



Teaching the State to Talk: Lessons for the Czech Republic on Using Strategic Communication as a Counter- Disinformation Tool

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Summary

→ A state-level strategic communication is a key part of any successful counter-disinformation strategy. The Czech Republic is currently missing any system capable of coordinating and conducting strategic communication efforts aimed at countering this type of threat.

→ The United Kingdom and Taiwan, the two democratic countries with the most advanced systems for using communication as a counter-disinformation tool, both share similar characteristics in their strategies. Both systems have strong central anti-disinformation teams close to the heart of government, and they both put emphasis on the speed and effective targeting of their counter-disinformation messaging.

→ In order for the Czech Republic to have an effective counter-disinformation system, the development of a central strategic communications unit, tasked with high-level analysis, decision making, monitoring and coordination, is a crucial step. Modelling its system on best practices from the UK and Taiwan would allow the Czech Republic to replicate best practices and avoid costly mistakes.

Recommendations

→ The Czech Republic needs to create a counter-disinformation unit under the Office of the Government tasked with high-level decision-making, monitoring, analysis and coordination of counter-disinformation communication efforts across the government.

→ The Czech Republic should establish a program for experience, capability, resource and expertise sharing between civilian and military departments dedicated to strategic communication. At the moment, the civilian sector in the Czech Republic lags behind the military in its information operations capacities, however, the military is severely restricted in using its capacities. The capacity sharing program would allow these capacities to be used under civilian supervision, while also helping the civilian sector to build-up its capacities.

→ In order for counter-disinformation communication to be timely and therefore effective, the responsible department must be sufficiently autonomous and to a certain degree exempt from the lengthy and complicated approval processes characteristic for the majority of Czech state bureaucracy.



Introduction

In recent years, the Czech Republic has, along with the rest of the Western world, experienced the harmful effects of disinformation on its democracy, state functionality, and social cohesion. Although it acknowledged the existence of the problem in the 2016 National Security Audit, it has been, to date, unable to organize its defences and develop an effective and comprehensive system capable of countering this new and elusive threat.

The scope of the problem was illustrated by the utter failure to respond to the 2020 Covid-19 “infodemic”.² The complete absence of any government communication that would counter the barrage of false and manipulative information has illustrated the need for a complex, robust, and synchronised system of state strategic communication. A system capable of serving as the first line of defence against both foreign and domestic disinformation and misinformation.

While the Czech Republic (along with most EU member states) was caught off guard, some democracies had systems put in place prior to the Covid infodemic and were able to readily deploy them during the crisis. Although it is difficult to quantify the impact of counter-disinformation measures, these states seem to have fared considerably better at handling the information chaos or at least at managing to decrease the harmful influence of disinformation-overload in the public sphere. And active strategic communication and a well-built central coordination, analytical, and monitoring system, seem to have played a key role in their counter-disinformation strategy. The Czech Republic is therefore in a position where it can draw inspiration from other democratic states that are ahead in this field, and replicate the best practices and elements of their systems. For this purpose, this paper analyses the strategic communication elements of the United Kingdom’s and Taiwan’s counter-disinformation systems and their application feasibility in the Czech context.

The United Kingdom and Taiwan were selected as the two global leaders among the world’s democracies in using strategic communication to counter disinformation. They are among the few countries that have fully operational systems for strategic counter-disinformation communication, but they are also regarded as having a particularly effective, complex, inventive, or active approach to counter-disinformation communication³. Their systems have been sufficiently stress-tested, both by the Covid-19 infodemic and other disinformation challenges. And finally, despite the similarities, the two cases are sufficiently different - while the United Kingdom has an unparalleled institutional tradition of government communication, Taiwan mostly built its system from the ground up starting in 2018. In this way, the Czech Republic can draw inspiration from two effective systems built on two quite different backgrounds.

Strategic communication

What is strategic communication, how does it differ from regular communication and how is it relevant for public institutions? Strategic communication means that communication is used to achieve high-priority policy objectives of the institution conducting the communication. In other words, communication objectives are aligned with the overall objectives of the organization and communication is used as

¹ As coined by the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

² Department of Global Communication, “UN tackles ‘infodemic’ of misinformation and cybercrime in COVID-19 crisis”, United Nations, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%99infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>.

³ Kerr, Walter, Phillips, Macon, “Taiwan Is Beating Political Disinformation. The West Can Too, Foreign Policy”, November 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/11/political-disinformation-taiwan-success/>.



one of the tools to achieve them.⁴ Unlike ad hoc reactive communication, strategic communication considers the wider context, it estimates what impact its messaging will have and adapts the communication accordingly.⁵ Although strategic communication is relevant for both public and private (commercial) institutions, the Czech public institutions rarely consider the effects of their external communication on their overarching objectives and priorities. However, this is slowly beginning to change in certain segments of the public sector. The domestic intelligence service or the Czech Armed Forces are gradually more active in their public-facing communication in a way that seems to support their overall strategic goals.⁶

Using Strategic Communication as a Counter-Disinformation tool

The precise definition of the term "disinformation" differs for almost every institution and is therefore always based on a definition of a specific institution or a state that we are referring to. However, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan all understand disinformation similarly. The definitions of the UK institutions are almost identical to those of the Czech Republic. There is a mutual understanding of disinformation as deliberately created and shared false information with the intent to deceive or manipulate and misinformation as unintentionally false information.⁷ Taiwan only recognizes and uses the term disinformation for which it has a legal definition - intentionally false information harmful to the public.⁸ When referring to disinformation in this paper, the Czech/UK definition of the term is being referenced.

Although there are various methods of countering disinformation, only a limited set of options is accessible to national states that lack leverage over large social media platforms and wish to avoid enforced censorship. Excluding strategic communication, these options are limited to education, resilience-building, civil sector empowerment and demonetization of disinformation platforms.⁹ While all the aforementioned options can have a positive impact and can indeed contribute to successful counter-disinformation efforts, they are fundamentally passive and their impact is long-term-only. Used alone, without the active communication element, their impact is deeply insufficient, particularly at times of crisis.

Strategic communication – active dissemination of disinformation rebuttals, developing counter-narratives, countering adversary brands and promoting one's own values – is a cornerstone of any versatile counter-disinformation policy. The Czech state bureaucracy, however, has not yet understood or acknowledged the value of communication as a policy tool and as a result, has almost no experience in using it in that way. In the Czech context, communication tends to be seen only as a tool

⁴ Government Communication Service, "Strategic communication: MCOM function guide", UK Government, 2018. <https://3x7ip91ron4ju9ehf2unqrm1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Strategic-communication-MCOM-function-guide.pdf>.

⁵ Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, "Všechno, co jste kdy chtěli vědět o strategické komunikaci (ale báli jste se zeptat)", Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic. <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/vsechno-co-jste-kdy-chteli-vedet-o-strategicke-komunikaci-ale-bali-jste-se-zeptat.aspx>.

⁶ Dušková, Lenka, Jak strategicky (ne)komunikovat? Aneb Česká republika a strategická komunikace, Armádní Noviny, October 2019. <https://www.armadninoviny.cz/jak-strategicky-nekomunikovat-aneb-ceska-republika-a-strategicka-komunikace.html>.

⁷ Government Communication Service, "RESIST: Counter-disinformation toolkit," UK Government, 2019.

Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, "Definice dezinformací a propagandy", Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic. <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/definice-dezinformaci-a-propagandy.aspx>.

⁸ Butler, Steven, Hsu, Iris, "Q&A: Taiwan's digital minister on combating disinformation without censorship", Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019. <https://cpj.org/2019/05/qa-taiwans-digital-minister-on-combatting-disinfor/>.

⁹ Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, "Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression", UNESCO, September 2019.



for political competition in the hands of elected officials. As a result, the state's communication capacities are severely limited. Media teams across different ministries are used to shield their institution's top officials from unwanted attention or to boost their public image, rather than for promoting their institution's policy objectives via strategic communication campaigns. The National Security Audit from 2016 acknowledged the absence of a strategic communication system as a national security weakness. However, its recommendations to develop a functional system have unfortunately never materialized.¹⁰

Developing and implementing a strategic communication system can understandably represent a difficult task. The Czech state bureaucracy lacks an understanding of why strategic communication is necessary and the society is wary of the concept of a state „communication agency“ attempting to influence the attitudes and behaviour of its citizens. That was clearly demonstrated by the highly emotional public reaction of a significant segment of the Czech society to the launch of the Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats under the Ministry of Interior in 2017¹¹. Given the circumstances, it is crucial that a strategic communication system be apolitical, independent and promote the interests of the state, rather than a partisan agenda or the private interests of elected officials. Examples from countries that have already managed to do so can significantly help when establishing a strategic communication system that will work for the good of the whole society, rather than for the good of just a few individuals.

Case Study United Kingdom: A Multi-Dimensional System

The United Kingdom has a unique position when it comes to strategic communication. More than any other country, it has the idea of using communication as a policy tool embedded deeply in the structure and institutional culture of its Civil Service.¹² The basis of the British government communication was developed during the First World War, in the form of its wartime Ministry of Information, bolstering the morale of British citizens during the conflict.

The practice of disseminating information to influence the behaviour and attitudes of people survived until the modern-day era and became part of the Civil Service mindset. More than any other democracy, the UK government recognizes communication as an invaluable tool that can be used to achieve its goals. Communication is officially recognized by the UK government as one of the four levers it can use, on the same level as the other three, i.e. legislation, regulation, and taxation.¹³

To be able to realize this concept, the UK government has a central communication service, the Government Communication Service (GCS), bringing together approximately 4500 communications professionals embedded across ministries, non-ministerial departments, and other governmental organizations. The GCS coordinates all government communication, recruits and trains communications professionals, distributes them for placements in institutions across the Civil Service,¹⁴ provides support for other departments and operates specialized

¹⁰ Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, "The National Security Audit", The Government of the Czech Republic, 2016. <https://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Audit-narodni-bezpecnosti-20161201.pdf>.

¹¹ ČT24, "Zeman opět kritizoval centrum proti dezinformacím. Nikdo podle něj nemá monopol na pravdu", Česká televize, January 2017.

¹² Civil Service – official name of the UK national bureaucracy.

¹³ Government Communication Service, "What We Do", UK Government. Available from: <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/about-us/what-we-do/>.

¹⁴ The UK Civil Service operates in a slightly different way than most other national bureaucracies. It primarily recruits its employees into professions, such as Security, HR, Policy, Analysis, and Communications, rather than into departments and agencies. The Civil Servants then permanently



teams, including the specialized disinformation unit. Working with a network of pre-vetted advertising agencies, the government runs around 140 communication campaigns a year focused on everything from attempting to reduce the number of prison suicides to informing passengers about disruptions in the railroad system.¹⁵ While its communication campaigns do draw criticism at times, they are viewed and valued by experts as both highly citizen-centred and highly strategic. In other words, the communication is apolitical and does not promote a partisan political agenda, and it is being used to pursue complex strategic ambitions rather than to conduct ad-hoc campaigns.¹⁶

In addition to domestic communication campaigns, the UK government conducts strategic communication campaigns targeted abroad. These are either conducted by the GCS in cooperation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or by dedicated units of the British Armed Forces (in particular the 77th Brigade of the British Army). These campaigns previously included targeting Daesh's ability to attract new recruits or information support for British forces deployed in conflict zones.¹⁷

Finally, slightly separated from GCS and the military, is a stand-alone Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) based in the Home Office. RICU was created post the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks and tasked with using strategic communication for de-radicalization and terrorism prevention, particularly aiming at British Muslim communities.¹⁸

Strategic Communication and Disinformation

Despite its competitive advantage, in the wake of the emerging disinformation phenomenon, the UK failed to act in the same way as other Western states. Until 2018, disinformation was seen as a problem more for the former Eastern Bloc that was being targeted by Russia, rather than as a direct threat to the United Kingdom. While the UK sponsored programs in the Eastern Partnership region, it failed to counter disinformation targeting its own population. The strategic shift only really came in 2017 and 2018, in light of the suspected Russian interference in the Brexit referendum.¹⁹

In March of 2018, the newly published National Security Capability Review (NSCR) announced the launch of three new key counter-disinformation initiatives.

belong to a profession rather than a ministry or an agency and they move across the government throughout their career as they receive placements in different institutions.

¹⁵ Griggs, Ian, "UK Government to Run More than 140 Campaigns in 2018/2019", PR Week, April 2018;

Government Communication Service, "Strategic communication: MCOM function guide", UK Government, 2018. <https://3x7ip91ron4ju9ehf2unqrm1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Strategic-communication-MCOM-function-guide.pdf>.

¹⁶ Sanders, Karen, Canel, Maria Jose, "Government communication in 15 countries: Themes and challenges", Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

¹⁷ Miller, Carl, "Inside the British Army's secret information warfare machine", Wired, November 2018. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/inside-the-77th-brigade-britains-information-warfare-military>;

Government Communication Service, "Strategic communication: MCOM function guide", UK Government, 2018. <https://3x7ip91ron4ju9ehf2unqrm1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Strategic-communication-MCOM-function-guide.pdf>.

¹⁸ Cobain, Ian, Mahmood, Mona, Ross, Alice, Evans, Rob, "Inside Ricu, the shadowy propaganda unit inspired by the cold war", The Guardian, May 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/02/inside-ricu-the-shadowy-propaganda-unit-inspired-by-the-cold-war>.

Government Communication Service, "RESIST: Counter-disinformation toolkit," UK Government, 2019.

¹⁹ Janda, Jakub, Vichová, Veronika, "Overview of countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin's subversion operations", European Values, May 2017. <https://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Overview-of-countermeasures-by-the-EU28-to-the-Kremlin%E2%80%99s-subversion-operations-3.pdf>.



First, the “Fusion Doctrine” was announced, a new British hybrid warfare strategy. Covering multiple hybrid threats including disinformation, the Fusion Doctrine clearly stated that the UK will respond to irregular, multi-domain threats in a similar manner. Using a wide array of means, “the Government will use the full suite of security, economic, diplomatic and influence capabilities to deliver [UK’s] national security goals”.²⁰ Strategic communication was recognized as one of those means. In other words, it put communication on the same level as military, financial and other means that can be deployed as weapons in hybrid warfare conflicts.

Second, the NSCR admitted that the government has, “taken a more consistent approach to delivering domestic communications campaigns, such as on road safety and stopping smoking, than in national security” and vowed to change that.²¹ It announced a radical expansion of the existing National Security Communications Team (NSCT), a task force responsible for, “dealing with communications elements of threats to national security, including (but not limited to) disinformation”, staffed by professionals from the Government Communication Service.²² In other words, the NSCT became responsible for dealing with disinformation, proliferated by both state and non-state actors, that is recognized as a potential national security threat.²³ Meanwhile, the 77th Brigade was also being significantly expanded in order to match the military strategic communication capabilities with the civilian ones.²⁴

Third, a Rapid Response Unit (RRU), was created as part of the National Security Communications Team and based in the Cabinet Office headquarters at Number 10 Downing Street. While the RRU is part of the NSCT and the two bodies work closely together, the RRU is tasked mainly with monitoring, detection, and analysis of disinformation and enabling the Government to provide the correct information to target audiences via Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and other means. It also works with media teams across the civil service, notifying them of disinformation relevant to their departments and advising them on how to respond. The Rapid Response Unit is tasked with covering both dis- and misinformation, including stories on domestic issues such as crime and health.²⁵ So, unlike the NSCT, the RRU also focuses on false information that is neither a national security threat nor the result of a coordinated influence campaign but which can still have negative effects on society.

The UK Counter-Disinformation Strategy

The UK counter-disinformation strategy, including the use of strategic communication, was set out in detail in the, “RESIST Toolkit”, a detailed manual written by the GCS. The toolkit was created as a handbook for communication teams across the government and public sector on how to recognize and approach disinformation in their work.

²⁰ Aiken, Alex, “Disinformation is a continuing threat to our values and our democracy”, Government Communication Service, June 2018. <https://perma.cc/CJ8H-JKXB>.

²¹ Cabinet Office, “National Security Capability Review”, UK Government, March 2018. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf.

²² Feikert-Ahalt, Clare, Government Responses to Disinformation on Social Media Platforms: United Kingdom, Library of Congress, September 2019. https://www.loc.gov/law/help/social-media-disinformation/uk.php#_ftn80.

²³ James, William, Britain to set up a unit to tackle ‘fake news’ - May’s spokesman, Reuters, January 2018. <https://perma.cc/2N7U-Q5MH>.

²⁴ Owen, Jonathan, Government boosts national security comms capability to combat international threats, PR Week, March 2018. <https://www.prweek.com/article/1465497/government-boosts-national-security-comms-capability-combat-international-threats>.

²⁵ Smith, Chloe, Mass Media: Internet: Written question – 157646, Cabinet Office, June 2018. <https://perma.cc/QNM3-8RKW>.



In terms of strategic communication, it describes what characteristics an effective response should have and outlines several different response strategies. The RESIST toolkit promotes a rather careful strategy of countering disinformation – it advises against rebutting individual disinformation narratives and regards this type of effort as ineffective and possibly counterproductive. Instead, it suggests either pointing out motives or errors of actors disseminating the disinformation and communicating an alternative vision to the one provided by the disinformation narratives.²⁶ The strategy also describes an ideal communication response - value-driven, transparent and accurate, timely (but not necessarily fast) and edgy (engaging enough to compete with disinformation narratives).

The UK strategy differentiates between three types of responses: reactive, proactive, and strategic. The reactive type is a short-term response in the form of press releases and briefings, updating information on government websites and enhancing their visibility via SEO. The reactive response is suited for rapidly emerging disinformation that needs to be refuted as soon as possible. The proactive type is a medium-term response, suited for already established disinformation, based on combining various forms of messaging to communicate a brand or set of values, rather than proactively disproving an adversarial narrative. Finally, the strategic is a long-term type of response, built on both sustained campaigns promoting brand and values and tarnishing the adversary brand and on reshaping the information space to promote a position of oneself and deter the actions of potential adversaries.²⁷

Strengths of the UK Stratcom System

The UK counter-disinformation system can be rather confusing due to its complexity and multiple participating elements. However, disinformation represents a complex and vertical threat, rather than a horizontal one. And a system consisting of different units participating in counter-disinformation efforts with each responsible for a different aspect of it, corresponds to the complexity of the issue.

At its core, the British system recognizes that it is necessary to distinguish:

- between mis- and disinformation,
- between coordinated campaigns and organic sharing of misleading information,
- and between state-backed influence campaigns and domestic disinformation.

While some disinformation campaigns are coordinated, others are not. Some originate from abroad and others at home. And some should be treated as an issue of national security, whereas others should not. Different cases represent different levels of threat and require different responses. Having two counter-disinformation teams with a different focus on top of the GCS and media teams across different departments, creates the option to choose the appropriate response to a specific piece of disinformation.

The Covid-19 infodemic showed remarkably well the dual nature of the disinformation threat as well as the advantages of having multiple parts of the system collaborating to create a response.

The Rapid Response Unit was tasked with the main responsibility for monitoring and analysing Covid disinformation and deciding on the appropriate responses for individual pieces of disinformation that could take the form of taking down certain falsehoods, refuting them in cooperation with health experts, or amplifying government messaging to make sure the public receives the correct

²⁶ Government Communication Service, "RESIST: Counter-disinformation toolkit," UK Government, 2019.

²⁷ Ibid.



information.²⁸ The Rapid Response Unit was, for the duration of the crisis, reinforced by the 77th Brigade of the British Army which provided its human resources and expertise.²⁹

The National Security Communications Team would get involved in the case that a coordinated disinformation campaign, conducted by state-actors, was detected. The goal of the NSCT is to prepare and execute more complex strategic responses, in cooperation with other national security institutions (as well as the RRU). Unlike the Rapid Response Unit which focuses more on refuting individual cases of disinformation, the NSCT would focus on proactive communication of counter-narratives. The RRU also responds to the content of a certain piece of dis- or misinformation, while the NSCT is supposed to consider the motivations of the actor disseminating the disinformation and take them into account when preparing a response. The NSCT was, therefore, presumably responsible for the attribution of the influx of anti-vaccine disinformation in the second half of 2020 to Russia and for launching a counter-operation in cooperation with GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters)³⁰, or for the response to Russian disinformation regarding the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in 2018.³¹

Case study Taiwan: The Start-up Approach

Unlike the United Kingdom, until 2018/2019 Taiwan did not have any pre-existing communications capacities comparable to the British GCS, nor the historical tradition of deploying strategic communication in pursuit of national security objectives. Instead, Taiwan found itself facing intense hostile disinformation campaigns from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in recent years. Taiwan, recognized in 2019 as the target of more foreign disinformation than any other country in the world,³² had to act fast and develop a system of government strategic communication capable of countering efforts to interfere in its elections through computational propaganda.

Although the amount of computational propaganda targeting Taiwan radically increased in the years prior to 2018³³, the government only genuinely and publicly acknowledged the threat after intense PRC efforts to interfere in the Taiwanese 2018 local elections. The 2018 elections were seen as a report card for the Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-Wen, who was under intense pressure from Beijing for her pro-independence opinions since she took up office in 2016.³⁴ As such, the 2018 local elections became the target of fierce Chinese election interference efforts,

²⁸ Proctor, Kate, "UK anti-fake news unit dealing with up to 10 false coronavirus articles a day", *The Guardian*, March 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/uk-anti-fake-news-unit-coronavirus>.

²⁹ Allison, George, "77 Brigade is countering Covid misinformation", *UK Defence Journal*, April 2020. <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/77-brigade-is-countering-covid-misinformation/>.

³⁰ GCHQ - the UK intelligence agency responsible for providing signals intelligence (SIGINT). Warminsky, Joe, "UK launches cyber-operation against Russian disinformation on COVID-19 vaccine, report says", *Cyberscoop*, November 2020. <https://www.cyberscoop.com/gchq-cyber-operation-russia-covid-19-disinformation/>.

³¹ Slack, Keith, "Information Power in Action: Salisbury, deterrence & the importance of attribution", *Defence in Depth*, April 2020. <https://defenceindepth.co/2019/04/26/information-power-in-action-salisbury-deterrence-the-importance-of-attribution/>.

³² Mechkova, Valeria, Pemstein, Daniel, Seim, Brigitte, Wilson, Steven, "Measuring Internet Politics: Introducing the Digital Society Project (DSP)", *Digital Society Project*, May 2019. http://digitalsocietyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/DSP_WP_01-Introducing-the-Digital-Society-Project.pdf.

³³ Monaco, Nicholas J., "Computational Propaganda in Taiwan: Where Digital Democracy Meets Automated Autocracy", *Computational Propaganda Project*, Working Paper No. 2017.2. <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Comprop-Taiwan-2.pdf>.

³⁴ Horton, Chris, "As China Rattles Its Sword, Taiwanese Push a Separate Identity", *The New York Times*, October 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/world/asia/taiwan-name-republic-of-china.html>.



attempting to tarnish the image of the president and her pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party and sway the result in favour of their opponents by doing so.³⁵ The main goals of Chinese propaganda, according to Taiwan government officials, included causing fear of Chinese retribution over Taiwan's pursuit of independence and undermining support for Tsai Ing-Wen's administration.³⁶

Experiencing the impact of Chinese disinformation in 2018, Taiwan acknowledged that disinformation represents a significant threat to its democracy and decided to form its own system of defence. Audrey Tang, the Taiwanese Digital Minister, was tasked with developing the strategic communication element of the system,³⁷ able to counter the disinformation campaigns expected in the run-up to 2020.³⁸ The system was set up in early 2019 and further improved and expanded as Taiwan faced the election interference efforts and the Covid-19 infodemic.

The strategic communication system has two main components: the communication mechanism itself and the novel way of conceptualizing the disinformation issue as a public health problem.

The Counter-Disinformation Communication System

Since 2019, the Taiwanese government has had a centralized social media and web monitoring team, tasked with around-the-clock disinformation monitoring. Once potential disinformation has been detected, it goes through a fact-checking process and its level of potential harm is assessed by disinformation experts in the central unit. Based on the results of the analysis, the decision of whether to react or not is made. If the disinformation reaches a certain threshold of traction and engagement on social media, or if it makes its way on to TV, a response is mandatory. Following the initial detection, analysis, evaluation, and decision-making processes made by the central unit, the appropriate ministry or agency is notified. The relevant institution is then responsible for developing a counter-narrative and delivering it to the target audience.³⁹

The counter-disinformation method is based on three key criteria that must be met when responding to any disinformation narrative: speed, humour, and multi-platform messaging.

First, after the appropriate department is notified of the existence of relevant disinformation, it is tasked with developing a counter-narrative that would be at least equally as convincing as the original disinformation. The speed of the response is considered to be critical and relevant departments are supposed to develop a narrative, create a response, and send it out within 60 minutes of being notified of the disinformation.⁴⁰ The idea is to deliver the government counter-

³⁵ Horton, Chris, "Specter of Meddling by Beijing Looms Over Taiwan's Elections", *The New York Times*, November 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/22/world/asia/taiwan-elections-meddling.html>.

³⁶ Li-chung, Chien, Li-hua, Chung, Chin, Jonathan, "China using fake news to divide Taiwan", *The Taiwan Times*, September 2018. <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2018/09/16/2003700513>.

³⁷ Green, David, "Taiwan Takes Centerstage in Global Fight Against 'Fake News'", *The News Lens*, October 2018. <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/106412>.

³⁸ It is important to note that strategic communication represents only one element in a more holistic approach of the Taiwanese government to tackling the disinformation issue. This includes media literacy education, legislative reforms, partnerships with civil society and close collaboration with social media platforms.

³⁹ Huang, Aaron, "Combatting and Defeating Chinese Propaganda and Disinformation: A Case Study of Taiwan's 2020 Elections", *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*, July 2020. <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Combatting%20Chinese%20Propaganda%20and%20Disinformation%20-%20Huang.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Butler, Steven, Hsu, Iris, "Q&A: Taiwan's digital minister on combatting disinformation without censorship", *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2019. <https://cpj.org/2019/05/qa-taiwans-digital-minister-on-combatting-disinfor/>.



narrative to as wide an audience as possible before the audience is even reached by the original disinformation. If the first information an individual receives is about the existence of a false narrative along with its rebuttal, they are significantly less likely to believe the original disinformation, since it takes away the familiarity bias (the tendency to see familiar information as more likely).⁴¹

Second, the government has been from the onset emphasizing that if a counter-narrative is to be successful, it needs to be packaged and delivered in an engaging, and ideally also an entertaining way, making it more likely to be organically shared and thus reaching a higher number of people. Therefore, apart from a standard press statement, the department developing the counter-narrative is required to come up with a more engaging form of response that would express the narrative in an easily understandable form.⁴² This can be a meme, a short movie, an infographic, or a social media post. In particular, the government aims to bring in a humorous aspect to the response, in addition to the informative value. The idea is that disinformation aims to provoke an emotional response, most commonly anger and outrage. Thus, if the government can ridicule the disinformation, it can offset the negative emotions caused by the disinformation.⁴³

Third, once the counter-narrative is developed and packaged in a variety of engaging forms, the final task is to deliver the message to different audiences in the most suitable and effective way possible. A response limited to one or even several platforms (social media platforms only for example) will be necessarily limited in its effectiveness and reach. Disinformation is not restricted to social media; it can be shared through traditional media or even word of mouth. Therefore, government communication cannot be limited either and it must be capable of delivering its message across all different platforms to reach different segments of the population.⁴⁴ A press release and a social media post (meme) is the required minimum in each case. However, counter-narratives to disinformation that seems to be gaining traction or is particularly harmful are further promoted via other additional means. While government-employed communications experts develop the counter-narratives, elected government officials actively participate in delivering them. Ministers, the prime minister, or the president can help to share the government message from the authority of their position.

The platforms that the counter-narratives can be shared through are diverse and various. They can take the form of a high-level press conference attracting traditional media, an appearance by the prime minister on a popular talk show, or in a live-streamed video of a famous social media influencer. The overarching objective is always to reach the target audience, wherever it may be. Whether the target audience consists of teenagers on TikTok, or older consumers of more traditional media, the government messaging needs to be able to find the right way of reaching them.

The “Public Health” Counter-Disinformation Doctrine

Besides countering individual cases of disinformation and narratives, the Taiwanese government has developed and adopted a specific way of thinking, understanding

⁴¹ ox, Craig R., Levav, Jonathan, “Familiarity Bias and Belief Reversal in Relative Likelihood Judgment”, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Volume 86, Issue 2, November 2001.

⁴² Butler, Steven, Hsu, Iris, “Q&A: Taiwan’s digital minister on combatting disinformation without censorship”, *Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2019. <https://cpj.org/2019/05/qa-taiwans-digital-minister-on-combatting-disinfor/>.

⁴³ Huang, Aaron, “Combatting and Defeating Chinese Propaganda and Disinformation: A Case Study of Taiwan’s 2020 Elections”, *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School*, July 2020.

<https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Combatting%20Chinese%20Propaganda%20and%20Disinformation%20-%20Huang.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.



and labeling disinformation and its effect on society. The government approach is to view and treat disinformation as if it were a public health issue and it perceives disinformation as a certain type of psychological "virus". From the government's perspective, individuals who share disinformation are not causing harm on purpose and they should not be seen as enemies who need to be fought against. Instead, they have simply contracted a "disinformation virus" and they are now its carriers, without even knowing about it. In the same way that fighting an actual epidemic requires a whole-of-society effort, fighting disinformation requires a similar approach. Just as each citizen shares a responsibility for not catching and spreading the virus during a pandemic, each citizen is expected to be actively trying to recognize and avoid disinformation.⁴⁵

This approach has several benefits. From the government's perspective, the public health lens helps the relevant officials to conceptualize and better understand the disinformation problem. Disinformation is often talked about in very abstract terms and applying a public health perspective makes it slightly more tangible and conceivable. The public health lens also enables the government to de-stigmatize the issue, making it a less divisive topic in the public debate and a less controversial one, when addressing the public about it. From the citizen's perspective, it takes away the good-bad, friend-enemy binary divide of understanding disinformation. Rather than seeing a significant part of the population as enemies or foreign agents, they can be viewed as innocent patients who have simply contracted a virus. This in effect, according to the Taiwanese government, helps to decrease the polarization and societal divide which inherently comes as one of the effects of disinformation campaigns.

The public health concept does, however, have a problematic element to it. Officially, the government sees disinformation as a problem coming specifically from abroad, a product of hostile foreign governments. However, based on available research, most of the disinformation targeting the Taiwanese population in fact is of domestic origin and did not come from abroad, despite the fact that Taiwan is the target of more foreign propaganda than any other country in the world.⁴⁶ Therefore, the government's rhetoric does not fully reflect the reality on the ground. It does not account for local actors knowingly creating and disseminating harmful disinformation for political, financial, or ideological motives, which are at least equally as important as foreign, state-backed propaganda.

Since its establishment in 2019, the Taiwanese counter-disinformation system has been tested twice – the first time in the presidential elections in January 2020 and then during the Covid-19 crisis and the associated infodemic. In both cases, it is considered to have passed the test with flying colours. It is now commonly recognized as one of the most effective counter-disinformation systems in the world, in particular, because it relies on effective communication, rather than censorship and restrictions.⁴⁷ The use of strategic communication to counter disinformation is considered to have helped to protect the elections and considerably contributed to Taiwan's successful handling of the Covid-19 crisis.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Monaco, Nicholas J., "Computational Propaganda in Taiwan: Where Digital Democracy Meets Automated Autocracy", Computational Propaganda Project, Working Paper No. 2017.2. <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Comprop-Taiwan-2.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Kerr, Walter, Phillips, Macon, "Taiwan Is Beating Political Disinformation. The West Can Too, Foreign Policy", November 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/11/political-disinformation-taiwan-success/>;

McChangama, Jacob, Parello-Plesner, Jonas, "Taiwan's Disinformation Solution", The American Interest, February 2020. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/02/06/taiwans-disinformation-solution/>.

⁴⁸ Tworek, Heidi, "Lessons learned from Taiwan and South Korea's tech-enabled COVID-19 communications", Brookings Institutions, October 2020.

<https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/lessons-learned-from-taiwan-and-south-koreas-tech-enabled-covid-19-communications/>.



Potential for Replication in the Czech Republic

The United Kingdom and Taiwan models share a number of similar characteristics and they also have their own distinct features and advantages. In order to choose the best and most replicable practices from both models, both their shared characteristics and distinct features should be considered.

In the case of the United Kingdom, the main advantage of the system is its complex structure. The fact that it has two interconnected bodies, the Rapid Response Unit and the National Security Communications Unit (NSCT), both tasked with counter-disinformation communication, but with a different particular focus, makes the system well-versed to deal with such a multi-dimensional problem as disinformation and mirrors the situation on the ground.

The NSCT which has a national security focus looks primarily at state-backed disinformation campaigns and foreign propaganda, cooperates with other institutions within the intelligence and security community, and generally understands disinformation in terms of adversarial attack. The RRU instead looks at disinformation and misinformation as a communication issue, rather than one of national security, and focuses on the content rather than the actor responsible for it. In other words, the NSCT focuses on fighting the bad actor, while the RRU focuses on fighting the narrative. The RRU is also in touch with the affected ministries and departments and assumes more of a public-facing role, while the NSCT remains more in the background.

One of the main reasons why disinformation can be so elusive and so tricky to deal with is that it represents an assemblage of different elements. It is a security issue as much as a tech-related issue, a deliberate attempt to harm a democracy, while also an organic whirlwind of rumours and confusion, and it is a domestic and a foreign threat at the same time. The unique advantage of the UK system is that it is able to differentiate between the different aspects and has appropriate teams to deal with each of them.

Furthermore, the United Kingdom system has an advantage in its civil-military cooperation. As we have seen in the Covid crisis, the RRU received reinforcements from the 77th Brigade, part of the UK Armed Forces, and a unit with a considerable amount of experience in strategic communication, as well as technical expertise and human resources. The fact that the UK system can reinforce the civilian disinformation teams with the military reserves at times of crisis and that the two civilian and military counterparts are able to cooperate significantly increases its overall national capability to react to a disinformation crisis.

In the case of Taiwan, the entire structure is a lot less complex, but very functional. The quality of the Taiwanese system is in its emphasis on speed, the engagement value of its messages, and its ability to use different platforms to reach different target groups. Although, both the UK and Taiwan acknowledge the incremental value of swiftness in responding to disinformation, Taiwan managed to reach an incredible average response time of 60 minutes. The ability to deliver a counter-narrative to the target audience before most of it even receives the original disinformation significantly decreases the impact of a disinformation campaign. Also, the ability of the state communicators to package almost any message in an engaging form significantly increases the effectiveness and the reach of the state's messaging. Furthermore, the ability to effectively use different platforms (traditional/social media) allows it to target a wide segment of society, which is fundamental for a successful countering strategy.

Both the UK and Taiwan have an important aspect in common – there is a central unit tasked only with countering disinformation at the core of their systems. This unit is close to the centre of executive power, above the agency and ministerial



level, and it is responsible for disinformation detection and for top-level analysis, assessment, and decision making. This is radically different from the Czech strategic communication model, proposed in the 2016 National Security Audit, which was supposed to rely mainly on specialized units embedded within each ministry and lacked any centralized coordination body. The examples from Taiwan and the United Kingdom show that a central coordination body, staffed with both communicators and disinformation experts, is necessary for a functional system.

Recommendations for the Czech Republic

The Czech Republic has, in theory, a plan for using strategic communication to counter disinformation that was laid out in the 2016 National Security Audit. In reality, however, this plan was never put into practice and from today's perspective, it is not well suited to addressing all the challenges posed by disinformation and foreign propaganda. In 2021, the Czech Republic needs a counter-disinformation communication strategy more than ever and the Covid "infodemic" has stressed this importance. At the same time, the Czech Republic is in a favourable position where it can implement tried and tested methods and frameworks that have been successful elsewhere.

This analysis shows that there are three elements of the United Kingdom and Taiwan strategic communication models that could realistically and without larger concerns be replicated in the Czech Republic and that would significantly strengthen the Czech strategic capacities for disinformation countering. The three features are summarized in the recommendations below:

1) Create a central counter-disinformation body, responsible for monitoring, analysis, coordination, and decision-making under the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic

The case studies of Taiwan and the United Kingdom clearly show that a team responsible for cooperation, high-level decisions, analysis and monitoring, located close to the centre of executive power in the government structure, is a crucial component of any functional counter-disinformation strategic communication system.

The system of separate, embedded, and independent counter-disinformation units proposed in the Czech National Security Audit is simply too fragmented. This limits its operational capability, making it chaotic and uncoordinated. The proposed system also depends on harnessing political support at every individual ministry – a probable reason for why it never ended up being put into practice. Finally, the proposed system would require staffing up a high number of communication and disinformation experts at every single institution, which, given the shortage of this expertise in the public sector, seems rather unrealistic.

On the other hand, a single centralized unit would only require a relatively small expert pool and it would be able to act fast and remain flexible. Located under the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, the unit would be free from inter-ministerial rivalries and it would have sufficient authority to coordinate the counter-disinformation communications of other institutions across the government. Ideally, the unit would be staffed with both communications and social media experts, as well as national security practitioners, mirroring the dual focus of the NSCT and the RRU in the UK system.

2) Create a civil-military capability-sharing program

As the United Kingdom case study shows, the civil and military spheres often overlap when it comes to countering disinformation and information operations. Similar to the United Kingdom, the Czech Armed Forces already have dedicated units



specialized in information operations and strategic communications, namely the Cyber and Information Warfare Command Center, with the appropriate expertise, necessary human resources, and operational experience. At the moment, the civilian sector in the Czech Republic lags behind the military in its information operations capacities, and as such, it would be highly beneficial, if the Czech Republic could establish a program for experience, capability, resource and expertise sharing between the civilian and military departments dedicated to strategic communication. However, the military is severely restricted in using its capacities domestically and as such, it is unable to use them to counter disinformation in the Czech Republic. The capacity sharing program would allow these capacities to be used under civilian supervision, while also helping the civilian sector with the build-up of its capacities. Finally, it would enable cooperation and capacity sharing in the future and set guidelines on civil-military cooperation during crises when a coordinated effort is required.

3) Make speed and engagement the core values for creating counter-narratives

The UK and in particular Taiwan emphasize that the crucial factors for successful communication countering disinformation are speed, and the attractiveness of the messaging. Responding to disinformation with a counter-narrative is only effective if it comes soon enough and is attractive enough to be organically shared.

State communication, however, tends to exemplify the opposite. It tends to be slow, since approval is often required several times which in turn leads to it being complicated and emotionless since this makes receiving the approval more likely. In order to function effectively, the strategic communication unit needs to avoid this common malady of state communication and dare to be edgy, bold and funny. Disinformation aims to raise emotions and the state whose communication is competing with disinformation narratives needs to do the same. The leadership of the counter-disinformation unit as well as its supervisors need to understand that a certain level of "edginess" must be a core part of the communication unit mindset.



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