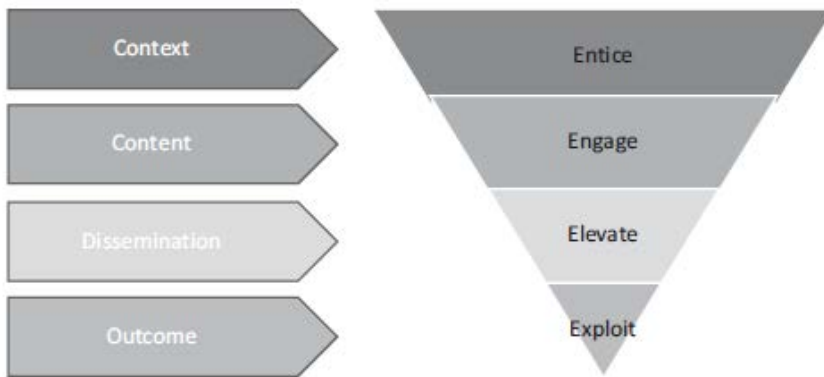
Fig. 6. The Model of the 4E Funnel (Source: Bjola 2019, 24)

6. Case studies: the MH17 disaster and the criminal case of Lisa

In this section I will use Bjola's model of the 4E Funnel in the analysis of two case studies which, in my opinion, demonstrate the efficiency of computational propaganda. After a brief presentation of each case I will argue that in each of the three cases we can observe the evolution described in the model: the launching of the propaganda topic (Entice), with a content that proves to be false (Engage), which is disseminated and enhanced by the use of social media (Elevate) and it is used in order to generate offline political actions (Exploit).

a) Example 1 : The case of the flight MH17 (Ukraine)

On 17 July 2014, a Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777 with 298 people on board was shot down by a missile fired from the separatist-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine

ENTICE: The Russian propaganda machine launched the theory that the plane was shot down by an Ukrainian military aircraft. As Ben Nimmo affirmed in an article dedicated to this case, "the MH17 disaster was a veritable case study in how to use a multitude of different communications channels to achieve a common goal: the discrediting of all those who claimed that Russia had played some part in the attack. Internet trolls, hackers, Kremlin-run media, state employees, retired soldiers, public officials, and anonymous programmers - all of them combined forces in a joint mission to attack investigators and even fake evidence" (Nimmo 2016).

ENGAGE: This theory was initiated by the tweets of an alleged Spanish air traffic controller named Carlos (@spainbuca) working in the

Kyiv Airport, who claimed to have seen a military aircraft in the area. The information was proved to be false.
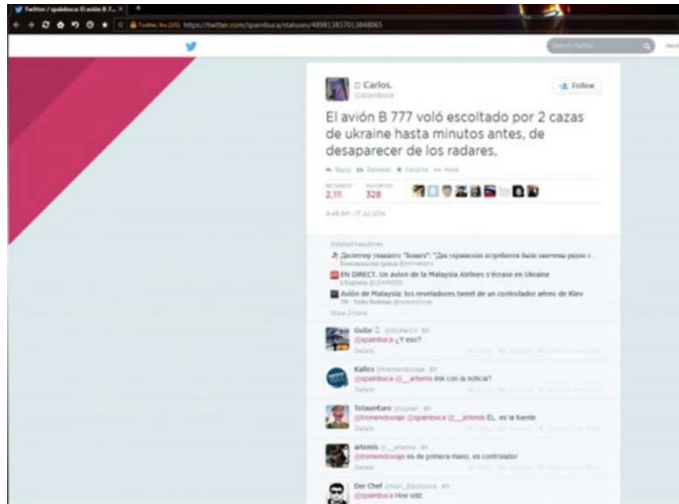

Fig. 7. Tweet from the Fake @spainbuca Account (Zhdanova and Orlova 2017, 14)

According to Mariia Zhdanova and Daryia Orlova the @spainbuca account was blocked, but it reappeared in late 2014 under the name of Lyudmila Lopatyshkina and continued to post pro-Russian tweets (2017, 15).

ELEVATE: The story was quickly picked up by the Russian channel Russia Today, and other news outlets such as RIA Novosti, Tass. For example, Russia Today, broadcasted a 23-minute documentary showing off the main armament on the Ukrainian Air Force plane, a live-fire test in which a Su-25 attacked two grounded planes to compare the exit holes with those seen on MH17. They used a so-called "report" featuring an anonymous mechanic at a Ukrainian air base who allegedly declared to have seen a Ukrainian fighter take off armed and return without the air-to-air missiles. Moreover, they also used the pretended expertise of Russian military officials to back up the fake story (Nimmo 2016)[3].

EXPLOIT: On July 21, 2014, Russia's Ministry of Defense held a press conference presenting a statement (Ministry of Defense, 2014) and a *fake satellite image* suggesting an Su- 25 fighter jet had been spotted near the Boeing.

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[3] The documentary aired by Russia Today is accessible at the following address : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuoIw3jBV4g
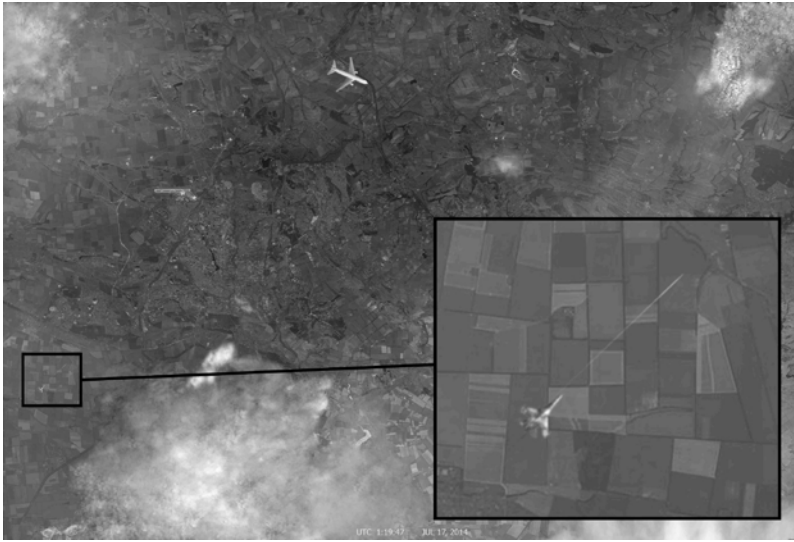
Fig.8. The image presented by Russian Media in order to support the fake story[4].

b) Example 2: The criminal case of Lisa (Germany)

The most prominent example of Russian misinformation in Germany was "the criminal case of Lisa," the Russian– German girl who claimed to have been kidnapped and raped by migrants in Berlin in January 2016. The German police proved that she had made a false statement, but the Russian media accused German officials of hushing up the case and covered the story extensively, claiming the girl had been mistreated and was being held as a sex slave.

Eventually, this story developed into a *diplomatic conflict*: the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov repeated the accusations, and the former German foreign minister Frank- Walter Steinmeier cautioned Russia not to politicize the case (Neudert 2019, 175).

In an article published in the *Nato Review* on July 25 2016, Stefan Meister affirms that, in the "Lisa case", we see evidence of different Russian elements of influence working in a coordinated way. I will present his description of the case in correspondence with the Four E model:

- **ENTICE:** A journalist from the First Russian TV channel picked up the case and brought it to the main news in Russia. The interest of a Russian TV channel in the story about the case of the 13 years old girl was strange but even more so was the effort they made in order to broadcast a series of

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4   Source: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/15/ukraine-fighter-shot-mh17-claims-russian-tv-photo-fake. The original video presented by Russian media can be accesses at: http://obkon.ucoz.com/forum/59-1403-1#6869.

highly emotional features on it, including interviews with the members of the girl's family accusing the police of refusing to investigate, and members of the community threatening to "meet violence with violence"[5].

- **ENGAGE:** The case was reported by Russian media like Russia Today, Sputnik and RT Deutsch by means of emotionally charged messages. In spite of the fact that the German police officially declared that there was no abduction or rape, the Russian Media continued the disinformation campaign.

- **ELEVATE:** Social media as well as right-wing groups distributed the information on the Internet. Hence, the story was digitally enhanced by the use of the computational propaganda instruments. The main target audience was that composed of members of the Russian minority from Germany, who were also involved in the protests that were later organized as a response to the so-called passivity of the German police.

Fig. 10. The Russian propaganda material and the declaration of the German police[6].

- **EXPLOIT:** Demonstrations were organized via Facebook by the German-Russian minority and neo-Nazi groups; Russian media in Germany reported on these demonstrations, which brought it to the German mainstream media. Finally, the Russian Foreign Minister made two public statements about his concerns regarding the inability of the German police to take such cases

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[5] For a detailed description of the evolution of the case see https://www.stopfake.org/en/ lisa-2-0-how-pro-kremlin-media-in-germany-have-been-using-a-new-fake-to-justify-an-old-one/
[6] Source: https://www.stopfake.org/en/lisa-2-0-how-pro kremlin-media-in-germany-have-been-using-a-new-fake-to-justify-an-old-one/

seriously because of political correctness. The German foreign minister responded and accused Russia of using propaganda[7]

Fig.11. Demonstration organized as a result of the propaganda campaign in the Lisa Case[8].

In my opinion, the two case studies presented above demonstrate how the new Russian propaganda machine is effectively using the new technology of communication and especially Social Media platforms in order to disseminate its messages. The MH17 disaster case shows how computational propaganda can be used to organize and systematically coordinate a massive disinformation campaign in order to spread confusion concerning the facts regarding the Russian involvement in the case. The criminal case of Lisa is even more revealing, as it proves how a common and isolated event can be expanded, by the use of the new propaganda machine, to the scale of a major diplomatic conflict.

However, what the two cases have in common is the fact that the results achieved by those who control this massive propaganda machine are by no means accidental. They are obtained in a highly planed and coordinated manner, based on the abilities emphasised in the theory of Reflexive Control: to map the cognitive filter of the opponent, his knowledge, ideas and experiences, in order to be able to understand it and imitate it, or to locate the weakest link of the opponent, that is the intellectual, moral, or personal features on which he bases his decisions. They also prove a good knowledge of the political, social and economic context of the targeted countries and a very effective capacity of exploiting their vulnerabilities.

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[7] The declarations of Sergey Lavrov can be accesed https://archive.fo/9HYxe at and the declaration of the German foreign minister can be accessed at https://www.fnp.de/politik/fall-lisa-steinmeier-kritisiert-spekulationen-moskau-10632529.html
[8] Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-eu-35413134.

7. Conclusions: What could be done to counter Reflexive Control?

In the previous sections of the paper I argued that a new and efficient type of propaganda instrument is used, especially (but not only) by Russia, in the context of the ideological conflict between Western and Eastern powers: a digital or computational propaganda machine that utilizes the virtues and limitations of Social Media platforms and allows for a very well organized and systematic production and dissemination of biased messages with the aim of manipulating public opinion. This new instrument is able to convert some of the most important virtues of democratic societies, like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to protest against the government and other important political rights, into vulnerabilities that can be exploited by the Eastern authoritarian regimes in accordance to their interest. And, I followed Corneliu Bjola in stating that the theory of Reflexive Control introduced by Vladimir Lefebvre and developed by Bjola himself in the form of the Four E Model is the best way of explaining the way in which this new type of propaganda functions.

However, a very unsettling question remains unanswered: What could be done to counter propaganda in the form of Reflexive Control? Hence, in the concluding section, I will briefly address this question. And I will begin by mentioning Bjola recommendations which are meant to counter Reflexive Control. Bjola's solutions for countering Reflexive Control are the implementation of media literacy programs for strengthening the informational environment against the risk of disinformation, a close monitoring of the potential for the viral dissemination of "hot button" issues, the development of a rapid response procedure for neutralizing the amplification effects and a careful political analysis of the potential implications of the offline political actions that parties are convinced to pursue as a consequence of the disinformation campaigns. However, the most important strategy in countering Reflexive control is in his view the development of a digital diplomacy, which would include a sustained dialogue between governments, academia, civil society and citizens on the topic of the importance of truth and transparency in the public sphere (Bjola 2019, 26-27).

To be sure, the recommendations mentioned above are commonsensical and are based on an authentic expertise in the field. Nevertheless, I must confess that I do not share Bjola's confidence that once these measures are implemented, the effect of the new type of propaganda will be significantly reduced. The propagandistic conflict

between states which do not share the same values is, as Vladimir Lefebvre rightly underlined, based on significant ideological al cultural differences an on a battle for supremacy that won't just disappear overnight. And, if we analyse the history of propaganda disseminated by the means of classical media, we can observe that it didn't vanish once the states became aware of its negative impact, but rather evolved and progressed in forms that were more devious and more difficult to counteract. Therefore, it is more plausible to think that the new propaganda machine and its computational instruments are here to stay and that they will continue to be used effectively in the future.

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