

Cognitive warfare and the vulnerabilities of democracies

Kimberly Orinx and Tanguy Struye de Swielande

UCLouvain



The nature of ongoing warfare has evolved, resulting in new wars that sometimes go unnoticed. Disinformation campaigns have become real weapons of mass disruption, weakening the proper functioning of our democratic societies. They spread and circulate quickly, are inexpensive and have a high impact. For Professor Giordano, the human brain has thus become the battlefield of the 21st century.

While for a long time we have been talking about information warfare, which aims to control the flow of information, cognitive warfare goes much further¹. The latter is a war for information as it is transformed into knowledge via the processes of cognition inherent in our brain². It uses knowledge in a conflictual way in the long term. The aim is to break the population's confidence in electoral processes, in institutions, in politicians, in alliances and partners. It is about weakening the cohesion, influencing hearts and

This Commentary is a free translation of an Op-Ed. published in *Le Soir*, on 11 May 2021.

¹ DU CLUZEL, F. (2020). *Cognitive Warfare*. Innovation Hub, p.6.

² WATTS, C. (2018). *Messing with the Enemy. Surviving in a Social Media World of Hackers, Terrorists, Russians, and Fake News*. New York, Harper Business.

minds and deteriorating the will to fight and the resilience of our societies (legitimacy and authority of democratic institutions). In cognitive warfare, the centre of gravity is, therefore, above all the population within democracies. Moreover, cognitive warfare does not distinguish between war and peace, between the combatant and the non-combatant: everyone is a potential target.

Although the power of persuasion has been recognized since Sun Tzu and Aristotle, there is now the ability to affect human cognitive capacities more effectively via new technologies. Indeed, the amount of information we are exposed to is growing exponentially and is inextricably linked to technologies. Consequently, the development of increasingly sophisticated means such as artificial intelligence, communication strategies, marketing, branding and neuroscience facilitate manipulation and form a significant challenge due to the inherent characteristics of human beings, namely cognitive biases, or heuristics.

Western societies have become easy targets of cognitive warfare waged by adversaries like China and Russia. This is due to the era of post-truth, individualism, polarization and distrust of the state, especially as emotions have taken over from reason. Individuals look more easily at information that confirms their ideology, prejudices instead of contradictory information. New technologies and social networks have amplified these biases. There is now an overload of (unverifiable) information. People read the headlines but not the content. They are attracted by the sensational, by the images more than the text. Facts are questioned. Individuals seek information, and people on social networks confirm their logic (echo chambers): this exacerbates existing antagonisms, sows social division and undermines faith in institutions. The enemies of democracy have understood this and amplify through fake news, deep fake and others, these discords for their benefit. Opponents of democracies have understood, as Nick Reynolds notes, that "in a political war, disgust is a more powerful tool than anger. Anger drives people to the polls;

disgust breaks up countries”³. Moreover, people in democracies actively participate in this decline, reinforcing the logics of silos and tribalism, as this false information is liked and/or re-shared. Alicia Wanless talks about "participatory propaganda"⁴. All this is further facilitated by bots and troll factories, by repetitive exposure and characterized by mutually reinforcing stories. Some social networks are also better suited than others depending on the content to spread disinformation. The form of the content will be different depending on Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn, for example. Finally, with the latest technologies, individuals are targeted by algorithms (personalized targeting or precision targeting), using the available, collected data.

The crisis of confidence in democracies creates a divide into which Beijing and Moscow, and others are falling. A divided society is a fragile and vulnerable society. As Hannah Arendt explained, “(...) a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please”. In Western societies, we have defended the infrastructures, but not the human mind. Nevertheless, as Sun Tzu reminds us: "You can be sure of success in your attacks if you only attack places that are not defended".

Facing this cognitive warfare, democracies are struggling to fight back. They are at a disadvantage concerning cognitive warfare, being traditionally open societies where information circulates freely, where information is diverse. In authoritarian regimes, where societies are closed, the rule is information control. There is thus a cognitive asymmetry. Authoritarian regimes penetrate our open societies with their disinformation, while the latter protect themselves through cybersovereignty. For instance, Chinese diplomats are

³ REYNOLDS, N. (2020). *Performing Information Manoeuvre Through Persistent Engagement*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, RUSI Occasional Paper, p.15.

⁴ Quoted in MATEJIC, N. (2020). *The Battlefield Within: The information war has many targets, its most valuable is you*, Krulak Center for Innovation & Creativity.

present on Twitter in our societies to spread their fake news, while Twitter is forbidden in China.

Not only are Western liberal democracies unprepared for these new forms of warfare, but they do not seem to be willing to take the necessary measures. However, we need to rethink our democratic societies by developing solid institutions, social and psychological resilience to disinformation. A strong discourse from democratic states is required. Therefore, it is necessary to develop counter-narratives that manage to mobilize a society: we need storytelling, coherence, common objectives, while avoiding falling into populism. The West must also be more offensive and wage real cognitive warfare to penetrate the societies of our adversaries. Finally, we should also develop a partnership between the GAFAMs and the States to fight against disinformation.

Kimberly Orinx (PhD student in International Relations - UCLouvain)

Tanguy Struye de Swielande (Professor in International Relations - UCLouvain)

